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Narratives of Suffering in Public Space:

What the Primacy of the Visual Conceals

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Introduction

The ethical dimension of the senses is reflected in the possible disconnection between what we see or hear and the actions that constitute an appropriate response to the perceived. Moreover, our culture of being television viewers, with the progressive colonization of all spaces, both public and private, by a growing number of screens carrying images, seems to favour this lack of connection. Indeed, it is now possible to be spectators of all the horrors of the world from one's own living room, without leaving one's armchair or while performing any other daily activity. Placed everywhere (in the kitchen, on the platforms of the metro, in stores, on computers ...), screens and images surround us and pervade us without demanding any commitment from us. The

subject, converted into a constant spectator of the life of others, wishes to be informed (or perhaps, to consume images without interruption and to feel stimulated by them), but also wishes to remain sufficiently neutral and disengaged, to avoid being overwhelmed by the constant bombardment of painful situations. It would appear that sight, of all the senses, enthroned by the hegemony of the image and the prestige of immediacy and speed, allows the viewer or the modern consumer to make use of its special aptitude for distance and indifference. It seems less and less clear that the act of seeing performed by *homo videns* in this society of images necessarily leads to an understanding of reality, to the deployment of appropriate emotions, or to the commitment to coherent acts. The connection between these different elements not evident, nor is it assured. Does the sense of sight, structurally, as it were, have some responsibility for this lack of connection?

The Nobility of Sight: The “Advantages” of Disinterested Contemplation

Hans Jonas, in an interesting article titled “The Nobility of Sight”, carries out a phenomenological investigation into this sense, in contradistinction primarily to hearing and touch¹. This research is a veritable eulogy to the excellence of sight, for the undoubted advantages it brings for the exercise of the theoretical aptitudes of the human spirit. For Jonas, the unique distinction of sight consists in the “image-performance”. His concept of “image” has three characteristics: a) simultaneity in the presentation of a manifold; b) neutralization of the causality of sense-affection; c) distance in the spatial and mental senses.

As the ancient Greek philosophers indicated, one look reveals a world of simultaneously present qualities, so that the content of the vision is given immediately as a whole. In contrast to this simultaneity and immediacy of the visual, the acoustic object, for example, is a temporary and dynamic object, which can only occur successively and whose content is completed as its temporary deployment occurs.

However, the most relevant peculiarity in the comparison of sight with hearing is the fact that the sound takes over, as it were, a passive subject: hearing does not involve reviewing a field of possible objects of perception as happens with sight. Rather it is determined by the activity of the surroundings. In the case of hearing, much more so than in that of sight, the initiative is in the outside world: something has to happen in order to be heard, while in the case of vision all that is needed is the mere presence of things to make it possible to view them. Sight, therefore, can move among visible objects following its own initiative. Although it is possible, in popular language, to turn a deaf ear, to lend an ear or even to be all ears, expressions which show the possibility of different levels of attention or the degree of auditory receptivity, hearing has a very limited freedom of selective attention in comparison to sight. It is therefore an inferior sense as far as the freedom it affords the perceiver: “in sight selection by focusing proceeds non-committally within the field which the total vision presents and in which all the elements are simultaneously available” (512). For Jonas, the simultaneity of the visual field implies the possibility of choosing the direction of attention and openness to possibilities. Consequently, sight would provide an optimal infrastructure for the exercise of freedom.

With seeing, says Jonas, the object may appear before me without my incurring a working relationship with it. In seeing something none of the ways of relating to it is as yet decided. In contrast, touch implies, through the mere exercise of it, an opening of practical relations with the object. In a tactile experience we lack the clear separation which may be enjoyed in the case of sight between the theoretical results of the information provided by the sense and practical behaviour resulting from having established a relationship with an object. Touching without affecting the other, without establishing a certain kind of relationship, is not possible. Moreover, one cannot touch without being touched, without being affected directly by the establishment of such a relationship.

The nobility of sight, of which the author speaks, would have something to do with the possibility of having awareness of things without the need to be in direct contact with them, knowing things without handling them: “Thus vision secures that standing back from the aggressiveness of the world which frees for observation and opens a horizon for elective attention” (516-517).

Sight is the only sense in which the benefits are not found at close range but rather at a distance: the correct distance can vary with the different objects and the purposes we are pursuing, but always acts as a positive feature and not a deficiency of the phenomenical presence of the object, because if we move away gradually from an object we lose clarity of detail, but we attain a broader panorama, which is not true for example with the ear.

By expanding the horizon of information, the sense of sight gives its possessor an enormous biological advantage. Knowing distance is the same as knowing beforehand. The perception of distant objects implies for it an immediate increase of freedom, due to enlargement of the temporal field of possibilities for action afforded by the distance of the object of the action. But it is not only freedom in the sense of greater possibilities of action, but also freedom in the sense of not being directly challenged, affected or modified by the object. Distance places the object outside any possible interaction and allows disinterested contemplation and pure objectivity.

Jonas does not draw in this essay any direct philosophical conclusion for ethics, but I think he has tilled the ground for reflection in this regard, given that he relates the simultaneity of the visual field to freedom, neutrality to the distinction between theory and practice, and distance to disengagement. Thus it does not seem out of place to attempt an ethical reading of the unique properties of sight. Especially when one wonders, as suggested earlier, if all the features that are described as an infrastructure providing theoretical activity may involve some kind of disadvantage or difficulty for practical activity. Is there not some link between freedom, disengagement and distance, which allows for disinterested contemplation and ethical indifference?

The Visual Agora and Indifferent Seeing

A reading of the unique properties of sight in a sociological key and with undoubtable implications for ethical reflection can be found in the original work of American sociologist Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone. The Body and the City in Western Civilization*². For Sennett, the civic culture of modern societies is eminently “visual”

and that contributes to isolation and lack of interaction between individuals. According to him, the domain of sight and the receding of contact have important consequences for social interaction and ethical concern over the other.

A characteristic phenomenon of our society would be the paradoxical compatibility of sensorial clouding which pertains to a hyper-consumer society with the growing tendency to isolation from unpleasant sensations. This is facilitated by the rupture which has taken place in the mass media between the virtual and the real. While we are great consumers of suffering displayed on the screens, we quickly flee from any direct contact with the real pain of others who provide us with their direct insight. Indeed, while virtual pain can be consumed passively as a spectator, real pain calls for intervention, an action, a commitment to which the passive and insensitive subject does not know or does not want to respond to.

The sensory numbness and difficulties associated with sympathising with strangers are closely linked, in Sennet's view, to the triumph of individual movement in space and the role of the experience of speed in modern urban settings: as space becomes a mere function of movement it also becomes less stimulating: "The traveler, like the television viewer, experiences the world in narcotic terms; the body moves passively, desensitized in space, to destinations set in a fragmented and discontinuous urban geography" (18).

The desire to rid the body of the resistance that may prevent or hinder its free movement in space leads to the paradoxical phenomenon of sensory numbness, highlighted by Sennett. This phenomenon occurs precisely in a society and in a historical context that gives utmost importance to sensations and creates a type of passive individual, devoid

of physical awareness of other human beings, removed from his own shortcomings and inadequacies, who tends ultimately towards disengagement and solipsism.

The correlative analyses of Jonas and Sennet, which we have discussed very briefly, look like the obverse and reverse the same coin. The same qualities that led the ancient Greek philosophers to regard sight as the most excellent and the noblest of the senses (Jonas) now relate to a deficiency, especially an ethical deficiency (Sennett). That is, combining the perspectives of both authors, one can conclude from that that what makes the sight particularly suited to support the theoretical life, can be a burden or an impediment to the development of fundamental ethical attitudes.

Haunted by Atrocious Images. Ethics of the Image

Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is an intrinsic experience of modernity; indeed, many of us live in areas where you can choose between being a spectator of the pain of others or not, which raises more than one question. Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, echoes contemporary criticism of the sense of sight and by extension photographic images that allow one to look at suffering from a distance.³

We have already found that sight seems to allow greater freedom and disengagement from the object. From the phenomenological analysis presented earlier in this paper it seems logical that it is easier to see unfeelingly than to remain indifferent to the stimuli by means of other senses which have less freedom or less ability to establish a distance between oneself and the object. However, Sontag shows that there are images or

pictures whose precise and specific function is to move the viewer, to arouse emotion, or to generate outrage. The author even goes on to state that there are images before which it is virtually impossible to remain indifferent.

Now, with great realism and abundant source material, Sontag shows that these emotional responses and ethical attitudes that may arise or be based on them are not always guaranteed. It is not enough to assume what might be called common humanity, but we must have the political, social or cultural context in which they occur, the story to which these images pertain and other elements that can profoundly alter the interpretation of what is contemplated in a photographic image. For example, in the early twentieth century, during the Boer War, there was a famous photo taken in a trench filled with British soldiers killed and dismembered by the devastating fire from enemy artillery. While for some it displayed the horror and cruelty of war, for others it invoked feelings of admiration and satisfaction.

Indeed, before the pain of others, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, there is not a single answer, nor is it assured. Between seeing and compassion there is no necessary and universal connection. It is always possible to close the heart against what is seen. As Sontag says, “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (6). There is also no necessary connection between emotional shock and a certain type of action. Seeing the images and feeling the shock they cause does not follow a single moral response. Photographs of an atrocity can produce opposite reactions: any massacre or slaughter or cruelty perpetrated on a group of people can be lamented as something horrible, or exalted as a great victory if it appears that the victim is our mortal enemy in a war without quarter.

Although Sontag considers the criticism that such images can easily cause more morbidity or curiosity than true compassion and also takes into account the danger that such images may be treated as artistic images or even advertising, she considers that war photography plays an important moral function in making us aware and conscious of a terrible reality, even when we cannot do anything to change it:

“Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: «This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don’t forget.»” (102).

For Susan Sontag, the ethical value of an atrocious assault of images is not invalidated because after seeing them we will not be completely transformed or not suffer enough in contemplating or not remedy our ignorance of the causes of evil that appear before our eyes. For the author, such images are, at least, “an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers” (136). It is true that the images provide only the first stimulus: to shift from pure sympathy to the reflection that “our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering” (92) requires a certain intensity of attention, the decision of being affected or made vulnerable not only in the level of our feeling or our emotions, but also our ability to analyse and rationalise. May what has touched our sensibility and our emotions also touch our thinking. And finally, that emotional upheaval and rational reflection will lead us to action. Because any experience, no matter how shocking the experience has been, is in danger of fading away like a dream, as if a fleeting mental episode, if an act is not

triggered, a behaviour that implies a transformation of ourselves and the world.

Conclusion

It does not really seem appropriate to attribute to some alleged ethical deficiencies of sight the potential for ethical indifference that we affect in our modern civic cultures.

There is no sense incapable of indifference, even though it may have a lower degree of freedom or autonomy from its object. It is not sight and its capacity to afford us an overview at will which makes us indifferent: rather, once we are determined not to allow ourselves to be affected, become vulnerable, the ability of sight to choose the object of interest, to keep it at a distance, to avoid being overcome by what is panoramically before the eyes and maintain a physically aseptic and emotionally neutral relationship with it is undeniably effective.

The various faculties which are involved in ethical behaviour: perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and actions, are not connected together in a unique or automatic manner.

Otherwise they would not be the senses, emotions or thoughts of a free being. Living, for the human being, is to some extent a constant task of adequately recognising, ordering and articulating the plurality of elements that converge in life.

Now, how can the tendency to visual derealization of viewers in our culture be counteracted, to make us emerge from our visual refuge which can neutralise the uncomfortable aspects of reality or place them far away enough so that we do not feel trapped into or compelled by the need to do something. In contrast to dominion –which

prefers a viewer consumer ethically appeased- Sennet considers one of the main tasks of civilization is to force the individual towards displeasure, to submit him to experiences that put him in contact with his own inadequacy and makes him aware of the needs of others.

In a similar way, a moral task of the first magnitude today could be to invite one to make the effort, costly as it may be, to interconnect elements that have become used to being disconnected, but that only acquire their true meaning in their mutual involvement. For example, what is perceived does not fully acquire the status of reality if it does not have the ability to affect us directly, to mobilize us for action, to enter the realm of the self, to somehow transform our lives in a tangible way. Perceived reality will vanish like a dream, like a fleeting mental episode, if what we feel is not translated into action, behaviour, or a transformation at the same time of both ourselves and the world. The other is not truly real while it cannot interfere directly in my life.

I think, in conclusion, that the need or the ethical challenge of multidisciplinary which constitutes the general theme of the conference, carries to the outside the need to overcome deep divisions within the human being. Talking about the reconciliation of art, science and philosophy places us on the road leading to the many necessary reconciliations in our fragmented lives. I think that ethics, aesthetics and religion can perform this task of mediation between our senses and our emotions, between our feelings and reflections, between our thoughts and our actions. And in this common task of rebuilding a broken human being there can be found the appropriate reasons and channels to engage in a fruitful dialogue.

¹Hans Jonas, “The Nobility of Sight”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 14 (1954): 507-519.

² Richard Sennet, *Flesh and Stone. The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (London / Boston: Faber and Faber), 1994.

³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding The Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books), 2004.