

The Violence of Loyalty and the Instrumentalisation of Justice in Curatorial Modalities

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The 2008 Swedish horror film, *Let the Right One In*, draws us to some difficult questions regarding the concepts of 'loyalty' and 'justice'.¹ In the film, the relationship between Oskar, a bullied twelve-year old boy, and Eli, a vampire who is manifest as a girl of the same age, shows the unfolding and cementing of a mutual bond and dependency. Oskar is lonely and thoughtful and has a morbid fascination with murder, death, and violence, but always acts in a reserved manner. On the other hand Eli is a vicious killer. However, in her relationship with her 'familiar' (an older man who we see sporadically procuring Eli's victims) and in her encounters with Oskar, she is also unassuming and quietly charming.

A friendship develops tentatively (as friendships often do), based on the sharing of knowledge about each other and the trust that this requires, generating the loyalty that ultimately bonds them. Their friendship is finally consummated in two incidents of violence towards the end of the film where Oskar saves Eli from the husband of one of her victims, and Eli saves Oskar from bullies who try to drown him. They then flee town together.

At this moment Oskar becomes Eli's 'familiar'. Previously, Eli's former familiar had to be killed. Seemingly he entered into this willingly, as he had become facially disfigured by acid while attempting to commit suicide after draining blood from a 'jock' at the local swimming pool and was interrupted by some other 'jocks'. In order that he cannot be linked to Eli, so that she is not discovered, he pours acid on himself as he hides in the changing rooms. However, this attempted self-sacrifice does not kill him, and as a disfigured figure he is far too conspicuous and threatening to potential victims and so no longer safe for Eli to be associated with. Her murderous activity needs to be kept as secret and stealthy as possible and he knows this. Eli then goes to the hospital where he is being treated, and he offers himself to her to be killed.

At the end of the film, as Oskar and Eli flee, we understand that this former familial relationship will be re-played between *them*. We know that Eli will protect Oskar, and Oskar will protect Eli by luring victims from whom she may drink. Their loyalty is based on the fulfillment of the promises made by this pact. In the fidelity to this loyalty, *they* become a killing machine. We know that they both *are* and *will be* complicit and active in the killings that already *have* been and *will in the future* become a necessity for them both.

In this pact Oskar's loyalty to this known local interested party, namely Eli, is particularly strong, especially as his pact with Eli means that his loyalty to a larger unknown party, namely the rest of his species, is severely compromised. In this relationship we see loyalty firmly outside the scope of justice.

In fact, their tentative friendship develops into a significantly violent form of loyalty. What binds them together in the final scenes of the film is *love*. It is, of course, a love story. The violence of the love that binds them eradicates the *two* separate individual subjects to become *one*. *They* become one as a killing machine. In this violent bonding there is no conceivable space for justice, as the operations of justice are theoretically and practicably incompatible with those of such an atelic state as love. To be more specific and accurate, love is intra-telic – it is its own *telos* or goal.

Justice here can be characterised as a special abstract promise to an as yet unknown party in an as yet unknown circumstance with regard to an as yet unknown outcome of some action. Justice in this sense is a promise that cannot be fulfilled. Justice is a pseudo-bond in which the consummation of the promised bond is eternally deferred or suspended. Justice, in this way, is a projection or recognition of that bond. Justice, in these terms, is the knowing or feeling that one has 'met' the illusive/allusive object of justice before. Recognition of this type always follows some perceived lack, and is the involvement of a complementarity of lost parts to be resolved or realised. Recognition in this way is the making whole of something once lost, fragmented, or dispersed.

The local familial loyalty that we see in Oskar and Eli's relationship, on the other hand, actively creates a strong identification, and is not based on recognition. That is, identification is the extension of oneself through association, and acceptance of one's own values, beliefs and interests as ascribed by the necessities of joining a particular social group. In this way identification is always in excess or an errancy of the self. In identification something more than the so-called whole is

created beyond the realisation or resolution of the whole. In pragmatic terms, the identification is *made* rather than found.

What is so interesting about the story of *Let the Right One In* is that it inverts the traditional dynamic of the relation between vampires and humans. Vampires are ordinarily absolute and charismatic ‘others’: strangers. Throughout most of the genre, and especially in the depictions of Dracula such as the 1930s films starring Béla Lugosi, the vampire is quite literally a foreigner, a Hungarian or Romanian, for instance. Also they are portrayed as from a different social class, very often aristocratic, and are regarded as exotic in the reserved indifference of their elite social behaviour. Their private *anti*-social behaviour is, of course, another matter entirely.

Let the Right One In, however, presents a different perspective, from the point of view of Eli. It is she who must be cautious of letting the ‘right one’ in. Throughout the film she is testing Oskar, to ascertain whether he might already share the same values, beliefs, and interests as hers. As the friendship develops, we see the building of identification generated. Their honesty with one another is a mutual identification that they are already the same at the level of their values, beliefs, and interests. They are not two halves seeking each other to become whole or resolved. Ideologically they are complex and share many convergences of values, beliefs, and interests. From the outset they follow a path together that their mutual identification generates as excess. They both have independence and yet they need each other for survival. They both face death without each other, whether this is the metaphysical death of the vampire or the banality of bullies at school threatening physical death.

This equity of Eli and Oskar’s symbolic and literal status is made evident in a subtle overturning of one of the main tropes of the vampire myth: that vampires have no reflection. Traditionally, the symbolic association of this is that the vampire is recognized as the human *Id*. In Freudian terms, the vampire is the ‘*Es*’ or, in English, ‘it’ (the violent primal object) to the self’s ‘I’, in German ‘*Ich*’ (the tempering subject of reason). However, in *this* film, there are several occasions where we see Eli’s reflection. We see it in a mirror in the hallway of her apartment, and we also see it in a window where she and Oskar gaze at a white cat on a windowsill that is hissing and scratching wildly because of Eli’s presence. Also, poignantly, the film begins with Oskar standing looking out of his bedroom window. We see his back and a bright double reflection of him in the centre of the Swedish double-glazing. Oskar has reflections of his own and so does Eli. Eli is just one of many possible agents of reflections with whom Oskar might associate in identifying with the values, beliefs, and interests of such agents, and vice versa.

This question of the balance of agency of both protagonists is what gives this film its invention in the genre, pushing it past its traditions. This is principally achieved because Eli is a child-vampire. Eli is dependent, just as any human child is dependent. Her survival is clearly contingent on her relationship with her familiar. We see this every time she tries to drink from victims without the help of her familiar. Each time she is nearly killed and exposes the ‘truth’ of her existence, significantly increasing her vulnerability. She relies on the mutual dependency of her ‘familiar’, far more than other vampires who can successfully live a more solitary life, taking familiars for amusement and pleasure. In this way, Eli has far less autonomy than other vampires.

Also, as a child-vampire, existing against the ethos of vampire law, Eli has a complicated symbolic status. Other vampires are emblematically fully formed and stable in their symbolic status. They have a mature adult appearance and are in absolute stasis due to their vampire immortality. This again has formed the symbolic association of the vampire as ‘id’: the timeless universal primal element of human animality (the human’s amorphous undifferentiated ‘object-ality’). Eli has this vampiric stasis, she will never grow old, but her child’s body also signifies change and development; a body on the path to maturity, even though this is denied by her immortality. The collapse of the symbolic categories of stasis and change is embodied here in Eli as a chimeral-monster figure. She is a monstrous-monster, a chimeral-chimera; a monster even to other vampires. She is the figuration of a polysemic object. She is an exponential subject – a subject to the power ‘subject’. She is a subject always and already in excess of her subject status: what I will call a ‘matrixial object’.

These collapses of dichotomies played out in the film unsettle the possibility of a comfortable designation of the subjects, as is possible in most other vampire stories; that is, a reading of the subjects *as* subjects *and* the subjects as subjects *of* justice. Or perhaps more accurately, subjects

subject to the demands of the object of justice. In order to be able to designate an act as Just one must be able to appeal to the absolute nature of the universality of the object of justice. The subject is formed in relation to the universality of this absolute by constantly moving towards the absolute to complete itself. However, the absolute is eternally suspended until the final communion with, for example 'God', where the subject is freed as spirit becoming one in communion with God, and the body becomes an object as it communes with the earth as dust.

In *Let The Right One In*, however, we see the complication of definitive designations of who or what is a subject and who or what is an object. Also, we see Oskar's rejection of what he sees as the 'corrupted' or 'untrustworthy' validity of justice in favour of a far stronger local empirically tested bond, that of loyalty. This is the basis of the 'realism' that the film puts forward as its structural point of articulation. Justice and loyalty are collapsed as loyalties of different scope. We are presented with a pragmatic reality where there are only competing loyalties. In other words, we cannot posit which parties are *absolutely* just.

This brings me to the essay, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', by the American Neo-Pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty in which he proposes the dissolution of universal moral obligations, such as justice, in favour of models of politics built on specific contingent relations.² Essentially, Rorty's essay is another of his many attacks on the Kantian basis of Jürgen Habermas's 'Communicative Action Theory'. Rorty's life's work, as is well known, relativises the universality of universal claims, principally those in philosophy. His extensive body of writing sets out to demonstrate that the assumed universality of Enlightenment rationality is simply a contingent by-product of the specific social and economic historical conditions (that is, the specific *cultural* particularities) of Western Enlightenment Liberalism and the economic wealth it has generated.

In this essay Rorty employs a surprisingly simple argument from another American philosopher, Michael Walzer. In Walzer's article, 'Thick and Thin: Moral Arguments at Home and Abroad',³ he proposes a counter-intuitive model of the qualification and quantification of loyalty vs. justice vis-à-vis sentiment vs. rationality, which are the normative assumed respective correlatives.⁴

Ordinarily, a universal claim such as justice is believed to be morally 'thicker' (i.e. more valid and stable) than a local sentimental claim of loyalty, because of its greater assumed articulation and applicability. However, Walzer and Rorty present the query that if a universal concept like 'justice' is based on rationality (i.e. the balancing of knowledge), then why is it that when it comes to loyalty it is more likely that we 'know' the interested parties involved in a 'thicker' (more, deeper, richer knowledge) than the 'thin' knowledge we would have of the unknown, unknowable parties that we assumed would benefit from the so-assumed more rational 'justice'. In this counter-intuitive empirical observation we conclude that 'justice' is far more like an irrational mode of thought such as belief or faith.

I will follow this flipping of 'thick and thin', problematising the assumed normative terms and tenets of *loyalty* and *justice* as I explore the complex relation between 'the curatorial' and 'works of art', to see if this 'flipping' is a useful model therein. The principle question is whether art has anything to do with justice, which is a question about to whom art is addressed and why. This 'address' is the reason for 'the curatorial' being involved. Here, I refer to 'the curatorial' as the mechanisms or apparatuses of visibility (in its widest sense) of art, 'the curatorial' as the apparatus that makes possible the manifestation of the 'art' of works of art.

To return to Rorty's essay, he cites an example from business to show the complicated problem of nominating or designating an attitude as 'loyalty' and another decisively as 'justice', and the precariousness of the universal validity of the concept.

When American business people are told that they are being disloyal to the United States by leaving whole cities in our Rust Belt without work or hope, they sometimes reply that they place justice over loyalty. They argue that the needs of humanity as a whole take moral precedence over those of their fellow-citizens and override national loyalties. Justice requires that they act as citizens of the world.⁵

Here Rorty refers to a specific case, but this mantra can be observed in the PR material issued by many global corporations (and curators, for that matter). He continues:

Donald Fites, the CEO of the Caterpillar tractor company, explained his company's policy of relocating abroad by saying that 'as a human being, I think what is going on is positive. I don't think it is realistic for 250 million Americans to control so much of the world's GNP'.⁶

Now what is literally said here by Fites may be something with which those of us with socialist sympathies could heartily agree. However, what is clearly going on *really* is that the humanist concept of 'justice' is being used as an alibi for the proliferation of the patently anti-humanitarian a-humanist ethos of capitalism – that is, for the Caterpillar Company to expand its profit margins. This is compounded by the fact that Fites feel he has to tell us here that he is a human being.

And so, it is with the precariousness of such humanist concepts as justice in mind that I would like to present a speculative account of one possible model of the relation between 'the curatorial' and 'the art of art work', or the 'action of art', that may help develop curatorial practice. My claim is that for approximately one hundred and fifty years since the birth of state-owned public museums and galleries, for all the formal innovations especially since the 1960s, art and curatorial practices have been and continue to be regarded as humanist activities or disciplines, and as such they have continuously been appropriated, assimilated, and instrumentalised to the ends of activities that generate wealth, economic gain, and the consolidation of power, such as capitalist activity, or naive liberal and cynical neo-liberal governmental activity, or ecclesiastic activity, or continued feudal activity. The ideological apparatuses of the various historical humanisms have time and time again been developed and then used for ends that actually turn out to be acts that threaten the ethics of any humanism.

One final word from Rorty about the problems of universal rationality and the instrumentalisation of humanisms, and the problems of international politics, before my final point about how all this relates to art. At the end of the essay Rorty writes:

Non-Western societies in the past were rightly sceptical of Western conquerors who explained that they were invading in obedience to divine commands. More recently, they have been sceptical of Westerners who suggest that they should adopt Western ways in order to become more rational. [...] On the account of rationality I am recommending, both forms of scepticism are equally justified. But this is not to deny that these societies should adopt recent Western ways by, for example, abandoning slavery, practicing religious tolerance, educating women, permitting mixed marriages, tolerating homosexuality and conscientious objection to war, and so on. As a loyal Westerner, I think they should indeed do all these things. [...]

But, I think that the rhetoric we Westerners use in trying to get everyone to be more like us would improve if we were more frankly ethnocentric, and less professedly universalist. It would be better to say: here is what we in the West look like as a result of ceasing to hold slaves, beginning to educate women, separating church from state, and so on. Here is what happened after we started treating certain distinctions between people as arbitrary rather than fraught with moral significance. If you would try treating them that way, you might like the result. Saying that sort of thing seems preferable to saying: look at how much better we are at knowing what differences between persons are arbitrary and which not (i.e.) how much more rational we are.⁷

Ultimately Rorty collapses the possibility of a universally valid distinction between loyalty and justice to propose quantitative measures of loyalty to smaller or larger groups, allowing for the possibility of an expansive politics of trust and acceptance on the basis of creating shared identifications rather than recognitions. To do this we can see that he uses an anti-humanist contingent localising model of ethnocentrism to try to put into effect this more broad humanitarian aim. I will expand upon the following questions:

- a) How can art and curatorial practice resist the kind of banal instrumentalisations that I described above?
- b) Can art and curatorial practice usefully employ *Anti-Humanist* methodologies to assist in

the reconfiguring of their operations to effect this?

c) What can and should 'the curatorial' do for 'art', and what might both realistically do for the concrete politicized of 'our societies' rather than for the abstract concept of 'humanity'?

Before my final argument, a quick recap:

1. *Let the Right One In* overturns the universal claims of justice in 'natural' kinship in favour of loyalty in 'cultural' friendship.
2. Rorty overturns the universal claims of justice in rationality in favour of loyalty in politics.
3. My argument is to overturn the universal claims of Justice in the curatorial's assumed duty to audiences in favour of contingent local loyalty between 'the curatorial' and art.

Justice in traditional vampire movies is exemplified in the fact that killing vampires is universally right. It is the rational reasonable thing to do. In politics, for Habermas, justice is achieved in the universal acceptability of rationality over irrationalism. That is the reasonable thing to do. According to Rorty, however, this is the 'imperialism' of universal rationality in Western liberal humanism, which in effect creates an anti-humanitarian politics.

In the humanist conception of art, justice is supposed to be delivered by 'the curatorial' in making art universally accessible, sensible and intelligible. However, my proposition is to consider the relationship of 'the curatorial' and 'art' as more like the unusual friendship between Oskar and Eli.

My analogy is that the ontological status of art is like that of Eli, a dependent 'matrixial object', and that the action of art is vampiric, in that it is anti-epistemological. The action of art transubstantiates the subjects of language into 'matrixial objects' (in Badiouian terms 'singular multiplicities'), in the same way that a vampire can transubstantiate humans in a way that is both destructive and creative.⁸ Vampiric action can transubstantiate a person (a subject) into an object (a dead body), thus destroying it, or it can transubstantiate a person into a living-dead body, another vampire ('matrixial object'), which is a radically creative action. The difference here is something like the difference between types of art that are illustrative, propagandistic, representationalist on the one hand, and art 'proper' on the other.

In the vampiric action of the work of art, language is 'delivered' to object status, its life-force (subject-representationalistic potentiality) is drained, just as the living blood is drained from the human by the vampire, 'delivering' the subject to one or other of these two forms of death. The *destructive* transubstantiation brings the newly created object into communion with the world, making it effectively disappear, reaching the logical end of its becoming. The *creative* transubstantiation, however, brings the newly created 'matrixial object' into an anti-communion with the world. This 'matrixial object' is made up of 'subject-ness' but the movement of becoming of this subject-matter is brought to a stasis, just as the child-vampire is unable to reach maturity, never able to continue or complete its becoming. In this way, the work of art is closer to Eli, than it is like other vampires, in that it is vulnerable in its static immaturity, and thus is dependent on the contingencies of a familial relationship with 'the curatorial'. I am claiming that a curatorial modality 'puffed-up' by following the objectives of justice would be too blunt to look after the fragile yet violent work of art. This kind of curatorial modality walks with art hand-in-hand proudly yet blindly into the dangers of possible instrumentalizations.

In the work of art, what is created is the *being* of language in stasis: the language-object (this 'matrixial object') is being as a singularity as a matrix of contingencies. The work of art here is not a liminal object, as is so often supposed. The action of art is a world-creating power. It creates the object not as 'threshold,' to world, but as world in *this* world as excess. These are incommensurable worlds built of subjects that are re-orientated and redirected as an implosive force.

The art action of the art work is the art work and cannot be read or comprehended in the language-movement world in and from which it is formed: it has its own dimensionality in the being of the language-stasis world that it is. Just as the vampire's way of living is radically different from the human way of living, so the work of art's operations of language are radically different from the uses of language by the subjects of language. The vampire drains and stills the life-force

of humans replacing it with another, and works of art drain and still the movement of language in the same way.

The 'curatorial' modality as the 'familiar' to the vampiric action of the work of art must betray the conventions of language such as 'universality', 'meaning', 'justice'. The curatorial brings the conditions for the possibility of language-movement to be brought to 'death' as a non-redemptive death. Freedom is not produced here for language, but far greater constraint. Death does not therefore equate with freedom. Instead, it produces other forms of constraint.

As the 'familiar', the curatorial action must protect and veil the art action of the work of art as it undertakes its 'eventality'.⁹ It must shield the action of the art work from the subjectivising power of ideology delivered by the action of the movement of the subjects of language. The art action of the work of art must not be 'figurable', just as the dependent vampire must not be exposed.

In this way, counter-intuitively, the curatorial must act against the arterial streams of language, i.e. culture. It must secretly assist in the destruction of culture and the deconfiguration of its subjects, while appearing to assemble the context for the possibility of culture, of *or for* the social. Curating is therefore only ever *quasi*-political in that, in this schema it hides the political action of art. It is an inherently duplicitous role to prepare or construct the conditions for the atelic 'transubstantiation' in the '*anti-social*' clinamenal action of art.¹⁰

The art action of the work of art is its own embodied justice, and the curatorial cannot and should not try to lead language (i.e. interpretation, meaning, value, etc.) out of this action's irresistibly violent being.

The curatorial is therefore only effectual if it effects the conditions for the political valence of the action of art, if it sticks to its fidelity to this local interested party, the 'eventality' of the art work.

In the model I propose, the curatorial only ever enacts loyalty to the event of the action of the work of art as a violence of loyalty, a violence directed at the social function of the subjects of language. In this way 'the curatorial' cannot deliver justice to 'the social' via the production or exegesis of language, which is what is ordinarily (and increasingly) presumed to index and constitute the value of 'the curatorial'.

NOTES

1. Dir. Tomas Alfredson, *Let The Right One In*, Sweden: EFTI; 2008.
2. Richard Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', *Philosophical Papers Set: Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, vol. 4, ed. by Richard Rorty, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2007.
3. See also Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Arguments at Home and Abroad*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2006.
4. See also Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Arguments at Home and Abroad*.
5. Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', p. 43.
6. Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', p. 43. Here Rorty is quoting from Edward Luttwark, *The Endangered American Dream*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993, p.184.
7. Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', pp. 54-55.
8. For a comprehensive outline of Badiou's use of the term 'singular multiplicity' see Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, London: Continuum, 2006. For discussion of how Badiou uses this concept in regard to art, see <http://www.lacan.com/frameXXIII7.htm> [accessed 11 December 2010]. The full article is found in the journal *Lacanian Ink*, no. 23, New York: Lacanian Ink Press, 2004.
9. Here I am using the term 'eventality' to indicate the contingent, fragile but violent nature of the exposure of the art of works of art. My position is that this moment of exposure is contingent upon the specific circumstances that are created by the presence of the work of art and an appropriate curatorial technology of visibility. The power of this moment is contingent upon the specific circumstances of what forms of visibility are recognisable by those to whom it is exposed. Also, the power that fuels this moment erupts unpredictably and is gone as soon as it flashes in to being. I take this characterising of the term 'eventality' from Alain Badiou (see note 8 above), and Louis Althusser (especially in 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter', in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, London: Verso, 2006, pp. 163-207).
10. The 'Clinamen', or swerve, is a concept most associated with the Greek philosopher Epicurus and later the Roman poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus. It is a beautiful metaphor that tries to account for the different strength of certain political actions, where some may have huge world altering effects and others disappear in to obscurity. In this way, it describes one model to account for change in the universe, which proposes that potentially potentially profound chance encounters begin with infinitesimally small moments of deviation from the invisible norms that traverse all matter in the universe, that they come from nowhere, that they happen all the time, and that their effects may have the potential to create new worlds. The model describes a rain of atoms all falling perfectly in parallel in a vacuum. As the atoms fall, completely inexplicably, one atom deviates from its path in an infinitesimally small way. This atom eventually hits the one next to it. This then nudges that atom into the next and then a huge pile-up occurs, and, to paraphrase Althusser, the potential of a world is born. For an illuminating introduction to the Epicurean/Lucretian notion of 'the clinamen' and how this concept can be applied to problems of contemporary politics and philosophy, see: Althusser, 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter', pp. 163-207.