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Culture, Art and Violence

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Beardless, face covered in acne, he is barely fourteen years old. He enters the Beaux-Arts bookshop on Didouche Mourad Street right in the heart of the city of Algiers. His hand does not even tremble as he takes his weapon from the inside pocket of his jacket and coolly fires four bullets into the chest of the man facing him. Mr. Vincent Gros collapses onto the counter while the child assassin calmly returns to his young partner-in-crime who is acting as lookout. And thus, Algiers loses its last Mohican for the promotion of arts and literature.

Equally symptomatic and symbolic is the murder of Mr. Asselah, the Director of Algiers National High School of Fine Arts, by youths whom all the witnesses confused with students of the establishment. All the data supports this fact: in Algeria the killers of Alloula (playwright), Hasni (singer) and other victims less illustrious or more anonymous seem to be recruited from the 14–25 year old age group. How can one explain this increase in violence, the cold-bloodedness of the crime,

this sense of ease with the horrific that young people, who often come from a comfortable background, seem to have? To be sure, violence appears in some sense to be an aesthetic of our times. Film and other media have made guns and bloodshed the basis for a flourishing industry. The blossoming of satellite dishes in the Algerian skies is proof enough that the country, in common with many other places, cannot guard against that which is a fact of civilization. The development of trans-border media has nothing but advantages, this is widely recognized and the argument needs no defense.

However, in developing countries where there is a powerful cultural and artistic tradition the exacerbation of violence remains, with some exceptions, in the demographic sector that is strongly marginalized by poverty, unemployment and other social ills. In his film *Bêtes, sales et méchants*, (*Beastly, Dirty and Nasty*) the Italian producer Ettore Scola has taken an unflinching look at the degeneration of the excluded.

The correlation between extreme violence, loss of culture and exclusion that more and more often forms part of the everyday life in advanced countries such as France sets us at the crux of an argument that we would quickly like to defend.

Isolated for decades from the normal, ongoing development of universal culture, newly independent countries have seen their spiritual fabric shrivel and their indigenous culture suffocate during the struggle for survival. In consequence, now that their sovereignty is restored these young states wish to focus on rebuilding their culture according to the acquired characteristics in the field. And yet, no serious progress was made in this direction, except hollow slogans praising a half-made "cultural revolution." In this respect, Algeria is a prime example.

Shaken apart by a tragedy that brought joy only to undertakers, this country found itself confronted by a formidable crisis of spiritual identity, which unleashed a whirlwind of violence that observers attempted to rationalize as being solely a product of socio-economic shortcuts. But, be that as it may, social evils, and a low general standard of living do not explain why young people from privileged backgrounds would similarly demonstrate a death wish or show an equal talent for destruction. The problem continues well beyond any generalization of violence, it almost seems to be an integral part of the feelings of young people themselves, who can become lethal grenades scattering their lethal shrapnel at the slightest provocation. Street lamps smashed with stones, women threatened in the street, knife fights . . . gratuitous vandalism runs through the streets like water, like a flood. This behavior of the "marginalized" constitutes, to our way of thinking, a set of indicators, that demonstrate a character totally out of synch with the world that surrounds it. Casual discussion with an assortment of individuals in the

street, the school or the workplace confirms that there is a splintering of personality to be found amongst young people who apparently, are well cared for, and otherwise enjoy professional ambitions.

What clearly emerges is a global characteristic which can be summed up as a type of "thinking on both sides of the brain," in other words, an ambivalent linkage to attraction/rejection of modernism and of tradition. Positions of normal and trusted reference collide and cancel each other out undermining all possibility of a firmly grounded and harmonious norm.

"It is Man who is of prime importance, and it is in him that we have invested above all other things," President Houari Boumediene once said. Fifteen years later it is almost impossible to gauge the magnitude of the disaster.

In the face of this insanity, something close to schizophrenia, it is legitimate first to question the responsibility of the Algerian educational system insofar as it is true that it is in school that, for good or bad, the cultural identity of the individual is established within the social framework. And the part that education plays obviously becomes more important during the development of a universal culture.

Algeria has most certainly not excluded education from its priorities, indeed huge sums of money have been channeled towards the construction of schools, this is evidenced by the net decline in illiteracy. "The basic schooling" and wide-scale educational reform demonstrate the degree of interest maintained by the authorities in higher education; a mandatory nine years of schooling, teaching open to life, science, and technical subjects. All this however does not prevent the Algerian educational system from being constantly decried. Even today, it is at the root of creating monsters and some teachers accuse it without hesitation of having created "a breeding ground" for propaganda and fundamentalist ideology. This, in our opinion, goes too far. The zealous, anonymous critic is most often to be found within the community of creative thinkers (albeit modernist) who consider the absence of a real artistic education to be a gaping omission. Abandoning all the practicality that surrounds it, the authors of scholastic reform, teachers according to their own ideals, have conjured away the aesthetic objective and their oversight has not missed to accelerate the instrumentalist phenomenon of art and culture, a natural inclination of society still close to its agricultural origins.

Is not the primary function of Art exactly to promote the development of taste and the harmonization of different personalities in the process of refining a higher sense and sensibility. Looking down upon the aesthetic dimension is related (is it not) to the confusion and the spiritual decline of the generations born after independence?

The lack of acceptance of artistic expression, the fault of having taken into account the aesthetic values at an educational level, has it not more or less catalyzed a cultural regression which has exacerbated violence?

These questions must be addressed within the context of the Algerian crisis and its legacy of crimes and hatreds, which are of an unusual cruelty: slitting throats, torture, mutilation, in short, the expression of a sordid and bestial brutality.

Certainly, this might seem to represent only a convoluted and fragile hypothesis. But the incontestable argument that will be sure to disturb, is, that advanced countries cannot in any way pride themselves that within their own educational establishments they have accorded Art the position of prominence that it demands. Nevertheless, what comparison can fairly be made between a world gravely deprived of its culture and those countries that form part of a more dominant civilization where art and culture have flourished uninterrupted over the course of centuries? Between these two extremes there is the same contrast as between the desert and a lush meadow, or between thirst and the constant availability of water. Never mind the drawbacks, the loss of earnings, the social and regional differences in aesthetic appetites, Classic civilizations profit from a cultural dynamic which integrates all forms of creativity and can adapt the infrastructure for different groups. With the assistance of momentum from the media this hidden force creates a cultural environment, which can have widespread influence sometimes without the knowledge of the audience who might have few aspirations to artistic sensitivity. The popular success at the Beaubourg (the Matisse exhibition has drawn huge crowds) lends perfect credibility to these suspicions.

On the other hand, in a country like Algeria, the nineteen-sixties saw the number of cinemas reduce, theatrical endeavor slide into lethargy, artists' showrooms close, and museum attendance drop off drastically. Another telling example is the National Museum for Fine Arts, which possesses more than two hundred outstanding masterpieces (Renoir, Pissaro, Daumier, Millet, Fromentin, Degas . . .) yet, fewer than two thousand people from the area visit annually. Because of a consistent political culture, creative activity has dwindled since the years of routine celebration of anniversary dates. The strict misappropriation of art leads to the mutilation of its aesthetic function.

The coming of independence has forcefully catapulted some seriously unsophisticated communities into the modern world with its array of consumer goods, complex technology, and often also, its artificial values. Unfortunately, the voracious assimilation of these fruits of progress is happening more and more often in a superficial fashion, without a genuine appreciation of the true cultural riches of modern thinking. The dichotomy that exists between, on the one hand, the knowledge and established values

of modern production, and on the other hand an agrarian mind set which ignores cultural values such as a measure, difference, respect for law, and punctuality . . . inevitably leads to a loss of identity and psychological disturbance. To interpret the historic continuity of human integrity, art, and aesthetic values is meant to reconcile man with his own nature and with the real world. Since Aristotle, artistic impulse has been studied exhaustively. Acting in many ways on the psyche of the individual, aesthetic sentiment, amongst other things tends to have the effect of alleviating negative impulses, promoting a better internal balance and an organic natural exchange between the individual and the outside world.

Consequently, it is no exaggeration to state that today's lack of appreciation of art and culture, indeed its subjugation by the body politic, is depriving newly independent countries of a powerful means of integrating themselves both mentally and spiritually with the modern world. The result as we can witness, is bitter: an indiscriminate and extreme violence, oppressive and sordid. It is ironic that rare intellectuals, like Alloula, Assela or Dr. Boucebsi who devoted considerable effort to combating this negligence, should be the first victims to suffer at the hands of young people traumatized by the specter of violence.

Now that peace has returned to Algeria, will it be possible to inspire an artistic and cultural energy, which can assimilate both modern and traditional elements? One can only hope for an increased awareness of this phenomenon on a world scale, as witnessed by the resolution of the recent International Conference on Demographics in Cairo.

Translated by Fran Devlin and revised by Carolyn Bryson