

Keynote, graduate Conference 2014 Philosophy Department Boston College
On Violence: ethical, political and aesthetic perspectives

On representation of violence

An opening lecture on such a vast topic like "violence", naturally calls for a definition, a distinction between modes, patterns or subjects of violence. Allow me to avoid this task of definition, believing that this might be the result of this conference.

I would like then to take a short cut and frame this talk around what we use to consider as the representation of "political violence"; that violence that is used in the purpose of implementing, sometime imposing and maintaining a social order. Any kind of political social order.

Obviously I'm well aware of Arendt argument that violence is in fact the weapon of the impotent or the weak, and real authority or power are not about use of violence but just about the threat of using it. But isn't Arendt after all suggests that all political regimes and any kind of ruling power is in it own way impotent? And this is what might explain the permanent use of both "subjective violence" - the one inflicted by a visible, define and named subject and "*the invisible systemic violence*" of authority, as put is Slavoi Zezik. And as I believe that we might all agree, that violence, whether subjective [visible] or objective [invisible] is one of cinema's favorite themes. In this following lecture I would like to reflect on the visual cinematic representation of violence but not on the representation of violence results, effects or victims if you wish but specifically on it's perpetuating subjects, which are the perpetrators.

But first I would like to start with a short story. One of this banal and everyday encounters. As artistic consultant of the South film Festival in Israel, I had once a meeting with the members of that committee.

Among them the new Festival's producer. A young Jewish-Israeli woman in her early thirties working in the field of theatre organization and more specifically in organizing Arab-Jewish encounter in Israel.

This lady came to the production of performance art after working for a short time in the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs as legal advisor. She came there after her military service as a military attorney and as military judge (she was in her twenties then) in one of the four Israeli military courts in the Palestinian occupied territories.

In her field of competences, she had for example the power, according to Israeli military law to sentence a young Palestinian who throw stones at a soldier up to 15 years of custody.

Immediately after this very short biographical exposure, she insisted to tell us about her permanent attempts to and I quote *"in the limits of possible I tried to relief the pain and humanize the situation"*

I could not avoid asking about a concrete example that I observed in on the military court of the west bank. (Court of route 181) where the Palestinian detainees are brot to court with foots chains, a practice which is forbidden by all international lows.

She immediately agreed that this is unbearable and added that she always fought this practice when she was the court president.

"And ?" I asked.

"Well I never succeeded to take the chains off. But I never stopped trying". This charming young lady and should I add, socially well adapted – what we use to call normal – was for almost three years one of the tenth of thousands of individuals, that each one in his own field and in the frame of competence worked in the implementation and perpetuation of the violent oppressive system known for more then 4 decades as the Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian territories, a system for example that has put in custody more than a third of all the Palestinian male society.

How can we define this young lady and her fellows all acting in the frame of the law? What can this lady revile on the relation between the existence of a violent, unmoral, oppressive and even criminal system and its actors?

What is obvious in her justification of what she herself considers as a problem that should be solved, is that she belongs to this uncountable amount of people who considered and still consider their work as a permanent attempt of relief – whatever the system itself will be, and mainly within a system that they themselves personally do not approve totally.

A second anecdote is of this student of mine, a socially talented young man a nice student, officer of elite unit of the Israeli army who presented as a final semester work about the ethical dilemma between opposition to the occupation and the duty to serve in the occupied territories. He entitled his work "no to occupation, yes to military service in the occupied territories". He argues that within the criminal situation, which is the military occupation of the West Bank and because of this situation, his duty is to be in the occupied territories to avoid what he calls "criminal acts". I should mention that this brilliant officer participated both in the battle and the destruction of the Jenin refugees' camp and in the destruction of the Rafah refugees' camp in the Gaza strip. If he can admit that because of this belonging to the occupied forces, he can be seen as a war criminal, he argues for, should I say justify himself, as an inner-resistant against unjustified brutality.

By the way, it is interesting to notice that no one argues the law-obligation or obedience to the military system as a such.

Well, these examples of different actors among the same violent power system - which is the military law in occupied territories - represent two

patterns, which compose what I'll define as the regime of justification of executors within a legal system of oppression.

We all know of course that any ruling system, any authority, and even the most corrupted and criminal ones, need its normal, ordinary, good working and even moral individuals that will work to its implementation, without critics and questioning.

Primo Levi reminds us when he wrote in 1960, at the moment of the capture of Richard Baer, de man how commanded the camp of Auschwitz after Rudolf Höss: *"Baer belongs to a type of man the most dangerous in our century. For those that know to observe, it is clear that without him, without the Hoess, the Eichmann [...], without the other thousands of loyal, blind executors of received orders, the big predators, Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels would have been impotent and disarmed [...]. They would have been like sinister meteors in Europe's dark sky"*¹.

In the field of reality representation – what we use to call the documentary – which deals mainly with the consequences of power and oppression these figures are almost totally absent.

Even more, the favorite figure of representation is the victim. We can argue on the reason and function of the victims' representation. Its redemptory function and its relation to the Christian vision of suffering and charity. Violence and evil have their image in the form of results and sometime in its basic primitive brutal image, but the executor, the normal screw of the big machine, the perpetrator figure is almost totally absent from the world of representation.

¹ Quoted in the preface by Vidal-Naquet to *" Ordinary man "*, by Christopher Browning, French edition : Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1994.

And in fact, what is the image of evil? How to represent the banality, the normality of evil, and what for?

If we stop for a moment to think about what we all consider as the evil, I mean the Nazi officer (or the SS ones to be more precise) we will find that most of the film done about the IIWW represent the Nazi in his own image. Big, well dressed, clear hair and eyes talking sharply. In a way we can conclude that Gobbles through his favorite filmmaker Lenny Riefenstahl achieved to impose the canonical image of the Nazi even over films that clearly denounce Nazism (like Spielberg's *Shindler's list* or Lilia Kavani's *Night Guard*).

The challenge of representing of the individual actors of a criminal system is both to break with the canonical images or faceless evil and the capacity to the immorality of the system itself recognize in the discourse of justification. In other words, the challenge is to avoid creating a new "regime of justification" which will be the de-responsabilisation through the banalisation of the discourses.

By discourse of justification, I mean what justifies their presence among a power system which exercise a legal criminality.

Raoul Hilberg defines the IIWW executors as *"the people that played a precise role in the formulation or the application of anti-jewish mesures. The ones who took part in this action had, in most of the cases, the entire conscience of the function that he exercises and attributed it to his position and his obligations. What he was doing was un-personal, he received orders or the full powers to conclude his task"*

The concept **Regimes of justification** (Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot 1999) is used here to qualify: patterns of human expressions and idioms used to justify an act - resulting in - inflicting suffering. These patterns are employed both a-priori and a-posteriori to the actual performance of these acts. Regimes of justification are used both a-priori and a-posteriori

to action and sometimes during acting. As such a regime of justification is permissive and even encouraging. Thus, regimes of justifications do not imply by any mean their dependency on thinking. Let's bear in mind that according to Arendt (the life of the mind); it is the capacity to think the result of an action. To **imagine** (to give it an image) it from the point of view of the meaning. *Thinking amounts to a quest to understand the meaning of our world, the ceaseless and restless activity of questioning that which we encounter. It constantly returns to question again and again the meaning that we give to experiences, actions and circumstances. The engagement of this faculty that seeks meaning through a relentless questioning (including self-questioning) is intrinsic to the exercise of political responsibility.*

If we consider the testimonies of perpetrators - executors in those rare spaces where they are bound to testify, like courts, inquiry commissions or other transitional justice (like the commission "truth and reconciliation"), we discover that beyond the geographical, political, economical, social, or ethnical conditions, there are patterns of regimes of justification, including criminal and immoral ones within the legal power system.

The actual challenge (that some visual artist indeed take up) is to represent these individuals, not through their psychological portrait but through their patterns of justification. Obedience, relief and humanitarian, misfortune, obligation through necessity, duty, etc.

These patterns reveal the nature of the violent system from which they emerge - a carrying power and a clear division of fields of competence and then responsibility.

All together, they can design a universality of perpetrators. The discourse of justification is closely linked and even depends on the need to describe events or actions, everyday work and accomplishment of missions from their perspective, which make them essential witnesses of the system.

The witness status, which is usually reserved to the survivors or the outsider actors, the observers, becomes also the status of the executors. This unbearable humanization is situated in a total opposition with canonical representation of evil, a un-human human being, an animal, a monster, a demon, etc.

This representation is part of an economy of evil representation. It allows also to keep a mythological image of evil and avoid the possibility to distinguish modern daily and banal figures of evil. Another way to hide the subject which composes the system is the victim figure. The representation of the victim on one hand, and on the other hand the exposure of the general discourse and critic of the system, both participate in the impossibility of hearing or representing the ordinary executors.

Giorgio Agamben in his book *Remnants of Auschwitz, the witness and the archive*, explains the difficulties of writing the history of Holocaust by the fact that it is difficult for the survival of it to be at once victim and witness. Hannah Arendt also considers that the history of Holocaust was not written by the victims themselves but was written after the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem after he spoke about it.

Primo Levi already distinguished between the witness and the survival (or the victim).

The great historian Raoul Hilberg, author of the *"Destruction of the European Jews"*, highly criticized a history based on victims or survivals narratives. He based his work on the perpetrators and executors' documents and testimonies. He was followed by Hannah Arendt who justifies her absolute need to attend the Eichmann trial by writing *"I wanted to expose myself not to the actions themselves - which are after all already known - but to the one who did them"*.

It is important to notice that very little was done in the field of visual representation from this same perspective.

Paradoxically, the notion '*duty of memory*' concerns only the victims.

Executors, perpetrators, the criminals themselves were never obliged neither felt the need to testify about their actions or deeds. Of course, when they did so, it was under the double figure of hero or/and victim.

There are not many public stages or spaces where criminals are band to testify. The justice courtroom or the truth committees are two spaces where criminals are obliged or willing to witness. In these cases, the simple filed soldiers and officers who implemented the criminal policy are invited to describe what they remember they did. The existence of such '*spaces of voice*', depends on one obligatory condition: the victims of the crime must become at a certain moment – and not too late after the event - victorious.

Under this condition, the justice court or the Truth and reconciliation committee becomes a way to collect the perpetrators' and executors' testimonies.

A second important point that conducts to the conclusion of the necessity to reconsider the documentary cinematic representation of violence and evil is to avoid that a mythical or/and ideological image of the perpetrators – also generated by the victims - will dominate their future representation.

Raul Hilberg explains, to resume more than 50 years of research, the interest of such a perspective: *"It was impossible to catch the full dimension of this historical fact if we don't understand the mechanism of the executors' acts. It is the executors who had the global view. He himself formed the fundamental element. It is through his eyes that I had to look at the event, from its genesis till its climax.*

The insurance that the perspective of the executors offers the first track to follow became for me a doctrine that I never changed."

I believe that we will agree about the universality of the victims. I would like emphasis the universality of executors, perpetrators among a system implanting immoral acts. The exposure and the attempt to deal and to achieve to represent universality of justification patterns is aimed to identify the elements of present or potential criminality in the daily discourse.

This attempt to create a typography of ordinary normal perpetrators opposes radically the vision of Satan as non-political un historical, and out of this world figure. An image and a discourse that joins the discourse of inhumanity of terrorism, the invisible and soundless figure of evil.

I am bound to conclude. I do not believe in self-representation of trauma as any collective, social or political sense. It is important for the traumatised individuals themselves. It is true that the monstrous war crimes committed by ordinary man, such as for example Adolf Eichmann, should not imply that by all being potential criminals, we are all guilty. Confusing this potential guilt with a real one is to disqualify the possibility of justice. *"If everybody is a criminal, nobody is a criminal"*, says Arendt. And this is exactly what Eichmann like many others tried to argue in his trial, that everybody is criminal, and that everybody is responsible. This is why the work done by Arendt invites us to judge every event as a new one, and as a singular event, to think about-facing the consequences of our own deeds.

"Morally speaking," said Arendt, "it is as bad to feel guilty when we did nothing precise, as it is to feel innocent when we are guilty."