

The Seven Deadly Sins on Film:

Lust

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Steve McQueen's recent film, *Shame* generated a media storm with its bleak portrayal of sex addiction. Gemma Simmonds uses the film as a lens through which we can think seriously about and better understand the sin of lust, in the third instalment of our Lenten series on the Seven Deadly Sins on Film.

Brandon, the executive protagonist of Steve McQueen's *Shame*, knows a great deal about uncontrolled passion. He is a sex addict, obsessed with obtaining sexual gratification at any given moment: in the shower, on the subway, on his computers at work and at home, in the most brutally casual encounters regardless of gender or context. The film is a catalogue of unsatisfactory, sterile matings which serve only to exacerbate Brandon's appetite and to render him steadily less able to reach any satisfaction for his endless longing. Ironically, and for reasons hinted at but never explained, the one thing he cannot cope with at all is intimacy. The one attempt at an actual date that we witness ends in awkward frustration. His unruly sister, Sissy penetrates his hermetically-sealed existence like a Viking marauder, a stranger to emotional boundaries, making demands on him that provoke a furious repudiation of her intrusion. Yet he lives, through pornographic services of every sort, in a perpetual half-world of de-contextualised intrusion into other people's lives and bodies, never able to connect because no one is a person, only a sexual commodity.

The thing that comes across most forcefully in this bleak, powerful film is the dreariness and banality of a life in thrall to lust, served by a sex industry that simultaneously over-stimulates appetites yet fails to deliver. Endless repetition and variation, even the exact copying of some of the standard fantasies of pornography, cannot bring about genuine fulfilment. Like the unforgiven lustful souls in Dante's *Inferno*, Brandon is blown restlessly about by the hurricane storms of his own



desires. Are we looking at a victim of one of the modern world's addictions, a natural appetite twisted out of control by the obsessively sexualized, all-pervasive media, wrapped up in the discourse of psychobabble to ensure that no responsibility has to be taken? Or is this a case of terminal lust, a deadly sin beyond the possibility of repentance and healing?

Anyone talking seriously about lust today has to put up a strong fight against the clamour of voices

condemning the joyless, repressive and necrophiliac teachings of religions peddled by sexual hypocrites. The very notion of lust as a sin, they argue, is an archaic and pre-scientific superstition, psychologically damaging and philosophically incoherent. Philosopher Simon Blackburn in his book, *Lust* lauds it as enthusiasm for the pleasures brought about by sexual activity, something to be embraced joyfully for its own sake.¹ Free-flowing lust, untrammelled by guilt or spurious notions of moral prohibition brings its own rewards in the delights of a good lay and should no more be condemned than thirst is blamed because some people get drunk.

I have childhood memories of Stanley Green, a man who used to walk up and down Oxford Street carrying sandwich boards proclaiming 'Less Lust by Less Protein'. He advocated a low-protein diet as an aid to purity. Regarded by most people as a harmless lunatic, he shared the views of physician John Harvey Kellogg that meat and spicy food inflamed the senses and lower instincts. Bland breakfast cereal was not invented in order to help people rise and shine but, on the contrary,

in order to damp down unruly passions. Saint Augustine was not an advocate of strange diets, but identified three forms of inflamed passion, each of which is, in its own way, a constituent part of lust: the rage for feeling, *libido sentiendi*, for controlling, *libido dominandi* and for knowing, *libido sciendi*. In *De Trinitate* he speaks of the mind's need to know itself and to live according to its own nature. Those arguing in favour of sex unencumbered by moral boundary often advocate it as 'just doing what comes naturally', 'a little of what you fancy does you good'. But if we understand 'nature' and what is natural to us as in the broadest sense the *imago Dei* of which we all bear the imprint, and to which our deepest orientation draws us, then however much that nature is warped and diverted from its original goal, its truest expression lies in what leads us to God. Augustine sees lust, or any type of 'vicious desire' as a toxic and self-destructive forgetfulness of our authentic goal and purpose. We get diverted from the good by perceiving and treating lesser things as goods, as commodities to be grasped and owned and exploited for gratification alone. We take things out of their proper context and they become meaningless and destructive.

It is no accident that in Biblical texts, knowing is a verb used to denote sexual intercourse. Knowledge is power and once a person becomes an object, our desire to know and feel what they have to offer in terms of gratification becomes a process of control and possession. But there is an alternative interpretation of 'knowing' the other in this context which does not involve a relation of power and exploitation. It has an irreducible moral dimension, and is compatible with the idea that one is relating to the other as a subject. Brandon, in it simply for gratification, does not know or want to know who his sexual partners are – this is completely irrelevant. They are simply a means to an end and any other person would have done just as well. One of the hallmarks of pornography is precisely that it is sexual gratification which offers an illusion of control. There is no need for any of the vulnerability required in the delicate negotiations of an intimate relationship. There is simply supply and demand, buyer and seller, a fix available through the connection-free encounter at the end of a computer mouse. Augustine sees that in the desire to control what God gives as a free gift we lose the capacity to value the givenness of ourselves, of others and of all creation, which is part of the givenness of God's own self to us, the true matrix of all our capacity for intimacy. We become alienated from our own desi-

res, which eventually end up tormenting us with their insatiable insistence. Attempts to assuage the torment lead to a dreadful boredom, a desolation in which, as the song says, we can't get no satisfaction because we have become hooked on what can never satisfy a human nature oriented inexorably towards the infinite.

Schopenhauer argues that humans are willing beings. Willing involves desiring which, as a lack or absence in the one desiring, causes a certain suffering. Desires can only be satisfied temporarily, so we are caught in a never-ending cycle of desire, satiety and renewed, tantalising desire, *ad infinitum*. Paradoxically, satisfaction of the desire, possession of its object, removes its charm. We appear to be trapped, as Brandon is trapped in his murky world of joyless sex, prowling the subways and streets and brothels in hope of finding the hit that will at last offer fulfilment. In a response to Schopenhauer, Lévinas posits a desire which tends towards something absolutely other and which cannot be understood in terms of a lack in the subject. This is not about seeking and finding a super-hit, but seeking no hit at all. In this sense the answer to 'what do you give the person who has everything?' is precisely nothing, or at least no thing. This no thing, no object like any other object of our desiring has its source in the infinite. It is of itself transformative of our desiring selves. It is not inaccessible but susceptible of a relationship in which distance 'is more precious than contact', and 'non-possession more precious than possession'.² This breaks the vicious circle of desire and fruitless satisfaction leading to more desire. Instead it sets us free to give expression to a natural part of ourselves, an 'insufficiency [...] outside of every perspective of satisfaction and nonsatisfaction'. This renders us receptive to what is genuinely other in an interplay of longing and seeking which is still infinite but which allows us to enter into a virtuous circle of ever-renewed meaning. For Lévinas, God is not reduced to just an other, one heavenly object of our ego-centred desires. The supremacy of such desires is challenged by the fact that we can only relate to God through standing in moral relation to others. 'The vision of God is a moral act. This optics is ethics'³. Thus, as mystics like John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila taught, the height of mystical union is charity, or, as Lévinas has it, 'I approach the infinite insofar as I forget myself for my neighbour who looks at me....A you is inserted between the I and the absolute He'.⁴ If God is truly to be God we cannot remain in an unmediated relationship at the

ultimate service of our ego. We relate authentically to God only insofar as that relationship bears fruit in love of the other, and that carries within itself moral imperatives, for 'to know God is to know what must be done'.⁵ Such a relationship makes it possible for us to relate to others without instrumentalising them and transforms desire and fulfilment from a vicious to a virtuous circle.

The tragedy of *Shame* is precisely that there is no shame in Brandon or in Sissy. She, at least, knows her need for love, knows how to reach out in order to connect, but she allows herself to be used and abused in a cycle of self-destruction. Brandon flees the moment of vulnerability he feels when he listens to her singing and blocks out the sound of her need for him to be present to her. There is no sign of redemption in the film, for there is nowhere for Brandon to go. He courts danger when picking up a girl in a bar and gets the thrashing from her boyfriend that he has been asking for. He almost seems to enjoy it – at least pain is a feeling of some sort, and maybe he wants to be punished for what he has become. But in the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius refers to the painful shame and confusion we may feel in acknowledging our own responsibility for sin. This is not a negative emotion, destructive of our psychic wellbeing and aimed at a body-denying asceticism. It is a felt, emotional response deriving from our orientation towards the infinite. By God's grace it can lead to a genuine repentance and reorientation towards our true end. It is transformative of the warped and broken trajectory of our desires, redirecting them to that which will always lie beyond our grasp, but which can lead us to authentic intimacy and the truest love expressed in charity.

Lévinas also rejects *eros* as it leads inevitably to an exclusive relationship between two lovers that is reducible to egoistic, mutual pleasure. But *Deus Caritas Est* allows that God's love – *caritas* – is *eros*-involving, and that we can share in this love by being both givers and takers.⁶ The seeker of sexual gratification for its own sake is a pure taker. In this sense lust is opposed to love, including erotic love. It is rendered sterile and meaningless because amputated from its original goal. The *Contemplation for Obtaining Love* in the *Spiritual Exercises* leads to a lust for life, a delight and relish in the gifts and graces of God (which would include our sexuality and our capacity for intimacy) in which we fully rejoice. Augustine, contrary to those who accuse him of peddling a

miserable, sex-hating version of Christianity, was no enemy of desire. In a sermon he preached,

The whole life of a good Christian is holy desire. What you desire you cannot see yet. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when it does happen that you see, you may be fulfilled... This is our life, to be exercised by desire.⁷

This capacity for genuine desire is what lust has drained from Brandon.

A sacramental view of matter teaches us not to ignore or brutalize our bodies as sources of temptation, but to take them seriously as the means by which we can achieve intimacy at many levels. In a long-running theological argument about whether or not married couples could be permitted to indulge in sex the night before they received the Eucharist, St. Francis de Sales judged sensibly that two sacraments could not rule one another out. Faith in the resurrection of the body includes a belief in its transformation and purification from self-imposed slavery to the freedom derived from union with the goal of all our desiring. Size isn't everything, but the trouble with lust is that, precisely, it is too small a feeling to encompass our capacity for love but paradoxically it can become obsessive enough to smother that capacity. It sells us short, offering cheap imitations of the real thing and dehumanizing us and others in the process.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, 'Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God'. There is a kind of satisfaction which is of a different order from the temporary satisfactions which tend to rule our lives. It lies in being a person of true desire, conscious of a fundamental lack at the heart of our being, but through that lack and the longing it engenders, touching into the hope of fulfillment that simultaneously lies within our deepest longings. In this sense our most earnest prayer should be to have our desires increased, even if that means increased restlessness, frustration, a sense of getting nowhere. It is an invitation to live life to the full – laying hold on life, as opposed merely to getting laid. It means allowing our bodies to pine for God, the source and goal of our longing, 'like a dry, weary land without water'.⁸ But the thirst is part of the blessing.⁹

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¹ Simon Blackburn, *Lust*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004)

² Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 2007), p.179

³ 'For a Jewish Humanism', in Emmanuel Lévinas, *Difficult Freedom : Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 275

⁴ Alphonso Lingis, ed., *Emmanuel Lévinas: Collected Philosophical Papers*, (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1987), pp. 72-3.

⁵ 'A Religion for Adults', in Lévinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 20.

⁶ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html

⁷ Augustine, *Tr. in Joann.* ep., 4.6

⁸ Ps. 63:1

⁹ I am indebted to Dr. Fiona Ellis of Heythrop College for her ideas, challenges and additions to the arguments presented here.