Lucifer . . . is the demon or angel of lucidity [ . . . ] Calculating and conquering, he did not believe that revolt was sufficient in and of itself, nor that bursts of instinct always led to victory. His lucidity, which he viewed as his primary and most powerful weapon, gave him a coolly detached and sometimes cynical indifference, which made him an accurate accountant of reality . . . . Like Satan, he probably inclined to pessimism by nature.

—ROGER CAILOIS

I will make a fine corpse . . . . Try, if you can, to arrest a man who travels wearing suicide in his lapel.

—JACQUES RIGAUT

The Antinomy of Suicide by Decapitation

I’m not interested in accidental suicides. There are many suicides, but few that assume it as a vocation. What could be less accidental than suicide by decapitation? This is a suicide that if done well—and it is no doubt possible to botch the affair—demands an approach that is meticulous, attended to with utmost care, and presumes a mastery of craft. For the subject that takes it upon itself to decapitate him or herself, the details should never be a matter of whim. It is a suicide that should suffer from what I would like to call an acute ailment called precision. It is the ultimate gesture of reduction: the impulse to reduce oneself in a single act to one’s real properties. The poles that define such an act are obscurity and lucidity.

3. [Kukuljevic seems to have in mind Jacques Rigaut’s proclamation: “Suicide should be a vocation.” See Jacques Rigaut, in Dada Suicides, trans. Terry Hale, et al. (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 120. Rigaut is an interesting character, for as Jacques-Émile Blanche recalls: “He was the most scrupulous of young men. He died from an excess of scruple. The horror of filthiness was in him from his childhood . . . he who killed himself on the 5th of November 1929, in an absolutely methodical fashion.” Ibid., 125-126. —Ed.]
Fig. 1: “Un Étrange Suicide,” Le Petit Parisien (1903).
There is a darkly comical dimension to such a subject—an ostentation verging on melodrama. Grotesquely captured by the figure of the businessman, Gerald Miller, who in a fit of impotent rage decapitated himself in the most macabre of ways. As Luke Sakfeld reports, “the businessman tied one end of the rope to a tree, then climbed into his Aston Martin and wrapped the other end around his neck. He drove the 90,000 quid car into a busy main road, forcing other drivers to watch his horrific death.” The black humor resides not simply in the horror of the spectacle, in the blood drenched Aston Martin, but in the act’s motivation. Apparently what motivated the deed was a desire not only to deprive his wife, who was seeking a divorce, of the possibility of alimony, but of shouldering her with a debt. For prior to his willed decapitation, he ran up “an extortionate amount of debt” precisely in order to leave her a negative sum. The fact that he sardonically taunted her with the rope that he ultimately used, suggests that the enjoyment that he derived from the fantasy that he literalized with the act, consists in the perversion of her aim. “You think you’ll get your hands on my money, but you just wait and see.” His headless corpse becomes an enduring symbol of the decapitation of her desire.

Yet, Gerald Miller’s desire to make a spectacle of his death betrays that the decapitation, the fact of it, is incidental. The bizarre and grotesque nature of his demise stems from a desire to dissolve himself in the excessive spectacle that the act engenders. There’s no will to lucidity, no concern with the self and the nullity of its properties. The end of his suicide obscures its means. He’s a fine example of how one can botch the job, a reversal of Cioran’s proposition that “[i]t is in the nature of a man who cannot kill himself to seek revenge against whatever enjoys existing.”

Suicide is often, but should never be, undertaken out of vengeance. There is something all too pathetic about a subject that deprives itself of the pleasure of cherishing the moment of destroying the object of hate. One should relish it. Like Benny, in Sam Peckinpah’s Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia [1974]: “Why?”—speaking as much to himself as to the decapitated head of Alfredo Garcia—“because it feels so good.”

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4. E. M. Cioran, A Short History of Decay [1949], trans. Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1975), 176. [In a section on “Resources for Self-Destruction,” Cioran also notes: “The sages of antiquity, who put themselves to death as proof of their maturity, had created a discipline of suicide which the moderns have unlearned. Doomed to an uninspired agony, we are neither authors of our extremities nor arbiters of our adieux.” Ibid., 38. —Ed.]

5. In this respect, Lone Wolf from Shogun Assassin [1980], or the Lone Wolf and Cub series [1972–1974], is exemplary. When faced with the samurai’s duty to honorable suicide, he chooses vengeance, leading with his sword.
Sebald provides an account of the other pole of this antinomy in *Austerlitz* [2001]. Here’s the narrator’s account:

Next morning I woke late, and after breakfast I sat for some time reading the newspapers, where I found not only the usual home and international news, but also the story of an ordinary man who was overcome by such deep grief after the death of his wife, for whom he had cared devotedly during her long and severe illness, that he decided to end his own life by means of a guillotine which he had built himself in the square concrete area containing the basement steps at the back of his house in Halifax. As a craftsman, and having taken careful stock of other possible methods, he thought the guillotine the most reliable way of carrying out his plan, and sure enough, as the short report said, he had finally been found lying with his head cut off by such an instrument of decapitation. It was of uncommonly sturdy construction, with every tiny detail neatly finished, and a slanting blade which, as the reporter remarked, two strong men could scarcely have lifted. The pincers with which he had cut through the wire operating it were still in his rigid hand. Austerlitz came to fetch me around eleven, and when I told him this story as we walked down to the river through Whitechapel and Shoreditch he said nothing for quite a long time, perhaps, I told myself reproachfully afterwards, because he felt it was tasteless of me to dwell on the absurd aspects of the case. Only on the riverbank, where we stood for a while looking down at the gray-brown water rolling inland, did he say, looking straight at me as he sometimes did with wide and frightened eyes, that he could understand the Halifax carpenter quite well, for what could be worse than to bungle even the end of an unhappy life?6

Here the death and its spectacle dissolve in the meticulousness of its execution. Everything turns on the “tiny details,” on the “absurd aspects of the case.” The goal—the end—is swallowed by the means that are executed with an excruciating attention to detail. The goal here is not to make a fuss, but to disappear quietly and meticulously. It is a death without pathos.

In both cases, an empirical death is of course sought and achieved. But our concern here is with the *means*. Not just any death whatsoever is sought, but a specific death—

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a death by decapitation. A death, in other words, that illustrates paradigmatically the resoluteness of suicide.

Fig. 2: Taxidermia (dir. György Pálfi, 2006).
a death by decapitation. A death, in other words, that illustrates paradigmatically the resoluteness of will for which the suicide in general stands. The specificity of the death—decapitation—indicates that something else is here at stake than the empirical.

In the case of Gerald Miller, death itself (its noumenal form) is not sought. Rather, the grim obscenity of his demise serves to underline the fact the Miller does not want to disappear, but to terrorize and offend. He wants a spectral return. And it is this utterly impotent offense—the desire to afflict life with your memory—that characterizes his desire to be resurrected in the impression that his gruesome disfigurement makes. Too weak to murder his wife, he wants to kill the life inside her by depriving her of the pleasure of his property. His dispossesses himself for the purposes of dispossessing her. It is a terribly Christian affair. He would like nothing more than to shoulder her with a spiritual debt. His decapitation stands in for her own. His impotence transmuted into her stunned silence in the face of the terrible spectacle of his headless corpse. The empirical death is a means to a second life, living on in the wager on the other’s misery.

If Miller’s suicide is a death that seeks life (the most pathetic form of vitalist terrorism), the case of the widowed carpenter seeks a death that absolves life of the living. It is a death that seeks finality. It is a gesture of an I that wills its own disappearance, that desires to occupy the void, the gap between life and death. The peculiar lucidity of the act concerns how it seeks to subtract itself from this dialectic by forcing consciousness in an instant to coincide with the mechanism that will ensure its demise. The carpenter puts all his faith into his machine, caring to each detail and he wants to withdraw into its final machination. It is a death that aims at the I. Such labor points to a subject that does not want to live after death or before death, but in death.

7. For Maurice Blanchot, it is precisely the character of resoluteness of will that links the suicide and the artist. “Both the artist and the suicide plan something that eludes all plans, and if they do have a path, they have no goal; they do not know what they are doing. Both exert a resolute will, but both are linked to what they want to achieve by a demand that knows nothing of their will. Both strive toward a point which they have to approach by means of skill, savoir faire, effort, the certitudes which the world takes for granted, and yet this point has nothing to do with such means; it is a stranger to the world, it remains foreign to all achievement and constantly ruins all deliberate action. How is it possible to proceed with a firm step toward that which will not allow itself to be charted? It seems that both the artist and the suicide succeed in doing something only by deceiving themselves about what they do. The latter takes one death for another, the former takes a book for the work. They devote themselves to this misunderstanding as if blind, but their dim consciousness of it makes of their task a proud bet. For it is as if they were embarking upon a kind of action which could only reach its term at infinity.” See Maurice Blanchot, The Space of Literature, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 106.

8. One could take here a psychoanalytic detour, which I will not. See Hélène Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?,” trans. Annette Kuhn, Signs 7, no. 1 (1981): 41-55. There is no more potent image of the problem of the relation between castration and decapitation than Cranach’s Judith and the Head of Holofernes [ca. 1530].
Fig. 3: Taxidermia (dir. György Pálfi, 2006).
Blanchot has dwelled extensively on the poetic nature of this structure. He writes:

The expression “I kill myself” suggests the doubling which is not taken into account. For “I” is a self in the plenitude of its action and resolution, capable of acting sovereignly upon itself, always strong enough to reach itself with its blow. And yet the one who is thus struck is no longer I, but another, so that when I kill myself, perhaps it is “I” who does the killing, but it is not done to me. Nor is it my death—the one I dealt—that I have now to die, but rather the death which I refused, which I neglected, and which is this very negligence—perpetual flight and inertia.9

If the carpenter’s suicide assumes a singular character, it is because it is a death that does not aim at the self (myself), but at the I. It aims to outflank the reflexive structure of objectification that withdraws the I from reach offering up the head of the me. It wants to cut and be cut. The lucidity of this gesture that I’m insisting on lies in its desire to observe this structure, to see that which is responsible for its dissolution, to observe the death which refuses itself, to force thought to converge with its own extinction. It strains for an instant to look upon the blade.

The mise-en-scene of the decapitated head is that of apperception. Bringing to a head the very problem of consciousness: “That I am conscious of myself is a thought that already contains a two-fold I.”10 The I cannot but encounter itself as other. The peculiar labour of transcendental apperception concerns binding these two I’s together as if life was nothing but a movement of recapitation.11 To decapitate oneself merely enacts the most intimate truth of the subject: the subject insofar as it is conscious is always already decapitated. The falling blade literalizes the paradox of the cut that separates the subject that subjects and the subject that is subjected.

11. [For Kant, “apperception” refers to that “mysterious power” which makes “judging possible,” that is, “the faculty of making one’s own representations the objects of one’s thought.” In the first Critique (1781), this “mysterious power” is called “transcendental apperception.” As Howard Caygill puts it: “The combination of concept and intuition in knowledge requires a unity which is not conceptual, ‘which precedes a priori all concepts of combination,’” namely, “transcendental apperception.” It is perhaps this “mysterious power” which Kukuljevic calls “recapitation.” See Howard Caygill, A Kant Dictionary (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 81-82. —Ed.]
The moment that the carpenter snips the wire, he delivers himself to the apparatus and hands thought over to the machine’s lucidity. *To make the whole of life a blank point without duration.* This is the dream of suicide by decapitation. It is difficult to imagine how excruciating it must be for the decapitated subject to catch the reflection of one’s severed head in the polished steel of the blade. Even in death one cannot be the thing that one is.

Suicide by decapitation: a monument to the brutal fact that there is something that cannot be mounted. Thought is that nullity that refuses life because it refuses death.

**The Guillotine Called Apperception**

_The main thing is that I resolved to die, not whether or not I actually died._

—JACQUES RIGUAT

A life without a head. A head without a world. I might be accused of taking Elias Canetti’s description of Kant too literally.¹³

The setting of the Kantian theater—at least in the *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781]—is the court room. The story is quite well known. Reason itself is to play the role both of interested defendant and neutral judge. Critique must decide on the heinousness of reason’s metaphysical crimes. Through the process of uncovering the principles immanent to its own deployment—criticism in the Kantian sense—reason subjects itself to a disciplinary regime that will hold in check its theoretical, i.e., speculative, excesses.

Critique is the subjection of reason. Far from suicidal, critique, at least at first blush, attempts to purify reason of its self-destructive impulses: its tendency to euthanasia (the case of Hume) or immolation (the case of Spinoza). Reason left to its own machinations is suicidal, destroying itself through the proliferation of antagonisms that it can neither dispel nor resolve. This is, of course, what Kant has in mind when he speaks of the infamous battlefield of metaphysics.

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13. [Kukuljevic seems to be alluding to Elias Canetti’s *Auto-da-Fé* (1935), a text whose original title—“Kant fangt Feuer” (*Kant Catches Fire*)—announces a certain post-Kantian dilemma between living intuition and rational dissection. Or as Johann Arnason and David Roberts put it: “[*Kant Catches Fire*] signaled the conflagration of reason, the suicide of the head without world . . . [a] blind intellect which has separated from and turned against life.” See Johann Arnason and David Roberts, *Elias Canetti’s Counter-Image of Society: Crowds, Power, Transformation* (Suffolk: Camden House, 2004), 66. —Ed.]
Critique places reason into a straightjacket, binding it not merely to the law of non-contradiction, but what Kant calls the highest principle of synthetic judgment—the principle of possible experience. It is the possibility of a concept’s representation, of its compatibility with a possible intuition, that provides a new criterion that enables Kant to banish the specter of metaphysical suicide from reason, returning ontology to the dream of science (episteme), securing a lasting peace. If one follows Kant’s proscriptions, one finds a recipe for keeping the phenomenal world in good order and thought within proper measure. The identity of apperception guarantees the unity and regularity of appearances.

Kant discovers a principle of internal inhibition, what Nietzsche describes as Selbstcastration. Critique must cut reason’s desire off at the root, channeling its libidinal excess into an arena in which its satisfaction is guaranteed. Reason divides itself by dividing being into the phenomenal and noumenal. The order of appearances is appearance maintained, the air of decency respected, at the cost of cutting the subject off from its being.

Critique cuts off the empirical head of the subject. It is more precise, perhaps, to describe critique, then, as a movement of auto-decapitation and not, as Nietzsche suggested, as a form of Selbstcastration. If reason is called upon to play the judge—and critique takes as its central concern the role of judgment—it also must play the role of executioner. And it is perhaps here that we touch upon that which explodes the eminently bourgeois attire that cloaks the Kantian critical edifice.

Heine alludes to something similar when he likened Kant to the archduke of decapitation, Maximillian Robespierre. I quote Heine at length:

The history of Immanuel Kant’s life is difficult to portray, for he had neither life nor history. He led a mechanically ordered, almost abstract bachelor existence in a quiet, remote little street in Koenigsberg, an old town on the northeastern border of Germany. I do not believe that the great clock of the cathedral there performed more dispassionately and methodically its outward routine of the day then did its fellow countryman Immanuel Kant. Getting up in the morning, drinking coffee, writing, giving lectures, eating, walking, everything had its appointed time, and the neighbors knew for certain that it was half-past three when Immanuel Kant, in his gray frock-coat, his Spanish cane in his hand, stepped out of his house and strolled to the little linden avenue called after him to this day the “Philosopher’s Path.” Eight times he walked up and down it, in every

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season of the year, and when the sky was overcast, or gray clouds announced a rain coming, old Lampe, his servant, was seen walking anxiously behind him with a big umbrella under his arm, like an image of providence.

What a strange contrast between the outward life of the man and his destructive, world-crushing thoughts! Truly, if the citizens of Koenigsberg had had any premonition of the full significance of his ideas, they would have felt a far more terrifying dread at the presence of this man than at the sigh of an executioner, an executioner who merely executes people. But the good folk saw in him nothing but a professor of philosophy, and as he passed by at his customary hour, they gave him a friendly greeting and perhaps set their watches by him.

If, however, Immanuel Kant, the arch-destroyer in the realm of ideas, far surpassed Maximilian Robespierre in terrorism, yet he possessed many similarities with the latter which invite comparison of the two men. In the first place, we find in both the same stubborn, keen, unpoetic, sober integrity. We also find in both the same talent for suspicion, only that the one directs his suspicion toward ideas and calls it criticism, while the other applies it to people and entitles it republican virtue. But both represented in the highest degree the type of provincial bourgeois. Nature had destined them to weigh coffee and sugar, but Fate determined that they should weigh other things and placed on the scales of the one a king, on the scales of the other a god. And they both gave the correct weight!  

Heine here grasps with the acuity of hyperbole that Kant’s critical apparatus is a metaphysical guillotine, erected for the purpose of decapitating a god, the god of the metaphysicians that held the world edifice intact. He decapitates this God by articulating a decapitated subject—a subject, more precisely, that decapitates itself. The banality of Kant’s daily routine and the meticulousness of his ambulatory movements provide an inverse image of the grand terror of his intellect. As Heine suggests, the terror of Robespierre remains empirical, that of Kant, transcendental.

Kant dreams of a perfect revolution, one in which the King loses his head, but order is restored. Likewise, his guillotine is perfect. Its blow analogous to that of a samurai whose cuts passes through the neck so seamlessly that the life of the victim remains undisturbed. It is only through some external contingency that the cut is revealed. A sudden gust of wind, perhaps, that opens up the seam, releasing a spray that fills the air with blood. Critique then must protect the subject at all costs from an encounter with such alien contingencies.

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Fig. 4: Taxidermia (dir. György Pálfi, 2006).
In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant finds himself in a position not too unlike that of the crew of the Nostromo in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* [1979]. After having decapitated Ash with a blow from the fire extinguisher, revealing that he is indeed in fact “a god damn robot,” they have to restore the cerebral functioning of Ash’s decapitated head in order to try and glean information about the alien being and their chances of survival. Likewise, transcendental apperception cuts and then restores the empirical head so that it can consistently synthesize alien matter, ordering it in accord with its *a priori* faculties.¹⁶ Kant does not then think decapitation per se, the cut, so to speak, of critique, but the movement through which the head is restored. Kant is a thinker, in the end, of restoration.

To speak of decapitation in anything other than empirical terms, for Kant, is a species of paralogism.¹⁷ The transcendental I cannot commit suicide, it can only execute. To imagine the decapitation of the transcendental subject is perhaps the most perverse form of transcendental subreption. One strains no doubt to even think what such an image might look like. For one can picture quite easily empirical heads being lopped off, one can imagine the blood violently pumping from the wound, but what does the decapitation of the mere form of the head look like? One would have to imagine the very execution of meaning.

This is what the transcendental does; it executes. It establishes the relation that makes possible schematization; it guarantees significance. It establishes the relation of *a priori* forms to the empty and pure form of apperception. The transcendental I, Kant insists, is not a substance, but an operational void, an empty form, that guarantees meaning and is itself without meaning. It is, as Kant puts it, “the mere prefix [designating] a thing of indeterminate signification.”¹⁸ At his most precise, he refers to it as an “it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts = x.”¹⁹ It is merely the requisite identity necessary for ensuring the logical binds of categorical judgment. Empty form,
Fig. 5: Taxidermia (dir. György Pálfi, 2006).
it itself is the carcass of meaning. The transcendental subject cannot be decapitated because it is headless. It executes itself and must at the same time be executed: a suicide by decapitation.\footnote{It is precisely this division between the passive and active that establishes the lucidity of the head. Its collapse quite literally would destroy its integrity. If suicide by decapitation is an obsession with a lucid death, the image of an exploded head provides an image of the eminent destruction of the subject. David Cronenberg’s \textit{Scanners} [1981] poses the problem well. Scanning is described in the film as a contingent result of a pregnancy drug that produced as a side effect a form of psychosis in which one is incapable of filtering out other streams of consciousness and forming the proper limits that produce and individuated self and an ordered and unified field of consciousness. A scanner experiences the world as an assault precisely because the limits of their mind have not been determinately formed. In scanning one not only experiences the other’s stream of consciousness, but one can become that other consciousness, take it over and destroy it if capable. In becoming the other, one collapses the difference between activity and passivity, destroying the constitutive difference that marks apperception, the difference between passivity and activity. The desire to reduce the substantial self to the formal subject, an abstraction accomplished by Fichte, according to Hegel, unleashes a "fury of destruction" that absolutizes negation as the sole form of concretion. The exploded head: extinction of thought.}

To enter into its mystery, is to enter into the Luciferian tendency at the heart of \textit{Critique}, to discover its malice, its thirst for annihilation. There is an essential incongruity between the critical edifice and its operation—critique. Kant’s unpoetic sobriety clothes the demonic, preserving the coherence of the surface as the taxidermist preserves the skin of an animal.

The body is a carcass whose life lives from its artificial structures: the decapitated subject is between life and death, between the eminently modern polarities that come to define it: the zombie and the automaton.\footnote{One is reminded here of Slavoj Zizek’s commentary on Daniel C. Dennett’s provocation that \textit{some of your best friends may be zombies} (“a zombie is or would be a human being who exhibits perfectly natural, alert, loquacious, vivacious behavior but is in fact not conscious at all, but rather some sort of automaton”). According to Zizek: [Dennett’s] notion of a zombie was proposed in order to reject behaviorist-reductionist constructions of human mind: they can construct an entity that looks and acts like a human being, which has all the phenomenal properties of a human being, yet it nonetheless does not have what we intuitively grasp as ‘consciousness’ or ‘self-awareness.’ The problem, of course, is that it is impossible to pin down consciousness to a specific, observable, empirical property. The two series of behavior (the human being’s and the zombie’s) might be, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable, and yet the elusive difference is nonetheless crucial (the elusive X that accounts for the difference being the Lacanian \textit{objet petit a}). Although Zizek seems to solve Dennett’s “zombie-problem” all too easily, a few lines earlier he notes that “If I were to know directly what I am as a body, in objective reality, as a ‘thing that thinks’ (Kant), I would no longer be thinking in the human sense (the only one accessible to us)—and reality itself would no longer be reality.” So, we might ask: \textit{who} (or \textit{what}) is the real “zombie”? See Slavoj Zizek, \textit{Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences} (New York: Routledge, 2004), 135. —Ed.}
There is Something That Cannot Be Mounted

The only way that we can still show our contempt for life is to accept it.

—Jacques Rigaut

What one feels when the blade gets near his head just cannot be mounted.

—Dr. Andor Regoczy

If it appears inconceivable how the power of thought can be shown in another part of the body besides the head, then learn here how the hand of a creative master is capable of informing matter with spirit.

—Johann Winckelmann

The cinema has a longstanding obsession with decapitation and one could trace an interesting history from Edison’s *The Execution of Mary Stuart* (1895) and George Méliès’ *Un homme de têtes* (1898) to its Giallo era proliferation. Yet, György Pálfi’s *Taxidermia* [2006] stands alone. It stands alone, not simply because it is the only cinematic depiction—to my knowledge—of a suicide by decapitation, but it unMASKs its logic with the same rigor that Kant approaches the problem of transcendental apperception.

The logic of Kantian decapitation is that of the seam and the stitch. The head is always already severed from the empirical body and can only appear in imaginary forms, sown back onto the body of content. If the Kantian transcendental guts the empirical, he makes sure to preserve the vitality of the organism by stuffing the carcass with its organs. For Kant, in the end, it is always a matter of cosmetic surgery. The head is remounted, placed back onto the pedestal of the body.

Pálfi, it would appear, is a fine reader of this Kantian seam. He knows that the transcendental I preserves in its empty machination the form of life, the semblance of the living.

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22. Jacques Rigaut, quoted in André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor* [1939], Ibid., 311
Fig. 6: Taxidermia (dir. György Pálfi, 2006).
For him, Kant is not so much a surgeon as a taxidermist. The taxidermist is not a sculptor of the flesh. Taxidermy is an art that has little to do with the expressionist notion of incarnating the depths of the soul in a material substance. Rather, the taxidermist is master of flaying and preserving the surface of the skin, protecting it from the corrosive effects of decomposition. It is not an art of impressing vital form into dead matter, but of separating the appearance of life from its animate substance. For the taxidermist, as for Nietzsche, “the living creature is simply a kind of dead creature, and a very rare kind.”

If life is indeed already dead and the human subject is an anterior suicide, then to kill oneself misses the point if extinction itself is not the aim. It is thus the head of the taxidermied body that must be cut off. And this is what Lajos Balatomy—the figure around which Taxidermia turns—undertakes to do. With the aid of an ingenious device, he taxidermies himself alive before triggering the mechanism that decapitates him and then saws off his arm.

He turns his suicide into an art and art into the act of auto-decapitation. Yet, the novelty of Lajos’s act does not lie in collapsing art and life in a gesture—suicide—that traces a zone of indistinction between them. It is not a matter of transgressing this distinction and thus parodying what is now a classical strategy of the avant-garde. Rather, it concerns excising life from art, transforming the ruin into a carcass.

By producing himself as a “beautiful corpse,” Lajos quite ludicrously perverts while at the same time retaining as a model, the classical Winckelmannian ideal of the Belvedere torso. In the final sequence of the film, Lajos’ torso sits in the museum “[l]ike the bear trunk of a grand old spruce which has been felled and shorn of its branches and boughs, the statue of the hero sits, mangled and mutilated—head, legs, arms, and the upper part of the breast gone.” Yet, if the Belvedere torso is a ruin whose body incarnates in the fleshy folds of its material substance the invisible dimension of thought (Geist), Lajos’s carcass exposes the body as an empty cavity—a surface without vital form. Rather than resurrecting the head, the material form refers to an act of composition that cannot itself be represented, that cannot, as Dr. Andor Regozcy states, be mounted.

The torso indicates that which cannot be shown, the cut itself, the action of the blade, which produces a decapitated subject—a subject that cannot commit suicide, but is suicided. The allusion to Artaud here appears perfectly apt:

I know nothing about things, I know nothing of any human state, no part of the world turns for me, turns in me. I suffer hideously from life. There is no state that I can attain. And it is certain that I have been dead for a long time, I have already committed suicide. They have suicided me, so to speak. But what would you say to an anterior suicide, a suicide which made us retrace our steps, but to the other side of existence, not to the side of death. This is the only suicide that would have value for me. I have no appetite for death, I have an appetite for not existing, for never having fallen into this interlude of imbecilities, abdications, renunciations, and obtuse encounters which is the self of Antonin Artaud, much weaker than he is. The self of this wandering invalid which from time to time presents its shadow on which he himself has spat, and long since, this crippled and shuffling self, this virtual, impossible self which nevertheless finds itself in reality. No one has felt its weakness as strongly as he, it is the principal, essential weakness of humanity. To destroy, to not exist.27

The work becomes the sole means of objectifying the act of decapitation which produces a subject that consists in its contemplation of its non-existence. Rather than preserving the life of thought, after death, the torso turns the non-existence of thought into an object for thought. Thought confronts in the materiality of the carcass an objectification of the very possibility of its own non-existence.

Pessimism becomes total. Art becomes a material that excises life before it becomes possible: dead matter, empty form. It is not surprising that it is the Luciferian figure of Dr. Andor Regoczky, abortionist and curator, who sees in Lajos’ gesture the lucidity of a century unable to free itself from the grip of the most abject of vital impulses: the organic processes of consumption and ejaculation. Suicide by decapitation: a monument to aborted life.


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