

PHOTOH



**Goran  
Bertok**

**Lakota |  
*Hunger***

# KAKO LEPO JE GRDO?

Avtorski opus Gorana Bertoka razkriva izjemno doslednost v upodabljanju človeškega telesa v nekaterih mejnih vidikih bivanja, predvsem pa v njegovi minljivosti. Če se je v zgodnjem obdobju osredotočal na ustvarjanje režiranih prizorov z motivi nekonvencionalnih spolnih praks, zlasti s področja sadomazohizma (serije *Omen*, *Stigmata* ipd.), se je pozneje posvetil še radikalnejšemu raziskovanju telesnosti. To ga je kmalu pripeljalo do ultimativne teme – fizične smrti. Tej temi je namenil večji del svojega ustvarjanja, tako skozi neposredno vizualno soočenje z razpadajočimi telesi (*PostMortem*, *Obiskovalci*) kot skozi portretiranje tistih, ki so doživeli neposredno bližino smrti (*Preživeli*). S projektom *Lakota* nekako logično nadaljuje v tej smeri, saj prezentira telo, ki »se giblje« v neposredni bližini smrti, ki je tako rekoč v »lju-bezenskem odnosu« s smrtjo. Pri tem pa ne gre za klasični duel med erosom in tanatosom. Tukaj ni veliko prostora za eros, saj

dominira tanatos, zato lahko kvečjemu govorimo o »ljubezni do smrti« kot končni esenci vsega materialnega.

Sodobna potrošniška družba skozi medijsko omniprezentnost postavlja imperativ zdravja, mladosti, moči in lepote, zato so starost, bolezen in smrt še bolj odrinjeni na obrobje. S pojavom socialnih omrežij smo postali obsedeni s samoupodabljanjem in samoprezentacijo, naša življenja pa zavestno spreminjamo v nek paralelni svet, oblikovan po naših predstavah in željah. Simptom prevladujočega kulturnega in mentalnega stanja je torej obsesivno (samo)predstavljanje mladosti, moči in lepote na družbenih omrežjih, za prezentacijo samih sebe pa nam sodobne tehnologije ponujajo možnosti neskončnega eksperimentiranja, preoblikovanja in manipuliranja z lastno podobo. Sodobna kultura tako reproducira narcistične, vase zagledane posameznice in posameznike, ki častijo kult zdravja in lepega telesa. Vendar se homo sapiens tukaj še ne ustavi; v prizadevanju za srečo, mladostnim videzom in zdravjem si sedaj želi prisvojiti še ultimativni sveti gral, to je nesmrtnost, večno življenje.

Kot posamezniki in kot družba si torej prizadevamo za ideale, ki zavračajo neizogibnost smrti. V relativno kratkem obdobju človeštva se je življenjska doba podvojila ali celo potrojila, praktično izkoreninili smo lakoto in »kugo« (zlasti nekdanje smrtonosne prenosljive bolezni), navzočnost smrti se odriva na margino našega predstavnega sveta in družbene realnosti. Mediji nas sicer, paradoksalno, preplavljajo s podobami bolezni in smrti, vendar so to predvsem spektakelske podobe trpljenja in smrti, ki pa se dogajajo drugim in ob katerih zgolj pozabimo na možno lastno trpljenje in neizogibni konec.

V nasprotju s tem nas Goran Bertok sooča s tistimi vidiki telesnosti, manifestacijami in prezentacijami bolezni, smrti, grdega ipd., ki jih povprečni sodobnik, uporabnik družbenih omrežij, zavrača.

Obenem nas na osebni, intimni ravni sooča z minljivostjo lastnega telesa, ki po svoji fizični smrti ostane le na razpad obsojen mrtev kos mesa. To nas spomni na srednjeveške podobe »zmagoslavja smrti«, katerih funkcija je bila v tem, da so se ljudje lažje soočili z neizogibnim in da so pri tem občutili še nekakšno pomiritev ob spoznanju ultimativne enakosti pred obličjem Smrti. Ko smo danes soočeni z deli Gorana Bertoka, nas ta lahko navdajajo z gnusom in grozo, vendar nam prav tako govorijo: »memento mori« ...

Tako se Bertok tudi v najnovejši seriji ukvarja z minljivostjo človeškega telesa, vendar tokrat iz nekoliko drugačne perspektive. Predstavi nam (iz)mučeno, izčrpano telo kot posledico skrajnih fizičnih in psihičnih izkušenj odpovedovanja hrani. Bertok se tudi v tem primeru ne sprašuje o osebnih, psiholoških ali socialnih motivih in okoliščinah, ki so subjekt njegovega upodabljanja pripeljali v takšno stanje. Avtor izkušnje anoreksije vzporeja z ostalimi mejnimi izkušnjami, najsi gre za t. i. SM prakse ali za preživetje v skrajnih pogojih koncentracijskih taborišč, s katerimi se je ukvarjal v svojih preteklih projektih oz. fotografskih serijah. Namen projekta tako ni »fotodokumentiranje« fenomena neke motnje oz. bolezni, temveč spraševanje o sami naravi naše telesnosti, našega odnosa do shiranega telesa in do bolečine, ki jo predpostavljamo ali sami občutimo ob pogledu na bližino smrti.

V zadnjih desetletjih smo lahko spremljali trend naraščanja motenj hranjenja, sočasno pa tudi trend spreminjanja lepote ideala. V procesu družbene konstrukcije »lepega telesa« so začeli prevladovati imperativi vitkosti, »zdravega« prehranjevanja, »športnega« videza ipd. Povojne lepote ikone lascivnih oblin iz zabavne industrije so v kratkem času povojnih desetletij zamenjale zmeraj bolj shujšane manekenke, ki so nekaj časa celo prevladovali v modnem svetu. Vendar se zdi, da ta trend, ki je (bil) v večji meri fenomen zahodne kulture, dosegel neko simbolno »točko obrata« – in to prav s fotografijo. Leta 2007



je namreč razpiti Benettonov fotograf Oliviero Toscani za reklamno kampanjo modne znamke *Nolita* fotografiral popolnoma shujšano manekenko Isabelle Caro, ki je leto pozneje umrla za posledicami izgube teže. Motnje hranjenja so ob tem primeru nenadoma postale pogosta tema javnih razprav, v katerih so se na primer dokazovale korelacije med medijskim forsiranjem lepotnih in zdravstvenih zapovedi ter epidemijo motenj hranjenja med mladimi. Anoreksija pa je postala na nek način metafora ambivalentnosti sodobnega sveta, kjer hkrati obstajata preobilje in pomanjkanje, pa tudi metafora sveta, v katerem lahko grdo nenadoma postane lepo in obratno.

V zgodovini umetnosti so znane mnoge upodobitve mučenih in trpečih teles, predvsem v krščanski ikonografiji upodabljanja Kristusa ter svetnic oz. svetnikov. Neoplatonsko pojmovanje sveta kot utelešenja prvobitne Lepote je v prvotnem krščanstvu sleherniku predstavljalo predvsem idealizirano podobo raja, dobrega pastirja in svetnikov. Vendar so s teološkim poudarjanjem odrešenikove človeške narave v ospredje začele stopati podobe pasijona, trpečega Jezusa in trpljenja svetnikov ob prav tako zmeraj večjem realizmu upodobitev. Protislovnost podob raja in zemeljskega trpljenja je verjetno dosegla vrhunec v severnjaškem naturalizmu, kjer je prikazovanje trpljenja in nasploh grdega namenoma stremelo k izpostavitvi čim večjega kontrasta s poudarkom na fizičnem in telesnem. Krščanska motivika na eni strani postane zgolj pretekst za prikazovanje mučenih in mrtvih teles, na drugi pa začne zahodno-krščanska umetnost tudi sicer v sakralnih motivih iskati izgovor za upodabljanje telesnosti, čedalje pogosteje pa tudi zelo erotičnih prizorov. Povezovanje trpljenja in erotike oziroma »erotičnosti bolečine in trpljenja« v manierizmu in baroku so opisovali mnogi avtorji, od klasikov ikonografije, kot je Erwin Panofsky, do radikalnih preučevalcev seksualnosti, kot je Georges Bataille. Kar nas na tem mestu bolj zanima, so motivi samotrpčenja na način odpovedovanja hrani

oziroma v krščanstvu tako priljubljenega posta, zlasti med spokorniki in puščavniki. Zlasti ženski svetniški ideali so bili pogosto povezani s stradanjem in redukcijo vse hrane, z izjemo posvečene evharistije. Najbolj znan je primer svete Katarine Sienske, ki je večino svetniškega življenja uživala samo hostije (!), v zgodovini umetnosti pa jo poznamo predvsem po upodobitvah, v katerih je pogosto predstavljena v sočasni agoniji in ekstazi.

V opusu Gorana Bertoka lahko najdemo mnoge asociacije na krščansko ikonografijo. Nedvomno ga ta religija, predvsem njena bogata vizualna zgodovina, intrigira in inspirira. Vendar lahko navezave na krščanstvo iščemo povsod, kjer umetniki tematizirajo vprašanje usodne določenosti z lastnim telesom ali vprašanje telesnosti v smislu njegove končnosti. Tako se v njegovem novjšem projektu *Lakota* sodobne motnje hranjenja navezujejo na krščanski fenomen t. i. *sancta anorexia* v širšem smislu, kot sta tudi sicer motiva posta ali zavestnega stradanja pogosto povezana z mešanico duhovnih (religija, ezoterika ...) in materialističnih (zdravje, šport ...) prepričanij. Krščanstvo vstopa v svet Bertokovih podob skozi metaforo – lahko bi rekli, da je podoba shiranega telesa podoba pasijona v družbi samozadovoljnih narcisov, ki naše ambivalentne občutke in misli ustavi pred ultimativnim spoznanjem. *Lakota* je tako še en Bertokov »memento«. Katerikoli smisel iščemo zase, najsi bo še tako »svet« (v smislu religioznosti) ali vzvišen v našem subjektivnem univerzumu (recimo vzdrževanje telesnega ideala), je končno bistvo vse materije smrt.





## HOW BEAUTIFUL IS UGLY?

Goran Bertok's body of work reveals a profound consistency in the depiction of the human body in certain borderline aspects of life and, above all, in its transience. While focusing on the creation of staged scenes with motifs of unconventional sexual practices, especially from the field of sadomasochism (series *Omen*, *Stigmata*, etc.) in his early period, he later turned to a more radical exploration of physicality. This soon led him to the ultimate theme—the physical death. He devoted much of his work to this topic, both through direct visual confrontation with decaying bodies (*PostMortem*, *Visitors*), as well as through the portraiture of those who experienced immediate proximity to death (*Survivors*). By presenting the body “moving” in the immediate vicinity of death, as if having a “love relationship” with death, he somehow logically continues along these lines in the series *Hunger*. The series is, however, not about a classic duel between Eros and Thanatos, since there is not much room for Eros while Thanatos dominates, so we can only speak of the “love of death” as the ultimate essence of everything in the material realm.

The contemporary consumer society fosters through media omnipresence the imperative of health, youth, power, and beauty, and thereby further marginalises ageing, illness, and death. With the advent of social networks, we became obsessed with our self-image and self-representation, and consciously transform our lives into a parallel world, shaped by our ideas and desires. The symptom of the prevailing cultural and mental state is therefore an obsessive (self-)representation of youth, power, and beauty on social media. To present ourselves, modern technologies offer us the possibility of endless experimentation, transformation, and manipulation of our own image. Modern culture thus reproduces narcissistic, self-centred individuals, who worship the cult of health and a beautiful body. However, the homo sapiens does not stop here; in the pursuit of happiness, youthful appearance, and health, it now seeks to acquire the ultimate holy grail, that is, immortality, eternal life.

As individuals and as a society, we thereby strive for ideals that reject the inevitability of death. In a relatively short period of humanity, life expectancy has doubled or even tripled. We have virtually eradicated hunger and the plague (especially bygone fatal, transmissible diseases), and the presence of death in our conceivable world and social reality is becoming marginalised. Paradoxically, the media engulfs us with images of sickness and death, but these are primarily spectacular images of suffering and death, which happen to others and only let us forget about our own eventual suffering and inevitable demise.

In contrast, Goran Bertok confronts us with those aspects of physicality—with manifestations and presentations of illness, death, ugliness, etc.—which the average contemporary user of social networks rejects. At the same time, we are faced on a personal, intimate level, with the fleetingness of our own bodies, which are, after their physical death, doomed to become a dead

piece of meat. This is reminiscent of the medieval images of “the triumph of death” that were intended to make it easier for people to cope with the inevitable and to feel some kind of reassurance in realising their ultimate equality in the face of Death. When confronting the works of Goran Bertok today, they may fill us with disgust and horror, but they are also telling us: “memento mori”...

Bertok deals with the transience of the human body also in his latest series of works, this time, however, from a slightly different perspective. He introduces us to a tortured and exhausted, weary body, bearing the consequences of extreme physical and psychological experience of giving up food. Again, Bertok does not question the personal, psychological, or social motives and circumstances that brought the subject of his depiction into such a state. The artist compares the experience of anorexia with other borderline experiences, be it the so-called SM practices or the survival in the extreme conditions of concentration camps, which he has dealt with in his former projects and photographic series. Thus, the purpose of the project is not to “photodocument” the phenomenon of a disorder or disease, but rather to question the very nature of our physicality, our relationship to the emaciated body and the pain that we presuppose or feel when looking at the proximity of death.

In recent decades, we have been able to monitor the increasing trend of eating disorders, and simultaneously the trend of a changing beauty ideal. In the social construction of a “beautiful body”, the imperatives of slenderness, “healthy” diet, “sporty” appearance, etc. began to prevail. The post-war beauty icons from the entertainment industry with lascivious curves have been replaced by ever-thinner models, who have even dominated the fashion world for a while. It seems, however, that this trend, which has been to a large extent a Western culture phenomenon, has reached some kind of a symbolic “turning point”—and this has





happened precisely through photography. In 2007, the notorious Benetton photographer Oliviero Toscani shoot for the *Nolita* fashion campaign the completely emaciated model Isabelle Caro, who died a year later as a consequence of weight loss. In the light of this case, eating disorders have suddenly become a frequent topic of public debate, exposing, for example, the correlations between the beauty and health criterions imposed by the media and the epidemic of eating disorders among young people. Anorexia has in a way become a metaphor for the ambivalence of the modern world, where at the same time there is abundance and scarcity, as well as a metaphor for a world in which the ugly can suddenly become beautiful and vice versa.

Many depictions of tortured and suffering bodies are known in the history of art, notably in the Christian iconography of Christ and of male and female saints. The Neoplatonic conception of the world in early Christianity as the embodiment of primordial Beauty was represented by the idealised image of paradise, the good shepherd, and the saints. (By the way, today [classic and social] media creates a similarly ideal picture of the modern consumer society.) However, with the theological emphasis on the Saviour's human nature, images of the Passion, of the suffering Jesus and the suffering saints began to come to the fore along with the ever-increasing realism of these depictions. The ambivalence of the images of paradise and earthly suffering probably culminated in northern naturalism, where the portrayal of suffering and the ugly in general, deliberately tended to expose as much contrast as possible by emphasising the physical and the corporeal. Christian imagery became on the one hand merely a pretext for depicting tortured and dead bodies, and on the other, Western Christian art began to find even in sacral motifs an excuse to depict corporeality and increasingly very erotic scenes. The connection between suffering and eroticism, or the "eroticism of pain and suffering" in Mannerism and Baroque

has been described by many authors, ranging from iconography classics, such as Erwin Panofsky, to radical sexuality scholars, such as Georges Bataille. What we are more interested in here is the motif of self-suffering by way of giving up food or fasting that has been favoured in Christianity, especially among the penitents and eremites. In particular, women's saintly ideals were often associated with starvation and the reduction of all food except for the consecrated Eucharist. The most famous example is that of St. Catherine of Siena who has enjoyed only the Hosts (!) for most of her saintly life, and is mainly known in art history through depictions in which she is often represented in simultaneous agony and ecstasy.

There are many associations with Christian iconography in Goran Bertok's oeuvre; this religion, especially its rich visual history, certainly intrigues and inspires him. However, relations to Christianity can be found wherever artists thematise the question of fateful determination within one's body or the question of physicality in the sense of its finality. Thus, in his more recent project *Hunger*, contemporary eating disorders relate to the Christian phenomenon of the so-called *sancta anorexia* in a broader sense, where the motives for fasting or conscious starvation are often associated with a mixture of spiritual (religion, esotericism, etc.) and materialistic (health, sports, etc.) beliefs. Christianity enters the world of Bertok's images by metaphor—one might say that the image of the emaciated body is the image of the Passion in the company of complacent narcissists, which halts our ambivalent feelings and thoughts before the one ultimate realisation. *Hunger* is thus another "memento" of Bertok. Whatever meaning we seek for ourselves, whether it be "holy" (in terms of religiousness) or exalted in our subjective universe (say, the maintenance of the bodily ideal), the ultimate essence of all matter is death.



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*printing | tisk:*

Birografika Bori, avgust 2018

*edition | naklada:* **100 izvodov**

*publisher & producer | izdajatelj & producent:*

Photon – Center za sodobno fotografijo

Trg Prekomorskih brigad 1, Ljubljana

*exhibition | razstava:*

Photon Ljubljana, **6. 3. – 24. 4. 2020**

Photon Vienna, **15. 5. – 27. 6. 2020**

*supported by | projekt so podprli:*



REPUBLIKA SLOVENIJA  
MINISTRSTVO ZA KULTURO



Mestna občina  
Ljubljana

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