

ARTS OF PERVERSION: JACK BAUER, "La Femme NIKITA" AND THE PERVERTED BODY OF CAPITALISM

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ABSTRACT:

This article discusses the television series "24" and "La Femme Nikita" with reference to perverted bodies and capitalism's feigned symbolization of the Imaginary.

RESUMO:

Este artigo reflete sobre as séries de televisão "24" e "Nikita" com referência a corpos perversos e à fictícia simbolização do Imaginário promovido pelo capitalismo.

KEYWORDS:

"24", "La Femme Nikita", Deleuze, Lacan, Badiou, Capitalism

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

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The first thing that springs to mind when we consider "The Arts of Perversion" is what is excluded from the phrase. As a marker of common resonances, "The Arts of Perversion" points to a metaphoric absence as we open our discussion of perversion proper. What is missing is clearly what we will not discuss – the Science of Perversion, although Freud and, to a lesser extent, Lacan may have preferred such a discussion. Remember their lifelong struggle to render psychoanalysis a respectable "discipline", and science always seems to trump the arts in the academic pecking order. The Arts imply a skill whose results cannot necessarily be repeated. They imply something in which iteration does not necessarily echo empirical corroboration but

rather the possibility of originality in duplication. The Arts imply there is not one all-encompassing, ever-repeatable Law. Indeed, the Arts imply perversion, as they push the limits of the Law's boundaries, demanding the Law changes as it remains the same, or remains the same as it changes. This, in psychoanalysis, is as good as tantamount to an isomorphic identity relation.

Yet, if we were to think about the Science of Perversion, what would that mean? Would modern torture techniques as depicted frequently on our television screens in prime-time entertainment slots as much in Portugal as in the United States be a Science or an Art of Perversion? Think of the portrayal of torture in contemporary cult classics like the extremely successful international television franchise operations "24" and "La Femme Nikita". Both are products resulting from a collaboration between Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran. The former stars Keifer Sutherland as the perpetually rogue counter-terrorist agent, confronting a torrent of pending catastrophes. Repeatedly, he has just seconds to save the world in a formulaic, if adrenalin-ridden, performance replete with betrayals. The latter is a television series based loosely on the eponymous 1990 cult French film by Luc Besson. It follows the travails of Nikita, played by Peta Wilson, who is an unwilling secret agent with constant ethical conflicts in the officially non-existent anti-terrorist unit, Section 1.

In both series, although more systematically in "La Femme Nikita", state-sanctioned but never officially legitimated torture often takes the form of bland pasty-faced men and women, in lab coats, entering the interrogation room where the recalcitrant international terrorist is constrained and refusing to cooperate. There, the sartorially coded representatives of cutting-edge science then dispassionately inject the prisoner with just the empirically proven right amount of pain and suffering to oblige the prisoner to cave in, and tell all. Overseeing the interrogation procedure in "La Femme Nikita" is usually the psychologist, Madeline, played by Alberta Watson, who embodies the coldness of science.

It is a depiction of true sadism, as Deleuze understood it, when he challenged the sloppy Freudian conflation of sadomasochism in his essay "Coldness and Cruelty". The torturer in these series is as good as an automaton: a body with no soul or subjectivity, measuring out torture like a machine, giving just the right dose, in a repeatable way, proven by years of scientific experimentation and the perfection of pain. These characterizations of torturers represent the Science of Perversion: the Deleuzian sadistic side of perversion with its instrumentalization of pain inflicted, and belief in the Institution (Section 1 in one case or CTU, the Counter-terrorism Unit, in the other) as a subjective mechanism.

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In the series, the scientific perverts do have their artistic counterparts, embodied in their heroes, namely Nikita and Jack Bauer. The crux of the distinction between the science and the art of perversion seems to be the ethical conflict. Nikita and Jack constantly face ethical dilemmas. Nikita feels she does not belong in Section 1 but nor can she escape. She faces a series of uncomfortable choices that, as the series progress, become less about escaping from Section 1 and more about understanding what her role is in the unit. Throughout it all, she is the moral conscience, articulating concerns on behalf of the innocent lives sacrificed for collective security. Jack always seems to have to choose between saving his wife/daughter/friend/boss and the world at large. Both are perverse in artistic, unrepeatable ways, flouting the Law in order to prove the Law's existence. They skillfully twist the Law that governs their social interaction, in order, they hope, to have their cake and eat it – to save both the individual due to be sacrificed and the collective, an option ruled ineligible by the Law. Having their cake and eating it is, of course, a fundamental characteristic of perversion. As the heroes negotiate within the dictates of the Law, they accept its contract only to shift its parameters in order to enforce the Law itself. If we remember one of Deleuze's distinctions between sadism and masochism, a sadist is all about the institution of the law, where

a masochist is most interested in the contract of the Law. Jack and Nikita, in the repeated abuse to which they subject their own bodies in the causes for which they fight (among other confections, Jack's drug addiction in one series in order to complete the task; or Nikita's eventual giving up of the love interest she most desires (Michael) at the end of the final series) embody masochistic heroes, even amidst their immense aggression and testosterone surges. Everything they do, as they fight to save the world, comes at the expense of their own sacrifice, to such an absurd degree that the viewer is left wondering if the trigger for their actions is not so much the causes they defend but the suffering it costs them as individuals. In other words, what the series present us with are the hero-as-masochist, and even more bizarrely in the case of Bauer, the peculiar configuration of the torturer-as-masochist, who claims not to want to do what has to be done, who suffers as he does it, and who, at the end of the day, even if he takes the blame somehow is exempt in the viewer's mind of any kind of responsibility for his actions. He had no choice! Imagine the perverse sophistry of being framed as the ethical character who ultimately has no choice. Where the scientific pervert has no desire and is almost psychotic in his sadism, the artistic pervert strives to call the shots, but never be pinned down by anything as prosaic as responsibility.

If we remember the Lacanian framework, each subjectivity is neurotic, psychotic or perverse, depending on how the subjectivity occupies its place in the Symbolic order. In order to progress to consider how perverse subjectivities in a neocolonial capitalist order of things may be contemplated through Badiou's concept of the perverse body, it is helpful to begin by returning to Lacan's notions of registers and psychoanalytical typologies, and to muse about how capitalism manages to mimic these orders. Yet, in the process, capitalism stakes a claim to totalize where Lacan was a firm believer in the "Not-All", in awkward residues that become the fundamental of any register. Indeed, it

is precisely in this fallacy of completed and unconnected registers that capitalism breeds its violence, and creates its perverted bodies – expendable life forms that are neither meritorious nor sacrificed – another typology, this time of Alain Badiou, to whom we will briefly return¹.

As we may know, Lacan, refining Freud, defined each subjectivity in relation to the Law. The Law, in Lacanian terms, is to be understood as something almost Lévi-Straussian, as the norms that govern our social interactions, and dictate what meaning can and cannot be articulated. Lacan, throughout his career, repeatedly referred to his system of registers, refining in later years misunderstandings that had often located registers in some kind of chronological sequence of human development, to an understanding that the three registers were, in most of us, inextricably linked, like the button hole in a quilt.

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The three registers are the Real, the most difficult to conceive due to its simplified definition as that which cannot be symbolized; the Imaginary – a register in which egos and jealousies, rivalries and fallacies of total independence from the Other reside; and the Symbolic – the domain of meaning and social interaction, the entry into which gives us our subjectivities. Vaguely corresponding to those three registers, but by no means resident in each of them discretely, we have Lacanian Need, Demand and Desire. Need is what a pre-symbolic baby has – a time when it is just a blob given definition in the Symbolic order by doting parents and care-givers, who do all the acts of interpretation on its behalf. When the blob squawks, the mum, or whoever the caregiver is, determines this means the baby is cold or hungry or ill. At the moment of Demand, when the young child plays Freud's Fort-Da game in an effort to control an increasingly separated Other caregiver, it throws its food away for no other reason but to instigate a reaction in the Other – to force mummy to scowl as she picks the slop up off the floor. Desire, which is the surplus between Need and Demand, and which for most, but not all, of Lacan's career was the thing that made subjectivities tick,

has but one objective: more Desire. Desire's aim is Desire itself. Desire is provoked by that mystery flaw in the Symbolic order – the residue that cannot be symbolized: the *objet petit a*.

Where does capitalism fit in with these three Lacanian registers and is there anything productive to be gained by thinking capitalism through Lacanianism? It is tempting to locate capitalism, with its need for constant repetition, wasteful reproduction and process of petty rivalries which often instigate our compulsion to buy more, somewhere in an Imaginary realm. Yet, what capitalism is most eager to achieve is absolute exchange – the ability to assign a quantifiable exchange value to everything and then oblige everything to flow tagged by its unit of exchange in some kind of Symbolic order of things. So does capitalism belong to the realm of the Symbolic? Is our compulsion to buy just a trope of (manipulated) Desire? That possibility is not wholly convincing, either. In capitalism, we are before the last great totalizing narrative. In it, we witness the last, very pervasive yet currently imploding, trace of the Enlightenment's fantasy of the possibility of the whole picture, capable of capture and exchangeable if only we have the right tools. If we remember, science gave up on such a fantasy, when positivism ceded to relativity and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. Psychoanalysis, for its part, forced a rethink of philosophy's hubristic epistemological claims to want to know it all. The principal area of human existence that has yet to catch up with the "Not-All" of knowledge is the economic system. We were told capitalism was the only game in town, until it suddenly all came apart at the seams, in stock market crashes, bailouts, unemployment and generalized panic.

The issue is not that capitalism is an Imaginary order that makes us all behave selfishly as if I did not depend on the Other. Nor is it a Symbolic order that assigns exchange value to everything. Or rather, that is precisely the issue: it is *not* a Symbolic order because it does try to assign an exchange value to everything. The Symbolic relies on the lack at its center – the flaw in the fabric that cannot be symbolized, the point where the three

Lacanian registers intersect. Capitalism's ruse has been to fabricate another layer, to pretend to be total, and as Lacanianism predicts, any system that does that is prone to violent explosions of the Real. These explosions of the Real occur when what is excluded, as if it were not there, resurfaces in unexpected places and wreaks havoc with the fantasy of totalization. Capitalism, with its penchant for fragmentation – for chopping up natural relationships where they exist, and repackaging them with discrete units of value – tries to fill the hole in the Symbolic order. Yet, by definition, there is no Symbolic order without a hole. In other words, there are things in this life that cannot be assigned an exchange value. (It is interesting to think how close Lacan was to Marx on this, and how a theorist like Erich Fromm highlights precisely in works like the *Art of Loving* and *Marx's Concept of Man*, a non-totalizing space at the heart of Marx).

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This brings us to Alain Badiou's idea of the perverted body, to which he alludes in his article in *Lacanian Ink*, "The Son's Aleatory Identity in Today's World". A perverted body is a body we may be able to relate back to Jack Bauer and Nikita, and their conflicted role in essentially defending a capitalist order. Badiou's concern in his article is as much the place of the father as the place of the son in the marketplace. Indeed, he seems to have pangs of paternal guilt as he dedicates his article to his three sons. He begins his argument by almost lamenting the collapse of the Freudian order in which the mythic father's monopoly on *jouissance* is removed by a fraternal pact of aggression and a subsequent institution of the murdered father's Law: the three stage action of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*, namely "concrete revolt, abstract submission, universal love" (Badiou, 2008: 74). Badiou's concern is that, in the capitalist world order, rather than boys becoming men like they did in the olden days, men become boys. He fears that the only meeting point between fathers and sons is "by the infantilization of the adult" (*idem*: 77), in a culture that privileges youth and the eternal circulation of objects. In this order, Badiou only sees an

Imaginary Father, rather than the Real (or mythical in Freudian terms) father who used to develop into Symbolic Father. In fact, the thrust of Badiou's argument locates capitalism's apparent success precisely in its ability to locate us all in the Imaginary, and I concede there is a certain degree of validity to this argument. However, it is not so much that capitalism aims to locate us in the Imaginary, but rather that it tries to smash the quilting points that make us human – precisely those essential gaping links between the three registers that are horrendously difficult to navigate, but without which we are not human (in Badiou's language, maybe we remain animals).

Capitalism forecloses initiation into a true Symbolic by faking what supersedes the Imaginary as a totalizing web. The only register with a true fantasy of totality is the Imaginary – as an infant imagines itself to be a self-contained unit. The difference is that we only reach capitalism having passed through some kind of warped Symbolic, which, through its symbols of exchange, mimics the Imaginary order of things. This is a subtle but important distinction.

Badiou proposes that one of the three possible results of a market-driven "initiation without initiation" (Badiou, 2008: 78) he sees taking place in young adults today is the "perverted body": a body initiated into the "immobility of infinite adolescence" (*idem*: 78), an a-subjective body: a body that is perverted, claims Badiou, not in any reference to "perversion", but rather because of the "rejection of its usual function, which is to be the place of the subject" (*idem*: 79). Yet, there is something of the perverse in the body he describes. It is a numbed body, a drugged body, a body without passion, with no need to negotiate a complex Symbolic network, the complexity of which is precisely in its intrinsic points of lack. What Badiou describes is not so much the aleatory nature of the Son, but the emasculation of the Father, as his function is feigned in a new, faked version embodied in the institutions of the market. Let us not forget Lacan's repeated pun: père-version: perversion as a version of the father. The perverted

body is a body that has collapsed the Father's role into the Son. It has rendered the Son the figure emulated as the keeper of *jouissance* and determinant of Symbolic meaning. As such, it has destroyed meaning.

Here, we return to "La Femme Nikita" and "24". In both series, there is a père-version. Fathers malfunction either in the form of Jack Bauer whose lifestyle and career choices have catastrophic consequences on his daughter and whose own father wants him dead, or in Nikita, whose father is ultimately responsible for her being forced to accept her fate as an ethically challenged agent in Section 1. There is, however, something the two series have in common that complicates Badiou's phallogocentric castration of the Father. In both cases, it is a daughter – as Kim or Nikita – who bears the consequences of their fathers' actions, who suffers from her father's refusal to cede a place in a Symbolic network because he masochistically and adolescently wants to retain his place as an artistic pervert, constantly but never repeatably able to control the plot by enforcing and breaking the Law in the same action. Jack Bauer's constant refrain "I need this now!", whether it be a crucial piece of data or a discrete favor from a colleague in CTU, conspires with the show's rapid-fire format, to locate heroism in the immediacy of the adolescent universe. No contemplation or consideration is possible in the universe of "24". There is only space for Demand and immediate reaction, and the corollary of the artistic pervert-as-hero: no real responsibility for any action. Doing exactly what he wants to do, the hero will always claim he does not want to do what he is about to do, but has no choice. In the process, he defends a (capitalist) system which officially condemns him, but which needs him, too. Likewise, in "La Femme Nikita", the mysterious Mr. Jones – Nikita's father – operates in a universe devoid of complex choice, in which decisions to sanction paramilitary operations are determined by computer calculations and not ethical conflicts. The ease of the "no-choice" Demand-reaction is complicated in both series by daughters who question the adolescent spheres their fathers' deem

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as normal. Rather than being Badiou's sons who infantilize their fathers, Kim and Nikita are daughters who question the very premises of the universes their fathers represent. They foreground the real choices being made in a system of facile exchange. They reclaim a space for ethical interrogation that refutes the notion that everything has a Symbolic equivalence. Ultimately, they reopen the "Not-All" Lacan designated as the Woman's territory as the only mechanism for bringing the humanity of the body back into play in a world that perverts every ethical choice. <<

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NOTES

[1] Badiou distinguishes between three body types: the "perverted body" (he designates it as such to claim no direct link to perversion); the "meritorious body" – worthy of state protection; and "the sacrificed body" of a subjectivity driven to extreme, fundamentalist action. See Badiou, 2008.

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