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LEONARDO THINKS

Editorial: Can Ideas and Words Be Useful?

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In May 1999, I wrote an editorial, which was published in the *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* and then in *Leonardo*; at that time the war in Kosovo, which was called the "humanitarian" war, was taking place. Today, 1 October 2001, the U.S. is about to respond to the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The war, the international police action, the operation, has changed names a number of times, but it is now ready to begin (some actions have in fact already been carried out, although they have remained secret).

Undoubtedly it is difficult to respond with a sort of absolute pacifism to actions that call for a strong response, to actions that are violent, illegal, inhuman. Was it possible not to react to Hitler's attacks? How could the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and their invasion of Asia have gone unanswered? That is just to mention two examples, about which few have any doubts.

War was necessary in so far as it was not possible to block the expansionist ambitions of Nazism and Japanese militarism in any other way. Millions of people died all over the world, men from all over the world fought, died and were taken prisoner in countries that they perhaps did not even know. For example, I recently learned, at a show in Venice this summer, that Maori soldiers from New Zealand fought and died to conquer the Abbey of Montecassino in one of the most famous battles fought in southern Italy during the Second World War.

Also in that war, my uncle participated in the Russian campaign; a cousin of my mother died in a concentration camp; my parents were able to flee to Switzerland; my wife's father was taken prisoner in Africa. All over the world, families counted members dead, missing or wounded. Most of the dead were not soldiers but defenseless civilians. Entire populations were wiped out, including 6 million Jews.



All this took place in Europe, in the center of Europe, 60 years ago, two generations ago. After the overwhelming destruction of that war, it was thought that there would be no more wars. There had been too many tragedies, too many dead. Actually, however, the next war had already begun, and wars have continued ever since, the more important ones, the less important ones, some remembered, some forgotten. But Europe, following the Nazi and Fascist folly, thought it had become a happy island, at least apart from the "local" conflicts in Ireland, in Spain, in Hungary, in Corsica, in Poland, in Yugoslavia ... and apart from Germany, divided into two parts by the wall, and the concentration camps that continued to exist.

But we thought that, all in all, Europe was at peace, and its development would be infinite. This could only improve our way of life. And so, bit by bit, the idea was born of a happy Europe, together with the U.S.A., Japan and a few others. And yet these happy places were as a besieged city, with the mass of "other" men and women looking toward it as toward a mirage of happiness. Indeed the phenomenon of migration may be perhaps the most important phenomenon of the entire history of humankind, as men and women since the beginning of history have migrated, married, merged with other populations, fought, killed, loved.

Does history always repeat itself in the same way? I do not know whether history does repeat itself, but it is never the same. Every period, every population, every man and woman bears a different story.

Perhaps these are obvious reflections that anyone might entertain when it is difficult to understand what to expect in the future—for us, for our children, for our friends, for our country. It is certain, though, that in this American tragedy, there have been some tragically new elements. The attack achieved the maximum tragic result, perhaps even exceeding the expectations of those who planned it, with a very modest financial investment, and with very small losses for the authors of the attack: more than 4,000 dead vs. less than 20 suicide terrorists.

Another great novelty is the CNN effect. In today's world, everyone, from statesmen to terrorists, plans their initiatives so as to be on CNN at the right time. The power of television, of the digital media, has become so great that such an important and tragic event would surely have been less "traumatic" if no one had filmed those planes crashing into the towers. The deaths would have been less "visible" without CNN and other world television networks.

It will be a great demonstration of intelligence if the response to the attack takes place without the media knowing anything about it. It will mean that the results will be more important than what can be seen. Starting with the war in Kuwait and Iraq, war has become mediatized. Our reactions also beat in time with the media. Do we want to say that everything is a show? Undoubtedly, the immediate diffusion of the images of the New York tragedy has had an enormous effect on men and women all over the world. To see those people jumping out of the buildings, not wanting to be burnt to death, without even knowing for what reason they were dying, has strongly upset millions.

It has been noted that many tragedies are not seen on television and that, since the television networks and those who control them decide the strategies



of entire countries, the participation of humanity in the great dramas of the planet is fundamentally reduced to watching television: a great instrument for presenting information and for gathering consent-in any case, a medium with its own language.

Psychologists worry about the children who must be told that those images were "true," that they were different from video games and films about catastrophes, and that, because behind those images there was humanity, men and women were suffering and dying. And at the same time television was making all this "bearable," just because we had already experienced those nightmares a number of times at the cinema. And now at fiction has become reality and the tragedy has become greater than any special effects, however spectacular, the film industry has decided to stop showing images of virtual catastrophes, as if there could still be some confusion between reality and fiction. Perhaps it has not been explained well enough that when a film is made, a film-maker provides the theme and the time frame for this virtual reality, that what one sees is "invented" and cannot be confused with reality, that it is a scenic language used to provide entertainment. This language was so effective that the terrorists made use of it.

Language, images, cinema, virtual reality.

In 1999, I wrote that

[T]he responsibility concerns everyone.... No one has more insight into the truth than anyone else, so there is no point in asking scientists or artists what they think about war. But perhaps there is one question worth asking: Do we believe that artists produce art, mathematicians mathematics, scientists science and soldiers war? Each one of us deals with our own specific field and therefore should not waste time in discussion? . . .

In recent years, much has been said about globalization and complexity. Now, in May 1999, we are faced by an enormously complex problem that is extremely difficult to solve while at the same time safeguarding all the people involved. And do we still have nothing to say? Since we are artists and scientists? This is not to suggest the absurd idea of creating the art of war, the aesthetics of war; nor is it out of a sense of guilt or to exorcise our fears. It is simply that in today's world there are artistic and scientific communities that are able to converse with the whole world, who have access to all the means of communication, who are responsible for educating entire generations of young people. Have we nothing to say in order to understand, to try to let tolerance and comprehension prevail? [1]

However, it must not be forgotten that, notwithstanding what some politicians with a poor cultural background have said, this is not a war between cultures and religions, fought to ensure that one prevails over the other. Similar words were said in Berlin, and much irresponsibility is required to speak of Western civilization prevailing in those places in which it was decided to exterminate entire human populations, in a scientific and industrial manner, because they were considered inferior.



This is not a fight between cultures, but a fight for culture, as the German premier Gerhard Schroeder wrote in *La Repubblica* (18 September 2001), without forgetting the injustice in the world, the poverty in the world, the atrocities in the world. Knowing that humankind has never succeeded in reaching that Eden of happiness and brotherhood that all of us say we are dedicated to. Nothing is forever on this earth. But in our DNA we have genes that tell us that what we are doing tends towards immortality, infinity. Otherwise we would not be able to live. And therefore it is right to fight and struggle to make justice triumph, to stop hunger and poverty. I do not know if we will ever succeed. Because globalization means that the cover, as it is, is narrow and does not cover everyone. Some pull it more to their side, and some remain uncovered.

I obviously do not have any answers. Still, I have some hopes, and I hope that future generations will create new causes for hope.

Our task is to give them the instruments needed to understand, to try to be just, to look for solutions. Our mistrust will not affect them. The survival instinct will push them on and overcome the dark moments.

There are moments, after great tragedies, in which humanity, for a short time, feels closer together. It feels that it can carry out great and praiseworthy actions. These rare moments must not be ignored, even if they last a very short amount of time. Then our immune defense system gets back to work, and we become egoists again.

Without any illusions, we must try to ensure that the so-called global economic order truly begins to seek solutions to the great problems of the world. Will this save us from wars, from massacres? Nobody knows, but humanity has always tried and will always try.

I wanted to be brief in this editorial, to say only a few things. Instead I have let myself be carried away by collective and personal tragedies, by war and death, by civilization, by the global economy, by what is in store for us ahead.

When I wrote my earlier editorial, I received replies from people in many countries, but only a few from the U.S.A. Now, sadly but understandably, many are coming from the U.S.A. It is natural, it is normal, it is an expression of our survival instinct. However, I believe that all of us, including the artists and scientists of the world, should always bear in mind that "when a person is killed, all of humanity is killed."



Endnotes

[1] Michele Emmer, "Only BombsAre Intelligent?" LeonardoElectronicAlmanac7, No. 5 (June 15, 1999); Leonardo 33, No. 2, 83-84 (2000).

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