

HUMPHRIES, MATTHEW MCLAURIN. M.A. *You Made Me This Way: Systems of Oppression in Joseph Heller's *Something Happened**. Directed by Dr. Eve Wiederhold. pp 47.

The purpose my paper is to examine Joseph Heller's novel *Something Happened* in regards to issues of gender, identity, and sex. Using a psychoanalytic framework, I examine the main character, Bob Slocum, and his relationship with the exterior world and the his memory.

Among the topics Slocum maintains focus on is his own sexual history and the sexuality of those around him. Slocum interprets the world in gendered terms but in such a way where his body is sexualized and he is reduced to his sexual parts.

I argue that Slocum's interpretation contributes to the unresolved and inverted Oedipal drama that runs throughout the novel and can only be resolved in the novel's conclusion. I argue that it is from a mixture of the need to resolve the Oedipal conflict in his life, his own sexual inadequacy and his latent narcissism that leads to Slocum killing his own son.

HUMPHRIES, MATTHEW MCLAURIN. M.A. Look at What You're Doing: The Body in Political Protest.  
Directed by Dr. Eve Wiederhold. pp 50.

I wish to examine the connection between political protest and body images. My principle topics will be center around images taken from various artists of the past decades and images used by anti-abortion activists.

Using a number of theorists, I aim to show that protests related to the body often rely on an understanding of passive participation. I aim to show that activists wish to appeal to this sense of passive participation and force audiences to act. Artists and protesters rely on a recognition of pain by the audience and attempt to incorporate pain and trauma into their pieces via their own bodies or through symbolic bodies.

YOU MADE ME THIS WAY: SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION IN JOSEPH HELLER'S  
*SOMETHING HAPPENED*

and

LOOK AT WHAT YOU'RE DOING: THE BODY IN POLITICAL PROTEST

by

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A Thesis submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
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Approved by

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Committee Chair

To the memory Kevin Michael Allin

if I only had your courage

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the  
Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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**YOU MADE ME THIS WAY: SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION IN JOSEPH  
HELLER'S *SOMETHING HAPPENED***

*“The underground man is vain, nasty, petty, tyrannical, vicious, cowardly, morbidly sensitive, and self-contradictory. He hates his fellow workers, never forgets an insult, tyrannizes over those who offer him affection, and offers affection to those who tyrannize over him. He turns love into lust, friendship into tyranny, and principle into spite. He respects neither love, nor affection, nor friendship, nor principle, nor logic. He is a sick and spiteful man”*

*Edward Wasiolek<sup>1</sup>*

*“I wonder how I would react if my wife came home smelling of another man's semen.”*

*Bob Slocum<sup>2</sup>*

In *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man*, the final book of Joseph Heller's career, Heller's closest literary doppelganger, aging novelist Eugene Pota (*Portrait Of The Artist*) comments on the difficulty in writing a book that will be described as a 'sex book.' He jokes that people want to hear about sex, they just don't want a (white/old/straight/etc.) man to say it. While others may be concerned with the propriety of such a novel, Pota worries about his own abilities. Heller writes, “And even more forbidding was the sense of irremovable uncertainty about a subject with which he no longer felt himself adequately in touch. In a cultural environment in which bunches of cheerleading teenage girls entering college boasted they were no longer virgins, had been in therapy, and were already on Prozac, he felt his civilization had bounded ahead too speedily for him to

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<sup>1</sup> Wasiolek, Edward. *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction*. Cambridge: M.I.T. UP, 1956, p 94.

<sup>2</sup> Heller, Joseph. *Something Happened*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997, p 440.

remain acquainted with all the specifics and that he had been left faltering impotently behind”.<sup>3</sup>

Eugene Pota is never able to complete his sex novel, with his lack of desire, ambition and knowledge all standing in the way of its completion. However, it is arguable that Pota’s creator did indeed write what could be termed a male sex novel. Such a term is likely to mischaracterize any novel as it would likely lead to unrealistic expectations, but, in some ways, Joseph Heller’s second novel, *Something Happened*, is something of a male sex novel. In what is still the most important piece written on the novel, Kurt Vonnegut recounts in his New York Times review of the work that “A middle-aged woman who had just finished *Something Happened* in galleys said to me the other day that she thought it was a reply to all the recent books by women about the unrewardingness of housewives’ lives.”<sup>4</sup> While those unspecified books may or may not deal specifically with sex, *Something Happened* most certainly deals with the subject and it deals with it from an unashamedly male perspective.

The voice in *Something Happened* is unmistakably male. He has male desires, goals and fears and, because of this, how he positions women in his monologue is especially significant. *Something Happened* is filled with a number of entropic systems, but it is often overlooked that women in the novel represent another type of closed system. They create familial and sexual systems from which Bob Slocum, the only voice in the novel, cannot escape. As a result, much like the bureaucratic language of his work,

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<sup>3</sup> Heller, Joseph. *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, p 24.

<sup>4</sup> Vonnegut, Kurt. “Something Happened.” *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*. Ed. James Nagel. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984, p 95.



the female body oppresses his desires. Whether he focuses on the sexual organs or the uterus, Slocum views women, from his wife and the women he sleeps with to Virginia from his youth and his mother, as inescapably linked to his own misery. It is no coincidence, then, that what ultimately leads to an improvement in Slocum's outlook of the world is the death of his son at his hands. Working within a Freudian paradigm, where repetition can be seen as the desire for death and self-created trauma as a sign of the desire towards living and escape, Slocum can escape the world of (subconscious) female oppression only by creating a trauma in his own life that will eliminate both the Oedipal conflict in his life and the embryonic desire for death.

**And frankly, I don't think I'd want to write a book about any of them, or about me.<sup>5</sup>**

As with many artists, there is a tendency to associate Joseph Heller with characters in his novels. With Heller this is especially tempting as so many of his protagonists share traits with one another and share portions of their histories and lives with their creator. The central character of every major Heller work, with the exceptions of *God Knows* and *Picture This*, is a white male who shares at least a cursory similarity to Heller. Heller has devoted interviews to denying the belief that Yossarian in *Catch-22* is based on specific events that occurred in his own tour of duty in World War II, and, he left the name of the company in *Something Happened* a mystery so it wouldn't be interpreted as an old employer. Being a writer obsessed with his own artistic status, often peppering his

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<sup>5</sup> *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man*, 54

interviews with specific and obscure quotes drawn from reviews of his works, Heller was well aware of the criticism that his protagonists frequently mirrored each other and their creator.

This can be seen most easily in his novel *Closing Time*, the sequel to *Catch-22* written over 30 years later, and dealing heavily with themes of aging and death. Yossarian, having survived World War II despite the infamous catch which seemed to doom him and also having survived the decades since, now realizes that time will be his ultimate killer. With death seeming more inevitable now than ever, Yossarian reflects on some of the figures of his generation who have already died, listing friends, celebrities, politicians and finally authors. He writes about Mario Puzo (a close friend of Heller's) having recently died and that "the Coney Island boy Joey Heller" is nearing death; he declares he will be glad when Heller dies so people may finally stop confusing them with one another.<sup>6</sup>

The similarities are not limited to Yossarian's likeness to his author as virtually every major Heller protagonist could be assumed to be Heller in some form. While Yossarian shares Heller's military background, it is important to note that in the initial chapter of *Something Happened*, published independently nearly ten years before the completed novel was released, Bob Slocum mentions his war experiences in the second World War. These similarities are exercised in many places but Slocum still experiences the freedom he experienced in wartime and the sexual awakening he underwent, two traits he shares with both Yossarian and Heller.

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<sup>6</sup> Heller, Joseph. *Closing Time*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994, p 346.

In other texts, the white, male, frequently Jewish protagonists also mirror Heller's life. Slocum and Gold from *Good as Gold* hold jobs, one an ad executive and the other a professor, that Heller held before abandoning all but writing, and the protagonist of *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man* is a barely disguised Heller down to the commencement speech at the University of South Carolina. In a somewhat cynical reading of Heller's relatively small output, it could be reasoned that Heller never found or could create a character he believed more interesting than himself. This is part of the reason his interviews are frequently as enjoyable as his works and play some role in his somewhat marginalized critical status.

With all works not expressly autobiographical, however, there is a danger in assuming the novel to be an expression of the author's life. It may be entirely correct to assume a work is filled with personal experiences of the writer, but it does not necessarily follow that the work is then a personal testimony. This may seem a fairly elementary point but it is one that should be made in relation to Joseph Heller especially in the context of *Something Happened*. Admittedly, Heller's strength as a writer did not lie in his ability to construct a carefully thought out and easily apparent plot. Though he would hardly be considered avant-garde – in fact, Heller himself would probably cringe at the pretentious notion – none of his major fictional works follow a traditional plot structure or format. *Catch-22* jumps chronologically and leaves numerous loose ends. *Good as Gold* and *Closing Time* follow a strict timeline but feature little in the way of conflict or resolution. *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man* and *God Knows* feature numerous stories within stories and each borders on a metafictional dialogue between artist and creation.

Even his autobiography, *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here*, abandons the standard biographical format, moving seemingly aimlessly throughout his life and short-changing reader's expectations as to what are major events. For example, in *Something Happened*, which he dubs "a masterpiece," is given all of two paragraphs in his autobiography and those are devoted primarily to the financial windfall it provided him and changes it allowed him to make ("I don't give presents anymore and I no longer observe holidays. I hardly ever hurry").<sup>7</sup>

This deviation from standard storytelling is another reason it is tempting to insert Joseph Heller into Joseph Heller novels, and nowhere is this more dangerous or understandable than in *Something Happened*. For a reader familiar only with *Catch-22* and Heller's biography, it is reasonable to imagine that this work is autobiographical and, more than that, something of a philosophical treatise disguised as a work of fiction. The novel, whose form will be discussed in greater detail later, is a free-form monologue of sorts whose first-person presence can be found in nearly every paragraph. With the exception of dialogue, it is rare that a sentence will pass without an 'I,' 'me' or 'my' included. The novel is an intense character study, prone to often irritating repetitions and the contradictions of a single mind. Readers are given access to one man and must hear the story as he wants to tell it.

With their similar backgrounds, Slocum could easily be mistaken for Heller. As the very act of storytelling can be seen as a Freudian act in and of itself, either in the

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<sup>7</sup> Heller, Joseph. *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999, p 215.

subconscious tendency towards fantasy and daydreaming or in the latent desires of creation and destruction, it is important to examine some of the similarities between Slocum and Heller. Though they may seem fairly obvious, merely an act of comparing biography to character development and plot, I believe it is fairly important as it helps codify some of the central themes I will discuss later. Many of these parallels and issues will be discussed later but I believe it is important to introduce them now.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, one of the most obviously important parallels between Slocum and Heller is the lack of a father. At virtually the same point as in *Something Happened*, Heller writes in *Now and Then* that he was unaffected by the loss of his father. Heller writes, "About my father, I simply lost interest in him after he was gone." He goes on to say, "If anything, the passing away of Mr. Isaac Daniel Heller was for me more a matter of embarrassment than anything else".<sup>8</sup> While the latter statement may be true, it is somewhat difficult to believe the former as Heller's own forays into psychoanalysis deal heavily with the loss of his father. Though Heller claims to have dismissed psychoanalysis as a trick of self-delusion, he does recognize why he found it so appealing. Even though he may not accept much of psychoanalysis, Heller realized he had a desire to reconcile the abandonment trauma of his father's absence in his own life. In dismissing psychoanalysis, Heller admits that he was more interested in presenting himself as an ideal patient, one equal to his analysand, than of gaining any insight into his life. Heller gives evidence to his own claim that he enjoys showing off intellectually by writing "I would imagine that in my eagerness to make an excellent impression as a

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<sup>8</sup> *Now and Then*, p 13.

patient, I was not alone among male subjects in a sophisticated hurry to plead guilty to such likely flaws as an Oedipus complex, castration fears, impotence fears, performance fears, ill will, ambivalent emotions toward everyone close to me, latent homosexuality, rage, shame, lustful thoughts, unconscious hatreds and unaccountable losses of confidence, vague perceptions and disguised, subterranean volcanoes of murderous aggression”.<sup>9</sup> This sentiment is transferred to *Something Happened* in part as Slocum’s feeling toward his father may have been successfully manufactured as these issues, but it is doubtful Slocum was entirely disinterested in them.

Freud is a name that appears frequently in Heller’s fiction and nonfiction, normally either in vague explanations or humorous quotations or quirks, and Heller appears too submerged in the Freudian paradigm to have completely dealt with all issues concerning his father.

In conjunction with Heller’s own biography is Slocum’s biography which becomes clearer upon rereadings. *Something Happened*, more than any other novel by Heller, benefits from a second reading, as it is only on the second reading that readers appreciate the act of Slocum telling his own story. By this I mean that, once the ending is known by the reader, Slocum can be seen to be trying to come to terms with his own actions and loss through the act of storytelling. Slocum is attempting to reconcile his guilt through storytelling for according to David Aberbach “Creativity, the affirmation of

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<sup>9</sup> *Now and Then*, p 222-223.

the wholly individual ability to imagine, may act as a vital part of survival, of the re-emergence of the whole and unique human being.”<sup>10</sup>

The Freudian reading of *Something Happened* cannot be limited entirely to what Slocum says but how Slocum tells his story. Slocum the narrator, paradoxically participating and unique from his telling, is as much of interest as any other portion of the story. As I will argue, Slocum’s narrative, in its monologue format, is a mimicry of the talking cure associated with Freudian psychoanalysis. By retelling his own story with errors in continuity and tense, Slocum attempts to gain mastery over his past and his role in it.

When examining the form of Heller’s novel the Freudian essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” stands as the most important text as it deals specifically with the ideas that dominate the form of *Something Happened*. The essay does not deal specifically with literature but it does deal with repetition, loss and creativity which are three of the dominant premises in Heller’s novel. Concerning children’s games, Freud writes “in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and in doing so they abreact the strength of the impression and, as one might put it, make themselves master of the situation.”<sup>11</sup>

David Aberbach in *Surviving Trauma: Loss, Literature and Psychoanalysis*, sees this childlike desire manifesting itself in literature. As the job of an author is often as much retelling as it is telling, Aberbach believes authors often use art to overcome

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<sup>10</sup> Aberbach, David. *Surviving Trauma*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989, p 3.

<sup>11</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. New York : Norton, 1975, p 16-17.

trauma. This may seem to be a rather mundane observation but it is worth making. Aberbach sees artistic statements, which, he points out, the overwhelming majority do not make, as attempts at mastering events that, in a sense, seem too big to deal with. From the loss of a loved one to surviving the Holocaust, Aberbach sees writers trying to gain a mastery over their surroundings. They want to return to an equilibrium in the conflicting ideas of causality and guilt that exist in their minds.

In his initial chapter, titled “Creativity and the Survivor,” Aberbach writes “the searcher still commonly believes, or half-believes, that the dead can be found and recovered.”<sup>12</sup> This helps explain some of Slocum’s lapses in tense. At one point he is describing events as they happened, the next he is talking about “looking back” and “now that I know.” In his search, in his retelling, Slocum can relive with the mistaken assumption that he can correct or alter the past. One of the difficult elements of *Something Happened* is that it presents a totally unlikable character, one for whom the audience would have nothing but contempt, and then has him suffer a terrible loss. Slocum searches believing his son can be rediscovered. “Searching is in any case an expression of the normal human impulse to explore and create, and bereavement may give especial force and direction to this impulse.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Surviving Trauma*, p 7

<sup>13</sup> *Surviving Trauma*, p 18



**He puzzles over things like that well in advance (although not in these words, which are mine)<sup>14</sup>**

Though Heller would later come to dismiss the usefulness of psychoanalysis, *Something Happened* follows a clear psychoanalytic model down to the form. At one point Slocum asks “Is this schizophrenia or merely a normal, natural, typical, wholesome, logical, universal schizoid formation?”<sup>15</sup> In Slocum’s world, the world created in Heller’s long, single-voiced narrative, determining the difference verges on being impossible as there are few answers to the multitude of questions raised, and, for those answers Slocum gives, he frequently offers the negative. Few affirmations present themselves that will not later be denied, and the repetition, the constant re-asking of the same questions and re-telling of the same stories, becomes as much an answer as anything else provided.

The schizophrenic nature of the narrative, or, to say it better, the dual-voiced nature of this monologue, exists even in the way the story is presented. Slocum fills his monologue with parenthetical asides that create a tension in tone where the reader hears an honest presentation of the main character’s conflicting thoughts. Readers get the conscious and the subconscious if such a thing is possible. Slocum lives as a man with dual thoughts, though few are ever positive, but he cannot help to present them both which radically alters the meaning of his speech. For example, to the comment “That boy. Oh that boy of yours. He is really something,” Slocum, without his parenthetical statements, tells his reader “We think so too and operate automatically to change

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<sup>14</sup> *Something Happened*, p 223

<sup>15</sup> *Something Happened*, p 506.

him...lying to him and to ourselves that it is for his own good.” This hardly reads as a positive affirmation of his son’s gifts, but sounds glowing compared to the same answer with the parenthetical comments replaced:

We thinks so too (we are somewhat vain and braggarts about these precious intuitions and idiosyncrasies of his in which we can take proprietary delight) and (like rigid, high-powered machines, not really in charge of ourselves) operate automatically to change him...lying to him and to ourselves (as I lied, and knew I was lying, when I filed my mother away into that repulsive nursing home that I described to her and others with false energy as being beautiful, new, and comfortable as a modern hotel) that it is for his own good. (And not for ours.).<sup>16</sup>

In this passage, which is not an anomaly, Slocum turns from a compliment toward his son to revealing his latent guilt about his treatment of his mother. He provides context and subtext and creates a circular language in the text where the one man’s two voices work to create one meaning.

This circular meaning stands as only appropriate for a character whose entire life moves from one circular system TO another. Many critics of *Something Happened*, in particular Lindsey Tucker, see Slocum as trapped within a life of entropy. Though Slocum can move within his social structure, he cannot escape it. This can be seen in his job, where he can advance but the advancement will not alter his psyche in any novel way, and in his home life, where his family has formed a closed system that, despite his covert feelings, he cannot escape.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Something Happened*, p 112.

<sup>17</sup> Tucker, Lindsey. “Entropy and Information Theory in Heller’s *Something Happened*.” *Contemporary Literature*, 1984 Fall; 25 (3), 314-317.

The form of *Something Happened* is set up in an unequivocally Freudian model. Concerning the Freudian nature of all literature, Peter Brooks writes, “narrative’s ‘instinctive’ desire to seek its own cure in the death of the plot, a death that can only come - following the psychoanalytic model – after the text has remembered and worked through its own original and repressed secrets and traumas. Narrative middles repeat and replay lost time, delaying the ending of the plot, in an attempt to gain a knowledge and understanding of the relation of origins to desire the ends of desire.”<sup>18</sup> Heller’s novel follows this formula almost as if it were written in specific response to it. *Something Happened*, for all its formal and structural abnormalities, does feature formal, traditional closure. In a stylistic move even a writer as dexterous as Heller has difficulty pulling off, it attempts to morph into a traditional narrative with traditional closure. It believes closure can be achieved.

More than that, the entire novel is an ideal example of the psychoanalytic model of the talking cure. Without clear direction or rigidly defined ends (best represented in Slocum’s desire to define the ambiguous ‘something’) the subject is allowed to discuss in monologue till his own self-determined solution is reached. Slocum’s internal reliance on the monologue shirks the traditional storytelling model but is, in its own way a form of conflict resolution. Taking the Freudian talking cure as a literary model, Heller gives Slocum a free-form outlet to define the ‘its’ and ‘somethings’ that continue to influence his adult life. If the novel can be defined a plot it somehow revolve around one man’s attempt to confront and define his infantile desires and traumas. Slocum attempts to

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<sup>18</sup> Brooks, Peter. *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p 16.

master his own life through constant self-examination. The solution to the present and future lie in the examination of the past for, as Brooks again points out, “the structure of literature *is* in some sense the structure of mind.”<sup>19</sup>

### **My boy has stopped talking to me<sup>20</sup>**

Along with manipulating time and showing little regard for consistency, Heller’s novel rejects a number of other standards of literature. Most of the chapter breaks are completely unnecessary, the storyteller occasionally admits to lying even to himself, and the title of the novel is something of a joke as for nearly the entire 600-page monologue nothing happens. On one hand this exists as a bizarre and daring stylistic move. Faced with the difficult task of following *Catch-22* (some 13 years later no less) Heller presents his audience with a monologue that repeats itself and contains virtually no plot. There is little external conflict and stories are told and retold throughout. Certain events, like Slocum’s chances at getting a promotion at work or giving a speech at a conference, could be said to provide the novel with a plot but these events are so secondary to Slocum’s internal thoughts that to characterize the novel through these events would be very misleading.

In an interview with *Playboy* magazine Heller justified this technique in this way: with *Catch-22*, he attempted to put everything of the external world into a novel. With *Something Happened*, he put in everything of the internal world, and the internal world

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<sup>19</sup> *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, p 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Something Happened*, 549

lacks linear time and space. It cannot be compared to the external as thoughts appear and reappear seemingly at random, but are ultimately shaped by how they are presented to the reader.

In this presentation the reader learns that Bob Slocum is a neurotic man. At times he spends paragraphs simply documenting his fears: closed doors, calling hospitals, death, and, most repeatedly, he claims to fear choking, which hints at his focus on certain parts of the body.

Among the descriptions of the body, two areas of interest arise in *Something Happened*. The mouth and the feet appear as central symbols to the entire novel, appearing again and again in many different contexts. The discussion of feet images will be delayed until the section dealing with the Oedipal conflict in the novel, but I will address the symbol of the mouth here.

In the novel, the mouth is a part of the body particularly focused towards violence and inability. Slocum asks, “How would top management feel about someone in middle management who’d been punched in the jaw and felt sexually impotent?”<sup>21</sup> Here Slocum makes explicit the connection between damage to the mouth and sexual inadequacy. As he tends to do throughout, Slocum makes the point too often and too obvious (going so far, not long after the previous quote, to say “there are times now when I have trouble maintaining my erections”) but that does not negate the insight he is providing for his situation. Stuck in one of the early stages of sexual development, Slocum projects all his infantile desires onto the mouth, from his fears of death to his sadistic urges. Freud

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<sup>21</sup> *Something Happened*, p 422.

writes, “The first zone to make its appearance as an erotogenic zone and to make libidinal demands upon the child from the time of birth onward, the mouth...Sadistic impulse, already begin to occur sporadically during the oral phase along with the appearance of teeth.”<sup>22</sup>

Of all the repetitions in the novel it is hard to miss the disproportionate emphasis placed on the mouth. Almost all of Slocum’s fears and worries in some way relate to the mouth. If the novel can be granted such formalities as conflict and crisis, both of these would involve the mouth. For one, the son’s death is caused by covering the mouth (suffocation). Slocum writes of the time when he was in the hospital learning of his son’s death: “When I feel I am able to speak, finally, I lift my eyes slowly a little bit and say: ‘Don’t tell my wife.’”<sup>23</sup>

In this passage Slocum overcomes his own voicelessness and orders the doctor to, essentially, keep his mouth shut. The other crisis, the one at work, deals with his being denied the ability to speak at a conference, and, in a sense, he is denied his worth.

The mouth is the most powerful and frequent symbol in the book. Here is just a sample of how Slocum includes it in his monologue:

- “And when children *drown, choke* or are killed by automobiles or trains, I don’t want to know which children they are, because I’m always afraid they might turn out to be mine.”
- “All of us were *breathing heavily* (even I, who was just watching).”

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<sup>22</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. Eds. Nandor Fodor and Frank Gaynor. New York, Philosophical Library, 1950, p 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Something Happened*, p 562.

- “I think he is carrying a knife; I *try to scream but can make no sound.*”
- “The *big speech* I’m going to have to make to open the convention. I’m head of the department now. This might not mean much at home but it means a hell of a lot there. I run the whole show. I can do what I want.”<sup>24</sup>

This last quote dealing with the speech Slocum wants to make at the company convention was originally intended to play a much larger role in the novel. Long before the novel was published and still in its nascent stages as a complete work, Heller would declare in interviews that his second novel was to deal with the struggles and empty fulfillment of a man desperate to make a speech at his company’s convention. This focus would eventually be minimized but it is still important. The desire to make the speech is still very much present; it is arguably his one constant desire in the novel but it is no longer the focus of the text. The emphasis has been moved away from the convention into the home and office, and the speech, when it is clear he will be able to deliver it, is a minor occurrence in the monologue.

However, while the speech itself may be marginalized slightly, the act of speaking is still very much an emphasis. The act of speaking or its antithesis, an often forceful silence, factors in virtually every aspect of the novel. In *The Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, Freud writes “the function of speech...brings the internal of the ego into a firm connection with the memory traces of visual and more particularly orderly perceptions.”<sup>25</sup> However, speech is not the sole function of the mouth. There is a

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<sup>24</sup> *Something Happened*, p 6, 95, 169, 543, emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> *Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, p 53

survivalist aspect to the mouth, issues like vomiting and hysteria and the sexual connotations that makes Slocum uneasy. The mouth, to remove its sexual connection for a moment, is the primary tool for communication, and the fear of silence is a sublimated form of the fear of death. Slocum often makes the connection overt as choking is the most common method of dying in Slocum's imagination. From his son's actual death to the imagined deaths of those around him to his Freudian nightmare to the hyperbolic death of his mother, Slocum is confronted with a world where to remain silent is to die.

Throughout the novel Slocum talks about the fear of being unable to breathe. This is something he fears not only for himself but for others. Heller clearly foreshadows the death of Slocum's son throughout the novel, as Slocum talks frequently about his son dying from suffocation. When it happens, it appears no less than inevitable that it happens at Slocum's hand. Because of this much of the critical debate over the novel hinges on this very question – does Slocum kill his son intentionally or not?

Reading this novel through a psychoanalytic lens, it is almost impossible to claim that the accident lacks some sort of intentionality on Slocum's part. The issue of Slocum as a reliable narrator certainly could be addressed concerning this topic, but even if he can generally be believed, it is difficult to accept Slocum's son's death as entirely accidental. The question that then arises is one of degrees of intentionality. Although it sounds like a paradoxical question, perhaps the original question should be instead – Slocum kills his son, but does he want his son to die?

To address this question it is appropriate to address the running Oedipal narrative in *Something Happened*, or, rather, the dual Oedipal narratives that run throughout. One



comes very clearly from Slocum himself. In an idea that would achieve full fruition later in *God Knows*, Heller attempts to rewrite classical narratives in *Something Happened*, here with Slocum retelling the story of Oedipus and challenging the common conclusions that story produces.

In Slocum's retelling of the Oedipal story, Oedipus is the real victim. His actions, which run counter to a number of social norms and have horrific effects, are all accidental. Oedipus lacks any sense of intentionality. He cannot help himself and becomes a victim to his own story. As Slocum sees it, most conclusions about Oedipus have him a secondary victim at best. His own actions victimize him, but in Slocum's version he is not even the victim of his own choices. He is the primary victim with all pretense of choice eliminated. Oedipus acts as the ultimate victim as he and others suffer, and he stands as the cause of this suffering. In Slocum's reimagining of the story, the tragedy of Oedipus is that it exists as Oedipus' tragedy alone. Others who have as much knowledge as he are viewed as victims while the ignorant Oedipus is blamed for all.

It is not difficult then to see Slocum as creating his own mythology. The parallels between his Oedipus and himself become obvious. For all the connections, the central theme is that both Slocum and Oedipus are denied agency in their lives but have it applied retroactively as a result of their actions. Just as Oedipus is paradoxically blamed for choosing incorrectly when he has no knowledge of the options, Slocum views himself

as trapped in an entropic system possessing the façade of free will. He lives by a deterministic system where he denies being able to choose at all.<sup>26</sup>

The second Oedipal conflict in the novel is a more traditional psychoanalytic one, although Slocum constantly confuses the participants in the drama. Slocum at once wants to be the father and the son, the killer and the victim. On top of that, he constantly confuses one of the characters, his son, with a product of his imagination and memory.

Many critics have noted the running metaphor of innocent children in the novel, and, indeed, it is hard to miss. One of the images Slocum constantly returns to is that of a little boy who has not been corrupted or even exposed to the world. He is the boy that exists inside the grown man, that the grown man longs to return to. Slocum writes, “I knew at last what I wanted to be when I grew up. When I grow up I want to be a little boy.”<sup>27</sup> Slocum’s idealized boy lacks the subconscious intent that he sees his real son as possessing. By associating himself with the innocent child inside him, Slocum attempts to deny his own guilt. David Craig writes, “he conceives a prelapsarian self, who though admittedly lost, is still him, and he refigures his experiences so that he is the injured innocent.”<sup>28</sup>

Slocum’s little boy (the metaphorical one, not his real one, though he works to blur the two) is perfect in that he lacks guilt. *Something Happened* begins with Slocum recalling himself as a young boy accidentally stumbling in on his brother having sex with

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<sup>26</sup> LeClair, Thomas. “A Permanent Game of Excuses?: Determinism in Heller’s *Something Happened*.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1978-1979, p 555.

<sup>27</sup> *Something Happened*, p 276.

<sup>28</sup> Craig, David. *Tilting at Mortality: Narrative Strategies in Joseph Heller’s Fiction*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1997.

“Billy Foster’s tall and skinny kid sister.” After walking in on them, and after his brother throws a lump of coal at his head, Slocum claims he could not leave the scene. He says, “I felt too guilty to escape and almost too frightened to stay and take the punishment I knew I deserved – although I didn’t know for what.”<sup>29</sup> This moment gains significance for Slocum as here he first recognizes the connection between guilt and sex.

Whereas Slocum the man lives with a catalogue of fears, Slocum as a boy is obsessed with guilt. He feels guilty that his family is poor, that his father died, and for “the sad discouraging realization that no matter what it was in life I ever tried to do, there would always be somebody close by who would be able to do it better.”<sup>30</sup> Slocum the boy constantly feels inadequate, which could have Oedipal roots. Though he rarely mentions his father, he does mention his father’s death and, soon after, talks about his own physical inadequacy as a child. In the death of his father he loses not only his male model for the world but he also loses his subconscious competitor, a competitor he will now be unable ever to defeat. Even though he rarely mentions his father in the rest of the novel, Slocum does not go three paragraphs into his story before talking about him. He says, “Or the day my father died and left me feeling guilty and ashamed – because I thought I was the only little boy in the whole world then who had no father.”<sup>31</sup> With the emphasis Slocum places later in the story on the Oedipal story in his own life, it is interesting that this incident mentioned so early in the story is later ignored; aside from establishing the solipsism that will characterize him as an adult, the claim is a complete

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<sup>29</sup> *Something Happened*, p 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Something Happened*, p 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Something Happened*, p 3.

lie. Slocum the man feels no less guilty as an adult without a father. One of Slocum's ways of dealing with guilt is to repress the source. He deals with the guilt over the death of his father by rarely mentioning him. The few mentions allow the reader to realize the importance the event has on him, as the belief that he secretly killed his father increases the guilt he possesses, though as an adult the feeling is complicated by his own children and his desire to also eliminate them.

From this early moment in his life, Slocum has already made the connection between sex and guilt. As a little boy he stays to receive punishment from his older brother and he knows he has committed a crime. He just cannot define it. Just witnessing a sexual act leaves Slocum in a position where he feels he should be punished. Defining the crime to him is not as important as accepting the punishment.

Slocum continues to equate sex with guilt and punishment, though as an adult sex has been shaped by social norms. Slocum still has the secret need to rape women, but he finds that it is only possible with his wife and then it is completely unsatisfactory. Marital rape is almost a contradictory term for him. From his perspective, his wife is allowing him to do all that he wishes. He recognizes her resistance but does not associate it with her refusing him.

As an adult, and a type of family man even, Slocum must recognize his own mortality and the possibility of his replacement. In the Oedipal drama existing in his home life, Slocum nearly acknowledges his sons' role as the phallic substitute in his family. Subtlety is uncommon in his language, as he prefers the uneasiness of blatant honesty over subtle messages, but Slocum only slyly acknowledges his awareness of his

children's importance. In mentioning one of the times he watched his son helplessly lost in a crowd, Slocum says "He remained stationary on the pavement in that single spot on his tiny bare feet as though every bone in his ankles had already been crushed."<sup>32</sup>

Oedipus translated literally means swollen-footed. While this could be coincidental if it occurred only once, Slocum returns to his description too often for the meaning to be lost on him.

Slocum's two sons, who are radically different, come to be the physical embodiments of his subconscious fears about himself – his fear of death, replacement and impotency. His boy, his 'normal' son, comes to embody the fear of replacement and fatality. Slocum longs for his youth and one of the final fears Slocum blames on his mother is the fear of death. Death is something Slocum believes achieves power only through recognition. He will not ask about someone in the hospital as only by asking will he discover he or she are dead (this belief Slocum shares with Heller's more famous protagonist Yossarian – hospitals and doctors only provide bad news). Slocum aims at avoiding all signs of death. He says "[I] am silent also with everyone else I know in who I begin to perceive the first signs of irreversible physical decay and approaching infirmity and death."<sup>33</sup>

Slocum's son is the constant reminder of his own eventual death and he often experiences his son's pain as though it were his own. During preparation for his son's tonsil surgery, upon witnessing blood flowing out of his unconscious son's nose, Slocum

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<sup>32</sup> *Something Happened*, p 319-320.

<sup>33</sup> *Something Happened*, p 422.

writes, “I could not speak. I thought I’d vomit (but didn’t feel healthy enough). My ears buzzed, my brain ached, the floor undulated and I really believe I might have fainted away right then and there (like a woman) if my wife hadn’t jumped up from the bedside of my boy.”<sup>34</sup> Aside from the unusually unadorned misogyny, this passage is noteworthy for the introduction of vomiting into the symbol of the mouth. Slocum reveals exactly how clearly he associates himself with his son. When his son feels pain, he feels pain; and when his son ceases to feel pain (by way of death) his pain also ceases.

Despite his love for his son, it is important to note that over the course of a five hundred plus monologue dealing in large part with his family Slocum never provides his son’s name and often describes him in the same language he describes the mythical boy living inside him. The only difference in identification is that one is “the boy” and the other “my boy.” Both are idealized and Slocum anticipates the death of each.

In idealizing them, Slocum exhibits the personality of a clinical narcissist with his infantile refusal to grant agency separate from himself. Part of Slocum’s narcissism manifests itself in his refusal to acknowledge the individual identities of those around him. Unlike Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the most famous example of a missing name in fiction, *Something Happened*’s central character is named. It is the secondary characters who are hidden but even this is not universal. Virtually everyone in Slocum’s work place is referred to by name, with much of the first chapter devoted to the similarities and coincidences in the names at his work place (the names of colors, of other jobs, the chance encounter with another Slocum, etc.). Virginia, from his past, is named

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<sup>34</sup> *Something Happened*, p 346.

as are most people from his days at the insurance agency. The names he fails to reveal are few but they are very significant. Of his four family members who constitute his home life, only one is given a clear and concrete name (Derek – “my idiot son”), one is possibly revealed (at one point Slocum ambiguously says “Sarah” when he is talking and he could be talking about his wife) and his other children are never named. They are “my son” and “my daughter,” never given a distinct identity away from their father.

His family, which can also be expanded to include “my father,” are never defined individually away from Slocum except for Derek, whom he wishes he could separate himself from permanently. His ideal family, the one with an idyllic wife, son and daughter, is perverted by the inclusion of Derek, whom he attempts to separate from the rest by presenting him as an entity separate from his other children.

Through the refusal to name his family, those he feels he can control the most, Slocum exhibits the narcissistic tendency to view the world egocentrically. In Freudian dynamics, the narcissist is still stuck in the early stages of childhood when the separate individual interests of those around him/her are not recognized. Jeffrey Berman writes “In normal child development, self cathaxis is slowly converted to object cathaxis, resulting in the child’s awareness of the external world.”<sup>35</sup> This move from subject to object cathaxis is necessary for the child to become aware of the external world and allows for the creation of ‘healthy’ interpersonal relationships. The narcissist maintains the self-cathaxis, with the focus on the ego instead of objects.

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<sup>35</sup> Berman, Jeffrey. *Narcissism and the Novel*. New York: New York University Press, 1990, p 13.

The lack of names is also another stylistic break for Heller. In *Catch-22* the names are numerous and memorable. Most famous is Yossarian the Assyrian, an uncommon and rhythmic name and description that is, in an offhand manner that Heller also used to possibly reveal his wife's first name, attached to the intentionally unimaginative first name John. There is even the alliterative Col. Cathcart, Milo Minderbinder and Major Major Major Major. There is also a character who is partially unnamed but rather than "my sergeant" or "the colonel", he is \_\_\_\_\_ de Coverley, left unnamed not because the narrative voice wishes to withhold it but instead because no one knows what it is. As this is the name of de Coverley in the language of the soldiers, so it should be on the page. However, again, the internal world dominates *Something Happened*. Slocum cannot name his son because his son exists uneasily in his psyche where love and hate intermix and interchange with one another.

Slocum longs for and dreads the death of his son whom he sees as a sexual replacement for him. Closely connected with his fear of aging is his fear of sexual inadequacy and his son represents the vitality he feels he is losing. His son, in a fairly obvious attempt by Heller to build the son as a phallic substitute, often sleeps outside the door of Slocum and his wife. Slocum locks the door for the dual reasons of not wanting his son to walk in on them having sex (a scene of Oedipal violence) and because he knows his son will sleep in the bed with them. At the very sight of his sexual power, Slocum sees his son entering in and minimizing his power.

While he is still sexually active, both with his wife and with numerous other women, Slocum notices his own sexual role changing in a way he does not like. Early in



his marriage, his sexual appetite is very much the typical Freudian model of male pleasure and female submission. In the closing pages of the chapter “My wife is unhappy” he describes his sexual attitude toward his wife in the early years of their marriage. He says, “I was absolutely wild for her...absolutely out of my head with volcanic lust. I was all cock and hard-on. I wanted to come, come, come.” In describing sex between them he says:

she would recline and heave submissively beneath me with her eyes wide open in gleaming fright, turning her gaze from one side to the other rapidly and distressfully to make certain no one was seeing listening, or approaching. (I think now that I probably enjoyed her terror and my violence.)<sup>36</sup>

He notes that sex between him and his wife, though still frequent and enjoyable for him, lacks the excitement and impulse it had before. Now his wife plays a more active role, initiating and enjoying. Part of the enjoyment for him earlier was her resistance and fear.

The increase in pleasure and participation by his wife (or the decrease in fear and submission) is a sign of his growing weakness for Slocum. He mentions often his fear of castration, but, more than that, he feels himself losing power, a belief necessarily connected with his fear of impotence.

His sexual inadequacy is connected to his relationship to his two sons. His unnamed son lives as a sign of his previous power and vitality. Derek, the “idiot” son, as a substitute phallus is deformed and abnormal. He is a “nightmare copy of the self.”<sup>37</sup> It

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<sup>36</sup> *Something Happened*, p 120.

<sup>37</sup> *Tilting at Morality*, p 94.

cannot perform normally and, rather than supremely powerful, it is totally dependent.

Slocum says of him, “I no longer think of Derek as one of my children. Or even as mine. I try not to think of him at all.”<sup>38</sup> Eliminating all thoughts of Derek will also eliminate all thoughts of his own potential impotence.

Whereas Slocum attempts to recapture and idealize his oldest son he attempts to create a psychic distance between himself and Derek. He wants to deny ownership, kinship and responsibility. Although no one is aware of Derek’s physical and mental condition until after he is born, Derek obviously plays into Slocum’s fear of death and infirmity having been born with “irreversible physical decay.” He is also a sign of sexual inadequacy. He represents abnormality and deformity barely disguised by his familial relationship

Taken together, these two sons act to remove Slocum from his position of power. They show him his own death and his own potential impotency. It is inevitable, then, in Slocum’s world, that one must be put away and ignored; the other must be destroyed.

**It’s your fault. Not mine.**

Just as Slocum combines himself, his son and the child of his imagination and memory, he equates the major women in his life – his wife, his mother and Virginia, the woman who always tempted/threatened to take his virginity when he was 17. Other female characters exist but their importance is secondary to this trio. His unnamed

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<sup>38</sup> *Something Happened*, p 129.

daughter offers him no threat and cannot compete with his son for affection. Her importance in Slocum's life can be described in the system of entropy his wife has created.

Other women, such as the women he sleeps with be they prostitutes or women he works with, are unsatisfactory sexual conquests. With them there is no resistance, greatly diminishing the pleasure he can receive. Slocum has a conflicting attitude towards rape. He fears it and associates it with all sex as a young man but describing sex with his wife as an adult as being nearly a rape. As indicated before, the absence of violence or rape seems to be what makes his affairs unsatisfactory. Sex with young women and prostitutes offers him little sexual pleasure as the rape fantasy he harbors cannot be fulfilled. The sex is pragmatic; a sign of importance in Slocum's office of high-ranking men is the number of mistresses and one-night stands a man has.

The punishment Slocum feels as a boy is from his inability to disassociate sex from violence. His brother's actions, taking place in a dark coal room and completely lacking any hint of romance or intimacy, is an event that continues to influence Slocum's life as an adult.

The fear of rape and the association between rape and sex continues with Virginia and his time at the insurance company. The other sexual couple in the company, Marie Jencks and Tom, also relate to one another in terms of violence and power. The genders are inverted but the power relationship remains. Marie, the older, more powerful of the two, dominates the sexual activity, ordering Tom to perform for her pleasure when she wishes.

Slocum's relationship with Virginia contains hints of romance but actual sex is still connected with violence. At one point Slocum finds himself in their file room with Virginia and two other boys. Virginia is a continuous flirt, always suggesting that he get a hotel room for the two of them, an act hinting at intimacy but one that Slocum is unable to perform. In the file room with the other boys, he says, "she had gone too far, joked and boasted about too much, and now they would not let her go, they said, until she 'took care' of the three of us." Even in this near rape the female is expected to be both submissive and active in pleasing the male. Everyone except Slocum (the youngest of the three) supposes this paradox to be true. After Slocum interferes and makes the other boys let Virginia go, he says, "they shook their heads in unbelieving contempt and told me I was stupid for letting her go just as she was getting ready to put out for the three of us." In one of his parenthetical statements following the events, where Slocum frequently contradicts himself and questions his own conclusions, Slocum marvels at the actions of Virginia after his "rescue." She continues to flirt with everyone, including the two boys, leading Slocum to question whether he has done the correct thing.<sup>39</sup>

Virginia stays in his memory, playing as important a role in his life as his mother and his wife, as she is the rare unfulfilled goal in his life. Even as he continues to see the hollowness of his life's goals, he still longs for Virginia. In his memory, she represents his romantic impotence and his adolescent fear of sex and violence. She is idealized in his imagination as the unfulfilled potential of his earlier sex life. He knows (or has convinced himself he knows) he could have had sex with her and could have even

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<sup>39</sup> *Something Happened*, p 95-97.

participated in the rape in the file room. She is the first sign of his impotence as she reveals to him the limits of his sexual desire. She reveals to him that he will not allow all of his subconscious sexual desires to be fulfilled. More than anyone else, he will stop himself.

Of course, coming from a basically fatherless family, much of Slocum's life is also influenced by the relationship he has with his mother. Slocum remembers with a small amount of contempt witnessing his wife call out for her mother after she had died. Slocum, it can be safely said, wishes to shed no tears for his mother.

She is largely absent in his life as a young man, which is appropriate as he views her as a silent oppressor. She cannot be eliminated as her role is fulfilled by Derek soon after her death. Slocum says, "All my life, it seems, I've been sandwiched between people who will not speak. My mother couldn't speak at the end. My youngest child Derek couldn't speak from the beginning." He goes on to describe the effect this has on his own speech abilities. "(...In dreams I often have trouble speaking. My tongue feels dead and dry and swollen enough to choke my mouth. Its coat is coarse. It will not move when I want it to, and I am in danger and feel terror because I cannot speak or scream.)"<sup>40</sup>

Forced silence is one of Slocum's greatest fears as it is associated with suffocation and death. Slocum's mother, once the central figure in his own Oedipal drama, is, near death, a hollow body that cannot communicate. He still feels that he is unworthy of her affection (a fact that is cemented in his memory with her final words to him – "You're no good. You're just no good"), but her influence on his life in *Something*

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<sup>40</sup> *Something Happened*, p 354.

*Happened* is primarily in the reinforcement of the fear of strangulation and death.

Slocum's oral fixation is one of death and the inability to speak reminds him of his own mortality. His mother, seen almost solely as an elderly woman, is the oppression of silence and the oppression of death in his life and, like Derek, his attempts to eradicate that fear is through removal and ignoring. He knows this plan cannot work but it is better than the alternative of constant reminders and interaction.

His mother is, in his mind, part of the life-in-death state that George Sebouhian sees as characterizing the novel. This is a novel of fetuses and corpses with his mother occupying the role of the corpse. The fetus, on the other hand, is a product of his wife. Of all the characters in his life, Slocum reserves most of his anger for his wife. She, is the ultimate source of his "unrelieved misery" as the insidious circle of his life he blames on her. The closed system of his work, the closed system of his home life, and the closed system those two together create is a result of both his wife's presence and his wife's actions. Entirely removing himself from the equation, this time denying himself agency, Slocum views his wife, the epitome of the basic female nature, as the creator and destroyer of all around him.

Unlike Slocum's mother, who, I have argued, pairs with Derek as a silent oppressor, his wife takes an active role, despite her lack of name. Derek and his mother are silent and, even in the case of his mother, lack the capacity to actively oppress him. Richard Costa writes, "He confesses to missing his mother even though his only memory

is of a human appendage he discarded.”<sup>41</sup> She is like Derek in that she is entirely dependent on him for action. It is perhaps because of this reason that Slocum reveals their names or, at least, does not attempt to hide them. His mother’s name is never told, but he does refer to her as “mother” and “mom” instead of “my mother” or “my mom.” This lack of possession Slocum attempts to create in naming is a failed attempt to invert the agency of the people in his life. His son and daughter possess at least the illusion of free will and the capacity to destroy him. Derek, who has severely limited mental capacity and motor skills, is called by his name even though he is entirely dependent on those who will take possession of him.

Slocum possibly reveals his wife’s name. Even if Sarah is his wife’s name it is the only instance of her being known as something other than “my wife.” Slocum aims at creating the image of her as his unwanted possession, though he ultimately views her as the creative authority in his world. She, even as she occasionally denies her own agency by saying things like “You made me this way” to him, creates the world that has trapped him, or so he believes.

Slocum’s wife ensnares him with the dual nature of sexual activity in their marriage. Pleasure and power are the aims for Slocum, with the complete denial of any female pleasure. He wants release and control. However, through childbirth Slocum’s wife inverts the power relationship of the sexual activity. Slocum occasionally talks about abortions, wondering when his daughter and her friends will begin having them,

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<sup>41</sup> Costa, Richard Hauer. “Notes from a Dark Heller: Bob Slocum and the Underground Man.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 1981 Summer; 23, p 145.

but he is unable to consider the option in his own marriage. Now that he has had his “idiot son” he wishes he had forced his wife to have one but recognizes that such an idea is purely fantasy. On one hand, the appearance of a normal, happy marriage would be shattered by a wife having an abortion (almost as much as that image is shattered by having an “idiot” for a son). He associates the procedure with the poor and the young. At no point would Slocum and his wife qualify as poor and by the time of his retelling of his story they are no longer young.

In addition to the image an abortion would create for his marriage is the guilt issue associated with childbirth. Slocum would be allowing his children, who he wants as much as he does not want them, to be killed. Slocum has a need for “anarchic vitality, love, and goodness” that children and marriage they suppose to provide.<sup>42</sup> Children provide the illusion of normalcy in his sex life, where female pleasure, thoroughly distorted in Slocum’s mind, is gratified. Slocum abhors the active role of women in sex and believes sex for women does not involve pleasure but instead draws on a biological desire to have children.

Any female sexual pleasure comparable to a man’s is by its nature perverse in Slocum’s mind. Slocum prefers single pleasure and dislikes any sexual situation that results in anything other than solitary male sexual pleasure. Slocum does not discuss masturbating himself (Slocum’s sexual appetite is fairly insatiable but his sexual pleasures are equally conservative. His sexual partners are many but they are always

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<sup>42</sup> Strehle, Susan. “Slocum’s Parenthetical Tic: Style as Metaphor in *Something Happened*.” *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 1977, p 10.



female, feature no oral or anal contact and are always in a male-dominant position) but he disapproves of its frequency in women. Female masturbation is a perversion in his mind, eliminating the purpose of sex which is a male orgasm.

Slocum creates the dichotomy of rape/man vs. sex/woman in his speech. He admits to once again equivocating, using rape in the sense of the female rape fantasy and not in its true brutal fashion. “She sought trouble,” he writes, “the rape in the storeroom was all her idea (I use *rape* loosely and boldly to relive my fear of it.)”<sup>43</sup> He claims that his definition of rape does not include beatings or children but then he admits to reading repeatedly descriptions of rapes in the newspaper. Slocum’s inconsistency and revelation comes as he admits only to being intrigued by rape in the sexual fantasy of domination.

As his momentary pleasure is being fulfilled, what he perceives as the ultimate sexual goal his wife has, that being pregnancy, also approaches conclusion. By giving birth to his children Slocum’s wife traps him in a system of guilt and responsibility. She seeks a form of male abjection that will deny his masculine power.

However, in the mythmaking quality Vonnegut and other’s see characterizing the text, it is not unique for Slocum’s wife to become the source of male misery. It is all wives, or, rather, the institution of marriage that creates a closed system nothing can escape from. Divorce is no escape as divorcees are not welcome in Slocum’s company. Unhappy marriages filled with infidelity are preferred, creating an inescapable link between the misery at home and the misery at work. Marriage is an imperative, but there is no need for it to be a happy one. Slocum says, “I can’t fall in love. That’s probably

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<sup>43</sup> *Something Happened*, p 476.

what holds my marriage together. If I didn't have this wife I would have another."<sup>44</sup> He sees marriage as an inherently oppressive system, much like his company, and as a social institution designed to suppress the urges inside him. Marriage is at its basis an act of social formation in Slocum's world, and, once inside, his subconscious sexual tendencies no longer have an outlet. His adolescent fear of violence has turned into an adult desire but one that is frequently denied. He says, "even now I'll rape my wife, *only* my wife, force her at times when she doesn't want to and I feel I *have* to have it from her *at once*; but there's no sublime relationship, no reciprocal contact."<sup>45</sup>

The "it" Slocum feels he must have is one that he cannot get from his wife. Immediately following this passage he discusses the possibility of his testicles exploding without warning. He claims that if it were to happen "it would not be because of a female" but this is hardly believable. His wife has castrated him. As Greg Forter writes, "With her, the submission to sex *is* the submission to force because in fucking you – in the very act of fucking you – she also invariably fucks you over."<sup>46</sup> Slocum's wife subverts his desires by appearing to submit to them, but his desires are ones that cannot be rewarded with submission. By creating a family, she creates a closed system where no energy, represented best in sexual energy, can escape. Slocum must always come home, always deal with his children, and always sleep with his wife. The womb, consistently associated with the sexual organs in Slocum's language, signals entropy in his life as it creates the illusion of social law and responsibility that he believes he must follow.

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<sup>44</sup> *Something Happened*, p 434.

<sup>45</sup> *Something Happened*, p 435.

<sup>46</sup> Forter, Greg. *Murdering masculinities : fantasies of gender and violence in the American crime novel*. New York: New York UP, 2000, p 33.

Through the entropy it initially causes in his life, the uterus stands in obvious contrast to the penis in the text. Slocum, given his self-awareness and apparent knowledge of Freudian theory, addresses his own phallic member in a seemingly open way, even joking about the effect it has on men and society. He says, “(*Women* don’t suffer from penis envy. Men do)”. Slocum’s description of penis envy is an equivocation of the Freudian term, but he does go on to explain his belief. He says, “What a feeble weapon indeed for establishing male supremacy, a flabby, collapsing channel for a universal power drive ejaculated now and then in sporadic spoonfuls. No wonder we have to make fists and raise our voices at the kitchen table”. Slocum minimizes the penis as a guiding force in society, recognizing its power but questioning how such a system is allowed to develop. In the surrounding passages, Slocum describes the penis as “very, very small, negligible, puny, slothful”; “fractional parts of the total construction”; “arrogant and absurd”; “feeble... flabby” and showing its power only in “sporadic spoonfuls.”<sup>47</sup>

It is in this way that Slocum defines his male penis envy. Just as he reconstructs the Oedipal conflict, projecting his own failures onto it so he has an easy solution to both accept and reject, Slocum redefines penis envy so that it fits his own life. He creates a myth of the Big Dick. By using the guiding principle that it is at least accepted that male dominance is a result of phallic control, he is able to make men (and himself) a victim. He attempts, in the longest chapter of the work, to present a world where it is men who are reduced to their sexual parts. He is not consistent with this thinking but it is another

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<sup>47</sup> *Something Happened*, p 368-369.

example of Slocum's egocentric attempts to create sympathy for himself. He attempts to characterize women, in their single-minded quest for the orgasm, as true aggressors, in a world where men are becoming increasingly absent.

It is in these few pages that Slocum even mentions female orgasms and he does so with open contempt. Discussing a girl, not his wife, he says, "I've got one girl who goes way out of control every time she has an orgasm and hates me and everybody else in the whole world bitterly and ferociously for five or ten minutes afterward."<sup>48</sup> This girl, also unnamed, would rather receive an orgasm "by herself with her vibrator or her finger" than with him. Slocum is consistently in a phallogocentric world where if a penis is absent then a clear penis substitute may be used to pleasure a woman. Female masturbation is subversive. It removes men. Women need the male parts but men themselves are seeing a reduced role. Slocum's misogyny is all encompassing; passive and submissive women mock his desire to dominate and rape, and active women behave 'like a man' and leave him in a reduced, subjugated role.

A similar heterosexual male nightmare can be seen in Charles Bukowski's short story "Six Inches." In the story a man, ignoring the repeated warnings of his male friends and coworkers, marries a woman that is strikingly beautiful but constantly alone. Through a process of weight loss and witchcraft the woman shrinks her husband until he is literally only six inches tall and then uses his entire body as a penis substitute. The story ends with the man escaping from his wife by way of another phallic substitute, a

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<sup>48</sup> *Something Happened*, p 365.

knife thrust into her chest<sup>49</sup>. Bukowski's story contrives the fear of female orgasm to a ridiculous point, but a similar theme can be found in Heller: the male is weakened by giving pleasure to the woman.

Slocum admits to an amount of sadism in his attitude but he prefers to keep women from climax in sex. He cannot escape from the phallogentric nature of his language as he "gives orgasms" as though they are the male possession to be doled out. Female orgasms, even if he feels responsible for them, are disgusting and degenerate in his mind. Slocum writes "There really is something disillusioning and degenerate, something alarming and obscene, in the gaudy, uncovered, involuntary way they contort."<sup>50</sup>

Slocum prefers sex as an arena for male pleasure and attempts to counteract what he perceives as feminist invasion and inversion of sex. He has successfully sheltered his wife so that feminist philosophy makes her uncomfortable. The open and explicit discussion of sex, which is essentially what Slocum has with himself throughout the novel, drives her away from the less abrasive aspects of the feminist movement. "She has nothing to do but align herself unpassionately with the new women liberationists (although all that blatant discussion about orgasm, masturbation and female homosexuality makes her uneasy)."<sup>51</sup> Around his wife, Slocum says all the appropriate things, telling her that her attitudes and insecurities are products of male-centered and

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<sup>49</sup> Bukowski, Charles. "Six Inches." *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town and Other Stories*. Berkley: City Lights Press, 1988, p 83-90.

<sup>50</sup> *Something Happened*, p 365.

<sup>51</sup> *Something Happened*, p 448.

dominated societies but to his audience (himself) he cannot deny that it is the elimination of such a society that is part of the source of his melancholy.

**Everyone seems pleased with the way I've taken command<sup>52</sup>**

Although it has previously been mentioned, the style and length of *Something Happened* is somewhat shocking as it defies the conventions of the popular contemporary novel. I am not shocked by people who find it almost unreadable, a decent short story extended into an overlong monologue. It is filled with 70 page chapters that tell the same stories the previous chapter told, only this time revealing a little more or giving a deeper insight into Slocum's views on the participants. Chapters with titles like "My daughter's unhappy" and "My little boy is having difficulties" eventually devolve into retelling the same stories or revealing the same feelings. It is only the final two chapters, "My little boy has stopped talking to me" and "No one knows what I have done," that avoid this technique. It is not surprising, then, that it is in these two short chapters that Slocum kills his son and also tells of his life's improvement following it. His son's death is a sign of freedom for him. Gary Forter in *Murdering Masculinities* writes:

If such repetition is the mark of the psyche's deathly desire to unbind itself, then locating pleasure on the side of compulsion enables an erotics of increased psychic tension in which the ego takes pleasure in its own unpleasurable undoing.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Something Happened*, p 569.

<sup>53</sup> *Murdering Masculinities*, p 14-15.

By creating a trauma in his own life Slocum is given conclusive proof that he has an influence on his own life. His covert feelings can be expressed, even if the expression is evident only to him. The moment after the son's death may be emotionally traumatic but it indisputably leads to an improvement in Slocum's psyche. The problems mentioned many times throughout the work, the crazy woman in his office, his daughter's stubborn attempts at rebellion, his inability to give a speech at a company conference, all are solved after his son's death, and he is personally responsible for solving all of them. The final line of the novel, which seems appropriately anti-climactic, is "Everyone seems pleased with the way I've taken command."<sup>54</sup> Slocum has wrenched control of his life from all the external forces who have oppressed him and his desires.

Chief among the external oppressors, of course, is his wife. The first words he is able to say after learning of his son's death are "Don't tell my wife."<sup>55</sup> He clearly recognizes his responsibility in the death. He recognizes that before it even happens. "I think I'm in terrible trouble. I think I've committed a crime. The victims have always been children" he says only pages before killing his son.<sup>56</sup>

The murder of his son, the only family member it can be said he truly loves, illogically eliminates guilt in him. It removes the desire for his own death and ends the repetition of his own life. He requests that his wife not know because her knowledge of the true circumstances of the boy's death will alleviate some of his individual responsibility. The death will no longer be something he alone owns. Slocum "takes

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<sup>54</sup> *Something Happened*, p 448.

<sup>55</sup> *Something Happened*, p 569.

<sup>56</sup> *Something Happened*, p 556.

command” of his life by performing something horrific, a subconscious act that he has long desired, and thereby escapes the entropy of his life. The false dilemmas of his life can be resolved and he can become comfortable in his psyche and with the decisions he has made. He can be comfortable with the fact he is glad Virginia committed suicide. He can make statements about her like “I was glad – glad, God dammit –*glad* she was gone and dead...(I would not have to screw her.)” and they can be believable.<sup>57</sup> He can claim he was happy when his mother finally died, and he can, bizarrely, begin to love his wife again. The paradigm of male dominance that has been eliminated from his life can return and he can finally live his miserable existence on his own terms. This is the fitting happy ending to the book Kurt Vonnegut correctly characterizes as “one of the unhappiest books ever written.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Something Happened*, p 458.

<sup>58</sup> Kurt Vonnegut’s rev. of *Something Happened*, p 95.



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## LOOK AT WHAT YOU'RE DOING: THE BODY IN POLITICAL PROTEST

### **“Punk rockers paid 12 dollars to be shit on/ the night GG Allin came to town”<sup>59</sup>**

In the world of punk music in America, a world that frequently featured an uneasy blend of didactic rhetoric and superficial nonconformity, few figures stand as abrasive or extreme as singer GG Allin. Violent, drug-addicted and amoral, he acted as punk's uncontrollable id, challenging the very structure of the subculture's existence. To some he operated as a nihilistic, obnoxious freak show, openly predicting and causing his own death. To others, like underground figureheads Jello Biafra, J. Mascis, and Thurston Moore, Allin stood as an open challenge to the underground ideology. By the time of his arrival as the audience's most extreme performer, punk music was well on its way to cultural and corporate adoption, having long since abandoned any idealism in favor of mainstream acceptance and fashion showiness.

One of the dominant punk clichés dealt with return to 'dangerous' rock 'n' roll. It worked to be a callback to the riots of *Blackboard Jungle* and the fires on Jerry Lee Lewis's piano. Instead, it had begun to court major label acceptance and 'dangerous' was as commodified as 'rebellious.' Into this stagnant situation stepped GG Allin and his notorious stage show. Touring with barely qualified musicians under names like AIDs Brigade, the Carolina Catholics, and, most famously, the Murder Junkies, Allin

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<sup>59</sup> Drive By Truckers, "The Night GG Allin Came to Town." *Pizza Deliverance*. Soul Dump Music, 1998.

confronted his audience unlike any other singer and rock ‘n’ roll turned, quite literally, dangerous again.

Allin, while never physically imposing, would inevitably fight with his audience during his concerts, and as the following photo attests, these confrontations would often lead to more harm for his person than any other. One of the numerous police officers to arrest Allin described him like this: "It's a weird case with a weird defendant. He's a strange one. He's knocked all his front teeth out hitting himself with microphones during acts. He's bloodied his head hitting himself with microphones. He beats spectators. He exposes himself."<sup>60</sup> Performing nearly, if not completely nude, Allin would often defecate on stage and proceed to either eat it or throw it at his already provoked audience.

These exaggerated animalistic actions have obvious shock value, but for Allin the act, along with every other violent undertaking against his own audience, is entirely justified. According to Allin, “My body is the rock ‘n’ roll temple and my flesh, blood and bodily fluids are a communion to the people whether they like it or not. I’m not out to please anybody; my rock ‘n’ roll is not to entertain but to annihilate. I’m trying to bring danger back to rock ‘n’ roll and there are no limits and no laws and I’ll break down every barrier put in front of me until the day I die.” Mixed with the messianic overtones is a message of destruction where the body is destroyed for social change or, as Allin puts it more succinctly, “My mind is a machine gun, my body the bullets, and the target is the

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<sup>60</sup> Treml, William B. “Rock Band Leader Held on Three Charges.” *The GG Allin SuperSite Media Guide*, <http://www.geocities.com/ekx001/MG/AAN140989MG.html>

audience.”<sup>61</sup> Allin promoted ideas of pure nihilism where nearly all social conventions were subverted.

For all his posturing and promises of an onstage suicide, GG Allin died a rather mundane rock ‘n’ roll death when he overdosed following a particularly violent concert that ended with him falling through a glass door, but his legacy, if such an elevated term can be used with someone such as he, has proved fairly significant. He provided a line of demarcation in underground music, questioning the ideas of acceptability and simple good taste.



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However, for my purposes, GG Allin’s significance lies in his use of his own body specifically, “the bullets” he used to attack social norms. Allin’s music, taken away from his persona, barely rises to the level of interesting bad music. The music, with rare

<sup>61</sup> Allin, GG. “GG Allin – Rock ‘n’ Roll Terrorist.” <http://www.lastcallrecords.com/stories/ggallin.html>.

<sup>62</sup> This image, along with a number of others, can be found at [http://www.ggallin.com/photo\\_gallery.php](http://www.ggallin.com/photo_gallery.php).

exceptions, is poorly recorded and intentionally obscene but hardly noteworthy. The only thing noteworthy about Allin comes in his willingness to turn his body into the medium. While he was never overtly political, Allin, it can safely be said, had a perverse type of anti-social philosophy that he either could not or did not attempt to articulate in his music. With, in, and on his body did Allin express his malevolent outlook toward the world. The metaphor is fairly obvious: destroy the body to destroy the world. But what matters more derives from Allin's notion that social messages, no matter how poorly articulated, can be seen in violent actions toward the human body.

The use of a body in a political protest, especially one containing an undercurrent of violence, is based on the metaphorical connections between subject and viewer. The viewer is urged out of a state of either antagonism or passiveness as he or she is meant to make the connection between the subject body and his or her own. This connection is made all the more strong as contemporary culture becomes increasingly media saturated, for, as Arturo Aldema points out, the medium of television often presents the body as a whole or in parts as signifiers of social stature. This type of body shown may signify high social or economic status in one subject or it may indicate social deviance, but it is through television, the most omnipresent cultural medium, that these claims are made and reinforced.

Even though one of my major examples is not dependent on media coverage to dispense its message, they all rely on the overall cultural perception of the body created, in part, by the media. Religious tradition and social convention that predate the current media trends contribute to the perception of the abstract body, but much of the reception

is based on media images. As Aldema argues, the body is used to reinforce the status quo and maintain order. Protests and art that deconstruct or abuse the body throw into question standards of acceptability and normalcy. To use an appropriately crass example, a show such as *COPS* reinforces certain stereotypes about the criminal body. The show is relatively open to all races with the white trailer park drunk as common as the black or Latino gang member, but the bodies are fetishized by the camera. Tattooed biceps, cornrows, glazed eyes or arms clasped behind the back become symbols for an entire criminal class properly subdued.

Bodily protests attempt to subvert the media in some way and alter the way the body is shown and treated. Bodily protests force viewers to make decisions on what is acceptable and what is not. A common sense argument, or perhaps an argument based on a sense of self-preservation, would enforce the idea that bodies should not be set on fire, shot, or cut to pieces. These examples help illustrate the point made by ethicist Peter Singer who claims that one of the great persuaders is the awareness of pain in another entity<sup>63</sup>. Whereas Singer's point is made in the context of animal rights, it certainly applies to humans. Ignorance is often the reason people do nothing to prevent suffering. Though few could claim to be ignorant of abortion, anti-abortion activists push the suffering they perceive as existing to the forefront of the debate. The speed limit protest in Toluca, North Carolina aims to highlight unnecessary suffering in an area most would not expect it. Though the creator of the protest I cite may be guilty of grossly exaggerating the seriousness of her subject, she is correct in her belief that her message

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<sup>63</sup> Singer, Peter. *Writings on an Ethical Life*. New York: Harper Perennial, NY, p. 16-22.

has a greater chance of receiving a reaction, either positive or negative, the more indelicate her tactics are. As most advertisers could attest, exaggeration and embellishment gain more attention than subtlety and nuance.

To examine this issue, I have divided the body of my paper into two sections. In the individual sections I will examine issues of representation and method involving political messages and the human body. One section will be devoted primarily to artists (with one exception) while the other focuses more on political protesters.

In the first section, titled “I am fighting for all of us,” I look at artists and how they incorporate acts of masochism into social messages. I argue that artists who destroy their own body or imitations of a real body aim to articulate the suffering either of individuals or groups of individuals whose voice has either been overlooked or ignored. Toward this point, I expand the theory of artist/audience contract articulated in Kathy O’Dell’s *Contract With the Skin*, which deals with masochism in performance art of the 1970’s.

With this section I will look at *The Passion of the Christ*, the documentary *Sick*, the performance art piece *Shoot*, and the roadside protest from Toluca, North Carolina. I will examine the ideas of pain and representation in each of them, finally arguing that, although their work features pain, they fail in expressing the totality and intensity of pain and suffering. I will argue that their attempt to express pain through the imitation of pain fails as language restricts the understanding of pain. In this section I will rely heavily on Elaine Scarry’s theories of pain and language put forth in *The Body in Pain*. Following



her theories, I will argue that these artists offer only an exaggerated mimicry that may increase awareness but is unlikely to promote understanding.

The next section, titled “The body bends/Yeah, the body, it calls out,” deals more with one specific type of political protest and how the body is represented in these protests. I will address the very controversial topic of abortion and examine the practice of many anti-abortion activists of using fetal images in their protests. These images may be of healthy fetuses but, more often and more importantly for this paper, they also include pictures of dead fetuses.

In this section I will argue that these activists hope to associate the viewer of the images with the fetus photographed. I will discuss how synecdoche affects these protests as small feet and hands are expanded to represent an entire person, which, in turn, is metaphorically compared to one’s own person. As these images, like violence itself, have no other or counter, it is difficult for the activist’s ideological opponent to present an alternative to the protest.

I will also discuss how this type of protest follows the logic of Strict Father morality as defined by George Lakoff in *Moral Politics*. Even though they are graphic and offensive to nearly everyone (including the protesters) these images are allowable in Strict Father morality as they express the need to protect and represent the type of allowable dependency seen in conservative logic.

In my brief conclusion, I provide a defense for using the body in these types of artworks and protests. In the two previous sections I conclude that using the body in a violent way is limited in its ability to persuade but in my conclusion I argue that using the

body in pain is uniquely provocative. Unlike perhaps any other type of protest, one that attacks the body prevents neutrality in the viewer or audience. The body in protest, for all of its limitations, is exceedingly confrontational and ultimately forces viewers out of a state of passivity.

Although some of these photos included are particularly gruesome, I believe in the interest of providing the necessary context for the discussion and giving a small indication of the visceral response they produce, my paper necessitates their inclusion.

### **Review of Literature**

Much of the theoretical base for my paper is provided by three works. These works are *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970's* by Kathy O'Dell, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, and *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't* by George Lakoff.

*Contract with the Skin* deals with performance art in the 1970's and, specifically, with performance art that centered around the artist damaging his or her own body. Among the artists O'Dell uses in her study are Chris Burden, Gina Pane, and Vito Acconci, each of whom used masochistic elements in their work. Burden, who will be discussed in greater detail later, allowed himself to be shot in the arm by a sharpshooter. Other artists would cut themselves, breathe in water, and literally sew their mouths shut.

Central to all these pieces, O'Dell argues, is the contract that the artist has with his or her audience. As I will discuss in greater detail later, these pieces, which

undermine the traditional meaning of ‘masochism,’ rely on a contract with the audience, one that may or may not be spoken or written.

The time focus of O’Dell’s work is neither arbitrary nor capricious. It was in the 1970’s that masochism came to play a role in performance art. The reason for this is a combination of events in the world of performance art and the happenings in the country at large. The 1960’s had seen a rise in performance art based on the body, but it dealt more with issues of sexuality and, while perhaps as confrontational as that of the 1970’s, this art dealt more with the body as a taboo subject. Performance art, with a few exceptions that indicated the changing times, did not violate the body in the way that it would in the following years.

The change that was to occur, according to O’Dell, centered around the Vietnam War. Not only was the war unpopular but Americans were beginning to realize they were being told outright lies and half-truths. The numbers of casualties were being hidden or distorted and the actions of the military were gradually, thanks to increased media coverage in wartime, being seen in a realistic light. While many artists protested the Vietnam War and the government’s actions at the time, these performance artists were unique in that they turned their art against their body. Their performances were not done with smoke and mirrors, and the things they did to their own body were damaging and painful. Many of them permanently scarred themselves and, due to a small mistake, Chris Burden nearly killed himself.

What prevents O’Dell’s study from being restricted only to her specified time period is that the awareness gained by the public in the 1970’s has not faded and,

periodically, large scale events will occur that led to a resurgence in masochistic performance art. The event O'Dell mentions as leading to such a resurrection is the AIDS crisis, when many in the artistic community felt the government not only hid the disease but characterized the disease as a gay disease. This possibly lessened the amount of sympathy for sufferers and led to an increased amount of homophobia in the population at large. As a result, many artists once again turned their work against themselves and used their own body and own pain to express something larger.<sup>64</sup>

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* also deals with the issue of pain, but focuses more on the limitations of speech in addressing pain than on the issue of artistic expression. Both books deal peripherally with the difficulty in expressing pain in a way that is understood by others, but Scarry's work centers on language instead of art.

Near the beginning of the second section of her work Scarry writes, "Because of the inevitable bonding of his own interior states with companion objects in the outside world, he easily locates himself in that external world and has no need to invent a world to extend himself out into. The object is an extension of an expression of the state....But nothing expresses his physical pain."<sup>65</sup> This is one of the central ideas of the entire work: Unlike any other emotion or experience, pain resists the communicative qualities of language.

One of the central premises of Scarry's work is that pain is almost beyond language. She writes of the "utter rigidity of pain itself: its resistance to language is not

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<sup>64</sup> O'Dell, Kathy. *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

<sup>65</sup> Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 162.

simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is.”<sup>66</sup> Pain, especially the type experienced in prolonged instances of torture, leaves people in a state where they are left with some sort of pre-language. Screams, grunts, and groans are the only outlet people have to describe their physical state. The sentience associated with the invention of language is still present as the subjects still feel the need to express themselves but the formal structures of words have been destroyed momentarily.

Just as it is hard to describe from one person to another directly, this state of pain is especially hard to describe in literature and art. Occasionally a writer or filmmaker will be gifted enough to translate the intense feeling of pain to the audience but rarely is that the case. For example, Scarry mentions an instance where many monosyllabic words in a Greek play were translated simply as ‘Ah’ in the English version. When someone questioned the translation and whether it accurately reflected the severity of the moment, the English translator simply added exclamation points to change the gravity of the situation so that ‘Ah’ was used in instances of minor pain and ‘Ah!!!’ in places where intense pain was being experienced.

However, Scarry is quick to point out that it is not simply English that is restricted when it comes to describing pain. It is all language that stops short of the ability to describe pain. As mentioned already, much of the reason for this is that pain has no object in the world. “It is not *of* or *for* anything.” It is unique to the individual and it is personal. Treating it as otherwise allows both for the dehumanization of certain people and the passive allowance of war. By that what is meant is that pain, due to its matchless

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<sup>66</sup> *The Body in Pain*, p. 5

position in reality, cannot be shared and pain in other individuals is frequently either minimized or ignored. Screams of pain are interpreted as signs of power and effectiveness of tactics by torturers, and the bodies of soldiers are treated as parts of a greater whole rather than isolated individuals experiencing terrific pain. Scarry writes, concerning war, “We will respond to the injury (a severed artery in one giant, a massive series of leechbites in another) as an imaginary wound in an imaginary body, despite the fact that that imaginary body is itself made up of thousands of real human bodies, and thus composed of actual (hence woundable) human tissue.” The entire mass of people that makes up an army is treated as one body so the wounds of real humans are taken as wounds to a larger, impersonal being. Scarry refers to a number of times in military manuals, strategies, and even memoirs where things such as 14,000 dead soldiers are treated one loss giant division and the individual wounds are forgotten or regarded as part of an overall loss. The language used, while very personal in other contexts, is removed from the real human loss and the real human pain being experienced.<sup>67</sup>

Scarry devotes much of her ‘Unmaking’ section to the issue of torture. In instances of torture, the restrictions of language become clear and the reliance humans have on language is addressed. It is at this point, when the body can no longer provide protection, that the failure of language becomes clear. In a particularly vicious mockery of pain, torture is often presented as a type of language game. Torture occurs presumably because one group wishes to extract some information regarding another and, for this reason, people who are tortured and do provide information are often looked down upon

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<sup>67</sup> *The Body In Pain*. 71-96.

by those who were otherwise allies. For the torturer all one has to do is ‘tell us what we want to know.’ For those on the prisoner’s side who did not experience the same he did, all the prisoner had to do was ‘keep his mouth shut.’ The fallacy that occurs here on both sides, Scarry points out, is that the actual information being extracted is either already known, entirely incorrect, useless to those extracting it, or honestly not known to the subject. Those who demean those that reveal information under torture are disregarding both the physical pain and the act of dehumanization that torture victims undergo. They fail to recognize that torture victims are in a position not where words will save them but where words and all of language is useless. In fact, the final extension of the body may be an internal one. The last things people can use to provide safety is their voice and language and pain can be seen as evidence that that safe boundary has also been breached.

The final book I will use as the basis for much of my argument is George Lakoff’s *Moral Politics*. This book differs from the other two in that it does not specifically deal with pain or with language. Issues of art and expression are addressed but they are not at the center of the work.

As indicated by the subtitle, *What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don’t*, this work deals with the differences between conservative and liberal thought. Lakoff writes, “During the election campaign, it became clear to me that liberals and conservatives have very different moral systems, and that much of the political discourse of conservatives

and liberals derives from their moral systems.”<sup>68</sup> The purpose of Lakoff’s book is to define these metaphorical systems and illustrate how they operate in the world. With political change in mind (Lakoff makes no pretense about his own preference and devotes an entire section to the reasons one is superior to the other), Lakoff establishes the two systems of thought. He then goes issue by issue over the larger, contested topics in politics and illustrates how the metaphoric systems lead to certain responses. Lakoff argues that these two systems each have their own logic and that every person bases their logic on this metaphor. For this reason, liberals follow their own logic and conservatives have their own. While each side may view the other as hypocritical, Lakoff points out that logic is not a shared commodity and that what appears logical to one is the obvious example of illogical behavior to another.

As much of the later part of my paper deals with the central metaphor Lakoff defines I will hold off on discussing it in detail here, saying only that the metaphor deals specifically with ideas of child-rearing. The two categories, Nurturant Parent and Strict Father, help define how one sees the world and how one defines the limitations and responsibilities of the government.

By combining all three of these works I will be able to address the issues concerning the protestor/artist and the viewer/audience in terms of the body in political protest. These three works, which range from art history to cognitive science, will

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<sup>68</sup> Lakoff, George. *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know the Liberals Don't*. Chicago: University of Chicago, UP, p. 11.



provide the structure upon which I will build my argument concerning the body and political representations.

**“I am fighting for all of us.”**

Perhaps the most well-known form of using the body as a type of political protest comes through self-immolation. Most frequently associated with monks, setting oneself afire requires a mixture of conviction and piety. It is a symbolic protest where the body intentionally destroys itself.

Setting one's self on fire establishes the body as a permanent symbol of injustice or terror, using the very symbol that calls into question whether the world operates rationally. The supposed goal of these acts is death, but it is not entirely necessary for the goal to be reached. By the very nature of the protest, the body of the protestor will become a permanent protest with visible symbols of the conviction of the protestor. Should the monk be killed, a corpse, a lack of a living human being, stands permanently as a silent antagonist against whatever cause the person fought. The Vietnam War, the slaughter of the Cambodian people by the Pol Pot government, or the silencing of Chinese dissidents may provide the catalyst for the protest. The contrast of death vs. death personifies in the body of the dead monk an unintended casualty that emphasizes the brutality of one group toward another.

Even if the protestor survives, the protest lessens in no way. It would be misleading to say that those who participate in this protest satisfy a suicidal urge as this protest subverts the typical definition of a suicide. Somewhat paradoxically, the

protesters affirm life by choosing death, associating themselves with the underrepresented victims. Thich Nhat Hnah, a Vietnamese Zen monk, describes monks burning themselves this way:

The press spoke then of suicide, but in the essence, it is not. It is not even a protest. What the monks said in the letters they left before burning themselves aimed only at alarming, at moving the hearts of the oppressors, and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese. To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance.... The Vietnamese monk, by burning himself, says with all his strength and determination that he can endure the greatest of sufferings to protect his people.... To express will by burning oneself, therefore, is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction, that is, to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people. This is not suicide.<sup>69</sup>

The most significant aspect of this quote is the notion that the monk “says with all his strength and determination that he can endure the greatest suffering to protect his people.”



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<sup>69</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. Hill and Wang, Inc. 1967.

<sup>70</sup> <http://www.uwec.edu/greider/BMRB/culture/student.work/hicksr/>

The monks used their bodies in a masochistic manner to call attention to the suffering of those around them. As images from their death's indicate, the monks willingly accepted the pain inflicted upon them to the point that they often stayed in a kneeling position and made no outward expressions of the pain they were experiencing.

Indeed, masochism ranks among the most important traits when it comes to the use of the body in political protests. For my purposes, masochism will mean the willing and intentional acceptance of pain when it could be avoided. In effect, what I am discussing deals with self-inflicted pain of the type seen in the act of self-immolation<sup>71</sup>. These monks, feeling no other act will meet the necessary ends, inflict pain upon themselves for the purpose of social change.<sup>72</sup>

According to James Jasper, much of the impact of all protest comes as an antithesis to the influence of scientific discovery and thought on the modern world. He writes, "Modern science is also thought to have drained the magic and moral meaning out of the universe; protest is one way to recreate that meaning, to insist that life makes some sense."<sup>73</sup> Science, for all of its advances, minimizes human creativity and takes the individual out of many issues. Along with being authoritative, modern science provides

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<sup>71</sup> I recognize that the term masochism does not perfectly fit my discussion, especially if the *DSM-IV* definition is taken into account. However, as my paper is heavily indebted to Kathy O'Dell's book *Contract with the Skin*, I will use the term masochism as she has defined it which is much broader than the one provided by *DSM-IV*.

<sup>72</sup> It is crucial to note that masochism in this context does not expressly deal with sexuality. In *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, masochism is linked expressly with sexual practice. According to the *DSM-IV* (the current version of the manual in use), the classification of masochism requires "recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behavior involving the act (real, not simulated) of being humiliated, beaten, bound or otherwise made to suffer." My use of the term does not include this sexual element, although some of the material I will discuss momentarily does have sexual overtones, and perhaps equivocates the term.

<sup>73</sup> Jasper, James. *The Art of Moral Protest: culture, biography and creativity in social movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, p 2.

sweeping answers that are impermanent and do not require the acceptance or willingness of other people. Protest, like art, allows individuals a voice in larger issues. Even if one is involved in a mass movement, say at a large peace rally or a march in Washington, a person is able to express themselves outwardly in a creative way. This avenue for creativity allows for the affirmation of life as, according to Jasper, this creativity works as an antagonist to the dehumanization of science. Individuals are able establish their own importance and value in their life, and they are able to recognize their lives as being defined by more than scientific processes.

While I would not totally disagree with Jasper's claims, I do believe that the introduction of the body into protest does draw it into question. Jasper claims that protests are, in a way, reductive and, though they are inevitably tied to ideological causes, based upon the principle of a concrete right and concrete wrong. This claim I do not question. My only qualm is in the latter part of his initial claim.

Images of the body in political protest do call into question the idea that "life makes sense." Oftentimes, this type of political protest does the exact opposite. While they may not necessarily call into question absolute right and wrong, protests may question the pragmatic value of such theories. Right and wrong may exist but defining them can be as difficult as finding masses of people that seem to operate under them. For this point, it is required to remember the rather elementary assertion that it is very misleading to talk about an impersonal "the body" as bodies are by definition personal. This is why political protests dealing directly with the human body are especially effective and even why certain works of art make audiences uncomfortable. The body

operates as a common symbol to which most can relate. It is reasonable to associate the treatment of another body with the treatment of one's own. As I will discuss in the next section, small portions of the body are enough to expand the similarities in one's mind. A hand or a foot is all that is necessary to equate one body with another. The body is one object that is not unique to any culture or area. Even though certain physical traits will characterize someone as being from one part of the world or another, there is nothing about the physical makeup of the body that is exclusive to one area. Taken alone, any body that is being beaten or destroyed could theoretically be from any point in the world and it is not unwarranted to associate the treatment of another body with one's own. Masochism helps solidify this point as masochism is, by definition, harming one's own body. While relating to a burning monk may be more difficult for a viewer, everyone can recognize that he or she, like the protestor or masochist, has the tools for destroying his or her own body.

Two films help illustrate this point on masochism and the audience, though they differ from one another radically. Each film makes its point, whether the point deals with religious suffering or of conquering physical handicaps, through graphic treatments of a single body. The first, *The Passion of the Christ*, ranks among the most debated and controversial films in recent memory and much of the controversy comes from the images of Christ's body in the film. As a film seemingly destined for a divisive effect, initial controversy, coming long before the film was released, dealt with director Mel Gibson's treatment of Jews in his retelling of the final days of Jesus, but once the film arrived before the general public the attention, both positive and negative, switched to the

scenes of violence in the film. Opinions ranged from those who believed the film to be powerful to those who thought it was nearly pornographic, and the reactions were based many times, at least in part, on the visceral reaction to the scenes of torture and abuse. Roger Ebert, the largest figure in film criticism today, went so far as to characterize the film as the most violent film he had ever seen.<sup>74</sup> Although he did so in the context of a very positive review (4 stars out of a 4), his comments caused a small controversy. By defining the film as “the most violent” he inadvertently linked the film to action and horror genres where violence appearing random and nihilistic is common.

Noteworthy about *The Passion of the Christ* and the contestable, and surely unwanted by Gibson and the film’s producers, claim of “most violent movie of all time” is that the scenes of violence are not of war, fighting, or murder. They are beatings and, furthermore, the beatings are all delivered to a single man. There is the obvious scene of crucifixion and other scenes where Christ’s body is flogged with sticks and whips repeatedly until his entire torso is ripped and bloody. In other “serious” films that feature graphic violence, ranging from films like *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Straw Dogs* to *Schindler’s List* and *Full Metal Jacket*, the violence is typically directed at a multitude of targets. In these films many people suffer and part of the power of the films is the graphic detail. Films like *Natural Born Killers* and George Romero’s *Dead* trilogy draw on the primeval reaction in the audience to scenes of violent dismemberment and death. Though they feature masochistic elements, they do not feature all of their violence and horror directed at a single, bloody and beaten body.

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<sup>74</sup> Ebert, Roger. “Rev. of *The Passion of the Christ*.” Chicago Tribune. 24 Feb., 2004.

To detractors of *The Passion of the Christ*, the scenes of violence come across as almost perverse. Critic Christopher Hitchens points out that the scenes of a nearly nude Christ being whipped and beaten do not drastically differ from the scenes of William Wallace's torture in Gibson's previous directorial effort *Braveheart*. Accepting Hitchen's specific point without the overall critique (Hitchens sarcastically claims Gibson's film appeals only to "the gay Christian sado-masochistic community"), it is interesting to note that each of Gibson's films aims at a large emotional release in the audience and also contains graphic and explicit scenes of individual torture.<sup>75</sup> The bodies of Christ and Wallace are presented as sacrifices and personifications of their causes. The audience, not unlike a political audience, is to vicariously experience the suffering and sympathize with the sufferer and his cause. The audience, with their ability to extrapolate due to their own understanding of personal pain, comes to understand the suffering and nobility of the protagonist.

A film that would appear as opposite to *The Passion of the Christ* as possible is *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*. This film, directed by Flanagan, his partner Sheree Rose, and filmmaker Kirby Dick, deals with Flanagan's attempt to turn his body into a piece of masochist performance art. What makes his case so unique is that he adds physical pain on top of physical pain. Flanagan was born with cystic fibrosis, knowing virtually from the time he became aware of the disease that it would kill him and make his life hard and painful. That he lived as long as he did (to 42,

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<sup>75</sup> Hitchens, Christopher. "I Detest this film...with a Passion." Rev. of *The Passion of the Christ*. The Mirror UK. 27 Feb., 2004.

almost literally dying on screen) surprises enough but his actions made his life all the more bizarre. He went out of his way to make his existence more physically painful. In both his private life and in public venues, Flanagan allowed himself to be cut, beaten, and hanged with a somewhat Freudian obsession with mutilating his own penis.



Unlike *The Passion of the Christ*, which somehow managed an R rating, *Sick* was released unrated and I cannot imagine the film could maintain the same primitive power had any edits been made.

Various theories are given as to why a man already sentenced to a life of pain would add to it – the most plausible being that he associated increased pain with relief as the draining of his lungs produced the most pain and the most relief – but, as Flanagan himself suggests, his appeal, if such a word can be used, comes from what can be termed a communal act of debasement. Flanagan does not only present masochism in art; he presents masochism as art as he forces his audience to become a secondary participant in the act. Just as the abortion photos used by anti-abortion activists aim at forcing the audience to both associate themselves with and condemn the abortion doctor, Flanagan,

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<sup>76</sup> Image from <http://blakeleyh.com/stuff/sundance97/journal97.html>



along with his sexual and artistic partner Sheree Rose, confront the audience with a debased and abused body that is enough like their own for connections to be made.

Unlike *The Passion of the Christ*, which is appropriately serious, *Sick* features a surprising sense of humor, albeit in a way that does little to lessen the gut reaction of the film. A bit of Flanagan's humor and artistic philosophy can be seen in the following quote taken from the film: "[after my death] I want a wealthy collector to finance an installation in which a video camera will be placed in the coffin with my body, connected to a screen in the wall, and whenever he wants to, the patron can see how I'm coming along."<sup>77</sup>

"How I'm coming along," is, of course, rotting. The final artistic and masochistic statement of Flanagan is to allow himself to be viewed as a decomposing corpse. This is the polar opposite of the webcam phenomenon where people can find comfort through the mundane connection of video. Viewers can watch a web personality eat or sleep (this discounts the pornographic aspects of webcams) and provide some sort of calming, connecting force in lives. Flanagan, not surprisingly, offers no such comfort. His connection is not to be between one lonely/sad/curious etc. person and another, it is between one person living and one dead. One person dead and one person dying. Growing vs. rotting, (human) patron vs.(human) piece. Virtually any dichotomy drawn from Flanagan's work features an asymmetrical emphasis on pain and death. Comfort

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<sup>77</sup> *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Super-Masochist*. Dir. by Bob Flanagan, Sheree Rose and Kirby Dick. Lionsgate, 1997.

can be found, as the admiring treatment of Flanagan by other CF sufferers attests, but it must be found somewhere in the world of pain Flanagan either highlights or creates.

The idea of punishing the audience is present in both these films. Roger Ebert says of *Sick*: “[*Sick*] is one of the most agonizing films I have ever seen” and then, “There are scenes in *Sick* that forced me to look away. But the scenes I did watch were, if anything, more painful.”<sup>78</sup> On *The Passion*, David Ansen wrote in *Newsweek*, “The relentless gore is self-defeating. Instead of being moved by Christ’s suffering or awed by his sacrifice, I felt abused by a filmmaker intent on punishing an audience, for who knows what sins.”<sup>79</sup>

Both of these films deal in some degree with masochism, especially Flanagan who devoted his professional life to the subject. However, Flanagan certainly is not the only artist to incorporate masochism into his or her work, nor is he the first. Pinpointing the first would likely be a futile work but Kathy O’Dell in *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* cites the Vietnam War as leading to gestalt shift in art. Just as it would in film, the Vietnam War led to a radical shift in action and interpretation in performance art. Performance art always holds a unique place in regards to the relationship between artist/art and audience and it is not coincidental that the Vietnam War signaled the introduction of masochism into the medium to a degree before unwitnessed. Part of the role of masochism, O’Dell argues, comes as it confronts the ideas of passive participation. She writes, “As people followed the war from home (on

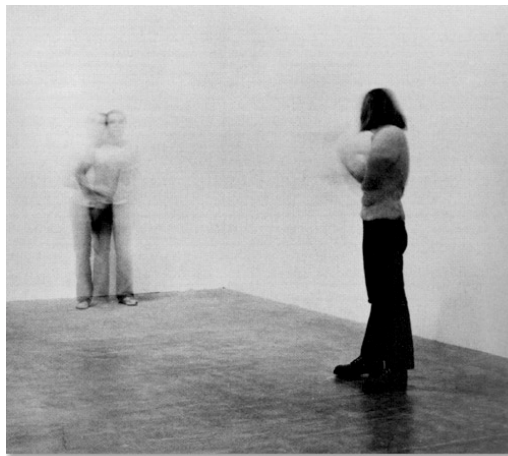
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<sup>78</sup> Ebert, Roger. Rev. of *The Passion of the Christ*.

<sup>79</sup> Ansen, David. “So...what’s the good news?” Rev. of *The Passion of the Christ*. *Newsweek*. 24 Feb., 2004

television or in the newspaper), they became aware that the body counts were being inflated and that atrocities such as the My Lai massacre were common. The gap between ‘what was said’ by those in power and ‘what was meant’ grew wider and wider.”<sup>80</sup> Even as the public abhorred the actions of their government, they could not totally disassociate themselves from it. Whether it is done in the name of the people or not, United States citizens were, perhaps for the first time, becoming aware of what their government was capable of doing.

The piece that best signifies this passive participation during the 1970s is Chris Burden’s *Shoot*. In 1971, in a gallery surrounded by people well aware of what was to happen, Burden allowed himself to be shot in the arm. From a distance of 15 feet a trained sharpshooter intended on grazing Burden’s arm but accidentally hit further into Burden’s arm requiring much more medical attention than anticipated.<sup>81</sup>



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<sup>80</sup> *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*. p 11.

<sup>81</sup> *Contract with the Skin*, p 2.

<sup>82</sup> Burden, Chris. *Shoot*. Photo taken by Alfred Lutjeans, 1971.

Burden's piece is masochistic in a sense: He welcomed pain when it could easily have been avoided. But it confronted most people with a type of masochism they had not seen before. Even by the time of the release of *Sick*, masochism had grown popularly into the cartoonish S&M parody of leather and whips. Burden and Flanagan operate with a masochistic sense that reveals such images to be a hollow parody. Their art involved real, physical pain; shooting one's own arm or shoving a metal bar through one's penis goes far beyond the suddenly tame world of whips and chains.

As people asked the obvious question of why Burden would allow himself to be shot, they often ignored two more pivotal questions: Why would someone, inevitably described as a friend by Burden, shoot someone, and, more importantly, why would an audience stand around and watch it? Why does the audience not attempt to prevent the shooting from taking place? As the slight misfire clearly indicated, it would only take a minor mistake for Burden literally to be killed. Why would people around Burden allow such a performance to take place?

The answer to this question can be found in what O'Dell terms the "contract" upon which all masochistic performance art is based. She writes, "I would argue that the crucial implication of such masochistic performances concerns the everyday agreements – or contracts – that we all make with others but that may not be in our own best interests."<sup>83</sup>

Masochism in art, specifically in art where masochism is allowed to take place rather than documentation of masochistic acts, relies on a tacit contract with the audience

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<sup>83</sup> *Contract with the Skin*, p 2.

although occasionally this contract exists in writing. A number of pieces required the audience to sign contracts saying they knew prior to going into the piece what was going to happen. In a piece titled *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* by Ron Athey, during which Athey mimicked the African scarification ritual on another performer, witnesses were required to sign a release prior to going into the performance area. This was done in part for legal reasons – an earlier, similar piece that featured bloody rags hanging above the heads of the audience led some audience members to complain that they were put at an unnecessary medical risk – but it also worked to reiterate the understood contracts of all masochistic performance pieces. The audience, by way of specific agreement, acknowledges they were allowing pain to take place and would make no movements to halt it.<sup>84</sup>

The political implications of these contracts are especially powerful in the context of the Vietnam War. These artists argued essentially that the role of the audience is not far removed from the role of the shooter. Unlike Flanagan, who made the private into the public (and also dealt with the sexual aspects of masochism in a way many of the 70's artists did not) these artists force the public into the private. They confront their audience with his or her own role in the act and, in turn, his or her own role in the current political situation. Essentially standing aside to allow someone to be shot equals shooting someone in terms of culpability and compassion.

Aside from Burden's *Shoot*, O'Dell looks at other pieces that include acts such as putting out fire with skin, biting one's own body to the point of scarring, literally

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<sup>84</sup> *Contract with the Skin*, p 75-85.

breathing in water (another piece by Burden), and sewing one's mouth shut. Each of these pieces was performed in the 70's, and O'Dell argues that each in some way was a reaction to the Vietnam War. Even though her study focuses primarily on this decade, she notes that a similar style of masochistic art can be found in the 80's and 90's as a response to the AIDs crisis and the government's reaction to it. Just like the earlier pieces that dealt with Vietnam, if only peripherally, these pieces "remind viewers of their relation to real violence in the everyday world."<sup>85</sup>

It should not be surprising that most of these pieces took place in major American cities, although it may be a bit odd that a contemporary parallel can be found in a yard in rural North Carolina. However, as most of these artists would likely admit, part of the effectiveness of these pieces is their unexpectedness and this protest would easily fall into the category of "unexpected."

In the small town of Toluca, North Carolina in Lincoln County is the house of Rachel Watkins and her unusual and somewhat masochistic protest against the North Carolina Department of Transportation. Like Gibson's movie, Watkins' protest does not feature violence directed at herself but it does feature violence directed at her creation. Watkins' house sits in a curve where the speed limit of 35 is rarely followed. The road past her house connects Highway 18 with the Wal-Mart Distribution Center in Shelby, NC, meaning that a number of transfer trucks use the road directly in front of her home.

Her protest involves a number of papier-mâché bodies in various states of injury or dismemberment. This could involve a single body part isolated:

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<sup>85</sup> *Contract with the Skin*, p 14.



or it may deal with an entire or nearly complete body, injured and bloody:



The constant among all of the bodies is that they are all in various states of injury. There are legs stuck to poles, bloody torsos tied to chairs, and a head without eyes tied against a fence. All of these bodies are easy to see from a passing vehicle, with the piles of body parts lying in front of a mock tombstone a bit less obvious. Along with the bodies there are a number of signs and boards featuring messages such as “D.O.T. – Buried in Bureaucracy” and “I am fighting for all of us. Kids, Mom, Dad and You. This road is dangerous” but the signs are something of a redundancy. While they do provide a context for the protest, they do little in adding to the seriousness of it.

<sup>86</sup> All photos of Mrs. Watkins’ yard were taken by the author.

Like the masochistic performance pieces, much of the effectiveness of Watkins' yard comes from the debased bodies witnessed. Although her cause in no way compares to the Vietnamese War or the AIDs crisis of the 1980's, it does draw on a sense of passive participation. While it may be difficult to imagine a car wreck that decapitates someone while also cutting off the arms and one leg, it is easy to imagine a wreck leaving someone looking like the bloody, full-body mannequin sitting awkwardly on her porch. Drivers, at least those who slow down to view Watkins' pieces, acknowledge their own complicity in the potential deaths that could occur in the road. Like those artists highlighted by O'Dell, Watkins' employs masochism in art. She mimics violence directed at an individual body to reflect the supposed severity of her cause. O'Dell writes, "the intensity of the masochistic turns against the self seemed to be proportionate to the intensity of desire for negotiation."<sup>87</sup> While Watkins' pieces are not literally directed at herself, she does use masochistic images to challenge the passive participation of those who come into contact with her protest. Watkins' pieces beg for consideration and ask for the participation of every person that comes in contact with them.

All of these pieces, whether they involve artist representations of real bodies or the literal bodies of the artist's themselves, confront the audience with violent images and hope to give voice, both artistic and political, to pain. Of all the human experiences this is among the hardest to express. Though it is of little consolation to anyone, Elaine Scarry points out that even the greatest, most insightful artists sometimes reach their limitations when trying to express pain. She writes, "Alarmed and dismayed by his or

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<sup>87</sup> *Contract with the Skin*, p 78.



her own failure of language, the person in pain might find it reassuring to learn that even the artist – whose lifework and everyday habit are to refine and extend the reflexes of speech – ordinarily falls silent before pain.”<sup>88</sup>

The reason for this difficulty is that pain is essentially an objectless state. Other internal states that initially may seem comparable to physical pain are *of* something whereas pain is not. Scarry notes that love is actually love *of* something, fear is fear *of* something, and so on. Pain, while it has an external cause, is not *of* anything and therefore can be difficult to express in terms of intensity. People can express their pain, either in words or the pre-language of screams and groans, but others may find them to be difficult to interpret. Their literal meaning may be understood but the severity may be missed.

To counter this problem doctors have developed the “McGill Pain Questionnaire” that allows patient to pair up words until an accurate physical description of the physical sensation is provided, but this technique is much more useful in a clinical environment where pain can be as much a symptom of greater illness than anything. In a social, political, or artistic environment this technique is fairly sterile and not helpful in describing the totality of pain.

The artists I have emphasized do attempt to address the totality of pain in their work and, unlike some that Scarry points out to be effective, these artists allow no room for subtlety. Each of them favors, for lack of a better term, overkill in their pieces. As is indicated in the title of the film, Bob Flanagan goes beyond the acts of a traditional

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<sup>88</sup> *The Body in Pain*, p. 10.

masochist into realm of “Supermasochist.” Mel Gibson, at points where others may have flinched, continues to show the body of Jesus being beaten. Rather than mimic the firing of a gun, Christ Burden actually allows his flesh to be penetrated by a bullet. And, in possibly the greatest instance of the overkill mentioned here, Rachel Watkins protests the speed limits in her neighborhood not just with signs or petitions but with a number of bloody and disfigured mimicked bodies. All of these artists made a conscious decision to treat pain and suffering in the way they did and they are united in that they all decided that excess was preferable to subtlety. In these specific pieces smaller acts are passed over in favor of grand, loud gestures.

When examining all of them collectively the obvious question that arises is one of effectiveness. Do these pieces work? Do they do what they set out to do? Every artist has unique goals he or she wishes to achieve, but they approach their goals in a similar way.

Even though the goals are very different (and possibly in conflict) with one another, every artist mentioned here, or even every artist period, is limited in his or her ability to express pain in his or her work.<sup>89</sup> Though acceptance or dismissal of a work is left to each particular viewer, these pieces each face barriers unique to their messages. For these barriers, their solution is almost inevitably to show more pain. The artistic choice is to continually heap pain, blood, and gore onto an audience until people either accept or reject the message based on their tolerance for the violence.

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<sup>89</sup> *The Body in Pain* 3-23

What these artists fail to realize or choose to ignore is that the volume of the screams in a movie or concentration of blood and pain in a piece does not correlate to the acceptance in an audience, or, similarly, to the righteousness of a cause.

For those that dislike his movie, Mel Gibson's film fails as it equates blood and gore with love and suffering. It would be nearly impossible to claim the film is not successful in showing that Christ physically suffered but, were this the goal, the film would have been a discredit to its medium and an equivocation of Christian theology. Christ's suffering, which is central to Christian belief, becomes purely physical and his sacrifice is minimized. The Christianity in *The Passion of the Christ* is a loveless and brutal one, based more on torture and torment than on love for humanity.

Again, Roger Ebert is useful in articulating this point as it regards film. Following a review of the horror film *Chaos*, which he calls "ugly, nihilistic, and cruel" and gives his lowest rating possible, Ebert received a response from the filmmakers. The director and producer, Jay Bernhew and David Defalco, ask, "Mr. Ebert, how do you want 21<sup>st</sup> century evil to be portrayed in film and the media?" To their own question the filmmakers answered, "We tried to give you and the public something real. Real evil exists and cannot be ignored, sanitized, or exploited. It needs to be shown as is."

The filmmakers, not unlike Gibson, rely on the premise that showing pain and "evil" in a realistic way is the only fair way to treat an audience in the modern world. To

this Ebert responds, “Your answer, that the world is evil and therefore it is your responsibility to reflect it, is no answer at all, but a surrender.”<sup>90</sup>

Here Ebert is nearly addressing the philosophy of torture as presented by Scarry. By allowing sufferers only screams to express their physical and emotional states, these filmmakers are depriving them of their voice into the external world. Scarry writes, “the torturer uses the prisoner’s aliveness to crush the things that he lives for.”<sup>91</sup> Torture, which is central to Scarry’s writings and the films of Defalco and Gibson, reduces the individual’s world to his or her own body. Communicating with the world becomes impossible as the external world has ceased to exist. All ideas of protection and assistance have vanished and the sufferer’s voice is little more than a parody of what it once was.

Not all of these artists deal with torture but the discussion is still applicable to all of them. Artists with a political bent, as pretentious as it might sound, aim to provide a voice to a voiceless minority. Art or protest (though, as I will discuss briefly, virtually any distinction between the two will be somewhat arbitrary) works to provide an artificial voice. Pain works to rob a person or persons of a voice. In the moment of pain language disintegrates and afterwards language is limited in its ability to describe the sensation. The artist has the potential to express creatively the suffering of another.

Still, each of these pieces is successful in establishing the reality of the body in question but their larger social or political goals suffer due to the excessive emphasis on

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<sup>90</sup> Ebert, Roger. “Evil in Film: To What End?” Chicago Tribune, 29 Aug, 2005.

<sup>91</sup> *The Body in Pain*, p. 38.

pain. In many instances, say in military strategies or war memoirs, body metaphors are used to allow military defeats to disguise actual human injuries but Gibson, Flanagan, Burden, and Watkins all direct attention to a real human body and real humans suffering. What their pieces lack is a sense of creative freedom art provides. To varying degrees all of these artists take a literal approach in their pieces. They wish to express pain with pain, which places them back within the same restrictions that pain originally produced.

Though this may seem a negative conclusion to each of these artists, this is not necessarily so. As Scarry and others interested in the ability to express pain point out, the first step in eliminating injustice or suffering comes with recognizing that the suffering involves real people. One of the characteristics of pain in a political context is that it works to dehumanize the sufferers and prevent aid from those uninvolved. Large scale injustices like genocide are allowed to pass with greater ease when the victims are seen as less than human. Their voices, already limited through lack of media outlets and political or military imposed restrictions, are more muffled by the limits of language.

These artists may not be able to produce empathy but they do produce awareness. They are not entirely successful, but they are far from the “surrender” that is chosen by others.

**“The body bends/ Yeah, the body, it calls out”<sup>92</sup>**

While their outlets and messages may have varied wildly, one unifying factor in each of the major pieces examined in the previous section (Gibson, Flanagan, Burden,

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<sup>92</sup> Banhart, Devandra. “The Body Breaks.” *Rejoicing in the Hands*. Young God Recordings, 2004.

and Watkins) is that each was done by an artist. For all the political and social goals meant to be reached there were individual artistic goals as well. Whether it was self-expression, personal exploration of a topic, or even maintaining status in an artistic community, each of these people had goals in the artistic sense as well.

Virtually any definition of the separation between artist and non-artist runs a slippery-slope risk but for the purposes of this paper all of the examples used from this point on are done not by artists but by political protesters. Perhaps the difference between the two groups will be that political change is but one of the goals of the people discussed earlier and the only goal of those that follow. This definition has its limitations but it is suitable for now.

In this section, rather than discuss a number of different protests, I would like to focus on one specific issue and one specific type of protest associated with that issue. Along with issues of war and health, another place in which images of pain are used for political ends is found in the abortion debate which, perhaps better than previous examples, allows for discussion of another way in which body images are effective: Along with the masochistic elements and the ideas of contract and passive participation, is the synecdochical relationship people find with those involved. People expand a smaller part into a larger whole. A smaller human foot or balled up human hand comes to represent a larger human body, which, in turn, is expanded to be metaphorically understood as the body of the viewer. This means that people not only associate themselves with the oppressors or causes of violence, but also with those who have violence perpetrated against them.

Unlike the artists mentioned, who succeed primarily in associating the viewer with the perpetrator of violence, these protestors put their focus almost solely on those suffering. Just as the artist reaches his or her limitations in trying to express the pain of the sufferer, the message of the protester is weakened when they remove the emphasis on the sufferer and attempt to connect the viewers with the cause of the pain.

As will become clearer, political protesters, depending on the type of parental metaphors they follow as defined by George Lakoff in *Moral Politics*, aim to help different groups of sufferers by illustrating the lack of difference between the sufferer and observer.

This is especially true in abortion protests as the abortion debate post-Roe v. Wade has become something of a misnomer. Calling it a debate presupposes some type of discussion where arguments and counterarguments are presented and individual pieces of information are considered or rejected. Abortion more than any other topic (war being the only possible challenger) evokes passionate and calcified opinions that are challenged but rarely changed. Abortion is an area where visual aids can sometimes outweigh reasoned arguments from either side, and the anti-abortion side clearly possesses more effective visual evidence.

As indicated in the last section, visual mediums often help identify the intensity of pain where language cannot. Visual protests must, through images, efficiently communicate the logic of the argument while also appealing to the emotions of viewers. Abortion images are an ideal example of this as they draw heavily on the logic of the

anti-abortion side while also confronting audiences with an image they will likely be unable to view neutrally.

To examine this issue it is important to understand the full belief held by most anti-abortion activists. Here is how Andrew Merton describes the logic of the anti-abortion side: “a.) zygotes/embryos/fetuses are human beings in the fullest sense of the term, and therefore deserving protection; b.) abortion kills zygotes/embryos/fetuses therefore c.) abortion is murder and d.) anyone who condones abortion condones murder.”<sup>93</sup> Proposition ‘a’ obviously receives the most debate of any of these and it contains an interesting clause as it relates to anti-abortion images. The most important question concerning abortion in the context of these images deals with “human beings in the fullest sense of the term.”

Abortion images often focus on humanizing a hotly contested entity. The fetus/human debate is simplified into individual body parts. Tiny hands, baby-like feet, a curled up position that is common even in adults. A number of writers have pointed out that the pictures of a healthy fetus do not look like a child; it is fairly grotesque in its own right. The closed eyes, bent body and disproportionate features do not translate entirely into the image of a healthy infant. This, I believe, misses the point. Synecdoche is the aim not complete representation. Celeste Condit points out that the feet in fetal photos are often the most important aspect of the fetal body. After describing the misshapen image of the fetus, going so far as to describe it as looking like “a wretched creature,

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<sup>93</sup> Merton, Andrew. *Enemies of choice : the right-to-life movement and its threat to abortion* . Boston : Beacon Press, 1981, p 104.



bloody and undernourished,” she turns her attention to the feet. She writes, “Fetal feet, however, are very close to baby feet in shape. The identity of the part is crucial. Our visual logic ‘recognizes’ such feet as ‘small human feet’ and we synecdochically expand the unseen picture to see a full ‘small human.’ Thus, the synecdoche tightened the identity between fetus and adult by eliminating all those components that reveal the difference between the two, focusing on one single, stunning similarity.”<sup>94</sup>

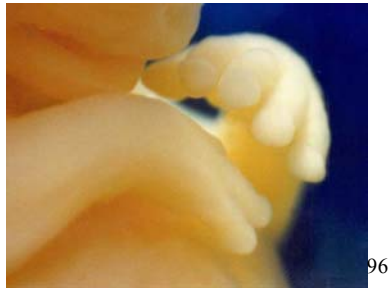
The same could also be said to be true for the hands or, specifically, the fingers of the fetus. What the fetus can do with the hands (turning them into a fist, appearing to grip, etc.) mirrors that of an infant. Thus, for many, the argument over brain activity is trumped by the ability to make a fist or the similarities in toes.



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<sup>94</sup> Condit, Celeste Michelle. *Decoding abortion rhetoric : communicating social change*. Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1990, 88-89.

<sup>95</sup> This image can be found on the Choose Birth website at [http://choosebirth.com/hi\\_res\\_fetal\\_pics/nojava\\_week11.html](http://choosebirth.com/hi_res_fetal_pics/nojava_week11.html).



The images used by many anti-abortion groups attempt to show the unborn fetus as completely human and they sometimes do so in a particularly graphic and violent manner.<sup>97</sup> One benefit of using the body in a sadistic or masochistic fashion is that the severity of the issue at hand is increased. Concerning abortion Mark Bracher writes “if this discourse has aroused in so many people such an intense opposition to abortion, it must have succeeded in making abortion extremely threatening to those people in one sense or another.”<sup>98</sup> Much of the antiabortion discourse is not centered on logic or reason but on violence. On numerous websites, among the information about various laws and testimonials are graphic, medical descriptions of abortion techniques. In many cases the language is not enhanced or noticeably different from the medical jargon likely found in textbooks with the accompanying graphs and images appropriately subdued. They form

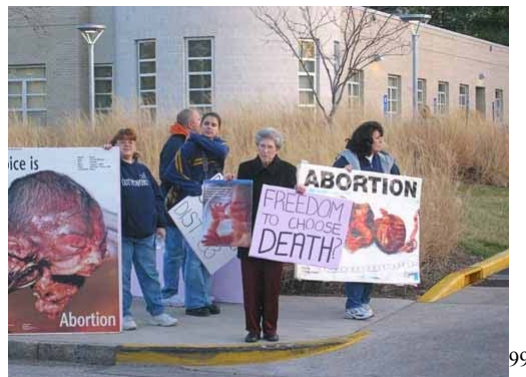
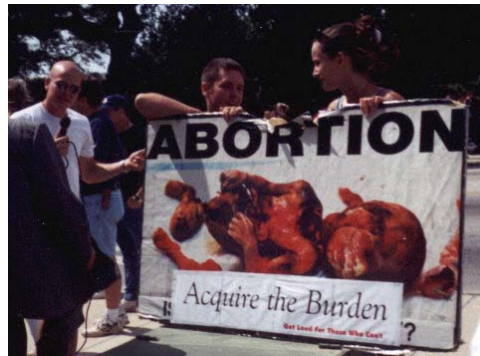
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<sup>96</sup> This image can be found at <http://www.priestsforlife.org/resources/abortionimages/fig09hands7.jpg>.

<sup>97</sup> By isolating the fetus completely, these images also completely remove the pregnant mother. The female is no where to be found in these picture, which allows anti-abortion groups to imply that the fetus is the only entity that can suffer. Apart from denying pregnant women the right to choose what to do with their own bodies, many anti-abortion groups deny women their bodies entirely, completely removing the female body from the issue of abortion.

<sup>98</sup> Bracher, Mark. *Lacan, discourse, and social change : a psychoanalytic cultural criticism*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1993, p 104.

a sterile counterpart to the visceral, grotesque images of dead fetuses common in antiabortion literature but actually enhance the discourse of violence and murder.



Using a common rhetorical device, the antiabortionists use information provided by their antagonist or supposed antagonist. By describing an abortion in the way a doctor would the antiabortionist reinforces the violence of the procedure. While their own

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<sup>99</sup> These images are of a protest by the group Operation Save America. They, along with the group's mission statement and other news, can be found at [www.operationsaveamerica.org](http://www.operationsaveamerica.org). Operation Save America is one of the most aggressive anti-abortion activist groups and have a considerable presence in North Carolina. For example, in March of 2005 the group staged a week long protest on the campuses of a number of Charlotte high schools where images similar to the ones above were shown to children being let out for school.

language may suffer from the hyperbolic tendency of any particularly passionate group, they illogically gain in severity by making their language colder and impersonal. The logic that underscores the antiabortion position increases in gravity as it is not invalidated by the medical evidence available. Just as pro-choice advocates would likely use medical data dealing with brain functions and self-functionality, antiabortionists rely on medical knowledge to underscore their beliefs, only they use information provided by their supposed enemies. There is a metonymical relationship at hand as medical information from a medical source is taken to represent a doctor who performs abortion.

Providing alternatives to these images would be difficult. As Elizabeth Grosz asks “What is the counter to violence? What is the other of violence?”<sup>100</sup> Violent images negate the typical forms of political discourse. Violent revolutions or violent repressions have a theoretical alternative but the very nature of violence resists ideology and presents discourse as naïve, unsympathetic alternatives. Recent examples in the Sudan and Rwanda show the ineffectiveness of rhetoric in the face of violent conflict. Neville Chamberlain stands as the historical epitome of the laughably naïve voice of ineffective rhetoric in the face of Hitler’s Reich. In fact, a World War II analogy is adopted even by the anti-abortionists themselves as they frequently refer to the ‘American Holocaust.’ Their cause, the elimination of “abortion mills” is not one that can be separated from violent action in their rhetoric. These groups do not, as their opponents many times suggest, advocate extreme violence of their own but they do seem to believe that the

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<sup>100</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. “The Time of Violence: Deconstruction and Value.” *Violence and the Body: Race, Gender and The State*. Ed. Arturo Aldema. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, p 137.

violence they fight against should be shown in its harshest form. Much like extreme animal rights groups such as the Animal Liberation Front, these groups refrain from actually endorsing violence. This may be purely for legal reasons but, as with A.L.F., it is important to note that these groups position themselves on the opposite side of violence.<sup>101</sup>

This distinction does not mean to suggest or advocate that violence always be countered with violence; only that pacifism and rhetoric are not true counters to violence. Violence has no other. This lack of opposite is seen in imagined violence as well as real with antiabortion images and literature acting as an ideal example. As stated earlier, the issue of abortion has devolved to the point that the rhetoric is rarely civil or convincing, and is highly polarizing. The antiabortion rhetoric of ‘baby-killer’ can be countered with scientific, legal, even moral discourse that is equally fervent.

What pro-choice advocates cannot do is counter the images. Even things in the public consciousness, such as the bloody coat hanger or back-alley abortionist, can do little to offset these images.<sup>102</sup> As a tool for debate or argumentation, the image must be

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<sup>101</sup> As with virtually everything associated with the topic of abortion, this is a very controversial claim. Much of the controversy on this issue arises from how ‘violence’ is defined. According to the National Abortion Federation since 1999 there have been “no murders or attempted murders of abortion providers or staff.” Also, the number of violent incidents decreased to the lowest levels since 1996. However, while physical violence has decreased, many anti-abortion groups have become much more aggressive in their tactics. The N.A.F. also reports that attempts at intimidation have greatly increased. Reports of blockades, burglaries, verbal and photographic harassment have increased in recent years.

There can be no denying that many of these groups, such as Operation Save America and Reform America, have become increasingly forceful in their tactics. Still, I am not entirely comfortable characterizing them as violent. They tend to operate in a gray area between violent and non-violent (though I would certainly not consider them peaceful groups). Perhaps the power of many of these organizations is the threat of violence which is barely concealed in their rhetoric and actions.

<sup>102</sup> It will be interesting to see, given the current turnover on the Supreme Court, whether these images will become more powerful and prevalent should certain abortion rulings be overturned.

easily interpreted and broad. There can be no room for misinterpretation if it is to be involved in an active protest, making it different than a medical image. To be involved in an active protest the bias must be at the forefront with little preventing any element from being viewed in a certain light.

Certainly, broad images such as these are guilty of using specious argumentation. Much of it is based on the belief that pro-choice advocates deny the true nature of an abortion. An anonymous writer in the Charlotte Observer's "Buzz" forum states this belief as such "The abortion rights crowd decries the use of sonograms by Christian pregnancy centers as 'coercive.' What they're really afraid of is that the mother will recognize a baby when she sees one."<sup>103</sup> Roger Shepard describes this synecdochical logic as such: "[A]n object that is novel and yet similar to one already significant object may especially warrant our close attention. We need to know how far something can depart from its usual or expected form and still have the consequences that we have found to follow from its 'natural kind.'"<sup>104</sup> Anti-abortion activists accuse their opponents of not only murdering human beings but of also relying on sophistry as their only weapon. Far from subtle, it is the type of immovable discourse that labels pro-choice as pro-abortion and characterizes the pro-life movement as driven by close-minded fundamentalists. On the connection between one body and another an entire movement rests and the antiabortion activists are dependent on the synecdochical relationships being recognized and acted upon.

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<sup>103</sup> The Buzz Forum, Charlotte Observer, March 8, 2005.

<sup>104</sup> Shepard, Roger. *Mental images and their transformations*. Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1982, p 82.

Even though the images of fetuses are graphic and certainly comparable to the type of art conservatives tend to criticize (Robert Mapplethorpe, Andre Serrano, etc.), it is not unreasonable or illogical for these protestors to use them. The images used by anti-abortion activists draw on the Strict Father morality metaphor presented by George Lakoff in his work *Moral Politics*. In this work, Lakoff reduces political thought to two broad metaphors where the government is seen as a parent and citizens as children; this metaphor creates a stiff line between these types of protests and the type of provocative art conservatives tend to criticize. That type of art, the kind that allows for and applauds, for example, an image of a crucifix in a jar of urine, is seen as crassly provocative or as attempting to subvert traditional structures and promote various agendas (that it is often government funded does not help either). The images of fetuses, at least as seen by those protestors, is none of those things and is aimed at promoting a social goal that is directly in line with Strict Father morality.

Strict father morality, the kind associated with conservative thought, has “the father having primary responsibility for supporting and protecting the family as well as the authority to set overall policy, to set strict rules for the behavior of children and to enforce the rules.” Also, in this perspective, “Self-discipline, self-reliance, and respect for legitimate authority are the crucial things that children must learn.”<sup>105</sup>

According to Lakoff, the central difference between conservatives and liberals, which often leave one side viewing the other as irrational or illogical, can be explained through this metaphor. If one accepts the strict father morality metaphor, then there is

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<sup>105</sup> *Moral Politics*, p. 11.

nothing hypocritical about claiming to be pro-life in regards to abortion while at the same time supporting the death penalty. A similar result can be found in the nurturing parent model Lakoff sees liberals as adopting. Within the context of this metaphor there is nothing illogical about claiming to be a champion of the working class while also supporting environmental causes that prevent the creation of jobs. Each metaphor creates a unique system of thought that dictates the logic of the individual believers.

Part of the core of the strict father model is the belief that dependency is, in most cases, something to be avoided. For an example of how this belief applies to real issues one has only to look at the common conservative view on welfare. Welfare is seen as a system that allows individuals to become dependent on the government just as a lenient parent allows a child to live in the home or not get a job long past the accepted age of adulthood. This attack on dependency is actually at the core of the anti-abortion protests. These protests follow the principal conservative belief that an excess of government in the lives of the citizens is unwanted. Conservatives often attack “big government” and so do these images, although in a less than direct way.

As most anti-abortion groups are quick to point out, abortion is a legal activity in America. While it is regulated and restricted, the right to have an abortion under certain set circumstances is legal. Part of the aim of these protestors is to take the emphasis off the government and place it on individuals. In the conservative worldview, where large government is perhaps seen as more sinister than it in the liberal one, depending on the government to solve problems is not only futile, it is also somewhat immoral. Lakoff



writes that the role of the government can be seen as “requiring citizens to be self-disciplined and self-reliant and, therefore, to help themselves.”<sup>106</sup>

Anti-abortion protestors of the type mentioned here present their message in such a violent, abrasive way not because they want the government to change the laws but because they want individual viewers to act. Their aim is to motivate citizens into action. Their example illustrates how the conservative model can be seen as a bottom-up model with the impetus being placed on the average citizen with government assistance seen either as a final product or a last option. Depending on the legal system, many would claim, allows sophistry and political influence to trump that incredibly loaded phrase “common sense.”

As already mentioned these images are meant to confront the (often unwilling) viewers with a real human body in a state of dismemberment and death. One thing that must be granted these anti-abortion activists is that they, without exception, hate the practice of abortion. To many of them, even treating the issue as a legal one is grossly immoral; in the minds of many conservatives, the practice is nothing short of murder<sup>107</sup>. Lakoff asks the basic conservative questions about abortion when he writes, “What could be a more perfect model of a helpless, innocent child than a baby in the womb? What could be a more heinous crime than bloody murder?”<sup>108</sup> In the conservative conceptualization of the issue it is the responsibility of the individual to save those who

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<sup>106</sup> *Moral Politics*, p. 47.

<sup>107</sup> It warrants noting that all those who oppose abortion are not necessarily conservative or would tend to vote Republican. Lakoff devotes a small amount of the section on abortion in *Moral Politics* to the logic of anti-abortion feminists and in my research for this paper I found groups like Feminists for Life and Culture Jam for Life who would hardly fit the common conservative stereotype.

<sup>108</sup> *Moral Politics*, p. 258.

cannot be expected to save themselves. Conservative thought, according to Lakoff and the Strict Father morality, makes a sharp distinction between the helpless and the able. The mother is considered someone completely able, meaning she should be held accountable for her decisions (which, in turn allows for conservatives to cut social welfare programs that provide economic and medical assistance to lower income mothers) but the fetus is seen as an innocent victim of a mother's selfishness or irresponsibility.<sup>109</sup>

For the anti-abortion activists these visual images are only a part of a larger effort designed to eliminate abortion but in these pictures much of the emotion and logic of the movement can be found. It is pivotal to their cause that a human body be seen in the practice of abortion. The human body, represented best in this case by small hands and feet, is shown literally torn apart.

Strict Father morality places such a heavy emphasis on duty and responsibility that for the activist it is almost necessary to show these images. Lakoff writes, "A primary function of the Strict Father model is the protection of innocent children."<sup>110</sup> The bodies in the images, which are already the subject of a controversy over naming, become more contentious as the anti-abortion activists claim that eliminating abortion is essentially an act of self-interest. As people synecdochely expand the similarities in the photos the body of the fetus becomes the body of the viewer. Anti-abortion activists use the human body to reinforce the similarities in victim and viewer. More than any other

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<sup>109</sup> *Moral Politics*, p. 269.

<sup>110</sup> *Moral Politics*, p. 268.

piece of anti-abortion rhetoric, these images play on a sense of self-preservation.

Activists hope to show abortion to be a personal and irreversible choice that removes human life by violently and painfully destroying a living creature.

**“Feel my arm/feel my fist”<sup>111</sup>**

In my examples, there is a confrontational element to the pieces. From Bob Flanagan to the abortion protesters, these artists and activists attempt to incorporate suffering in a way in which it cannot be ignored. In their reasoning it is decided that the body as a medium does not favor restraint. As a tool of expression or defiance it favors blood and pain. Nearly every protest involves some act of destruction. There is blood and wounds, many of which will not go away. More than a traditional protest, one that might involve personal involvement and the media even, there is a sense of permanency and irreversibility in bodily protests that is lacking in many others. As Bob Flanagan illustrated in his life, the body can continually be abused and new scars can be added, but death cannot be overturned.

As illustrated, the fetal photos are graphic, frequently in vibrant color with an emphasis drawn to what is sometimes referred to as ‘the silent scream.’ These photos are very similar to the kinds shown in the photos used earlier only in these the focus is on the mouths of the fetus instead of the hands or feet. The effect is still the same: Even if scientific evidence may suggest otherwise, these photos are presented as irrefutable

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<sup>111</sup> Big Black. “Fists of Love.” *Rich Man’s 8-Track*. Touch and Go Recording, 1986.

evidence of a being in terrible pain as the mouth is open and meant to be viewed as a body caught in the midst of a scream.

Much of the same can be said of the self-immolation protests. What is important to the protests of the monks is not that they die but how they die. Fire is not only violent but visual. A human being on fire, especially one sitting still, is vivid, attention-grabbing and surreal. Remaining impartial or unmoved is nearly impossible as the suffering of an entire people is personified in one dead body.

Ultimately, the value of bodily protests is that they force viewers out of this state of passivity. Though it is a bit of a generality, protests that involve a damaged human body actively criticize any timidity in political protest. The rhetoric of a body protest is galvanized and meant to incite. For many of these protests, their acts are seen as a line of last resort. Every political avenue available to them has been shut down or they are simply being ignored. With their actions, whether directed at their own bodies or symbolic ones in art, these protesters demand that the issue now be discussed on their terms. While they cannot guarantee any reaction, they can guarantee a response. By metaphorically attacking, abusing or destroying that which is shared by literally every member of his or her audience, the protester is able to subvert the traditional concept of the body and turn it into a political statement, one that acts as a type of grassroots rhetoric and demands to be taken and viewed on its own terms. Unlike GG Allin, their purpose is neither to entertain nor annihilate, but rather to provoke and persuade. Although they may fail in persuading ultimately, pushing viewers as much to their opposite position as to their own, these protests are always provocative as they attack one of the few things

that unites literally everyone. What should be protected they destroy and, as paradoxical as it sounds, help illustrate the body's true value.

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