

Ability as 'performance': analyzing the able-ness of 'life' through a critical study of *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Dark Knight*

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Abstract

This article deals closely with the relation between the *ability* and *state* of being alive. It asks an elemental question: what does the word 'life' remind us of? While 'life' may generically be defined as the ability to do all that signifies the act of living, a more political way of defining 'life' would be to consider it as the medium of being alive as human or, an individual person's existence. The generic definition of 'life' given above may suffer from reductionism if 'ability' is interpreted as a thing-in-itself, natural to mankind as an inherent, embedded process. This article, therefore, aims to analyze life by stepping out of this biological method of understanding and concentrates on the socio-economic and cultural nexus in which the *ability to do* is produced. It has chosen cinema as a medium of analysis because cinema does not dwell in a (cinematic) utopian space of its own, but it represents reality as much as it affects reality through the audio-visual experience of the audience.

Keywords: life, ability, performance, subject, death

Introduction: Life as 'ability'

What does the word 'life' remind us of? It may generically be defined as a technical process, the *ability to do* all that signifies the act/function of living (like respiration, growth, reproduction). Another and a more political way of defining 'life' would be to consider it as the medium of being alive as human or, in other words, an individual person's existence. The generic definition of 'life' given above may suffer from reductionism if '*ability*' is interpreted as a thing-in-itself, *natural* to mankind (or for that matter all living beings) as an inherent, embedded process. While analyzing life, we should for once step out of this biological method of understanding and concentrate on the socio-economic and cultural nexus in which the *ability to do* is produced. 'Life' as *ability*, in other words, is inextricably linked with the *state* of being alive.

Let us deal more closely with the relation between *ability* and *state* of being alive. As mentioned above, life as *ability* is not an independent, autonomous decision of the living being.

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In other words, the *ability* to live seizes to be a natural condition or an autonomous choice for individuals. It is not a question of *ability as potential* but *ability as performance* which highlights the conditions, constructs, discourses, prescriptions and proscriptions under which ability is produced and practicalized. Here 'potential' is not a natural category or an embedded gift of transcendental nature which gets exploited through the production of *ability as performance*. The point is not to search for an origin from which the *original potential* failed to develop. Rather, *ability as performance* is a process working towards a particular *telos* that is equivalent to the realization of an acquired constructed *potential* which is nevertheless *out of reach*. The operative question over here is: why does the achievement of *telos* or *potential* always elude *ability as performance*? Life as a *state* of being alive as human does not have a singular *aim*. No doubt the process of life is teleological where *telos* functions as the overarching phenomenon. However, when considered materially, there is no singular aim but *aims* in the 'life' of a human and s/he is always eluded in the journey of achievement because *ability as performance* always produces or, *must produce* in excess or surplus than the signified aim. However, the process of 'life' as producing in surplus has been specific to the capitalist mode of production operating through various socio-economic structures.

Life as subjectivity

Foucault (1995) gives us a comprehensive idea about the permeability of one mode of power into another. While disciplinary power slowly gaining ground in the European society, it did not, however, witness the complete eradication of the core practices under sovereign power. They were witnessed in pockets and corners of the society. However, the point is not to distinguish the practices under sovereign power from those under disciplinary power but to attempt a methodological distinction between them. The tag line for Foucault (2003) under sovereign power was "*take life or let live*" (p. 239-264). The sovereign did not interfere with the way the people lived but the right to take life was exercised when the body of the sovereign was in danger. The subject under sovereign power was a *living subject* than a living being where the right to live and the right to kill lay with the sovereign during his time of jeopardy. That was how the subject acquired any right, under the sword of the sovereign. Under such a scenario life as surplus or, the progress of *ability of performance* towards a specific aim *for* man and *by* man was irrelevant.

With disciplinary power Foucault (1995) argued that the creation of docile (that is, *quiet* and *easy to control*) bodies under the modern regime used elaborate scientific techniques to produce a *productive* human body. Such processes produced a discursive truth and docility was produced under the tripartite process of "exploration", "breakage", and "rearrangement" for its subjection and usage (1995, p. 138). In Foucault's study of the production of the docile subject, his continuous stress lay on the procedures involved in *creating* a new body (or rather mind-body) *flexible* and *manipulable* enough to the demands of that power, in other words "to obtain an efficient machine" (1995).

Under biopolitical power man emerged as a living being, as species. The image of man-as-species was a body with multiple heads. No state would now want the presence of just one head because that was not adequately democratic. The species did not need to be stripped off the question of variation. Here population emerged as a distinct category from the 18th Century.

It was not an aggregate of different individuals, but a sort of discursive entity related to the idea of average equilibrium, rate etc. Biopolitics intervened in life at the level of generality, as a regulatory mode of power that addressed a global mass. It regulated those aspects or characteristics of life that affected the population as a whole and just not as an individual. So, the shift from disciplinary to biopower can be regarded as a shift from anatomo-politics of the human body to biopolitics of the human race. The aim of disciplining the multitude suggested that biopower was already working simultaneously with discipline before the time that Foucault mentioned as the former's coming into practice. However, the point that Foucault made was somewhat different. For him, even though the multitude was controlled under disciplinary power, it was *politics of the human body*, addressing, regulating and surveilling actions of an individual which at the level of multitude formed a congregated and synchronized mass. With biopower the equation changed. Biopower wished to take control over life in general. It was a life fostering process which dealt with the average, the population, employed statistical measures and made policies to regulate life as a whole. No doubt it affected the life of the individual, but the specific body of a single person was not biopower's object of interest.

My basic aim in this paper is to evaluate the operative nexus of disciplinary-biopolitical power over two films that deal with the topic of 'life' in a lot of complex ways. *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont, 1994) and *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008) look at 'life' from different angles. *The Shawshank Redemption* talks about the experience of a prisoner (formerly an investment banker) imprisoned for life at a prison house called "Shawshank" and his escapade after twenty years from captivity into the world of freedom with the money to enjoy. *The Dark Knight* goes on to problematize this freedom and 'hope' itself. The objective—linked inextricably with the *evaluation* of the disciplinary-biopolitical nexus—of this paper is to experiment with the concepts of *resistance* and *death* that occur constantly in relation to each other, through the medium of these two films. In this paper, I shall be able to deal only with specific instances/cases from the films and not attempt an over-all (technical) cinematic analysis.

Resistance and *death* do not function *outside* the network of power-relation. Rather, such phenomena are produced *within* the functionality of power-relation itself. Resistance is not imposed from without and neither is death. I am trying to argue outside the thematic of a relationship which emphasizes *originality* of resistance not as the technology of resistance but as an *inherent tendency* of an autonomous intending individual to resist. My point is that the power of resistance is not outside the network of a specific power regime but, as I shall argue with *The Shawshank Redemption*, works as part of the network through spatial production (in this case, the prison) by disrupting an already functioning inequality.

***The Shawshank Redemption*: Disciplinary mechanism and Resistance**

The Shawshank Redemption is the story of a banker named Andy Dufresne who being accused of murdering his wife and her lover is sentenced to life imprisonment. It then narrates the life of Andy in prison, his friendship with a group of other prisoners (and mostly a man named Red), his fights with a group of other prisoners, his attempt to revive the prison-library and a simultaneous interest in reading for other prisoners. The Warden's knowledge of Andy's brilliance in accounting

earns him a place outside his office where he keeps the financial duties of the prison and simultaneously manages the Warden's illegal money. The representation of prison life in the film resonates with the Foucauldian picture (1995) of the regulation of 'life' under such a disciplinary system. The production of docile bodies in Shawshank State Prison operates through maintenance of a daily routine, specific timetables, maintenance of order in various bodily activities (walking in a line, standing erect etc.), various types of prison labor, books to be read from the prison-library, daily hour of sports and other such activities. However, as argued previously, disciplinary power (like the one in prisons) does not completely discard the mechanisms of control under sovereign power but modifies such techniques towards a different aim, that is, the security of the society.

The phenomenon of 'punishment'—as part of the disciplinary mechanism—is exhibitory. It is a form of assessment and evaluation of the subject under a disciplinary mechanism to check if the prescribed rules of behavior are followed with immediate and severe results. Interestingly enough 'prisoner checking' is not one of those mechanisms that functions through preparatory levels over a period of time but in the *here and now*. It operates equally on all standards distinguishing the 'undisciplined' through lack of virtue (prisoners are always already fallen subjects) and absence of an *a priori sense of discipline* to have not followed the written code, and not as something that is inculcated. Hence, the reaction of prison authorities mediates through the severity and immediacy of punishment. The operative point is the relation between discursive construct and the severity in the 'sudden' which lies in beating. The practical application of a construct (as in the prison) functions through a priori assumption of human virtue as *always already* present. The categorization of human *nature* under 'virtue' and 'vice' is the general mode of understanding professed through such constructs. Evaluation and punishment are as sudden as transgression itself where transgression is treated just not as violation of rules of behavior but as challenge and disruption, conceptualizing *absence* of virtue as qualitative deterioration. Punishment is therefore a methodological tool that the prison adopts to actually suppress transgression out of *fear*, eventually trying to suppress *fear* in them. This is because of the unpredictability of such instances which lack essence and cannot be particularly traced to a definite root and hence cannot be eradicated (more on the concept of unpredictability later in the discussion on resistance).

Punishment at the Shawshank State Prison also portrays the figure of the prison authorities in a different light. Borrowing from Giorgio Agamben's (1998) concept of the "sovereign exception" it makes sense to say that the prison-sovereign (the warden) operates as a "member" of the prison but is not "inclusive" of it (p. 15-43). Here I am highlighting a hybrid combination of the mechanics of sovereign power modified under an overarching disciplinary regime to focus on the position of the prison authorities. The position of the warden creates an exception, where he has monopoly over the decision on prison activities that are legal and illegal. The state of exception of the warden-sovereign functions not only through withdrawal from the set of juridical rules but also in using that position of withdrawal (of "sovereign exception") to engage in illegality within the prison premises. If prisoners are 'inclusions' of the prison system (prisoners are totally within the prison, all their parts are parts of the system and within it), and the warden its 'member' (that is, part of the prison system *without actually being included in it*), the warden-sovereign attains a state of 'singularity', not representable within the prison system. What happens in Shawshank is the warden-sovereign's manipulation of that absence of representability in

mistreating prisoners (illegal punishments and the murder of two prisoners) and earning money illegally through exploitation of prison labor. Such a situation creates an extreme polarity between the bodily discipline of the prisoners (a monotonous and mechanical everyday activity within the prison) and their exploitation, not as part of the mechanism or social security but in the personal singular interests of the warden-sovereign.

Andy's resistance to the disciplinary mechanism of the prison as well as the warden's monopoly of decisions operates from within the power-relation functioning within the space of the prison. The technicalities of such a mode of resistance operates across multiple axes of relations of power and through specific conditions and situations. This paper shall deal with three such instances: a) Andy's efforts in reviving the prison library; b) his skillful fooling of the Warden; and c) his escape from the prison. Andy's efforts in reviving the prison library may not initially convince the reader of any resistance in operation. The library is, after all, a part of the prison space itself and reading books is a mechanism under disciplinary power. However, as explained before, Andy's resistance is not in establishing something that does not exist. It is against the polarity that exists between the process of disciplining and exploitation. The library existed previously in a dilapidated state added to which was the disinterest of the prisoners to read. The exploitation of prisoners, illegal severity in the mode of punishment or the disinterest of prison authorities to renovate prisons results out of the power-relation between the authorities and prisoners itself. If the strategic position of the warden-sovereign as "member" of the prison system leads to the misuse of that position, the resistance of prisoners as "inclusive" of that very system operates through the units of power available to them in that very power-relation.

Andy's resistance is against exploitation itself, the techniques involved in the creation of polarity. Antonio Negri (2008) in his analysis of resistance designates it as an "excessive reaction of life to power" (p. 8-25), life in which resistance functions as *counterpower*, a moment of de-subjectification. The production of subjectivity under power-relation in the biopolitical regime also gives rise to resistance which can be analyzed as life's excess within the nexus of power-relation. If power-relation under the biopolitical regime aims to control life, and if life is the site for resistance, then such a counterpower (which is 'resistance') can emerge only if there is some power *to* life (Negri, 2008, p. 8-25). If resistance emerges from such a site of life as *counterpower*, it must feed into the nexus of power-relation itself, a form of counterpower that disrupts the construction of a subjectivity to have developed prior to resistance. For Andy his resistance succeeds primarily due to this power *to* life giving him the *ability of (counter) performance*.

Over here the specificity of spatial demarcation plays a useful role. Andy's expertise as an educated banker had failed to rescue him from life imprisonment. In the outer space of society, judicial laws had convicted him as a murderer, a *sinner* in the eyes of God, an *irresponsible* citizen and a *threat* to society. In the prison however, it is his expertise in accounting that invests power to life, under a specific socio-spatial scenario which would be unavailable or irrational with the absence of specific circumstances. It is this qualification, which became redundant in Andy's criminal case, that later helps him reunite with the space outside the prison. This power *to* life is enmeshed within the devices of control. Andy takes part in library activities, maintains prison rules, and does his assigned job as an accountant. It is from within this socio-spatial network, this enmeshing of power *to* life with the devices of control that resistance emerges as counterpower.

His resistance to the warden's illegal money laundering emerges out of the warden's refusal to look into the matter of his conviction and his knowledge of the money and the technicalities of its saving policies is derived out of being a part of the accounting system itself. All the technical details that are part and parcel of his escape are parts of the Shawshank prison just like Andy. It is his *inclusiveness* within the system and control of disciplinary mechanism over his life that give power to his life in a network of power-relation.

The particular shot in which Andy turns on the volume of the record player so that the Western Classical that is playing resonates from every nook and corner of the prison is exemplary in this case. For a series of shots to follow, the camera captures the reaction of other prisoners in a variety of ways including long shot, very long shot and low angle shot. The propagation of sound waves does not just carry a message of liberation, the *power* or *will* to resist but poses a definite challenge to the existing exploitation of prisoners by the warden-sovereign to try and seek redemption from the power of evil. Andy's usage of the rock hammer in digging through the walls of his cell develops an almost Latourian relation of a network of living and non-living actants, a network that does not have an origin, but which definitely leaves a trace of resistance. Such an act of resistance even if reabsorbed within power-relation shall always give rise to resistance(s) and surplus/excess of life to power as power-relation is inclusive of life itself.

The Dark Knight: What does 'quality life' really mean?

I would like to start the discussion on *The Dark Knight* (2008) with an epigraph borrowed from the film. The scene is inside a hospital with the main antagonist the Joker talking to the D.A. of Gotham City, Mr. Harvey Dent who lies on the hospital bed with half of his face burnt which gives him the name 'Two-Face'. Joker says:

"You know...you know what I've noticed? Nobody panics when things go 'according to plan'...If, tomorrow, I tell the press that, like, a gang banger will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics, because it's all 'part of the plan'. But when I say that one little old mayor will die, well then everyone loses their minds! (Nolan, 2008)."

A "gang banger" who is a criminal, and a "truckload of soldiers" who are supposed to give their life for the safety of the state fall within the plan of the state. They are *supposed* to die, one through punishment and the other through duty. Even if the death doesn't occur at the hands of the State, death wouldn't be *unnatural* or *abnormal* in their cases. On the other hand, death of a mayor, one who represents the state, in here the modern state, disrupts the entire mechanism of fostering life. People would not just mourn the death of the mayor but would themselves feel defenseless and insecure. Loss of their minds would just not be a result of disruption in the proliferation of life but also of the *fear* of death. In other words, even within a disciplinary-biopolitical complex of power-relation *death* is never an anomaly, a *past*. It is rather always present, the shadow of death that feeds into life as a *progress*. Death would annihilate the very function of power-relation. What is feared is the unpredictability of death.

We see here the coexistence of two types of death, one that helps to secure life and the other that challenges it. And when I talk about death in its variety as part of biopower I work within a Foucauldian paradigm. The fundamental question that Foucault (2003) asked is that if sovereign

power retreated with the proliferation of disciplinary and regulatory power, how did the power to kill function within the disciplinary-regulatory complex (p. 239-264)? Foucault regarded biopower as that which *makes live and lets die* (2003, p. 239-264). The interesting question he posed was not towards biopower's ability to kill or express doubt over the life proliferating quality. Rather, he found a connection between the two. Foucault did not fail to establish the connection since the answer was already before him, *to make live and let die*. The result for Foucault was embedded in the process.

In the *Batman* series Gotham City epitomizes neoliberal urbanism, a city with world class infrastructure, multinational companies, skyscrapers, fast cars, cautious police control. It is a model city. Yet it is one city where people wonder how they could raise children because Gotham is also the ideal place for corruption, crimes, drug dealing, gang war etc. Thriving under neoliberal economy life in the city just starts to sail smoothly when everything crumbles. People seem to be too complacent with their lives under juridical order, a regular situation which 'must be created' out of 'chaos' when in comes somebody (the Joker) diametrically opposite to order and plan itself. An "agent of chaos", the Joker shows "Gotham its true colors". The Joker reduces the 'good life' of people to its *bare minimum* and to mere living by the constant fear of annihilation, an unconditional power of death.

The Joker is not a typical criminal who fights for money. He is chaotic with a painted smile on his face which doesn't draw laughter from the people but is rather a sarcastic reaction towards how people try to control their own worlds. No one knows who he actually is. Nevertheless, he emerges within the biopolitical regime itself. If he emerges within the system and is yet not traceable, affecting all but not reducible to the single, surpasses everybody in cleverness and is yet not planned, and is not even the sovereign (he is after all an "agent of chaos"), then what exactly is he? The Joker is more like an experiment, conducted by the chaotic nature of *Chance* over society. The actions of the Joker are unpredictable like chance. Through the disruption of order by chaos (from chaos is order established for the function-ability of juridical order) is the production and construction of *bios* ("good life") affected (Agamben, 1998). Order functioning through "good life" is represented as natural to man. The Joker's actions challenge this very natural-ness of order in the life of man. Through the figure of the Joker, the film makes an experiment with chance and chaos. It questions man's alienation from chaos towards the production of a civilized society operating under a biopolitical regime, where to *make live* implies the persuasion towards and *for* 'life'. The proliferation of 'life' under a specific power regime encourages living but with precautions that man should *take care of*. However, to 'take care of' gets produced under biopolitics through self-centered practices where one takes care just of oneself and is constantly suspicious of the 'other'. Suspicion of the 'other' as Foucault (1980) showed, affects the security of the self to the extent of eradicating that 'other'.

Foucault's reference to Marquis de Sade introduced a form of control which brought back the image of *blood*, the way blood was important during sovereign power and the way blood is important now, bringing back the role of the sovereign, albeit in a different way (1980, p. 135-159). Race and the purification of blood lines became important in 19th century and its alliance with 'sex' and creation of life entailed just not purification through sex but also the purification of the population that already existed (Foucault, 1980, p. 135-159). In this context, Foucault

introduced the concept of state racism. Race is the subdivision that constitutes variation within the species. Race in a biopolitical state is not just a question of perpetuation but also purification. Interestingly the function of law under state racism functions not against the state but for what the state constitutes it to be. Legality as a tool for providing justice doesn't work in abstraction but as what justice is meant to be under the function of the state where, the state justifies justice in purifying life, purifying blood, annihilating a biological threat. This biological threat is not necessarily a part of the internal territory of the state. The aim to eradicate such a threat on behalf of the state under biopower is not to disrupt the operation of the state. A threat is constructed as already an *outside* of the population. It doesn't constitute the population but in turn hampers the population of the state through its heterogeneity. Hence is the need to purify. The Joker's actions are a challenge to such practices that occur under the garb of civilization ("a bad joke"). When 'life' is reduced to a bare minimum, when all that panics people is the fear of death—the Joker's action shows—selfishness expresses itself through *security of the individual*, of oneself than the security of the race. In one of the final shots the refusal of both civilians and prisoners on two ships to blow each other up (one of Joker's games) is not a failure of the Joker's experiment. After all mass murder is not the film's objective but manipulation of an experiment (through Joker) to make an ethical argument about life. Without the Joker's experiments of reducing life to a bare minimum, a practicality of the conceptual inexorability of death, realization of the importance of 'life' (as opposed to 'death' and 'purification') is an impossibility. *The Dark Knight* attempts to put across this point very strongly.

Conclusion:

The excess of biopower is not an anomaly, an aberration but an excess that is qualitative where the objective of biopower to control life can be stretched to a qualitative extreme (the qualitative nature of *potential* itself). This can happen as many times and frequently under the objective of proliferating life. The 'excess' is not an offshoot that is outside the normalizing effect of biopower. It happens when the action of 'make live' is used to create a monster at the qualitative extreme. The formidable power of death under sovereignty changes under biopower to a counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence over life. Power is situated and exercised at the *level of life*. Death that was once meant to save the body of the sovereign "is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life" (Foucault, 2003, p. 239-264). To say that thanato-politics does not lie within the general complex of biopower is to over read its life fostering aspect. To say that power takes control over life doesn't make biopower the preserver of every kind of life or of life in its heterogeneity. It is to control and regulate life in which 'letting die' or the annihilation of one kind of life for the purification of life in general is also a prerequisite. *Ability as performance* is what operates under biopower (*to make live*) to establish the *able-ness* of one form of life over another.

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