

Original research article
Received: 20 March 2019
<https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.56.3-4.06>

From Hellholes to Hell: On Political Agency in Purgatory

ZORAN KURELIĆ

Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Zagreb

Summary

In this essay the author creates and discusses an interplay of two incommensurable concepts of evil: Hannah Arendt's radical evil from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and David Lynch's evil presented artistically as "the bad electricity" in *Ronnie Rocket*. The first concept is related to Hell which Arendt uses in a few essays and in *The Origins...* In her opinion the first step towards the pure hell of Auschwitz was made in internment camps for stateless refugees. Giorgio Agamben revisits this idea and shows the link between statelessness and superfluosity. For Arendt the road which started with the inability to solve the refugee problem in Europe ended up in a Hell on Earth created in extermination camps. Agamben believes that spaces of extermination which reappeared on the European continent during the wars in former Yugoslavia demonstrate the grim possibility of recreating Hell in Europe. In his extraordinary script for the unmade film *Ronnie Rocket*, David Lynch creates a fictional hellhole of a city in which the rulers torture the population with bad electricity. The author discusses these two dramatically different visions of hell in order to show how Arendt's radical evil when compared to "the bad electricity" can be understood as a production of Hell, and how Lynch's switching from the bad to good electricity represents a revolutionary change which is simultaneously political and cosmological.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, David Lynch, *Ronnie Rocket*, Gestalt Switch, Radical Evil, Hell

Introduction

Our Lady showed us a great sea of fire which seemed to be under the earth. Plunged in this fire were demons and souls in human form, like transparent burning embers, all blackened and burnished bronze, floating about in the conflagration, now raised into the air by the flames that issued from within themselves together with the great clouds of smoke, now falling back on every side like sparks

in a huge fire, without wait or equilibrium, and amid shrieks and groans of pain and despair, which horrifies us and made us tremble with fear.

And we saw in an immense light that is God... a bishop dressed in White, ‘we had the impression that it was the Holy Father’. Other Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious going up a steep mountain, at the top of which there was a big Cross of rough-hewn trunks as of a cork-tree with the bark; before reaching there the Holy Father passed through a big city half in ruins and half trembling with halting step, afflicted with pain and sorrow, he prayed for the souls of the corpses he met on his way; heaving reached the top of the mountain, on his knees at the foot of the big Cross he was killed by a group of soldiers who fired bullets and arrows at him, and in the same way there died one after another Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious, and various lay people of different ranks and positions. Beneath the two arms of the Cross there were two Angels each with a crystal aspersorium in his hand, in which they gathered up the blood of the martyrs and with it sprinkled the souls that were making their way to God.¹

These two paragraphs are parts of the first and the third Secret of Fatima or the Fatima Prophecy. I decided to start this paper with the Prophecy because the first paragraph describes Hell and the second a massacre in a hellhole. The title presents the distinction between Hell as the place of eternal damnation and a hellhole as the place of incredible human suffering. The road from hellholes to Hell can be a short one. In this paper I will not discuss the theological, religious meaning of the concept of Hell. I will write about two attempts to use the image of Hell and visions of Hell in two dramatically different projects. The first one is Hannah Arendt’s attempt to explain totalitarian total domination as an “event” in which the “radical evil” appeared on earth, and the second one is David Lynch’s unrealized script for the movie *Ronnie Rocket*. The very idea to interpret two incommensurable projects, one philosophical and one artistic, by recognizing that both projects deal with Hell and hellholes may immediately sound bizarre and fruitless. However, I will try to show that this unexpected comparison of two different visions of a hellish society helps us to understand both projects in a new way.

Arendt’s book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a classic of political thought, while Lynch’s screenplay remains a cult classic for a very small group of film-lovers. In order to make this interaction understandable I organized this paper in four segments.

The first one (A) presents the way in which Arendt uses the concept of Hell, especially the relationship between Hell and radical evil. The problem of refugees is a central part of Arendt’s story and I will revisit it with the help of Giorgio Agam-

¹ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html (accessed 7 May 2018).

ben's reinterpretation of the link between "statelessness" and "superfluousness". The second segment (B) presents the unrealized script for *Ronnie Rocket*, while the third (C) interprets Lynch's apocalyptic vision by comparing it to a few other works of art dealing with Hell, especially Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. In this segment I will compare Lewis's and Lynch's understanding of Purgatory as a place in which agency is still possible, and that includes the political agency from the title.

The final segment (D) establishes the interplay of Arendt's and Lynch's ideas and tries to show the value of their apocalyptic visions and predictions.

The idea for this paper appeared to me in Vienna around Easter 2015, where irritated by the twitching of my left eye, I asked my cousin Alex to check if something terrible was happening in the world. He opened his laptop and showed me a photo of the refugee camp Yarmouk which was captured by ISIL. It showed ruins, a wonderful blue sky and a river of refugees moving down the main street. Christopher Gunnes, the spokesman for UNRWA, commented: "Things were absolutely inhumane. Yarmouk was a hellhole frankly and with the eruption of this intense fighting, things got dramatically worse."² The ruins and the refugees visually reminded me of the third Secret. Where do you go from a hellhole when things get dramatically worse?

A

Hell is not a standard concept in political theory, and Arendt used it only when she was thinking about totalitarianism in the 1940s and 1950s. It was always related to the incomprehensible crimes of two hellish regimes: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. These two regimes became totalitarian in a moment in which they created an institution, which eliminates people in a non-utilitarian way, as if they were destroyed for the sake of evil. The non-utilitarian extermination, which happens in Auschwitz and in the Gulag is in Arendt's opinion "radically evil". Paradoxically this institution, the camp, becomes the essential institution of the regimes and becomes the essence of totalitarianism. In a way the essence of totalitarianism appears as a historical product of two rather different regimes, which were not instantly totalitarian when they were created. Stalin's Soviet Union became totalitarian in 1930 and Nazi Germany in 1938. These are the years in which the state terror turned into total domination.

In 'The Image of Hell', an early article from 1946, Arendt uses the concept of hell, written without a capital letter in order to explain the horrors of Nazi camps. Soviet style camps are not mentioned at all. In this text she makes a very important

² <http://www.dw.com/en/its-a-hell-hole-unrwa-describes-yarmouk-refugee-camp-in-damascus/a-18363811> (accessed 7 May 2018).

point, which will become crucial for her discussion of evil. The Auschwitz-type camp is a place of “monstrous equality without fraternity or humanity” (Arendt, 1994b: 198), a place in which unique and different human beings are reduced to their common denominator: organic life.

Hell as a philosophical concept is seriously discussed in ‘Religion and Politics’ (Arendt, 1994b) and it is a part of the intellectual project which culminated with *The Origins...* It is a conference paper which clearly shows that Arendt was not a religious person, and that Hell as a theological problem does not interest her at all. She is interested in the political consequences of our belief in Hell. She points out that Plato introduces the doctrine of Hell for political purposes, and that the Christian Church used it politically in the Middle Ages. She argues in the paper that the political consequence of secularization is the elimination of the fear of Hell. This fear does not “stimulate the actions of the majority” (*ibid.*: 383) of modern citizens. She finished her paper with a strong warning: “If we try to inspire public-political life once more with ‘religious passions’ or to use religion as a means of political distinctions, the result may very well be the transformation and perversion of religion into an ideology and the corruption of our fight against totalitarianism by a fanaticism which is utterly alien to the very essence of freedom” (*ibid.*: 384). The reason why Arendt could not use any other word than Hell when she was describing the horrors of the camps was not religious. She simply could not find a better term.

The connection between the hell which as an event happened in Europe and the radical evil of totalitarianism is explained in her masterpiece *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Her strong link between the problem of statelessness and the phenomenon of superfluosity is fundamental within the context of this paper because they represent the steps which lead into the abyss of totalitarian hell. Statelessness is discussed in the second part of the book (Imperialism) and superfluosity in the final, third (Totalitarianism).

The so-called immigrant crisis which exploded in 2015 renewed interest for Arendt’s article ‘We Refugees’, originally written and published in 1943. In the closing sentences of her text she concludes that “(t)he comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted” (Arendt, 1994a: 119). The failure of Europe to deal with the persecution of Jews unveiled a sinister character of the link between nation states and human rights. In the final chapter of the second part of *The Origins...* entitled ‘Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Men’, Arendt famously argued that stateless refugees showed how human rights are respected within a state system as civil rights of citizens belonging to a certain nation state. When a group of people is stripped of its civil rights in one nation state it de facto becomes expelled from humanity. The promise of human rights is an empty one because the stateless persons

who were forced out from one nation state end up in internment camps of another one. The loss of a polity consequently means the loss of humanity. The extermination of Jews was in a way a pan-European failure. It was a radical solution for the unwanted masses of human beings who had nothing but human rights. The appearance of hell on Earth starts from the internment camps. It is a first step towards a “phantom world” of extermination camps in which the previously unknown evil enters the existence. In ‘Total Domination’, the crucial segment of the entire book, Arendt writes:

Concentration camps can very aptly be divided into three types corresponding to the three basic Western conceptions of life after death: Hades, Purgatory, and Hell. To Hades correspond those relatively mild forms, once popular even in non-totalitarian countries, for getting undesirable elements of all sorts – refugees, stateless persons, the asocial and the unemployed – out of the way; as DP camps, which are nothing other than camps for persons who have become superfluous and bothersome, they have survived the war. Purgatory is represented by the Soviet Union’s labor camps, where neglect is combined with chaotic forced labor. Hell in the most literal sense was embodied by those types of camp perfected by the Nazis, in which the whole life was thoroughly and systematically organized with a view to the greatest possible torment (Arendt, 1979: 445).

The totalitarian project in its most radical expression, the camp, shows its hidden essence, the attempt to make the entire humanity superfluous. Auschwitz operated as if its fundamental goal was to destroy human nature. As if its *telos* was the end of humanity. This is one of the most provocative and the most difficult issues of the entire book, and it is directly related to Arendt’s understanding of totalitarianism as a form of government which allows the appearance of the historically new form of evil. It is well known and discussed that Arendt later changed her position and replaced the idea of radical evil with a new concept of the banality of evil. I will not write about that problem in this paper for a very simple reason. The banality of evil is not related to either hell or Hell, and it is impossible to use it as a common overlapping essence of two types of totalitarianism.³ Evil, which happened in the Gulag and Auschwitz was not brought into existence on purpose. The superfluosity of

³ I wrote on the problem of radical evil on a few occasions, especially in Kurelić, 2009 and Kurelić, 2008. In these papers I argue that Arendt struggled with the idea of radical evil because, influenced by Jaspers, she did not want to present Nazis as some sort of demonic figures, operating on Earth like princes of darkness inspired by pure evil. Eichmann is not Jago. In this paper I will focus on the anti-human character of totalitarian evil, not on evildoers, because the focus on the evil intentions of either Nazis or Stalinists misses the power of evil as an “event” which happens in its own world. Jaspers completely missed this aspect of Arendt’s story and made his comments limited by Kant’s understanding of radical evil.

humanity is not a conscious goal of either Nazis or Stalinists. Even the camps are not the same. Stalinists organized Purgatory and Nazis Hell. However, the end result, the hellish byproduct of these institutions is radical evil itself. Totalitarianism in its pure total domination destroys individuality, plurality, natality and spontaneity and by doing so destroys human nature. Arendt was not sure whether she should present the camp as an organized conscious attempt to make humanity superfluous or to treat it as a “phantom world” of evil which sucks in and destroys even the evildoers, who actually become just mediums of the evil they created themselves. Obviously she was thinking primarily about Auschwitz and never thought through the way in which the Gulag consciously attacked humanity. The problem is relatively clear. She cannot have the theory of totalitarianism and the understanding of the camp as a conscious experiment in the destruction of humanity at the same time. In this paper I will insist on the unintentional birth of radical evil, and I will try to play with it by comparing it to Lynch’s Kafka-like political nightmare presented in *Ronnie Rocket*. The Hell which appeared on Earth was an unintended *telos* of totalitarianism.

I would like to finish this opening segment with a few sentences on Agamben’s interpretation of Arendt. There are a few reasons for this. Primarily, I want to use Agamben as a distinguished contemporary philosopher who creatively reinterpreted Arendt’s understanding of the camp, especially the link between the camp and the refugee. I will also use his criticism of the failed European peoples, living in failed states.

While he was still working on *Homo Sacer* Agamben wrote a short but extremely interesting article on Arendt’s text ‘We Refugees’. As a genuine Arendtian he wrote it exactly fifty years after the original publication. So, Arendt’s thoughts on the importance of refugees for the birth of totalitarianism are reflected in Agamben’s philosophical operation in which the refugees, the state of exception and the camp are connected with the help of the reinterpreted concept of biopolitics. Without going into details of Agamben’s trilogy I would like to point out a few strong ideas from Agamben’s article on refugees.⁴ From the very beginning of his article Agamben makes clear that the refugee has to be used as “the paradigm of a new historical consciousness”.⁵ The historical change should happen through the abandoning of concepts related to the European nation state and that includes citizens who have their rights as citizens and especially abandoning of the sovereignty of the people as a key idea in the foundation of the trinity of state, nation and territory. Agamben recognizes a problem which makes the inclusion of refugees difficult and

⁴ For my interpretation of the difference between Arendt’s and Agamben’s understanding of the camp see Kurelić, 2009.

⁵ http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%201018-08/We%20Refugees%20-%20Giorgio%20Agamben%20-%201994.htm (accessed 7 May 2018).

it is a link between a nation understood as a natural body and the political concept of the sovereign people. The question of inclusion becomes the question of naturalization. Arendt's concept of hell unsurprisingly appears in Agamben's article. He writes: "It would be well not to forget that the first camps in Europe were built as places to control refugees and that the progression – internment camps, concentration camps, extermination camps represents a perfectly real filiation."⁶ As I pointed out before, this was for Arendt a road from Hades to Hell. Agamben wrote his article in 1993 and he was perfectly aware that ethnic cleansing, so dramatically used in the wars which started with the disintegration of SFRY, demonstrates a radical solution to the problem of statehood based on the nativity of a nation.

He continues: "Before the extermination camps are reopened in Europe (which is already starting to happen) nation states must find the courage to call into question the very principle of the inscription of nativity and the trinity of state, nation and territory which is based on it."⁷ We now know that faced with the immigration crisis the numerous member states of the EU decided to protect the trinity with razor-wire. The new vision is as unlikely as ever. However, within the concept of this paper, Agamben's idea of the new paradigm as a hope for a better new world is quite important.

In the next segment I will present Lynch's script as an artistic attempt to imagine a paradigm shift from a political nightmare to a new world.

B

In a preface for one of his published works Marx wrote that he and Engels abandoned the manuscript of *German Ideology*, to "the gnawing criticism of the mice". In a pre-digital civilization that was a solution. David Lynch decided to put the digital version of the typescript of the screenplay for *Ronnie Rocket* on his website and by doing so published this original work, making it available for the entire planet.⁸ The status of the script is quite special because it appears on the numerous film blogs as one of the best scripts never made. It is well known that *Ronnie Rocket* was one of David Lynch's favorite and longest projects, but the movie never happened and it is a big question if it will ever happen. That leaves us with a draft of the screenplay which is itself a work of art. I will interpret it as a text which is an

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The first version of this segment was presented at the international conference in political communication and digital democracy called *Communication, Democracy and Digital Technology* (Rovinj, October 2015). The title of my paper was 'Dreaming the Revolution and Switching in a Digital Civilization'.

implicitly political and anti-authoritarian story about hell within a hell-hole. Lynch wanted to make *Ronnie Rocket* immediately after his first movie, the cult classic *Eraserhead* (1977), but no one was prepared to spend money on an unusual and strange story. The only person seriously interested in financing the project was F. F. Coppola, but his company bankrupted, so Lynch had to move to other films. Chris Rodley asked Lynch about his unrealized script in an interview published in a distinguished book called *Lynch on Lynch*.

Did any of the major studios call?...

I got one call early on to come into a studio and, you know, talk. And in the talk they asked me what I wanted to do. And I told them I wanted to do *Ronnie Rocket*. And they said, 'What is it about?' Since I do not like to say too much about something, especially when it's something strange or abstract, I told them that basically it was about electricity and a three-foot guy with red hair. And a few more things. They were very polite, but I never, you know, got a call back. (Laughs.)

What is it about?

It's about the absurd mystery of the strange forces of existence (Rodley, 2005: 90-91).

The beautiful thing about Lynch is that this answer is at the same time tongue in cheek and quite serious. The opening of the screenplay is very telling. Lynch writes:

Black ... fade in a giant stage ... enormous with black curtains – open. The entire stage is filled with a wall of fire 200 feet high. Within the fire are thousands of souls screaming out silently ... only the roaring of the fire.

FADE OUT

There is a dark land where mysteries and confusions abound, where fear and terror fly together in troubled cities of absurdities. Black clouds race by over a soot-covered city, where it is darkest night. Only a few tiny yellow squares of light in the old buildings and factories. Everything is so dark. ... A smoke stack pours tons of heavy black smoke slowly into the dark night sky. Hundreds of heavy electrical wires crisscross through the sky and electricity hums from giant boxes on the poles.⁹

The opening sentences present the distinction between the vision of Hell on stage and a dark industrial hellhole city. The period is the 1950s and the dark city is a Western city probably inspired by Philadelphia in which Lynch lived a number of years in a very dangerous and poor part of the town.¹⁰

⁹ <http://www.lynch.net/rrscript.html> (accessed 12 July 2016).

¹⁰ In an interview with Carrie Rickey organized by Bryn Mawr Institute in 2014 Lynch said: "Philadelphia is my biggest influence ... it was a filthy city, it had a feeling of industry ... it had factory neighborhoods, working neighborhoods. The streets were narrow, the buildings were all

The screenplay contains two parallel storylines and two main characters who are both anti-heroes. The first storyline follows Ronnie who is kidnapped, snatched from the hospital by two unorthodox surgeons Dan and Bob. Ronnie is a three foot tall teenager badly injured and deformed by an unspecified incident. He is in terrible shape and about to die. The doctors save him by surgically implanting an electric device in his chest which has to be recharged every 15 minutes. Dan and Bob live in a three way relationship with a dominant woman Dorothy who uses electricity as a part of sadomasochistic sex play. They are an unorthodox family, so it seems that they want to make Ronnie their son. Because he is about 16 years old they decide to enroll him in a high school where he by accident becomes a member of the band and eventually a national super star.

The other leading character Detective appears in a hospital before Ronnie was kidnapped by Dan and Bob and gets from the injured teenager a drawing of a closed and opened circle related to electricity. He will later use this cryptic information in the inner city. He leaves the hospital and goes to the inner city by train, but the train cannot go all the way because this part of the city is influenced by bad energy, bad electricity. So it seems that the two storylines take place in two different parts of the same space. It seems that the inner city is a part of the main city. Things get complicated when Ronnie's manager, who is a greedy despicable character, forces Dorothy and the two surgeons to zip Ronnie with bigger, dangerous amounts of electricity in order to make him perform. They reject doing that, they fight the manager and eventually get killed by him and his associate. After their death they mysteriously join the Detective and his inner city company and help him to find the top villain who produces the bad electricity. The group consisting of the Detective's group from the inner city plus the murdered people from the main city faces the bad guy, finds the electric triangulator and changes the direction of electricity. The pure light appears in the inner city.

They join with Ronnie in a golden egg which is eventually touched by a Hindu-like blue lady with four arms. The new universe is born.

Told like this the script does not suggest any political message and it leaves endless questions unanswered. However, I will try to interpret it as a story about switching from Purgatory into a new universe, a revolutionary change in which the revolution happens as a willing waking up from a nightmare. For me *Ronnie Rocket* is a story of hope and belief in a radical change presented literally as the reversing of the bad anti-human energy into a blissful new light. When Lynch seriously talks

soot covered, the clouds hung low ... In the atmosphere there was fear, there was violence, there was despair and sadness, there was feeling of insanity and kind of a knowledge of corruption." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WgZJOTATvk> (accessed 13 July 2016).

about the *Ronnie Rocket* project he always says that the movie was supposed to be about electricity. Electricity is present on all levels and it is involved in both storylines. Ronnie's life depends on electricity and his singing is triggered by electric shocks. Deborah uses electricity to erotically torture her partners, Detective's task in the inner city is to find the villain who produces the bad electricity or who reverses the good electricity. When Detective eliminates the villain he breaks the spell of the place and unleashes pure bliss. The most powerful scenes from the script are the moments which are in my opinion political. The citizens of the inner city are tortured by organized men dressed in black who destroy their existence by increasing the amount of bad electricity. This type of bad or reversed energy causes dramatic changes in the moods of the victims who turn from love to hatred in a matter of seconds, they lose control over their bodies, bleed from their mouths, develop skin diseases, eat their body parts and eventually burst into flames. Obviously there is something hellish about the bad electricity. The fact that it is delivered in an organized and sadistic way by the torturers dressed in black presents the inner city as an authoritarian nightmare. There is something almost Kafka-like in the atmosphere of the dark city deranged by bad energy.

In the next segment I will briefly present a few interpretations of the script and interpret the inner city as a type of Purgatory, an artistic vision of pre-Hell.

C

Interpretations of Lynch's unmade script are understandably not numerous. They appear in fragments in books written on Lynch and sometimes on more or less sophisticated movie blogs. Greg Olson's chapter on *Dune*, which is a part of his book on Lynch entitled *David Lynch: Beautiful Dark*, opens with a few informed pages on the *Ronnie Rocket* project. He explains the importance of electricity in Lynch's opus and points out how the ideas from the script appeared in later movies like the atmosphere of industry in *The Elephant Man* and in the planet Giedi Prime in *Dune*, the bad electricity in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, and Hindu-inspired universe-changing revolutionary ending in *Dune*. Olson did not discuss the relationship between the two main characters and the different worlds of the inner and the main city. For him: "Ronnie Rocket's city is a characteristically Lynchian 'hellhole', a place where bewilderment, disorientation, fear, and pain have control. Again typical for Lynch's work, a detective figure with a questioning intelligence will strive to restore an illuminating order to a shadow zone of chaos" (Olson, 2011: 146).

Michel Chion, a distinguished French expert on Lynch, mentions *Ronnie Rocket* when he writes about the importance of electricity in Lynch's movies. He points out: "The crackling discontinuity of electric lighting, lamps which crackle and blink irregularly before blowing, often at crucial moments, seem to express too strong a

tension leading to a short circuit or as an alarm when separate worlds come into contact. Discontinuous, short circuiting, stroboscopic electricity is the visual emblem not only of the production company which Lynch founded with Mark Frost, it also figures in the climatic scenes of three of his films: the death and transfiguration of the baby in *Eraserhead*, Dale Cooper's arrival in the Red Room in episode 29 of *Twin Peaks* and the murder of Laura Palmer in *Fire Walk With Me*" (Chion, 2006: 161). However, Chion never discusses the script itself.

When something is mentioned about the storylines of the screenplay it is usually about the interplay of the inner and main city and sometimes the relationship of Ronnie and Detective. In Kaleta's book *Ronnie Rocket* is mentioned as a project "in which a detective travels inside the consciousness of a young idiot savant dwarf rock'n'roller" (Kaleta, 1993: 133) while Martha Nochimson recognized "a relationship between electricity and internal factory similar to the one we see in *Eraserhead*" (Nochimson, 2005: 247).¹¹

Had *Ronnie Rocket* been realized it would have caused as many dramatically different interpretations as either *Mulholland Drive* or *The Lost Highway*.

I believe that the distinction between hellhole and hell makes sense in interpreting the *Ronnie Rocket* screenplay. More precisely, the real Hell described in the opening scene appears within the inner city as a possibility of the second death. This is quite important because a number of characters appearing in the inner city were killed in the main city, so the inner city becomes a type of pre-Hell which is permanently nightmarish and openly hellish in the presence of bad electricity. People burst into flames as a result of the bad energy but they are not permanently burning in the sea of fire. Had the detective lost his fight against the top villain he would have ended in Hell. The inner city is a vision of Purgatory, a pre-Hell in which residents live in a nightmare, but seem to be able to make decisions and affect outcomes which dramatically change the inner city itself. The inner city is a place between the hellhole and Hell.

Detective's distinction is that he can stand on one foot. Unlike the others living in the inner city he can still control his body. His motto is: "stay alert, concentrate, stay clean". The presence of bad electricity takes away the control over the body, destroys will and causes illness and despair, so in order to fight it an agent needs self-control and alertness which is secured by love and pain. The only way to fight the torturers dressed in black is to stay alert and to keep one's own will. Lynch's

¹¹ Den of Geek also sees a continuity between *Eraserhead* and *Ronnie Rocket*. Lynch's screenplay is interpreted as a story "about a little homunculus (the titular Ronnie) who sings when he's plugged into the mains, and has an entire city living inside his head". <http://www.denofgeek.com/movies/18832/the-joy-of-reading-movie-scripts> (accessed 13 July 2016).

characters use self-harming with needles in order to resist bad energy. Deborah and two surgeons use love. So, love and pain keep them focused enough to remain genuine agents capable of undoing the pre-Hell for good.

Lynch does not talk of Hell and Purgatory when he talks about *Ronnie Rocket*, and there is no doubt that the main city is a hellhole, but so was the city in which *Eraserhead* took place. It is difficult to find many examples of hell-cities in the history of art¹² but one is quite useful in my opinion and that is C. S. Lewis's hell-city from *The Great Divorce*.¹³ Lewis's book was a rejection of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and it plays with an idea which I find very useful in my interpretation of the inner city. Lewis rejected Blake's attack on Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* and in a way reintroduced Swedenborg's concept of Hell in which the sinners are not punished in the place of eternal fire, but in an environment in which they continue to posthumously live their pathetic early lives. Hell is a pitiful continuation of the earthly rejection of God. However, the damned are not definitely and eternally damned and they can accept God's love even in Hell and that is the reason why occasionally they go on road-trips to Heaven to see how things work there. In Lewis's book most of the residents of the hell-town find the conditions in Heaven unacceptable. This is where his idea of Purgatory comes into play. Purgatory is not a place in which sinners have to purge themselves of their sins in order to eventually reach Heaven, but a permanent possibility to change. In the standard understanding of Purgatory everyone existing in that state is already saved but with preconditions. Lewis's Purgatory is a place of a post-dead freedom. And this is exactly what happens with the dead residents of the inner city in *Ronnie Rocket*. They can fight to avoid the second death. They can even reach the source of evil and undo it. However, there is a big difference between Lewis's Purgatory and Lynch's inner city because Lynch's characters do not have to reject their pre-death ways of life and quite a few of them would be considered sinners. Detective himself has a very weak spot when the fondling of breasts is an option, the two doctors steal the terminal cases from hospital and try to help them in an unorthodox way,

¹² Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third* first comes to mind. "Hell is a city much like London. A populous and a smoky city." <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/PShelley/pbell.html> (accessed 14 July 2016).

¹³ At the very beginning of the book Lewis writes: "Everything was just closing in and it was raining. I had been wandering for hours in similar mean streets always in the rain and always in evening twilight. Time seemed to have paused on that dismal moment when only a few shops have lit up and it is not yet dark enough for their windows to look cheering. And just as the evening never advanced to night, so my walking had never brought me to the better parts of the town. However far I went I found only dingy lodging houses, small tobacconists, hoardings from which posters hung in rags, windowless warehouses, goods stations without trains, and bookshops of the sort that sell *The Works of Aristotle*" (Lewis, 2001: 1).

and they live in a love triangle with a woman who erotically uses hot lightbulbs.¹⁴ In my opinion Lynch should be placed between Lewis's Christianity and Blake's *The Marriage...* One of the most famous proverbs from Hell is: "He who desires, but acts not, breeds pestilence" (Blake, 1906: 13).

Detective and his group cannot be accused of repressing their desires. Their distinction is that they can stay alert with the help of pain and love and that is enough to cause the revolutionary transformation of the inner city.

The relationship between Ronnie and Detective is particularly interesting because they are connected as two opposite aspects of one self. Ronnie is permanently an object of energy. First he is saved by electricity, then he sings when zipped by electricity and finally he dies of electricity. Detective follows Ronnie's instructions, enters the inner city dominated by the closed circuit of electricity and opens it. This moment is the most direct artistic presentation of the gestalt switch imaginable. It is a world-changing revolution which happens as an apocalyptic enlightenment.

In the final segment I will try to see what happens when two completely different concepts of Hell and evil, Arendt's and Lynch's are played off each other.

D

In her reply to Eric Voegelin's review Arendt famously wrote: "When I used the image of Hell I did not mean it allegorically but literally" (Arendt, 1994b: 408). That does not mean that Hell was literally unleashed on humanity and that totalitarians open the gates of the underworld and let the hellfire loose. It means that the absolute terror of the total domination creates a space, "a phantom world" in which a historically new type of evil emerges. The one that cannot be explained by standard evil motives like greed, lust for power, resentment, revenge, self-interest, cowardice or any other. This world within a world of a totalitarian country is a place in which the abyss opens. The extermination is beyond comprehension because it is completely non-utilitarian, as if it is done for the sake of evil itself. The evildoers lost their belief in Hell and created it within their own world. They did even more, they created a world in which spontaneity, nativity, plurality, individuality and freedom disappear, which means that the project makes the evildoers as superfluous as their victims. Total domination destroys humanity whether evildoers are aware of that or not. This is especially important for the Stalinist hell which happens within a political system based on the idea of social justice and equality. The radical evil

¹⁴ Jeff Johnson, one of the strongest critics of Lynch, argues in his book *Perverv in the Pulpit* that Lynch's work remains within the horizon of strict Calvinism, but the *Ronnie Rocket* script certainly does not corroborate that view. For my criticism of Lynch's alleged conservatism see Kurelić, 2015.

cannot be consciously derived from the motives and ideologies of the totalitarian dominators, it happens behind their backs. It emerges. The death of humanity is beyond Nazis and Stalinists. Paradoxically they are mediums of the evil they created.

This is what is meant by famous Arendt's sentence that the essence of totalitarianism "did not exist before it had come into being" (*ibid.*: 405). "Hell" and "radical evil" are not the Christian Hell and Kant's radical evil. They are just old words and concepts used for something historically new. Arendt knows that and explicitly says that. However, evil understood in that way can very well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes. It can be recreated by using different elements. Without ever talking about radical evil Giorgio Agamben, inspired by Arendt's link between the refugees and the camps, created his philosophical story in which the step from biopolitics to thanatopolitics, which was done by the Nazis, can easily happen again even in the failed European nation states. The first step in the radically wrong direction was made when institutions like Omarska were de facto tolerated on the European continent. Not to mention the genocidal acts like Srebrenica. European nation states individually and collectively, organized in the EU, failed to prevent the reappearance of totalitarian solutions on a continent without totalitarian regimes.

David Lynch's story does not deal with actual horrors. It creates a fictional hell. He starts from the misery which actually exists in the Western cities and imagines an inner city in which life is like a living nightmare. His main character is badly injured, a terminal case helped by two doctors who save him by making him dependent on electric energy. Detective who is Ronnie's representative in the inner world has only one goal and it is to break the circle of bad energy. How can a story like that be related to a story of the collapse of the entire European civilization? What do we get when we compare two completely different hells presented in incommensurable mediums? Can we compare different approaches to evil?

David Foster Wallace was one of the most sophisticated interpreters of Lynch's work. In his elegantly written essay 'David Lynch keeps his head' he said:

Characters are not themselves evil in Lynch movies – evil wears them. This point is worth emphasizing. Lynch's movies are not about *monsters* (i. e. people whose intrinsic natures are evil) but about *hauntings*, about evil as environment, possibility, force. This helps explain Lynch's constant deployment of *noirish* lighting and eerie sound-carpets and grotesque figurants: in his movies' world, a kind of ambient spiritual antimatter hangs just overhead. It also explains why Lynch's villains seem not merely wicked or sick but ecstatic, transported: they are literally *possessed*. ... The bad guys in Lynch movies are always exultant, orgasmic, most fully present at their vilest moments, and this in turn is because they are not only actuated by evil but literally *inspired*: they have yielded themselves up to a Darkness way bigger than any one person (Foster Wallace, 2013: 204).

Evil in *Ronnie Rocket* is related to a brilliant idea of reversed energy, bad electricity. The evildoers create hellish pre-Hell literally. Evil is present as an objective power, a force which alters everything, turns love into hatred, health into sickness, death into eternal suffering. Had he created it *Ronnie Rocket* would have been an extremely violent film but it is, surprisingly, a film full of hope. The total crisis and the imminent presence of Hell can result in a universe-altering revolutionary switch which creates a new world.

It is of course well known that Hannah Arendt abandoned her concept of radical evil and replaced it with banality of evil. Arendtian scholars demonstrated how the two concepts can be reconciled,¹⁵ but she never bothered to do that herself. A Lynchian reading of radical evil refocuses on the event of evil as the production of evil. So it goes in the exactly opposite direction. It is irrelevant whether evildoers are banal or not. Anyone can become an instrument of evil, including the best ones. Anyone can become “inspired” by evil, to use Wallace’s term. The force which takes over, which haunts individuals and nations is not a preexisting Evil but a produced anti-humanity. The essence of totalitarianism is produced by potential totalitarians. Evil is an unintended *telos*. Europe can eventually be haunted by its own inability to solve civilizational problems in “a manner worthy of man”. The war in former Yugoslavia exposed “the silent consent” of the Maastricht EU, while the immigration crisis demonstrated the inability of the post Big Bang EU to act as a union. We now know for a fact that the EU is incapable of preventing rebirth of the purest forms of fascism on the continent. We live in a world in which the third Fatima prophecy does not have to be interpreted metaphorically – it can actually be understood “literally” as a prediction of a possible assassination. Europe flickers like a lightbulb. Lynch’s apocalyptic script allows us to interpret the internment camps as hellholes, as places on earth, real spaces, which operate as the generators of reversed humanity. In a famous hell-related play *No Exit* one of Sartre’s characters Garcin concluded: “Hell is other people”. We do not have to look for the others. Post-Brexit European politics already feels like Purgatory. The European idea may end up looking like the body of Ronnie Rocket. Hell is our peoples rediscovering their darkest potentials. The United Kingdom needed just one referendum to unleash vulgar nationalism as unsophisticated and ugly as any of the post-socialist nationalisms. When Arendt’s already proven prediction that totalitarian solutions will survive the fall of totalitarian regimes meets Lynch’s apocalyptic script we end up with a poetic belief that in the same way in which we create evil as an energy capable of hunting its creators we have the power to reimagine the entire universe. We have the power to switch. Revolutionary imagination and the deepest crisis are always linked, thus we do not have any excuses.

¹⁵ My favorite is Richard Bernstein’s attempt in *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*.

REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. 1993. 'We Refugees', http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%20108-08/We%20Refugees%20-%20Giorgio%20Agamben%20-%201994.htm (accessed 18 March 2019).
- Arendt, H. 1979. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Harcourt Brace & Company. New York.
- Arendt, H. 1994a. We Refugees, in: Marc Robinson (ed.): *Altogether Elsewhere, Writers on Exile*. Faber and Faber. Boston.
- Arendt, H. 1994b. *Essays in Understanding* (ed. Jerome Kohn). Harcourt Brace & Company. New York.
- Blake, W. 1906. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. John W. Luce and Company. Boston.
- Chion, M. 2006. *David Lynch 2nd Edition*. British Film Institute Publishing. London.
- Foster Wallace, D. 2013. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never do Again*. Abacus. London.
- Johnson, J. 2004. *Pervert in the Pulpit*. McFarland & Company. London.
- Kaleta, K. C. 1993. *David Lynch*. Twayne Publishers. New York.
- Kurelić, Z. 2008. Does the World Need Humanity, *Filozofski godišnjak*, (21): 121-132, Beograd.
- Kurelić, Z. 2009. *Telos of the Camp*, *Politička misao*, (46) 3: 141-156.
- Kurelić, Z. 2015. A Little Red Bird Catches a Bug and a Megaworm, in: Zoran Kurelić (ed.): *Violence, Art and Politics*. Politička misao. Zagreb.
- Lewis, C. S. 2001. *The Great Divorce*. HarperCollins. New York.
- Lynch, D. *Ronnie Rocket Screenplay*, <http://www.lynch.net.com/rrscript.html> (accessed 20 May 2018).
- Nochimson, M. P. 2005. *The Passion of David Lynch*. University of Texas Press. Austin.
- Olson, G. 2011. *David Lynch: Beautiful Dark*. Scarecrow Press. Plymouth.
- Rodley, C. (ed.). 2005. *Lynch on Lynch*. Faber and Faber. New York.
- Shelley, P. B. *Peter Bell the Third*, <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/PShelley/pbell.html> (accessed 14 July 2016).
- The Message of Fatima, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html (accessed 15 May 2019).
- <http://www.dw.com/en/its-a-hell-hole-unrwa-describes-yarmouk-refugee-camp-in-damascus/a-18363811> (accessed 7 May 2018).

Mailing Address: **Zoran Kurelić**, Professor of Political and Social Theory, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Zagreb, Lepušićeva 6, 10000 Zagreb. *E-mail:* zoran.kurelic@fpzg.hr