I should begin by explaining the reason for the unusual title of a semiotic paper dealing with the notion of purity and specifically with what I’m calling its tragedy. Why is purity tragic? And what does purity have to do with semiotics? I’m using the term tragedy to foreground its inherent ambivalence, oscillating between two principal meanings. One refers to the stagecraft—the artistry or artifice—of notions of purity. The second foregrounds the sad, lamentable, or tragic consequences and effects of such beliefs, whether involving communities, institutions, or individuals.

My general interest here is with the mutable and contingent nature of what are conventionally referred to as representation and expression. More specifically I’m concerned with the terrors and tragic consequences of one particular modality of semiosis, which, for reasons that will become clear as we proceed, I will refer to in shorthand as theism. What follows will travel a winding but hopefully not-too-crooked rhetorical path toward a modicum of illumination about the nature and consequences of maintaining distinctions between what are conventionally distinguished as fact and fiction. Little of what I will be arguing is new, unique, or surprising, as should become evident.

In her book The Origins of Totalitarianism, the German-American philosopher and social critic Hannah Arendt famously observed in 1951 that the aggressiveness of totalitarianism lay less in its lust for power and more in an ideologically-driven desire to make the world consistent. To make the world orderly, homogeneous, and pure. More orderly than it currently appears. Even if the deconstruction and transformation of it might entail marginalizing, banishing, expelling, or murdering persons or peoples perceived as impure, whoever and wherever they may be, and on whatever grounds they may be staged as undesirably other.

Othernesses, however, are not only external but internal: constituting what in myself I distinguish or bracket as other. The uncanniness of this is strikingly manifest when reckoning with or accounting for self-erasures or self-sacrifices of one’s life—the particular kind of tragedy that has become increasingly common today, overwhelmingly in societies dominated by monotheistic variants of theist religiosities. I’m thinking in particular of the martyrdoms—or acts
of “witnessing” performed in the name of the transcendence of a divine entity, spirit, force, or being. Indeed of the very idea – that is, the artistry or artifice—of divinity. A cosmological theatricality concerning what William Butler Yeats, in his remarkable poem Sailing to Byzantium, aptly called “the artifice of eternity” into which we shall all be “gathered.”

The British philosopher and cultural critic Simon Critchley, in a recent book (2013) called Infinitely Demanding, investigating the ethics of political and religious commitment, and drawing on Hannah Arendt and other authors, argued that in modernity the political order of the state comes to be staged as social cartography, cultural mapping, and psychological ordering. He took as a salient example Martin Heidegger’s 1933 inaugural address as Rector of the University of Freiburg, in which he divided the university student body into three types of projected community service: work-service, war-service, and knowledge-service (Arbeitsdienst, Wehrdienst, Wissendienst). In fact, this civic-psychic multifunctionality was directly modeled on Plato’s three-fold division of the “soul” of the ideal citizen 2500 years ago in his utopian dialogue Ta Politeia, or “[Concerning] Civic Matters” (known in English as The Republic). Heidegger’s lecture was delivered 3 days after joining the Nazi party.

For Critchley, politics and democracy were two names for the same practice. Democracy not as a kind of thing; nor as something fixed or immutable, nor even as the practice of social consensus. Democracy is more fundamentally the practice of what he calls dissensus—what might more explicitly be termed critique. By which I mean specifically the crafting of an awareness of the contingency, mutability, and artifice of the social and political realities promoted and policed by the state as natural; the militarization of civic life: the practice, in other words, of totalitarianism.

If democracy is an ongoing performative process, then in relation to what other practices would it be understood? What is it staged as antithetical to? While one might answer: practices such as aristocracy, plutocracy, and oligarchy; more fundamentally, democracy is antithetical to theocracy or theocratic politics. Which means, in semiotic terms, a fixity of signification or the ahistorical juxtapositioning and putatively permanent alignment together of signifiers and signifieds. That is, a totalitarianism of belief; the policing of signification and its affordances and opportunities.

In totalitarian polities this commonly involves the staging of shame: shame associated with and publically manifesting one’s own imperfections and inadequacies. The shame that has played a central role in expressions of martyrdom, both ancient and modern, eastern and western. One classic manifestation of self-shaming in the early Western Christian tradition was Augustine’s account of his revulsion and abhorrence of his own body, the reaction to an earlier life of excess. Augustine, it may be recalled, articulated and promoted (some 1500 years before Freud) the notion of “original sin” as an innately negative and permanent quality of personhood as such.

But the feeling of shame is neither uniquely Augustinian, or Western, or even Christian, nor is it limited to the other Levantine monotheisms such as Islam, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism. Indeed, it is not uncommon in many religious communities around the world. It is exemplified in East Asia in the Aum Shinrikyo of Japan, where there is no single transcendent divinity, and in South Asia in Mahayana Buddhism—where, as in certain monotheisms, there is mooted a benevolent superhuman immaterial entity or spirit with whom disciples learn to passionately desire unity or oneness.

Nonetheless, shame is most powerfully embodied and realized in societies in thrall to the phantasmagoric artistries of monotheist institutions. As exemplified in the actions of the jihadist terrorists behind the suicidal destruction of 9/11, 2001 in New York, whose quite explicit aim, as stated by one of its organizers, the 32-year old Egyptian architect Mohammed Atta, himself on board one of the flights, was to initiate a new series of religious wars. Wars that have multiplied and whose devastations, displacements, and genocidal atrocities have strikingly accelerated over the past decade and a half, especially with the growth of what has been proclaimed as an Islamic State (IS, ISIS, or ISIL) and the projected revival of a “caliphate” [a word derived from the Arabic kilafah, meaning succession. A caliph as a successor to Mohammed, ruling over the community of the faithful, either (as in Sunni Islam) elected by direct democracy, or (as in Shia Islam), allegedly directly “appointed” by the god].

These were self-proclaimed acts of destruction and simultaneous self-immolation, done in the name; the artistry, of the transcendental purity of
An artistry staged as if it were not artifice, not theater. As the American theologian and psychologist James Jones observed recently, this commonly entails crafting an image of a vengeful, demeaning, patriarchal divinity; one eliciting individual and collective obedience, submission, and purification. For some monotheists, this also entails the earning of divine favor—which, precisely because it can never be securely attained, keeps desire permanently unquenched and in play.

Semiotically speaking, what is going on here? What exactly is such artifice or artistry? I’m going to call such an entity by the ancient Greek technical term used exclusively for statues of gods: an agalma. It is what psychoanalytic theorist and master semiotician Jacques Lacan once referred to as the “objet petit a”: the aporia at the heart of semiosis, the still center around which revolves the world of signs. A sign that is not a sign. The “little a” stands for agalma.

Precisely like the Christian ceremonial object, the eucharist, the piece of bread that at a singular ceremonial moment comes to present; to be equal or identical to, what at all other times it would symbolize or merely “re-present:” the body of the divinity. An act which ironically simultaneously calls attention to the relationality and contingency of representation. These very issues were explicitly elaborated upon in the 17th century by the French linguist-theologians of Port-Royal, whose semiotic theory described a universe of contingent signs incorporating, as its enabling center-point, a sign that was not a sign and non-contingent: the eucharist. In scientific terms, this resembles the kind of massive black hole of antimatter said to be at the center of galaxies, and around which all galactic matter revolves.

I referred a moment ago to keeping desire in play, and the evocation of the formal or institutional solicitation of self-sacrifice. Making a sacrifice literally means making (something or someone) sacred. Self-sacrifice, furthermore, entails a proactive nihilism explicitly articulated not as “suicide”—which most monotheists see as cowardly—but as the dramatic witnessing of the inadequacies of the self. In the face of what that imperfection is the negative index of—the perfection of an absolutely transcendent and unattainable Real; the artistry of divinity; the absolute and complete purity of the idea of the god. Lacan argued that art is the most explicit staging of the impossibility of desire gaining access to its final object. Manifested as the artifice of determination within indeterminacy.

Indeterminacy’s interior other: its theatricality. This entails what in Greek Orthodox theology is termed apophaticism: knowledge of (the) god obtained by negation.

Those incorrectly called in the contemporary media “suicide bombers” are in fact performing the monotheist ritual of sacrificing the imperfections of their own selves so as to ostentify, reveal, or witness what that inadequacy is theanthitithes of: the purity and absolute perfection of the god. A supremely semiological act of self-knowledge as self-(re)creation or rebirthing through the theatricality of self-erasure. Where impending invisibility (death) is made visibly legible as an affirmation of life.

Such an act is structurally akin to making a woman’s body invisible by veiling or concealment; so as to make visible her “purity.” An allomorph of female genital ex-cision or clitorectomy as a negative index of sexual purity. Itself resonating with male genital alteration or circumcision, the removal of a foreskin and, in Jewish monotheism, its transference by replacement on the head and left arm as a phylactery—a square leather box containing a piece of skin (or paper). The artistry of absence as a witness of future potency. Recall the deliberately empty section of Daniel Liebeskind’s Holocaust Museum in Berlin, signifying the city’s removed Jewish population.

The subtitle of my talk—Plato’s Dilemma—referred to Plato’s patent ambivalence in reaction to what he saw as the inconsistencies, incoherences, and the very palpable messiness of his own social world: the direct democracy of the Athenian city-state. He proposed banishing (despite their obvious allure) the representational or mimetic arts—notably theater, sculpture, and painting—because in no small measure they had the power to seriously trouble or disturb the allegedly pure and ordered selves or “souls” of citizens.

Plato’s solution to the danger, and what he termed the holy fear or divine terror (theios phobos) of art seems (from a modern perspective) strikingly disingenuous. It lay not in something entirely different, something that was beyond or external to artistry. He was supremely aware that all that we call reality is social fiction and illusion...
(that is, artistry). His cure was in more better art. By which he meant an art that coherently and consistently echoed, reflected, and re-presented what was the greater order of the universe; the cosmos. This is more in line with what we would consider today a cure by inoculation—that is, by using a serum derived from what poisoned you to build up a resistance to that illness. Therapeutic semiology.

Plato’s case for reforming and reconfiguring ancient Athens as a theocratic utopia, ruled by a philosopher-king purportedly in synch with divinity, affords not a few contemporary similarities. For example, the actions and proposals by the contemporary American Tea Party (for whom the “cure” for the contestable meanings of the 18th century US political document and literary artifact or constitution was to canonize and reframe it theologically: as literally an object of idolatry). Or consider the psychopathic genocidal thugs and gangsters of ISIS or the “Islamic State” (IS / ISIL), or their mirror-image ethnic-cleansing cousins in the Israeli colony in Palestine, whose ongoing territorial appropriations and displacements of indigenous populations were “authorized” by the convenient fiction; the artistry, of being a gift or endowment by a transcendent tribal god. A material world secured by immateriality; playing the game of territorial acquisition with what has aptly been called a theological “get-out-of-reality-free” card.

In *Ta Politeia*, arguably the earliest extensively argued and documented philosophical—and as I’m arguing here, theological and semiological—speculation on the nature of the artifice or artistry of mimesis or representation, Plato voiced his deep ambivalence about the uncanniness of art. That is, its paradoxical ability to simultaneously create and potentially problematize the hegemonic political and religious powers imagined to be materialized, embodied, or merely “re-presented” in and as a people’s forms and practices. Art itself deeply destabilizes and renders indeterminate and mutable seemingly secure oppositions between fact and fiction, history and poetry, reason and emotion, the sacred and the secular, materiality and immateriality. Contrasts that are revealed or made apparent as the circumstantial, contingent, and mutable products and effects of artistry.

What art creates, then, is both a “second world” (a heterotopia) alongside the world in which we live, and the very topos or world in which we do live. It is both illocutionary and perlocutionary: creating and declaring or presenting that of which it speaks. The holy fear that Plato claimed art induced in the souls of citizens was the terrifying awareness of precisely this paradox: that works of artistry don’t simply imitate or reflect but rather create and open up a world. In Derridean terms, mythomorphic.

Art consequently really is dangerous, because it makes available to common understanding that what we take to be reality is a work of art: “the fictions of factual representation,” as the historian Hayden White once phrased it. Art is terrifying precisely because it makes it possible for ordinary citizens to imagine the world otherwise. Other than what their rulers would wish (or command) them to believe as real, natural, fixed, and true. Nothing could be more deeply threatening to those holding or desiring power than these two things: (1) that reality really is a fiction, and (2) that it can consequently really be changed.

There is what I’ll call a Praxitelean impulse shared by politics and theology: the drive to erase the marks or traces of their manufacture; their artistry. The fine art of artlessness, in other words—an essential feature or quality of any political hegemony, and especially, to recall Hannah Arendt, any totalitarian or theocratic power. The motivation of which, of course, being to forestall the need to even think about discussing what is already claimed to be fixed and sacred and eternal. Any political system concerned with the organization and management of daily life would thereby seem best grounded and legitimized not merely (if at all) in discourse, discussion, and parliamentary negotiation, but in effectively tethering materiality to immateriality; the physical to the metaphysical; the palpable to the virtual; the world you see to a more enduring (albeit invisible) world of transcendence. That cosmological realm that is the antithesis of whatever is palpable. Plato’s solution to his own dilemma, voiced two and a half millennia ago, is replicated in theocratic and totalitarian polities ever since.

And my “tragedy of purity”? The rhetorical logic of such an antithetically-grounded (theater of) purity was in fact explicitly articulated a decade ago by Joseph Ratzinger, the (currently emeritus) western Christian pope Benedict XVI. He strongly argued for the importance and indeed the utter necessity of art, precisely because its very imperfections and impurities were
legible indexically; as negative indexes—powerfully eliciting an unquenchable desire for the antithetically perfect, the pure, the fixed, the eternally immutable and immortal; the god. This entails, as noted above, what in Greek Orthodox theology is termed apophaticism.

Jacques Derrida once observed that it was “a divine teleology that secure[d] the political economy of the fine arts.” From a semiotic perspective, I would argue that Derrida’s assertion conjures up its ghostly obverse as equally cogent: that it has been aesthetics, or artistry broadly construed, that has always secured or grounded the political economy of religiosities, or “divine teleologies.” In the most general sense, artstries and religiosities are inextricable semiological and epistemological processes; variant positions taken on putative relations between objects, entities, and individual or collective subjects.

In conclusion, I trust it will have been clear that these brief remarks were intended as much interrogatively and hypothetically as they have been staged as assertions and theses. One can but stand in astonishment in the face of what I’ve called “the tragedy of purity,” and with what that theatricality has wrought in very real suffering, death, and destruction in so many societies around the world. Any hope for redemption in all this is what I’ve tried to weave into these remarks from the outset - stepping-stoned in the references made to the diverse writers I’ve cited. Which you are invited to take up as your homework. The texts and authors I’ve touched upon create an epistemological, philosophical, semiological and indeed an ethical trajectory which I might perhaps call a theological semiography. Which I’ll voice here again, finally and simply, as the courage to confront the truth of fiction as fiction; the real as artistry and artifice: the uncanny home we as social beings have been fabricating forever as reality’s very real fiction.

Art permits us to see fiction as fiction; to see with eyes wide open the fictiveness or contingency, the stagecraft and in short the tragedy of the artistry of the world. As the poet Wallace Stevens put it decades ago in a text he called “Opus Posthumous,” The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is fiction and that you believe it willingly. I’ve been suggesting that art and religion are semiotically imbricated—manifestations of alternative signifying processes, the essential cohabitation of the semiotic and the eucharistic—the distinction between a sign and a sign that is not a sign. Between—in terms explicitly used in the 13th century AD by Thomas Aquinas in his Summa Theologica—adequation and equation What was foregrounded here was the conundrum of representation itself, of which theism was its most alluring and terrorizing manifestation.

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