Walled lives. Images and violence

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In 2015, a photo was printed in the newspapers and went viral in the great kaleidoscope of the web: the image of an Ivorian child of eight, named Adou, who appeared before the eyes of officials, and the Western world, in an X-ray image taken at the customs checkpoint of Ceuta, a Spanish enclave in North Africa. His situation bordered on the unimaginable: curled up in foetal position inside a suitcase, as if he were enclosed within an "artificial womb" (Trevi, 2015, p. 23). I chose this image to begin this discussion around what is human, if I may use this word, for several reasons. The first is that this shocking and powerful image symbolizes – unintentionally – the lack of distinction between person and thing, which leads us to the question: what is it that is ripping to pieces the firmest convictions of our conception of humanity? Roberto Esposito writes in one of his latest book *Persons and Things*: "If there is one assumption that seems to have organized human experience from its very beginnings it is that of a division between persons and things" (Esposito, 2015, p. 1). If so, the story of little Adou places this postulate on shaky ground, to the extent that, together with other facts and events, it undermines the legal system of Roman derivation based on a clear division between *res* and *personae*. The second reason why I decided to begin with this image is the apparently tautological fact that it is precisely an image. Many events in recent history

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have confounded and are continuing to confound the conceptual outlet of language, taking us back to a state of "lack of words", absence of words (not to the ancient language of "barbarism", to which we shall return), a world in which material and symbolic wars are consumed through images. The great theorist of the vision, John Berger, in a book entitled *Ways of Seeing,* wrote: "We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. (. . .) We never look at one thing only; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves" (Berger, 1972, pp. 8-9). On the other hand, the writer Susan Sontag, in discussing war photography and our reactions to "the pain of others", notes that "the photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace (. . .), cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude" (Sontag, 2003, p. 46). Hence, the choice to start with this image, to which I shall return. Not only do we live in a culture of images that are compulsively devoured on multimedia platforms, but each image also carries with it a power of exclusion. By revealing, the image hides, exposing the alleged neutrality of our view of the world.

In this short contribution, I would like to look at the link between images and humanity, and also between violence and looking at it, through news events and the contribution of philosophers like Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin and contemporary philosophy. I would like to do this to offer food for thought about the issues of violence, cruelty, barbarity, and inhumanity, looking at the serial beheadings of Isis, the new war-not-war, or "peace" war, such as the proposed armed intervention in Libya to counter the phenomenon of migration, and finally the status of migrants. I am doing this not out of multicultural political correctness, including everything in the same pot, but precisely to challenge our Eurocentric prejudices which are seen as "universals", first and foremost, the concept of "humanity", namely to expose what it has been called a "founding hypocrisy" which directs our eyes towards cruelty (Dal Lago, 2012).

I shall start with the brutal and serialized phenomenon of beheadings (or decapitations) carried out expertly by Isis and then circulated on the web, in a paradoxical mix of the archaic and hyper-technological.[1] The images, which, in their cruelty, starting with the execution of James Foley in August of 2015, have been impressed onto eyes and

[1] For the phenomenon of Isis see Molinari (2015); Caracciolo (2014); Reuter (2015); and Malik, Younes, Ackerman, and Khalili (2015).

consciousness of the West, generating not only terror but horror in its literal meaning. "Horrorism" is a bold neologism coined by Adriana Cavarero to describe the unprecedented forms of contemporary violence, involving ritual and carnage (Cavarero, 2009). Cavarero argues that horror has a very different and deeper meaning than terror, as can be seen from the etymology of the word. In fact, the word "terror" refers back to the Latin *terreo* and *tremo,* and the root *ter*, meaning the act of shaking, and closely connected to the physical instinct of fleeing (in Homer, *phobos* stands for both "fright" and "flight"). The term "horror" derives from the Latin *horreo*, an allusion to bristling of the hairs on the body and linked to the static phenomenology of being frozen. In fact, the aforementioned Berger, in another book, speaks of the effect produced by photographs of agony and violence. His opinion is unequivocal: "They bring us up short. The most literal adjective that could be applied to them is *arresting*. We are seized by them" (Berger, 1980, p. 38), confirming a deep affinity between horror and looking. It is an affinity that is symbolized, according to Cavarero, in the Medusa of classical mythology. Medusa, in fact, not only freezes, petrifies, and paralyzes with her eyes, she is also a severed head, an allusion to the most extreme form of violence that can be exerted on the human body, a beheading.[2] Cavarero writes: "The ontological crime that, concentrating on the offense to the human being as essentially vulnerable, makes of wounding a disfiguring and a dismembering is repugnant to the singularity of every body" (Cavarero, 2009, p. 16). The extreme offense to the ontological dignity of the body of a man lies in the dismemberment of its figural unity, a disfigurement of the body that makes it literally *too unpleasant to be looked at*. Today, extreme violence is conveyed to us through images, which both interrupt the cycle of reciprocity intrinsic in the game of looking, which always involves an exchange of looks, placing us before images that are repugnant to the eyes, creating horror. This horror, which breaks up the unity and oneness of the body, depriving it of its face, the sign and location of a person, acts as an extreme form of dehumanization. To quote Cavarero again: "Medusa alludes to a human essence that, deformed in its very being, contemplates the unprecedented act of its own dehumanization" (Cavarero, 2009, p. 16). Not too dissimilar is Simone Weil's view of violence in her famous *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*: "force is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing" (Weil, 1939/1956, p. 3). It changes a man into stone,

[2] On decapitation see Kristeva (2011).

petrifies him, like the appalling gaze of the Medusa.[3] It is precisely this hellish descent from man to thing that reveals what is at stake here: the threshold between the human and the inhuman, the threshold which – in the above mentioned words of Esposito – has ordered our civilization from the beginning, with a clear separation of things and people. In this sense, people have talked of "barbarity" to describe the acts of savagery that we perceive as inhuman. Continuing along the lines of a purely linguistic definition, *barbaros* is one who stammers, one who does not speak our own language. This can easily degenerate into an ethnic-racial definition of doubtful epistemology, which has acted as a powerful linguistic/rhetorical stigma, confining entire civilizations into the realm of the minority and the irrational.[4] The use of the strongly Eurocentric term of "barbarity" testifies to the difficulty we find *vis-à-vis* nomination and conceptualization in the face of extreme forms of violence, thus itself constituting a dehumanization device, as argued by Primo Levi when he wrote that "barbarity, a condition of those that do not speak our language, becomes, by extension and refraction, the condition of those who refuse to consider another man as a man" (as cited in Magrelli, 2013, p. 88).

In mentioning a Eurocentric bias in the use of terms such as "barbarians" or "barbarity", our intention is certainly not to downplay the atrocities of acts that have shocked consciences and undermined the foundations of any reciprocally human way of seeing and living. However, it should be borne in mind that some have also (and rightly) spoken of a "founding hypocrisy" which underpins our way of looking at cruelty (Dal Lago, 2012), a hypocrisy that is linguistically marked by expressions such as *collateral damage*, inflicted by the West's supposedly "humanitarian" wars. It should be noted that the term "collateral" in English has also the significant meanings of "secondary", which implies that some deaths are secondary. Without entering into a "genealogy of the Western way of seeing cruelty", which has been attempted by some, it's worth pointing out that in this case, too, it is a matter of looking. It has been pointed out, that since looking is a system of interpretation, it contains within itself "the essentials of a grammar and a syntax of action (and inaction)" (Dal Lago, 2012, p. 67). In our part of the globe, we would be witnessing a kind of "sterilization of looking", a process of progressive blindness so that death (of others) can no longer be termed cruel because the "killing

[3] On Medusa see Vernant (1991).
[4] As regards "barbarity" see Dionigi (2013).

space has been removed from view" (Dal Lago, 2012, p. 111), becoming mere statistical chance devoid of the spectacle and pleasure essential to cruelty. The procedural language of *collateral damage* is, in fact, substantially de-humanized. What this implies is that some dead count more than others. Precisely this "cognitive dissonance" – this contradiction embedded in the heart of contemporary humanitarianism – can only make us wonder about the ultimate criteria that can define what we mean by humanity. The technological sophistication of drones allows for a person to be killed without our knowing who the person is, taking us into a "purely theoretical area of annihilation" (Dal Lago, 2012, p. 111), where the dispensing of death in total visual opacity comes to the point that war is fought without there being a state of war (a non-war). The question must be asked if this cancels violence, and with it cruelty. Again, what has been created is an "area of non-existence of those we have killed or helped to kill" (Dal Lago, 2012, p. 110), something which radically questions the distinction between human and inhuman. The allusion, rather, is to rhetorical and media strategies for the dehumanization of others, preventing us from holding a supposedly firm universalistic concept of "humanity".[5] To look at war without seeing it, or seeing it as something that does not concern us – according to mythology of the humanitarian war with "zero victims" – does not expunge cruelty from the Western world, but it involves, rather, a process of progressive blindness, of inexorable (and interested) "loss of sight."

From another point of view we can say that cruelty, far from disappearing, gets lost in police proceedings, bureaucratic decisions, paperwork on which life and death depend, following a logic outlined by Walter Benjamin when he wrote about the "ghostly power" of the police: "Its power [of the police] is formless, like its nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states. And though the police may, in particulars, everywhere appear the same, it cannot finally be denied that their spirit is less devastating where they represent, in absolute monarchy, the power of a ruler in which legislative and executive supremacy are united, than in democracies where their existence, elevated by no such relation, bears witness to the greatest conceivable degeneration of violence" (Benjamin, 1921/1978, p. 287). For Benjamin, then, the greatest degeneration comes about with the informal "ghostly" spread of violence, affecting every area of daily

[5] For a discussion on today's political and linguistic strategies of dehumanization I would refer to Fornari (2013).

life. From this point of view, the phenomenon of immigration provides a good case in point, to the extent that immigrants represent the most emblematic instance of the transition from person to thing, from person to non-person, which makes the threshold between humanity and inhumanity indistinguishable. In this regard, Alessandro Dal Lago has defined the state of immigrants as the paradigmatic condition of non-people (Dal Lago, 1999):[6] of human beings, that is, that are most prone to losing, against their will, the condition of being people, like the slaves in ancient times, people, that is, who were classified as *res corporales* and were considered, from Aristotle onwards, as mere "speaking tools", individuals *alieni iuris*. Dal Lago describes them as "dying tools", stressing that "the radical extraneousness of these foreigners from the world of people is shown by the fate of those who perish as stowaways, drowning in our seas" (Dal Lago, 1999, p. 224). Again in this case, the transition from person to thing – a "living thing" or "a life buried in a thing" – takes us back not only to the horror and invisibility of some deaths, but also to the amphibious state which violence seems to determine. Again in the words of Simone Weil: "From the power to transform a man into a thing by killing him there proceeds another power, and much more prodigious, that which makes a thing of him while he still lives. (. . .) The soul was not made to dwell in a thing; and when forced to it, there is no part of that soul but suffers violence" (Weil, 1939/1956, p. 26). What Weil describes as a "compromise between a man and a corpse" (Weil, 1939/1956, p. 28) is exactly the status of contemporary non-people, whose destiny seems more and more to be that of an anonymous and despairing death submerged in the now immense watery grave of the Mediterranean.

As pointed out by Dal Lago, another thing to consider is that the idea of "person" also entails the "human face" – as in the case of the French word *personne* – i.e. man as seen by others, within a network of looks. The linguistic opacity used to designate immigrants (illegal, irregular, refugees) is accompanied by a social opacity, which is yet another aspect of their constant dehumanization. In fact, the sociologist observes, "striking a man through the person or the person through a man are two different strategies for the dehumanization and dispossession of the human being" (Dal Lago, 1999, p. 209). The first case (the destruction of man through the person) is part of daily practice, a seemingly or formalistically legal way of depriving someone of their rights and

[6] See also Dal Lago (1998).

confining them to radical social invisibility. However, the second (the destruction of the person through man) involves – as we mentioned – extreme and destructive forms of violence, which disfigure the body and deprive it of any visibility, or else, as in the anonymity of "asymmetric wars", their very mortality is hidden. It is not, of course, a case of establishing a moral gradation of the forms of dehumanization, but of highlighting how the state of present day immigrants epitomizes the indistinguishability of person and thing. This indistinguishability cannot but make us wonder about the seemingly universal value of our rights and human rights in general. This line of thinking was pursued by Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, before the phenomenon of mass of stateless persons produced by the Second World War. Arendt notes that "the conception of human rights (. . .) broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships – except that they were still human. If a human being loses his political status, he should, according to the implications of the inborn and inalienable rights of man, come under exactly the situation for which the declarations of such general rights provided. Actually the opposite is the case. It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man" (Arendt, 1966, pp. 299-300). The "abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human" (Arendt, 1966, p. 297), far from returning us to a kind of natural life protected by inalienable rights, brings us extreme dehumanization: a "suspended life", or "naked life" to use the expression of Giorgio Agamben (1998). Being situated in a grey area outside the law and jurisdiction, it is a powerful, and now ubiquitous, form of dehumanization, systematically excluding people and individuals from the inclusive circle of *the polis*. What does this say about our Eurocentric notion of humanity? A partial answer is found in the words of Judith Butler, who rightly claims that "a spurious notion of civilization provides the measure by which the human is defined at same time that a field of would-be humans, the spectrally human, the deconstituted, are maintained and detained, made to live and die within that extra-human and extrajuridical sphere of life" (Butler, 2004, p. 91). The logic of dehumanization, therefore, far from being confined to an presumed ethnically and culturally connoted area of "barbarity", pervades all fields of social life, making us think, more than ever, about the forms assumed by the eternal themes of violence (material and symbolic) and cruelty, and especially the status of the

universals, in which Western rhetoric is cloaked when it is the lemma of "humanity" that is a stake.

To conclude, I would like to return to the image of little Adou, crouched in the foetal position inside a suitcase in an attempt to evade the many barriers erected today to counter the movement of persons. If it is true, as Susan Sontag claims, that images create as well as preserve the meaning of what is shown (Sontag, 2003, p. 87), it is because of this that they contain an excess of meaning and sense that cannot be deciphered in any one way. While, on the one hand, this image reminds us of the condition of "living things" that spectrally inhabit our daily space, it can also be perceived differently. The fact we see him curled up like a foetus in what has been described an "artificial womb" directs our gaze in another direction, the one of birth, a second birth which, from an area of misery and degradation, brings the child-thing to the community of political beings possessing the power of *logos*. We know with Arendt that "birth" is the paradigm of the human bursting into the new world, disrupting the flat uniformity of occurrences in history. So, it is precisely the image of a child who crosses borders and customs, as if he were a foetus waiting to be born to a better life, that offers us a powerful symbol for a reflection on what constitutes humanity, its confines and its chances of reinvention.

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