

Kurt RÖTTGERS

The Pornographic Turn
Or: The Loss of Decency

Once upon a time men had no souls, regardless of their evolutionary heredity. They are supposed to have been happy, and they did not miss anything like that what people later on called the soul of man. And then there appeared the inventor of something invisible within himself. He may have said: "I've got a daimonion in my inner. I can witness it, but you can't. This is my soul, and it is immortal. The proof is, that I can remember things which my bodily senses never experienced. My body is ugly, I know, and you all know it as well. But what you don't know is that my inner sense sees the idea of Beauty itself. I hate my body, but I love my soul. It inhabits my body like a ruler of a cart, and it is prepared to live along when my ugly body is deceased. My soul is absolutely private, no one else can get an impression of it, even if you cut me up."

We know him, whose virtual speech I just reported. But even if we voluntarily concede that the man Socrates has a soul, how can we assure that everyone has a soul, even women after some time, and even mermaids some time later can achieve an immortal soul, on the wise condition, it is true, that it is not allowed for them to speak about it. Believe or not, that Socrates had a soul, the fact is, that this soul is of no special use besides allowing the proposition, that the ugly body is not all of Socrates, and that the inner Socrates is immortal. That is not really much about it, isn't it? I mean, if someone has a beautiful body and the life of it is full of sense, then why should he or she afford to have an immortal soul? A soul which is absolutely private like that of Socrates is by definition unsocial. So it is no wonder that this man was found guilty by his fellowmen.

The situation changes when everybody has something within himself which nobody else can see. Then we can work together to make more of it than just the instance of immortality. Nietzsche, Foucault and nowadays Judith Butler have shown by which procedures of power souls are made to fit into the bodies and into the body politic. The Church, the institution of the administration of immortality, the army, as the institution of organizing mortality, and the institutions of education have invented an arsenal of a great refinement in producing this inner world. At the climax of modernity this inner world is highly differentiated in an inner infinity, called individuality. Though it is produced, it is, take it for a paradox, still a secret for others, even unreachable for common language: Individuum est ineffabile, to say it with a word reported by Goethe. But since it is produced or induced by social practices, it is social by origin, opposite to the Socratic soul. It may be immortal or not – a theme of the Romantic psychology –, that is not our concern, but at most that of those instances which have to handle the overcrowding in heaven.

At the noon of modernity this inner world is not only unreachable for others. It would also be regarded as an offence to try to step into the inner world of others; the body, the clothes, the masks we wear, protect us against such offences. The protection of privacy, esp. of the inner privacy is an elementary right of man.

All this has changed in the era of postmodernity we now live in or from. Now everyone is observed in all details, not only the bodily motions by surveillance cameras, but also every motion of his or her soul, the motives, the wishes, the most secret ambitions are registered and saved to great data files, esp. by customer cards, the bookings by credit cards the contacts by telephones etc. The mobile phone has become an attribute of identity; whereas former stationary telephones identified a place, where persons could be or pass by, the mobile phones identifies a person, or at least a user, which is not located in a fixed place, but from

moment to moment just where the user happens to be. And you are meanwhile expected to have a mobile phone, otherwise you are not really a person. If you are walking through a forest and you fail to come to a meeting place in time, everyone expects you to phone from the forest to announce the delay, otherwise you are supposed to be eaten by a bear or at least lost your consciousness. And if you tell someone that you do not own a mobile phone he or she will not believe it and will suspect that you are just not inclined to give him or her the number. A normal person among human beings has such a number.

This transition to postmodernity is a consequence of the process of globalization, initiated by the eighties of the 20th century, but it is also a consequence of the great ideological process of unmasking, initiated by modernity with the aim of transparency. The critiques of ideologies believed that only absolute transparency would guarantee the necessary trust in individuals with an unmeasurable and infinite inner world of motives and incentives. Of course the opposite is the case. Trust is a risk, invested because there never is the guarantee of transparency. So societies lie on trust not on transparency. That is why there is no sense in unmasking veiled souls. Secrecy of the other side of a society of trust. Lenin is attributed the saying, that trust is good, but control is better; it is not proved that he really said it, but in case he did, he was wrong. Control is good, but trust is better. A society which relies on control as many dictatorships do, has very high costs in organizing the security necessary for any kind of communication. But the technological progress nowadays makes it possible to reduce the costs of absolute transparency and surveillance. This project of transparency I tentatively call pornographic. The literal sense of the term pornography is that something is made visible, which better should not be seen, what should be kept as a secret. It is better to kept in secrecy whether you have a soul or not and all its qualities drives. The pornographic curiosity not only to see all the hidden details of another persons body, but also all the hidden details of his soul. Shame is the mechanism not to expose or exhibit everything to anybody. The postmodern tendency to a voyeuristic transparency is corresponding to a growing readiness to an exhibitionism, which is normally apologized with the formula "They – whoever it may be – may see me, since I have nothing to hide." That is the fault, I would like to answer; you should have something to hide." It is offensive not to hide some details of your body or of your soul. Total transparency equals to the total loss of decency, i.e. the loss of the necessary politeness against other people.

In the internet you can find whatever you want; if you have the respective pornographic ambitions you can even look into the bodies of other people, e.g. into the inner of a vagina. But, I think, even worse, you can, if you want to, exhibit every part of your body to the international community if web users and surfers. And the same holds for the soul. And if you expose your body that implies more than quasi physiological information a doctor may professionally be interested in, because got rid of every bit of decency implies exposing your very soul. Nearly every perversity of your wishes, you can publish them to the global society. And since the soul was by definition something you cannot see, psychic pornography destroys that secret which modernity used to call the soul.

That means postmodernity is the era of the end of the soul. Let me illustrate this thesis by a final remark. People not only say that they do not have anything to hide, i.e. that they do not have a soul, but they also feel the more safe the more they are subjected to surveillance. Of course this is an illusion. But people obviously like this illusion; The more you see of me, the safer I am, and the safer I am, the more I am really. Modernity said: I think therefore I am, and in addition the later modernity. I am acting in freedom, therefore I am. Postmodernity says: I am seen, therefore I am, and in addition: I can be called by everyone, therefore I am. I have a mobile phone number, therefore I am really.

Personally I do not regret the loss of the soul. Through the pornographic turn. But what I do regret is the loss of decency. I do not want to be confronted with all the details of

other people's bodies or souls, which were masked formerly. But even when we adore nudity and transparency, there are differences not to be neglected. The destruction of the soul by transparency creates new spheres of secrecy, "krypta" called by Abraham and Torok, but the bodily offence by nudity in front of the surveillance systems does not give us an residual body. It is the only one we have, and it is mortal.

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