

Disembodied Americans and “The Crucifixion of the World”

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“The existent, the body, disappears. We live within a spectacle of empty clothes and unworn masks....Nobodies and no Necessity – for Necessity is the condition of the existent. It is what makes reality real.” – John Berger, “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible”

“The real body. To be real, it must be bodily; and to be a body is to be eaten. The humiliation in incarnation; to become bread. To be eaten: to be consumed by sorrow, sickness, and death. – Norman O. Brown, Love’s Body

“If Marx were functioning today he would have been hard put to avoid saying that imaginary sex is the opiate of the people.” – John Ralston Saul, Voltaire’s Bastards

Why are so many Americans indifferent to the savage slaughter of millions of people around the world carried out by their own government under a long string of presidents?

Why were they stone-cold silent during eight years of Obama’s many wars and drone killings of which he boasted? Why are they silent in the face of the Trump administration’s continuation and expansion of those wars and its push for a nuclear war with Russia? Why this incestuous turning in and away from the bloody havoc their government keeps inflicting on the world?

And why all this denial while focusing on the pornographic media spectacles of Stormy Daniels (the porn queen turned “Adult Film Actress”), Monica Lewinsky, and a host of others paraded before the cameras to distract and entertain a population of spectators?

I, like many people, wonder why. What follows is an attempt at an answer, with the focus of my thinking being primarily on middle to upper class Americans, for the poor and working classes have a hard enough time making ends meet and keeping alive themselves, since they are the victims of a domestic war waged by the same heartless ruling class that kills so many overseas.

For when people lose touch with the physicality of life and embrace spectral images, mediated reality, and abstractions as real, they have stepped into a totally nihilistic world. A disembodied world. When this is joined to a narcissistic self-preoccupation with one’s own well-being and comfort, indifference to the suffering of others becomes the norm. This is the world of unreality populated today by so many Americans, who have grown progressively indifferent to the slaughter by their own government of people throughout the world – heaps of millions of dead bodies, blood, and body-parts everywhere. In “Song in the Blood” the French poet **Jacques Prévert** says:

There are great puddles of blood on the world

where's it going all this spilled blood....
murder's blood...war's blood
misery's blood...
and the blood of men tortured in prison....
Where's it going all this spilled blood
the earth that turns and turns and turns
with its great streams of blood.



To the bodiless bloodless insouciant ones, however, the blood of “others” is invisible. It is our lives that matter. What is being done to these “others” is of little consequence because it is experienced as an abstraction – unreal – as if it weren’t happening, even as it is. And in a twist of fate straight from Greek tragedy, those who embrace this delusion are in denial of the very real possibility that they too will be “disappeared” by a nuclear war being provoked in their names. Having turned their backs on nature and the corporeal reality of all living beings, having denied the passion play that is life on earth for all people, having denied that there are limits to American hubris and the West’s clearly insane and nihilistic push for nuclear war with Russia, they will pleasure themselves “until the atom too bursts into flames,” as **Albert Camus** warned (right), **“and history ends in the triumph of reason and the death agony of the species.”**

In an incisive article, “It is Us,” **John Stepling** recently asked a series of Tolstoyan questions about the ruling class (and by extension most Americans): “What does the ruling class want?” he asked. How much money do these people need? Is it power they are after with their mad quest to gobble up the world and slaughter as they go? Power for what? For more money? **Why are they provoking a nuclear war with Russia? Are they simply crazy? Don’t they know they too will die?** And what about all those affluent liberals and conservatives, the narcissistic bourgeoisie, the average person, are they all suicidal?

I believe they think in their delusional way that the coachman will pass them by. They are living in the unreality that has overtaken so much of the Western world. They believe they will pass. No failure for them. They won’t die. They will “pass on.” They are different, special, they live in a fantasy of bodiless abstractions, even as they work on their bodies to go on and on, exercise and diet, pill after pill, supplements, dreams of running marathons at 98, body parts replaced as they do yoga poses to dreamy ethereal music in the safe surround of a warless environment where bombs and missiles are for the others in bloody bodies over there far away. The pornography of war out of sight and thought; the screening of pornographic titillation in everyone’s face.

It is generally assumed that the United States is a materialist society where the voluptuous life of bodily existence is affirmed and celebrated. Big breasts and bigger butts, skinny jeans and streaming sex scandals to the contrary, I think this is not true. American society has joined its Puritan tradition to instrumental reasoning and its go-go-get-it-done practicality to create a culture where the human body has become, like everything and everyone else, a thing to be manipulated – an instrument to be masturbated, a thing to be pampered, paraded, and presented in a society of looking-glass selves. Selfies in flight from others and human encounters where care and communion of consciousness lead one to love the world as one's body and to feel compassion for others far away in other lands who are being slaughtered by our guns and bombs. And to say No, not in my name, not over my dead body.

To burst the bubble of the self. **W. H. Auden** put it this way in the poem ***Are You There?***

Whatever view we hold, it must be shown
Why every lover has a wish to make
Some other kind of otherness his own:
Perhaps, in fact, we never are alone.

Yet Americans pursue loneliness as if their mirror images were the world. Or the things they so avidly buy reflect who they are: interior decorating for the soul. Souls divorced from their instrumental bodies. With packaged and commodified consciousnesses, so many “interact with products” these days, as they pursue constantly retreating phantoms; the social narcissism of images falling in love with their own images and reaching out to embrace their shadows.

This is as far from eroticism as one can get, if one grasps the true meaning of Eros, the god of love, life, joy, and becoming, whose growth was stunted until his mother Aphrodite was oracularly told that “Love cannot grow without Passion.” And passion is a reaching out for others, not for oneself, or one's phantom image. The brilliant psychologist Rollo May summed up our situation by saying that when “eros has lost passion,” it has become “insipid, childish, and banal.” And when the cult of technique and technology becomes a social addiction, feeling, passion, and individual identity is blotted out and, “mirabile dictu, we discover that the myth [of Eros] proclaims exactly what we have seen happening in our own day, eros, then, even loses interest in sex.” Except on screens.

Once the human body becomes an object of narcissistic preoccupation – its maintenance, presentation, coddling, etc. – it has become an instrument to be used, as do other people. The body remains but the human disappears, and the remaining “instrumental” body is “disembodied.” Once the human body is reduced to a machine and human intercourse in its multiple meanings is accepted as a “mediated reality” through so-called smart devices, we know that the era of humanoids has arrived, as Howard Beale so famously announced in the film *Network* over forty years ago. Smart phones for dumb people; always in touch but never touching.

To be human is to be embodied, incarnated, to love and suffer passionately, body and soul. Sexual passion and tenderness in the service of life, not death. Eros, not Thanatos. Passion for a suffering world and victims everywhere. I think one important reason why so many Americans have turned their backs as their government crucifies the rest of the world is because they have lost their bodies not their minds, and in exchanging shadows on the wall for flesh and blood they have abandoned the world and embraced the unreality of things

that a capitalist, consumer society proffers in lieu of life. And as so many great thinkers (Coleridge, Swift, Brown, et al) have pointed out, to try to rise above the body is ironically to equate the body with excrement. Norman O. Brown writes, "Thus the morbid attempt to get away from the body can only result in a morbid fascination in the death of the body." From this flows the narcissistic focus on self-preservation and the spending of one's life energies on the acquiring of dead things rather than the carefree letting go of one's love and care into the whole world that is crying out for redemption from an orgy of violence.

Of course, the paradox of the disappearance of the living body into spectral images and things is the departure of the soul as well, the embodied soul. And a soulless country is a place where reality no longer exists and one can, for example, view Michelangelo's Pietà and think, "What an amazing sculpture, how did he do it?" but fail to feel heartache and rage that so many mothers across this planet are now weeping and cradling the crushed and crucified bodies of their children, victims of American weapons of war. Our weapons. Our wars.

When will we dead awaken?

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