

In the Beginning there was Evil
On Carlos Reygadas' Critique of Culture in
Post Tenebras Lux

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2012 film *Post Tenebras Lux*, which won the Best Director Award at Cannes Film Festival, Mexican director Carlos Reygadas tells the tragic story of a family getting torn apart. While the parents' mutual love slowly but surely turns into hate, their children, who can be seen as material representatives of the love relation, are condemned to observe how that what they represent is fading. Yet, the reason for this tragedy doesn't lie in a specific failure committed by one of the family members but in a general failure of the cultural institution which includes the family order. Hence, it's clear that Reygadas in *Post Tenebras Lux* continues the cultural criticism of his three earlier films *Japón* (2002), *Battle in Heaven* (2005) and *Silent Light* (2007). The only difference is that *Post Tenebras Lux* articulates this criticism in a more radical and consistent way, as we can learn from a short comparison with *Japón*.

Although at first it seems as if Reygadas in *Japón* launches his cultural criticism in all its harshness, for he portrays culture as a slaughterhouse that necessitates people either to kill each other or to commit suicide, his criticism ultimately is subverted, because he adopts Tarkovsky's religious spiritualism, introducing an abstract third option, i.e., an "absurdist" belief in God in the Kierkegaardian sense of the word.¹ Yet, since this third option doesn't emerge from within the film's conceptual or logical form but functions as an external *deus ex machina* that magically resolves the contradiction between killing and committing suicide, *Japón* must be considered what Aristotle calls a bad tragedy.² Hence, by adopting

¹ Cf. Kierkegaard, Sören: *Furcht und Zittern*. München: dtv 2012, pp. 212/214/298.

² Cf. Aristoteles: *Poetik*. Stuttgart: Reclam 1982, p. 49 (1454b).

Tarkovsky's spiritualism, Reygadas introduces an inconsistency to his debut film which turns it into a mediocre work of art.³

Now, unlike in *Japón*, there's no such inconsistency in *Post Tenebras Lux* because here Reygadas negates every spark of salvation by articulating a fatal teleology immanent to culture. Thus, we're left with nothing but a world that symbolically is bewitched by the Devil himself, who appears as an animated red Beelzebub in the second scene, introducing the principle of evil that – by mediating everything that follows – serves both as the film's *arché* and *telos* and must be seen as the substance or essence of culture, as it is portrayed in *Post Tenebras Lux*.

Yet, in contrast to that, the Biblical metaphor contained in the film title – which in itself is a quotation of the well-known verse in *Job* 17,12 – depicts a classical eschatology by referring to a *light* that will arise *after darkness*, i.e., a “morning” of hope which will follow the hopelessness of “night”. In the film's diegesis, this element of hopeful morning or light is represented by the two children of the protagonist's family who are named after two Biblical figures that symbolize hope, i.e., just and loyal Rut from the book *Rut*, and Eleazar, Aaron's third son who helped Joshua administering praised land Canaan.⁴ Therefore, in contradiction to what we said above, the title seems to indicate that evil won't have the last word and, finally, will be supplemented by good.

Nevertheless, this tendency of good supplementing evil must be understood strictly within the conceptual framework offered by the book *Job*, namely within the fundamental difference between believing in predictable divine justice on the one hand and believing in radical unpredictable grace of God on the other.⁵ That is to say, believing in the film title's light, morning, hope or good – which, again, is only represented by the Biblical names of the two children – is nothing but a counterintuitive and wishful thinking against the film's predictable logic, i.e., the realization of its *telos* which is represented by darkness, night, hopelessness or evil. Hence, we can repeat what we said in the prior paragraphs by stating that, different to Reygadas' earlier films, *Post Tenebras Lux* offers *less than nothing*⁶ that transcends the chaos of culture, for that what seems to transcend it is nothing but an unpredictable and therefore abstract hope against the predictable and therefore concrete hopelessness of the film's internal logic. Or to quote John Milton: Against the meaning of its own title, in *Post Tenebras Lux* all paradise is lost.⁷

³ For more detail see my review of *Japón*: Monsberger, Markus: *Why Carlos Reygadas' Japón must be considered a failed 'materialist' critique of Tarkovsky*. In: Letterboxd, <https://letterboxd.com/monsens/film/japon/1/> (16.9.2021).

⁴ Cf. *Numeri* 34,17.

⁵ Cf. i. a. *Job*, 9,15.

⁶ Cf. Žižek, Slavoj: *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. London/New York: Verso 2012.

⁷ Cf. Milton, John: *Paradise Lost*. London: Penguin 2014.

However, since an artwork's quality can only be determined by the immanent form of its content, i.e., by the inner coherence of how it articulates that what it's about,⁸ we must pay close attention to the form in which Reygadas launches his critique of culture. In this regard, the first thing we ought to mention is the threefold scheme of the critique's mediation: Firstly, Reygadas establishes the fundamental dichotomy "nature vs. culture". Secondly, he attributes contradicting predicates to each of the two opposed terms, e.g., nature is determined as chaotic and evil, whilst culture is determined as orderly and good. And thirdly, Reygadas shows us how the predicates that seem to apply to one term of the dichotomy also apply to the other term, leaving us with the final conclusion that it's not just nature which is chaotic and evil but also that what seemed to be its opposite, i.e., culture. Yet, in order to prove this threefold scheme to represent not just our abstract or subjective phantasy but, in fact, the film's objective or concrete form that mediates all of its content, we need to take a closer look at *Post Tenebras Lux* in terms of elaborating an *immanent critique*⁹ that *deduces*¹⁰ the objectivity of our subjective claim.

II. INTERPRETATION

In the film's absolutely astonishing opening scene, Reygadas undertakes the first two steps of the abstract scheme mentioned above. Firstly, he introduces the fundamental dichotomy "nature vs. culture" by means of quoting the Bible's second creation story: On the one hand, we see nature in terms of a soaked and muddy field with animals running around in sheer chaos; on the other hand, we see culture in terms of a human child (Rut) who – just like Adam in *Genesis* 2,20 – gives names to the animals, calling them dog and cow. Secondly, this scene also determines the fundamental dichotomy by attributing the first predicates to each side: Whereas nature is not only portrayed in terms of chaos amongst animals but also – since we see the dogs attacking the cows – in terms of being violent and therefore evil, the cultural speech act of the human child introduces the predicate of order, thereby transferring nature's chaos into cultural cosmos, which represents the notion of natural law, justice and therefore good. Hence, the opening scene articulates not only the fundamental dichotomy "nature vs. culture" but

⁸ The idea that it's form which determines an artwork's quality is a commonplace in classical aesthetics, cf. Schiller, Friedrich: *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*. Stuttgart: Reclam 2000, pp. 88/95; Hegel, G. W. F.: *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1986, pp. 151 sq.; Adorno, Theodor W.: *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2014, p. 213.

⁹ Cf. Benjamin, Walter: *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*. In: *GS I.1*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1974, pp. 77 sq.; id.: *Ursprung des deutschen Trauspiels*, l. c., pp. 224 sq.

¹⁰ Cf. Kant, Immanuel: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2014, p. 129 (B 122).

also the first contradicting predicates of this dichotomy, i.e., “animal vs. human”, “chaos vs. cosmos”, “violence vs. justice”, “evil vs. good”.

Now, if we compare this scene with the film’s second scene, which shows the interiors of the protagonist’s family house, we not only get a further determination of the fundamental dichotomy’s content but also the central determination of its cinematic form: Whereas everything inside the family house is shot with a clear lens, everything outside is shot with a filter-lens that blurs the edges of the frame. Therefore, nature, on the one hand, is topologically determined as outside, representing a place for animals, violence and evil, while culture, on the other hand, is topologically determined as inside, representing a place for humans, justice and good. Or to put it in other terms, “outside vs. inside” is a further determination of the fundamental dichotomy “nature vs. culture”, which, at the same time, gives us its cinematic form by means of the dichotomy “blurry vs. clear shot”.

However, apart from these two determinations, the second scene also introduces the beginning of our scheme’s third step: We see the animated red Devil entering the family house during nighttime, carrying a toolbox in his hand and looking for the bedroom of Rut’s and Eleazar’s parents Juan and Natalia in order to “work” on them. In other words, the Devil inscribes evil into the very term that, in the opening scene, was determined as good, i.e., the cultural family relation of humans. Yet, since little Rut is sleeping and slightly older Eleazar is watching the Devil from the children’s room (thereby virtually seeing what awaits him as a grown-up), and since Natalia, as it turns out, is spared by the Devil, evil is only inscribed into Juan who represents male grown-ups or men. Hence, the contradicting predicates of the external dichotomy “nature vs. culture” reoccur as an immanent contradiction inside culture in terms of children and women representing “good culture”, being opposed to men representing “evil culture”.

Furthermore, this scene is supplemented by the third scene that allegorically articulates its meaning, showing us the consequence of men representing evil culture: We see an indigen Mexican – future killer of Juan – who is cutting down the “tree of knowledge of good and evil”, one of the two important trees in Biblical paradise (in the next to last scene, the same man is going to be linked also to the fall of the “tree of life”). Now, this scene shows us the consequence of the Devil inscribing evil into culture because with the tree of knowledge cut down, it will be impossible for Juan to regain the ability to differ between good and evil. Therefore, this scene tells us in an allegorical way that, from now on, Juan will import nature, i.e., evil and animal-like behavior, into that what he used to represent, i.e., culture in terms of good and human family relations.

In addition, this teleological process of inscribing evil nature into good culture also is indicated by the name of the Mexican, for he’s called Seven, which refers to the eschatological seventh day of God, i.e., the day on which God

celebrates his creation-work by not working (cf. Jewish Sabbath and Christian Sunday).¹¹ But whereas in the Bible the eschatological number seven represents hope, it represents hopelessness in *Post Tenebras Lux*, for it arises from the killer's name which indicates the fatal process of evil culture teleologically negating good. Therefore, we can also refer to the film by calling it a negative eschatology in this precise sense of "negative".

Anyhow, the film articulates this teleological or eschatological process of inscribing evil nature into good culture in the episodes that follow the allegorical third scene: At first, Juan is acting like an animal, tormenting his most beloved dog, just like the dogs tormented the cows in the first scene; then, he joins a supporting group, confessing that he's also tormenting his beloved wife Natalia by only being able to sleep with her while watching pornography; thirdly, there's the episode in which he forces Natalia to participate in an orgy that takes place in a steam bath, i.e., a room that imports the characteristics of nature's outside into culture's inside because steam and sweat refer to the soaked and muddy fields of the first scene as well as to the formal aesthetics of the blurry shot. And finally, Juan is destroying the cosmos of family life by means of introducing irrational chaos, violently accusing just Natalia for things she hasn't done.

All these scenes are part of the film's teleological process, realizing the evil essence of culture that symbolically was introduced by the Devil. And Reygadas seems to reach his *telos* when Juan is shot down by Seven, whom he catches robbing his house. However, the film even transcends this devastating climax: Against all odds, Juan survives the shooting but suffers from severe injuries including amnesia, which makes it impossible for him to identify the Mexican. Hence, it is necessary for Seven to finish the job in order to stay free because Juan could regain his memory which would coincide with his imprisonment. After visiting his own family, which seems to know all about his trouble, he therefore decides to return to Juan's house in order to kill him. In front of the house, he finds Rut and Eleazar and asks them where he can find their father. Now, as if Juan just stayed alive for us to see the devastating decision of Seven to kill him, the children tell him that their father died of his injuries last night. After that he returns to his own house, finding his family vanished, as if by destroying Juan's family he also destroyed his own. At last, he goes into the woods, where we see two trees falling down: The first one is the "tree of knowledge", whom Seven already cut down in the film's third scene, negating the possibility for Juan to represent good; the second one is the "tree of life", whose collapse refers to the film's fatal logic which is indicated in this very scene by means of Seven committing suicide, brutally chopping off his own head. Therefore, we can say that the teleology of evil negates good by means of an auto-referential or suicidal process

¹¹ Cf. *Genesis* 2,1 sqq.

that realizes the evil essence of culture, a process whose goal at last coincides with the absolute negativity of death.

However, even after this devastating negation good remains alive in women as well as in children who, therefore, are yet to be negated by culture's teleology of evil. This is achieved in a scene that – by means of montage – takes place at the same time as the killer's suicide: The animated red Devil reappears in the family house, is observed again by Eleazar and finally enters the parents' bedroom. But since Juan already died, this can only mean that the Devil now "works" on Natalia, doing to her what he did to Juan in the second scene. Hence, the immanent contradiction of culture is adjusted in terms of women now representing evil culture against children who remain the only representative of good culture.

Although *Post Tenebras Lux* ends shortly after this scene, that is to say, without showing us the concrete process of Natalia realizing evil (a process that Reygadas articulates at length in his 2018 family drama *Our Time*), it is clear that the film must take a further step because Eleazar and Rut still represent good culture and, therefore, ought to be negated by the teleology of evil. This last step is virtually introduced in the film's final scene: We're confronted with a flashback that shows young Juan playing rugby, gathering his team-members around him and telling them that the other team "may've got individuals but we've got a team", a sentence which indicates that collective team-spirit is superior to individualism. Yet, the point of the whole film was exactly the opposite, namely that the cultural team-spirit of good and orderly family relations is by no means superior to but rather leads to and finally coincides with the natural chaos of evil individualism. Hence, this last scene not only proposes a hypothesis which has already been negated but also makes it implausible to assume that Eleazar and Rut, i.e., the last two representatives of good culture, will escape the teleology of evil because they too are part of the very same team-spirit of Juan's family. Therefore, this last scene completes Reygadas' radical critique of culture by virtually negating also the last remainder of good culture, inscribing the hope for a *Light after Darkness* into a completely abstract register of counterintuitive believing or wishful thinking that won't stand a chance against the concrete negativity of evil culture's teleology.

III. CONCLUSION

We started our analysis with the abstract or subjective hypothesis that *Post Tenebras Lux* articulates a radical critique of culture by means of following a threefold scheme: (1) determining a central dichotomy between two opposed terms, (2) adding predicates to them, (3) showing the process of how the predicates that apply to one of the two terms also apply to the other. In our immanent

interpretation of the film's first scene, we saw how the film enacts and thereby objectivizes our subjective claim about the first step by introducing the central dichotomy "nature vs. culture". Furthermore, it also started to enact the second step by adding at least four contradicting predicates to determine the central dichotomy, i.e., the predicates of "animal vs. human", "chaos vs. cosmos", "disorder vs. order" and "violence vs. justice". At last, we summarized all these predicates in the dichotomy's fundamental predication "good vs. evil". Therefore, it was possible for us to say that the film itself determines nature in terms of representing evil and culture in terms of representing good.

Yet, as we went on to analyze the second scene, we came to realize that the film subverts the central dichotomy because its fundamental predication starts to appear within just one of the opposed terms. That is to say, apart from supplementing the list of predicates by introducing the topological dichotomy "outside vs. inside" as well as the formal dichotomy "blurry vs. clear shot", we saw how the film starts to enter our scheme's third step: By "working" on Juan, the Devil inscribes that what used to be the predicate of nature, i.e., evil, into one of the representatives of that what used to be good, i.e., culture, thereby introducing the new dichotomy "good vs. evil culture". But since the Devil is a mere abstraction which functions as an external symbol for the evil essence of culture, it's clear that the film needs to concretize this abstract symbolism by showing us how culture itself becomes evil in terms of systematically negating everything that is good about it. Therefore, we had to follow the most important scenes that articulate this systematic negation to which we referred to as the teleology of evil.

However, by following this teleological process, we came to realize that the dichotomy "good vs. evil culture" functions as a dynamic category: At first, Juan, who symbolizes men, represents evil culture, while Natalia, Rut and Eleazar, who symbolize women and children, represent good culture. But as the film evolves, this determination gets modified, for the Devil reappears in the family house and again enters the parents' bedroom, which can only mean that he now inscribes evil into Natalia because at this point Juan has already died. Hence, the dynamic category of evil culture is passed on to women, while children remain the only representative of good culture.

This new form of the dynamic contradiction inside culture led to the analysis of the final scene in which *Post Tenebras Lux* negates also the last spark of good culture: We see young Juan proposing that cultural team-spirit is superior to natural individualism. Yet, the film's teleology of evil proposed exactly the opposite because it showed the concrete process of how the cultural team-spirit of Juan's family is a mere illusion and ultimately identifies precisely with the natural chaos of individualism. Thus, the final scene not only proposes a hypothesis that has already been negated by the film's internal logic, but also makes it implausible to assume that Eleazar and Rut will escape the teleology of evil for they too are part of the team-spirit of Juan's family. Hence, this scene fulfills Reygadas' radical

critique of culture in terms of virtually negating also the last representative of good culture, which made it possible for us to conclude in an objective manner that *Post Tenebras Lux* transfers the hope for a *Light after Darkness* into a completely abstract register of counterintuitive believing that won't stand a chance against the teleology of evil, i.e., the film's concrete logic or systematic form which has been object of our analysis.

IV. POST SCRIPTUM

In order to avoid confusion, we can add to our analysis the following graph that visualizes the conceptual structure of *Post Tenebras Lux* by gathering the threefold scheme of its critique of culture together with all the dichotomy's predicates which we elaborated above:

- (1.) **Central Dichotomy:**
Nature vs. Culture
- (2.) **Contradicting Predicates:**
 - a. **In Regard to Content:**
Chaos vs. Cosmos
Disorder vs. Order
Animal vs. Human
Violence vs. Justice
Outside vs. Inside
Muddy field vs. Clean House
 - b. **In Regard to Form:**
Blurry Shot vs. Clear Shot
 - c. **Unity of Form and Content:**
Evil vs. Good
- (3.) **Immanent Contradiction in "Culture":**
Evil Culture vs. Good Culture
Individualism vs. Family Order
Juan vs. Natalia, Eleazar, Rut
Natalia vs. Eleazar, Rut
Concrete Logic vs. Abstract Hope
[Eleazar vs. Rut]
[Rut vs. X]
[X]