INVISIBLE VIOLENCE

Partner institutions:
Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade
Artium, Basque Museum-Center of Contemporary Art, Vitoria-Gasteiz
Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg

Exhibition venues:
Belgrade, Serbia: 9 May – 30 June 2014
Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art /
Heritage House /
Instituto Cervantes

Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain: 12 September 2014 – 11 January 2015
Artium, Basque Museum-Center of Contemporary Art

Salzburg, Austria: 14 February – 10 April 2015
Salzburger Kunstverein

Curators: Blanca de la Torre, Zoran Erić, Séamus Kealy
Invisible Violence as the Basic Instinct of Life

Very often philosophers are used to thinking about the metaphysical structure of reality in order to grasp some of the basic properties of reality itself. My sense is that invisible forms of violence, which are now imprisoning contemporary western society, have to be faced primarily through a reflection on the metaphysical nature of violence. As we have some intuitions about the nature of violence, we will be able to explore some cases in which violence is invisible, hoping to make it visible and to make our consciousness more sensible to isolating it.

Every time we tackle the topic of violence we have to reflect at least on three major issues: the nature of violence, its structure and all the forms (both visible and invisible) in which violence manifests its nature and effects. As I said, I’m quite convinced that a deep reflection on the forms and manifestations of violence is not possible without a deep exploration of the metaphysical structure of violence. So it is important to explore questions like these: What is violence? What kind of entity is it? What forms can it assume?

Two philosophers in particular were interested in capturing and exploring the inner essence of violence. I’m referring to Thomas Hobbes and Friedrich Nietzsche who explored the nature of violence respectively in human societies and in the constitution of the individual personality.

A common thread emerges comparing the very fine analyses outlined by Hobbes and Nietzsche. Through their arguments, we can notice that violence is something basically invisible: that is, something existing as a component of things or as a relation between persons or between persons and institutions. This component becomes visible only when violence explodes, so to speak, but it is silently present in most circumstances. Why is invisible violence so diffused? Hobbes and Nietzsche would both reply that this is due to the inner constitution of human nature: because of their physiology, which is very close to the animals’, human beings’ actions have very deep roots in the instinct. Of all instincts, one in particular is able to reveal the essence and form of violence: the will to power, as Nietzsche called it. The notion of the will to power tries to capture a very basic idea: the necessity that life be affirmative of itself through the will and the agency of the individual ego. My sense is that the Will to Power as an auto-affirmative instinct is the most basic form of invisible violence. This instinct is so close to the subject, a proper part of its nature that it is not in the power of the subject to acknowledge it. The Will to Power wants itself and nothing else. This idea basically means that the will to power is an expression of desire, that of expanding one’s life and one’s space of influence, subtracting life and spaces of influence from others. This instinct, in a word, is the form of pure life that all human beings share through history and different forms of life.

To be an animal (human or non-human) essentially means to be an individual who must violently impose his/her will to power. There is just one difference: non-human animals do this simply by living while human animals generally impose their will to power by using sophisticated and often misleading strategies. In the Nietzschean view, violence is indeed necessary and it becomes all the more invisible the more human beings distance themselves from their animal origin.

Was Nietzsche right? Does the invisible violence of the will to power become really more subtle and sophisticated the more society becomes civilized? Since Nietzsche certainly identified the importance of the will to power in being able to understand violence as an intrinsic component of the human nature, my sense is that the progress of culture and civilisation remains the only possible strategy to reveal the multiple and invisible forms of violence. Art, due to its meta-ontological structure, is particularly useful to show invisible violence. As is well known by both artists and philosophers of art, the boundary between art and life is one of the main topics in the arts. This boundary — which is often marked physically in the body of the work of the arts or in the context in which the works of art are placed — is a formidable real space that renders the language used by the artworks as something that goes beyond the rules of epistemic knowledge. The space between art and reality is safe from the instinct of the will to power, to the point of being completely open to the representation or representation of objects from real life. In this space, through the works of artists and the reflections of philosophers, we can see violence become visible and in a way, also tangible. My sense is that good artists have a great power: they are able to feel and capture one of the most basic instincts of life — that is, the will to power — and to embody it in a representation showing its essence.
I would like to try and explain this idea by reflecting on some cases in which we see invisible violence in life and then by considering some of the representations of this violence made by artists.

**Personal Identity.** The Nineteenth century was the time in which the Cartesian idea of the self was systematically discussed and problematized. The idea of personal identity as something transparent and coherent was outlined as a methodological myth introduced by philosophers to ground their systems on something stable. This theoretical idea is the nucleus of the Cartesian system which regarded the whole of epistemology as founded on the transparency of the subject.

Now, someone could ask where is the violence here. Well, the answer is quite simple: just consider the cost the subject paid in order to be a whole as required by Cartesian philosophy. The subject was intended as something basically coherent: there were no differences between her impulses or passions, nor between her ideas. The person was thus transformed into something hypothetical, a mere logical postulate. And, of course, it is very difficult to live as a logical postulate. This is a very insidious form of violence introduced by scientific thought and is due to the vanity of scientists and philosophers. Human beings have to be rational and logical in their deep essence — this is the main thesis. This assumption is particularly dangerous for all those who have unstable personalities, less coherent with a supposed regulative unity: they are taken to be guilty for this supposed deficit of rationality. The real subject, the subject who was not idealized by rational thought, is very well portrayed by Francis Bacon. Bacon's portraits light up the tension of a soul that is permanently without a centre and without boundaries. Pervasive rationality and calculating thought generally try to veil this disturbing reality but Bacon — as a metaphysical portraitist — unveils this ambiguity and depicts it as in a slow motion film. Three portraits of the same face are placed together as a film sequence: a very impressive technique to project the movement of the soul. The internal deformation of the soul — we may say — is reflected in the exteriority until the perfect casing of the face is completely corrupted.

What do you see when you look at those faces? Do you see a man whose artistic portrait is opening a clear representation of the self? I don't think this is the case. We see, rather, something definable as forces in action. It's as if the artist had made a picture of all those forces that, under the veil of the skin, are deforming the soul.

said that the body is the tomb of the soul. The Platonic judgement was going to mark the whole history of western philosophy and of religion as well. If the soul something perfect and incorruptible, very close to ideas, the body carries the spirit of time and is similar to a wax board on which the world impresses its actions. postmodern era deeply subverted Platonic thought by declaring the death of god and relegating the existence of humans to a merely physical dimension. All that left are bodies without souls.

Is this subversion a kind of violence? I think it is. Damien Hirst explains the reasons for this thought by using objects and installations instead of arguments. You is left when we take away from a living human being all the proprieties that can be reduced to mere physicality? The artist's answer is illuminating: simply nothing beyond that physicality. So, all that we have left to look at is bare physicality: why Hirst makes a great effort in dissecting or representing mere body parts. It at the cross with the skeleton. That cross is placed horizontally by the artist, directly from the classical iconography, which shows the cross as perpendicular to the ground. In all the major classical crucifixions, the dead body is exposed perpendicularly but Hirst prefers to suspend it horizontally, embedding the skeleton in the middle of a transparent cross. So, "death is irrelevant" for a body which has lost soul. That body is a mere skeleton, embedded in a symbol that has become transparent because it has lost its power.

Is this a form of violence? I think so: it is the violence deriving from a silent at radical deletion of human spirituality. Now the question is: who is responsible this violence against humanity? It is difficult to see and difficult to say. But, perhaps, this violence is another effect of the will to power.

**Animals.** Darwinism taught us that life is a continuous chain. It is a chain inclusive of all living forms, and these differences: one of the most meaningful is certainly conscious thou Philosophy, and science as well, has to face many compelling puzzles regarding science: what is consciousness exactly? Where is it placed? Is consciousness reducible to the brain?

Among all these questions, one of the most interesting is that about the carriers of consciousness. So — again — what is consciousness and who has it? In a nutshell, we define consciousness as a thought about thoughts. It is the capacity of some being reflect on their own thoughts. Humans, typically, have this ability and they norm
them the power to change and determine the life of other beings. But all this considered, are we really sure about the fact that human beings are the only beings with conscious thought? And, even more, are we really sure that our conviction is sufficient to justify the idea of human supremacy over all other species?

Some time ago a well-known American moral philosopher, Thomas Nagel, said that it is logically impossible for humans to know and describe what it feels like to be a bat. Humans are just able to describe what they see: that is, bats normally sleep during the day, catch their prey during the night, and use ears as if they were eyes, as a radar. Do human beings have justified claims to conclude that they really know what it is to be a bat? Nagel's answer is "no": this claim is not justified, because human beings draw their conclusions using their sense organs which are different from those of bats, and their conceptual schemes, which probably are also very different from those of bats.

There is no serious argument to conclude that humans are animals with something that non-human animals do not have. We are not really in the position to understand and explain how a non-human animal feels but, in spite of this, the human will to power often takes an affirmative form, imposing upon non-human animals the human way of interpreting world.

Chaim Soutine seems to express exactly this idea in his painting: a beef carcass which is half meat, half a man. There is no separation between human and non-human animals and every time humans introduce a separation, they are manipulating reality, using violence upon a part of the natural world.

In *In nomine patris*, Damien Hirst represents the continuity between the domain of animality and that of the divine. The installation presents an animal body hanging as on an imaginary cross. The body is transformed into a carcass which has very close semblances to the holy body that we are used to seeing exposed on a wooden cross. The artist is expressing death through a re-presentation of a real dead body. In this way he is showing perhaps the only property that is shared by all beings, including those that are very close to the divine. All beings belong to the same living space; so it is undoubtedly an invisible violence on that which is made by introducing a separation between different forms of life. The power of Hirst's image lies in capturing all the living in one body, invested with a great symbolic meaning.

Marina Abramovic at the beginning of her performance career explored very deeply force of sound without meaning (consider "AAA AAA", 1978). We can feel the force sound and that force could become devastating if it is associated with powerful meanings. We have all experienced something similar and we are quite prepared to defend ourselves from violent words. But what do we know about the invisible violence in wo

My sense is that, especially in the contemporary era, people are generally very vulnerable to populisms. Populism is a form of communication that uses work in a strategic way. Typically, populism is embodied by charismatic leaders who people what they want hear so as to get political consensus. The language these leaders is never concerned with truth or falsity or good or evil. It is in spite matter of consensus and of instruments used by the leader to obtain it.

In philosophy we generally say that words are semantic vehicles; that is, they have physical vehicles embodying meanings, generally sensitive to the truthfulness falseness of the meanings they carry. And those meanings obviously exist in a relation with the external world and its objects. However, when words are used in populist way, they become insensitive to truthfulness and falseness and are made sensitive to the reality constructed and described by the political leader. Now, where is the violence? What kind of violence is in action here?

Well, it is the soft and silent violence through which the populist leader transforms it into a collective dream or nightmare. The aim is clear: to replace the knowledge reality with its narrative. A useful definition of knowledge can be this: true and just information. This means that generally we intend that knowledge, in order to be edge, has to be justified. This condition is not necessary for the structure of narratives. Narratives are mainly used in fields like literature or history, as was masterfully shown by Arthur Danto. Both literature and history belong to domains different from the epistemology which is notoriously concerned with the conditions that make scientific knowledge possible. The narratives typically used by literature and history are not the same type. The former is absolutely unconcerned with truth and falsity, the latter concerned with truth but in a way that is not that of epistemology.

Now let us turn to our problem: the invisible violence of populist leaders. In society whose structures of powers are ever more diffuse and liquid, populist uses the narrative model of fantasy to communicate and impose its own imagery. My feeling is that the more the power of the populist leader is effective.
My opinion is that words must capture things, their proprieties and facts, which already belong to the world itself. If they are used just to create narrations independent from the external world, they are doing violence to reality and to people as well, who become simple appearances utilized in a narration written by the prevailing power.

Artists can be sensitive to these circumstances in two ways. Let me refer to two well known artists as an example: in some cases they were both critical of economic-political populism whilst supporting populism in other cases. Andy Warhol has certainly been one of the leading Pop artists in the world. Warhol’s paintings and installations were great examples of how artists can criticize political populism; however Warhol has also been one of the artists who has magnified American economic populism. Andy Warhol’s Mao, painted in 1973, represents Mao Tsetung, the famous Chinese leader, in the same Pop style he used to iconize Marilyn Monroe. If there isn’t any difference between an actress like Marilyn and a political revolutionary like Mao — if they are both symbolic figures, simultaneously authors and components of two different national mythologies — the artist can underline this particular aspect by representing both in the same Pop style. Certainly Warhol could have titled Mao’s painting Demythologizing Mao. Nevertheless, Warhol also contributed in other ways to mythologizing the American society of the late nineteenth century. This marvellous Coca-Cola is one of most amazing examples. Warhol’s Coca-Cola is an artistic tribute to Coca-Cola as Coca-Cola is. Coca-Cola, that is, as the symbol of American life style, is simply perfect as it is and Warhol decided to reproduce a Coca-Cola bottle without any stylistic redundancy. This is Coca-Cola, this is America; both are simply great.

Wang Guangyi is a contemporary Chinese artist whose famous cycle — Great Criticism — has a clear aim: using Pop style to demythologize the most important American or European cultural symbols. But do Wang Guangyi’s paintings simply deconstruct the mythology and the populism hidden in American and European culture, market and politics? No. In his demythologization of Western culture, Guangyi is also mythologising Chinese history by using a narrative which is deeply populist.

What is the moral of the story? We must be careful: we all become very imaginative when we want to express our will to power upon the world, often using many forms of invisible violence.