

Brumaria issue #18: Expanded Violences 2011

Abstract of contribution

The subject of violence is considered beyond the black and white of its physical / non-physical or legal / illegal aspects, expanding into media-perpetrated and institutional violence through manipulation, representation, distancing and systems. To read violence as such, Cramerotti adopts the framework of Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), the preparatory notes (published posthumously) for a lecture series on the characteristics of literature. The lectures never happened due to Calvino's premature death.

Obliquely

Alfredo Cramerotti

The phenomenon of violence has no precise contours. It can take on a variety of forms, from the exertion of physical force, to psychological treatment or even to the alteration of meaning that occurs whilst speaking or editing a text. A behavioural trait that is common to all species, violence ranges in intensity. And in the specific case of human society, it surfaces in bar brawls, systematic mass murder and ideological indoctrination. In attempting to make this reading of violence, in particular in relation to war and the mediatized aspects and instigation of violence, it is clear to me that I most try to understand *how* violence is at work within our society, rather than what it is or why it happens. Perhaps only through confronting it obliquely can I recognize the various contexts in which I deal with this very basic instinct on a daily basis.

Not every act of violence is illegal or considered as such. If I take on board the violent aspects of law, education, administration and social systems (social injustice as a form of violence), then it is possible to determine that violence takes place mainly within a consensual framework, or one that is acknowledged as such. Also the matter is further complicated if I think about the marked differences between countries and cultures in considering certain acts as constituting a violation of law or a socially acceptable practice. Moreover, what is deemed violent does not only change in space but also in time; for even in the same location, a violent act or attitude shapes itself differently throughout epochs – in medieval time, physical castigation or even death as punishment for tax fraud was an expected practice.

Another point to advance here is that violence is a 'learned behaviour'. I am not an expert in social and behavioural sciences, but it seems to me that consistent patterns of violence, whether instrumental or emotional, are likely to generate comparable attitudes¹. Certain physical or psychological patterns

¹ I share this thought with Mayra Buvinic and Andrew Morrison of the Division of Social Development, Department of Sustainable Development, IDB, authors of a technical note about violence partially based on

can be perfectly legal and well utilised within a society, and these 'relational' aspects of violence have been studied in fields ranging from psychology and criminology to medicine and economics or literature. It is specifically through the latter that I propose to read violence.

Memos

In 1985, just before his death, Italo Calvino prepared six lectures for The Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures series at Harvard University. The book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*², published posthumously in 1988, contains five memos, or personal testaments. The sixth was never finalised on paper. The Memos are simultaneously visionary and surgically precise in exposing what Calvino felt were the essential 'values' of literature in the coming millennium. Ultimately, the lectures aim to connect what he referred as 'the unbridgeable gulf' between language and experience.

I turn to Calvino's work to find an 'image' of violence that demonstrates my view, as through an interpretative model I can place the concept of violence in a relation to the systems that govern our lives. I have therefore taken each memo heading –lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity and consistency– to an area beyond Calvino's original intention in the hope of gaining a better grasp on contemporary life, both personally and in the socio-political world at large.

1. Lightness

This is perhaps the most contradictory term to apply to violence, yet it is particularly pertinent in this discussion. For example, the media's reporting of violent conflicts, and indeed the way we receive this information, is always diluted as a result of remote viewing or participation.

The 'light touch' of violence is also evident in behavioural patterns through which we construct our individual and collective being. Forms of adult entertainment such as sport, as well as children's games present an opportunity for suppressed anger to be expressed through attacking an opponent, for example, or micro-torturing pets. These seemingly light forms of violence are universally prevalent but, as A.C. Grayling puts it, the road from torturing insects to committing crimes against humanity is not so tortuous after all.

2. Quickness

The rapid pace of information, administration and technological processes defines our age and, by necessity, violence is quick – even when it is slow. Although the coalition's campaign in Iraq and Afghanistan cannot necessarily be deemed as occurring over a short timeframe, it is the quickness of the hit-

documents prepared by consultants César Chelala and Ana María Sanjuán, Loreto Biehl and Ginya Truitt. <http://www.iadb.org/document.cfm?id=362825>. Accessed 20 August 2010.

² Calvino, Italo: *Six Memos for the Next Millennium/the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1985-86*, Vintage International: 1993 (first published in Italian 1988)

and-run counter-strategy of local fighters that has become the major headache for the occupiers, and its accumulation the most destructive possible outcome.

When trying to escape death, time for reflection and assessment is impossible. Immediacy, real-time engagements, impatience and on-the-fly responses are the main features of modern warfare and, indeed, of most part of civilian life. And violent acts themselves may be a result of simply not taking time to establish interpersonal or intercultural relations.

3. Exactitude

Whether urban counter-terrorism or distant military campaigns, armed conflicts involve precise targeting and engaging at the right moment. This is consistent in other contexts of contemporary life too: for instance, captions that elucidate images recurrently ensure that we absorb the 'correct' information.

This may be more the case for opinions and commentaries, rather than the actual content of the images themselves. Scanning the flow of data and affixing a precise connotation has superseded consideration and doubt. This, in turn, plays a substantial part in the everyday deployment of violence, since prefigured meanings do not allow for user interpretation or creativity.

4. Visibility

In part, visibility refers to the greatest distance at which objects or situations can be identified, either with the naked eye or through devices. Hito Steyerl reflects that the closer the distance, the more we lose the ability to see. This holds if we consider a televised or Internet-streamed war, where the embedded journalist is shooting and broadcasting in real time from his mobile phone, perhaps even at night while on the move. The pure visual sensation of flickering patches of green and black, nevertheless become the war, distracting from the real violence it stands in for.

5. Multiplicity

Pluralism is emblematic of our late capitalist society. I am many, even if I am only one. Violent acts and thoughts mirror this 'split personality'. Violence has always been perpetrated and suffered in a variety of forms, but what is new, perhaps, is that a violent act or attitude can become socially and ethically acceptable that are not only normalized, but also sustained for the benefits it may bring elsewhere.

During the two Gulf wars, for example, the United States launched, with all its economic and military strength, an economic war against an unnamed, or rather, unconstructed enemy. As we have witnessed, the fallout expands exponentially, impacting on family relations and economics, education and entertainment, global politics and humanitarian action. This is multiplicity in the extreme, where the many implications for many social strata and the many benefits beyond the field of war become apparent. Regrettably, the eventual unmasking of hypocrisy has not put a stop to it.

6. Consistency

This is the most evident aspect of violence in our society. To be consistent is to be well rehearsed, to apply one's approach repeatedly, but always producing different results. We have eventually gleaned that in the Greek tale of Medea the brutal infanticide of her sons was in reaction to hatred of her as a foreigner in Corinth,³ – a situation that has recurred down the ages, as suggested above.

Here we are dealing with the very origins of violence, as the necessary 'act' for the passage from a 'primitive' world to an 'advanced' society and the price to pay for capitalist civilization.

For another time

And here I must end, barely commencing a discussion that could expand exponentially. These concepts that may help to 'read' violence and the habitual associations about how the world works are –for the most– not visible to me, but I am their subject and through them I exert violence. Calvino helped to open a little window, to let us get some air.

³ Christa Wolf's version of Medea is extremely valuable in unearthing the political and ethical motivation for such false accusation, going back to pre-Euripides sources to back this up.