



Article

Regarding the Image of the Pain of Others: Caravaggio, Sontag, Leogrande

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Abstract: Why were Caravaggio's *Sleeping Cupid* (1608) and *The Seven Works of Mercy* (1607) requested for display at a number of humanitarian public events? And why did Caravaggio's work inspire a series of photographic and journalistic reportages on contemporary migratory phenomena? This article surveys the main circumstances linking Caravaggio's pictorial corpus to the so-called European migrant crisis. After critical reflection on the social construction of the "humanitarian Caravaggio," the focus shifts onto a book that is at the same time a journalistic investigation of migratory phenomena, a literary work, and a theoretical reflection on the ways of looking: *La frontiera* (2015) by Alessandro Leogrande, which concludes with a reflection on the representation of suffering in Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (1600). By following a path that connects Caravaggio's painting, Susan Sontag's thought, and Leogrande's writing, what emerges is the critical and self-critical potentiality of a comparative approach to the arts and images.

Keywords: Caravaggio; quoting; displacing; witnessing; representation of suffering; humanitarian visual culture

1. Introduction

He has never been as contemporary as he is today. To describe the public events dedicated to his paintings over the last few years, an entire article would not suffice. But there is definitely something more than this: his old gaze pushes us to reflect on our contemporary ways of looking. I am referring to Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio.

At the end of the last century, Bal (1999) had already developed a reflection on the quotation of Caravaggio's paintings in contemporary art and on the "preposterous," anachronistic approach implied in his masterpieces. Nowadays, Caravaggio's work seems to constitute a reference point not only for contemporary art, but also for curatorial, photographic, literary, and journalistic practices focusing on social and humanitarian issues. Caravaggio's painting is not only quoted; as I will explain in detail in the following pages, it is also physically or metaphorically transferred with the intention of paying homage to migrants and all those who live in dramatic circumstances.

Quoting and transferring Caravaggio has become an easy form of public engagement, yet the extraordinary strength of his paintings—the attention to bodies, gestures, forms of pathos—pushes us to think critically and deeply about the ways in which we still represent bodies, suffering, life, and death. Within this scenario, it is therefore necessary to be aware of the risks and potentialities involved in the juxtaposition of paintings from the history of Western art with the most haunting and compelling images of the present. Instead of deluding ourselves that bringing Caravaggio close to the most dramatic events of our time can solve anything, it is necessary to value the gesture of displacement and the critical potential that it opens up. As I have argued elsewhere, embracing the notion of "displacing" (Zucconi 2018) as a theoretical and methodological paradigm for the humanities may therefore help to investigate the persistence of visual configurations that have characterized Western visual culture and that still questionably frame the present on a global scale.



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Reflection on the relationship between the forms of photo reportage and the repertoire of Christian iconography is certainly not new. In one of the best-known pages of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag (2003, p. 80) noted that

Photographer-witnesses may think it more correct morally to make the spectacular not spectacular. But the spectacular is very much part of the religious narratives by which suffering, throughout most of Western history, has been understood. To feel the pulse of Christian iconography in certain wartime or disaster-time photographs is not a sentimental projection.

I do not intend to venture into an exegesis of Sontag's text. It is enough to say that after Sontag, the representation of suffering has become the focus of attention of various scholars.¹ I would like to start from her suggestion that looking at the pain of others has to do with the forms of representation of Christian art. The main objective is therefore to return to this idea at the end of the article, where I will try to reconsider the ethical dilemma present right from the title of her acclaimed book.

This paper develops some of the issues already present in my above-mentioned study dedicated to the explicit and implicit presence of Caravaggio's painting in contemporary humanitarian visual culture. Each section opens a space for comparison of visual arts and literature, trying to highlight the relationship between the forms of representation inherited from the past and the dramatic contingencies of the present time that somehow demand to be witnessed through the images.

In the Section 2, I reconstruct some of the attempts that have recently occurred to physically transfer Caravaggio's painting within humanitarian initiatives, or at least to produce juxtapositions between his work and the topicality of the migratory phenomenon in Europe. The idea is to describe these attempts, restoring both the impetus that has characterized the social construction of a "humanitarian Caravaggio" and the limits of those projects that, however ambitious and committed in their intentions, end up concealing differences and asymmetries, contributing to strengthen the consensus around the status quo.

In the Sections 3 and 4, I reflect on the final pages of an important book that came out in Italy in 2015, but which has not yet been translated into English: *La frontiera*, by the late lamented Alessandro Leogrande. In particular, I analyze the way in which the writer approaches Caravaggio's painting at the conclusion of a book that reconstructs stories of the suffering and hope of those who have crossed and continue to cross the thresholds between the so-called Global South and the Global North. The aim is to highlight the critical and self-critical potential of anachronistic juxtaposition and the anastopic displacement of images.

Obviously, the three authors mentioned in the subtitle occupy different positions in both scientific and cultural discourse and assume different functions in this paper: Caravaggio's painting is capable of arousing easy enthusiasm in contemporary public debate, but also of activating an investigation at the crossroads of different times and spaces; Sontag's essay is the starting point for any reflection on the image of people who are affected by a disaster, living under emergency conditions, or in structural poverty; Leogrande's book is an ideal object of analysis to conceive Western arts in a dialectical way, as well as to reflect on the very idea of "witnessing," whether visual or literary. Through a path that connects Caravaggio, Sontag, and Leogrande, what emerges is the *pars construens*, the potentiality of a comparative approach to the arts and images. This is an approach capable of pushing us to reflect critically and self-critically on the ways in which Western art, media, and communication still tend to imagine violence, suffering, and assistance.

2. A Humanitarian Caravaggio?

In the summer of 2014, a painting by Caravaggio became embroiled in negotiations among a group of institutions and representatives of civil society. The talks concerned the possibility of its temporary transfer. The painting in question was *The Seven Works of Mercy*, which was delivered by Caravaggio to the Confraternity of the Pio Monte della Misericordia of Naples on 9 January 1607 and has rarely been moved since that time. The

negotiations—which lasted for several weeks, at times sparking public debate—focused on the possibility of transferring Caravaggio’s iconic masterpiece from Naples to Milan, specifically for the 2015 Universal Exposition. The possibility considered by the lay and religious institutions was that of exhibiting the seventeenth-century work inside the pavilion of Caritas. The pavilion would house the pastoral body of the Italian Episcopal Conference for the promotion of charity and the Italian branch of Caritas Internationalis, one of the largest nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the world, whose humanitarian activities spread over dozens of countries. As is well known, Caravaggio’s painting is a powerful representation of the iconographic theme of the corporal works of mercy, which every good Christian is expected to perform in aid of the needy by providing basic necessities such as food, water, clothing, shelter, and so forth. The reasons behind the request to borrow the painting can therefore be found in the Expo 2015 theme—“Nourish the Planet, Energy for Life”—and even more so in the humanitarian campaign launched for the occasion by Caritas called “Divide to multiply,” along with its global action campaign “One human family, food for all: it’s our duty.”² Despite the authority of the institutions involved, the idea came to nothing. The painting remained where it was. The pavilion had to manage without Caravaggio’s work or, at best, referred to it indirectly. As soon as news of the painting’s possible transfer became public, protests erupted in Naples—not so much because of the risks associated with transferring any work of art, or even because of potential issues bound up with introducing Caravaggio’s painting into a contemporary humanitarian framework, but because the demonstrators demanded that the historical and artistic heritage of southern Italy should be defended from a predatory attitude on the part of political and cultural institutions in the north.³

At the beginning of 2016, Caravaggio’s *The Seven Works of Mercy* found itself enmeshed once again in a controversy, also involving several institutions and a possible transfer—this time from Naples to Rome. The idea was to display the work inside the Palazzo del Quirinale—the residence of the President of the Republic and a symbol of the power of the Italian state—during the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, which was inaugurated by Pope Francis on 8 December 2015 and ended on 20 November 2016. This was a tribute to the desperate condition of migrants attempting to reach Europe along the Mediterranean routes and, by extension, to everyone suffering from the hardships of war or natural disaster.⁴ At first it seemed as if the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, was personally involved in implementing the proposal. However, not long afterwards, the Presidency was forced to specify that a group of people linked to the Pio Monte of Naples had put forward the idea of the loan for the Jubilee, so it was not the Quirinale that had spearheaded the initiative.⁵ As a matter of fact, the President of the Republic had, a few days earlier, been addressed in an open letter published in the newspaper *Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, in which intellectuals and art historians had asked him to give up on the idea of exhibiting the masterpiece. They reminded him that, in 1613, “the Founding Members of the Pio Monte established the ‘perpetual immovability’ of the painting because the chapel, on whose main altar it is preserved, was created specifically for Caravaggio’s masterpiece: the architecture, the context, is complementary to and inseparable from the extraordinary pictorial work.”⁶

From the Expo to the Jubilee, then, this time too, prompted by its relevance to a large public event with a strong symbolic impact, someone had had the idea of moving the same painting by Caravaggio. Controversies then arose and everything stayed where it was. But this was hardly the last word on the matter. Attempts to juxtapose Caravaggio’s art with humanitarian emergency conditions did not end in Naples; nor were they limited to the failed cases mentioned here.

In June 2016, President Mattarella inaugurated the exhibition “Toward the Museum of Trust and Dialogue for the Mediterranean” on Lampedusa. Located in the heart of the Mediterranean, the island has been the main arrival point for migratory routes from the African continent since the 1990s and a host for NGOs regularly engaged in rescue and hospitality operations along its shores and in its interior. The exhibition center, located only a short distance from the sea, brings together works of art with a variety of objects

salvaged during recent years from shipwrecks and, in particular, from the shipwreck of 3 October 2013 when at least three hundred and sixty-eight migrants lost their lives off the Isola dei Conigli. Screens were installed on the walls that showed television images of the rescues at sea. In the various rooms, works of art and precious objects were exhibited, in some way linked to the theme of intercultural dialogue in the Mediterranean area. The centerpiece of the 2016 exhibition was a painting: Caravaggio's *Sleeping Cupid* (1608), normally displayed at the Galleria Palatina in Florence but loaned to the fledgling museum for the occasion. After the many failed attempts to move Caravaggio in the name of "humanitarian relevance," the initiative had finally met with success. One of the forces behind the loan was the director of the Uffizi Galleries, Schmidt (2016, p. 64), who tried to express the relevance of the transfer of Caravaggio's work to Lampedusa by focusing on two particular aspects. The first was that,

like the refugees who arrive in Lampedusa, the painter (however, to escape conviction for murder in Rome) in 1606 had taken refuge in Malta, welcomed with open arms by the knights of the eponymous order, certainly moved by the interest of gaining the services of an artist of fame, but perhaps also by a shred of the same human solidarity that today, every day, the inhabitants of Lampedusa show for those who land on their shores.

The second aspect behind the transfer of the *Sleeping Cupid* on Lampedusa was that Caravaggio's painting abruptly brings the memory of antiquity back to the most harrowing events of the current day. Indeed, more than a few visitors to the Palatina Gallery of Florence were struck and disturbed by the forceful and explicit naturalism of an image that they instinctively connected to that of the Syrian child Aylan Kurdi, who lies lifeless on the beach of Bodrum in Turkey.

The juxtaposition proposed by Schmidt between the iconographic theme of Caravaggio's work and the dramatic photo of Alan Kurdi (the correct name of the child), taken on 2 September 2015 by journalist Nilüfer Demir, was taken up repeatedly in media discourse, so much so that it became the dominant interpretation of the entire Lampedusa show. The exhibition ended on 3 October 2016 with a flurry of journalists who arrived on the island for the event.⁷

I would like to conclude this overview with a reference to the literary sphere, which opens the second part of the article. Among the attempts to refer to Caravaggio in relation to migratory phenomena is the article by the Nigerian-American writer and photographer Teju Cole, published in September 2020 in the *New York Times* and reproduced inside a book that collects some texts realized in the last few years.⁸ Cole traces Caravaggio's extraordinary painting and adventurous life—his geographical transfers—and somehow decides to project them onto the present time, onto the bodies and gestures of those who cross or have crossed the Mediterranean:

What if I traveled farther south, to each of the places where Caravaggio spent his exile? Many of the works he made in those places remain, some in situ. Naples, Valletta, Syracuse, Messina and possibly Palermo. The more I thought about the idea, the more I wanted to make it happen. I wasn't after a luxurious summer sojourn. The places of Caravaggio's exile had all become significant flash points in the immigration crisis, which was not entirely a coincidence: He'd gone to them because they were ports. A port is where a given territory is most amenable to arrival and to escape, where a stranger has a chance to feel less strange. (Cole 2020)

Cole's article therefore develops, in a programmatic way, through four stops on his journey: Naples, Syracuse, Malta, and Porto Ercole. Each stop includes a visit to a painting by Caravaggio (except in Porto Ercole, where Merisi, exhausted and ill after the long journey from Naples, died a few hours after arriving, on 18 July 1610) and an encounter with a migrant or with a contemporary story of migration. In particular, at the Neapolitan stop, Cole dwells on the extraordinary fascination of *The Seven Works of Mercy* and *The Flagellation*

(1607–1608) kept at the Capodimonte Museum, but he also expresses the feeling of euphoria felt while wandering around the Quartieri Spagnoli, described as “the populous quarter where Caravaggio lived.” (Cole 2020)

Even in their diversity, the criticalities and the limits of the operations mentioned so far seem to me substantially to be two, both concerned with the supporters and the detractors of the “humanitarian Caravaggio.”

In the first instance, those who opposed the transfers did so mostly with the intention of preserving the painting within the historical–artistic context in which it originated. This is a principle of conservation and curatorial sensibility that can be applied in any case. In contrast, these specific transfers and juxtapositions required an in-depth examination of social and political issues: the fact of bringing together the religious theme of *Misericordia* and the tendentially secular field of contemporary humanitarianism; the ethnocentrism potentially present in the gesture of bringing the work of a master of Italian painting closer to the conditions of the subjects assisted by NGOs, in different parts of the world; and the risks of giving rise to a sort of oblivion, or at least of placing in the background the actual suffering of those affected by catastrophic events, to the advantage of the work of art.⁹

Second, what drove these projects—think of the Lampedusa exhibition, but also of Cole’s article—was the idea of superimposing the venturesome life of Caravaggio, who sought refuge in Malta and lived in many other port cities, on to the troubled life of migrants. This is as if to say that, instead of questioning the paintings and letting them question us and our gaze, the tendency has been to superimpose the biographical paths, making Caravaggio and the characters represented by Caravaggio into contemporary migrants.

In summary, the idea of juxtaposing a work of seventeenth-century art with the phenomenon of migration and the activities of NGOs—but without problematizing the anachronism and anachronism of this maneuver—threatens to conceal and hinder understanding of the historical and political phenomena in question. Under these conditions, even the idea of moving paintings by Caravaggio or by other masters of western art in conjunction with historical or current events might in itself constitute a threat to fully developing a postcolonial discourse.

3. In Front of the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*

In November 2015, having written several books on the exploitation of workers in southern Italy and on the migratory phenomena, Alessandro Leogrande published a book on the Mediterranean border and on the stories of those trying to cross it. *La frontiera* is a hybrid text: at the same time a first-person reportage and an interweaving of the voices collected in close contact with migrants in various parts of Italy and Europe. But it is also an investigation of the historical and political implications of migration that open glimpses of the recent colonial past of the Old Continent.¹⁰ The book—and this is the aspect I am most interested in focusing on—is therefore a theoretical and critical reflection on the visual regimes associated with the very notion of “migration,” and on the ways in which the life of those who are forced or wish to move is represented and considered.

La frontiera occupies a particular position within that field of practices concerning Caravaggio mentioned above. In his book, Leogrande does not merely produce a “humanitarian Caravaggio” or emphasize his topicality; he seeks to reflect on what makes him contemporary, on what in his painting concerns our way of imagining and shaping the events of the present time. A red thread runs through the various chapters of the book: the “question of the gaze;” the way in which we tell, and represent what comes from the horizon and what is already here; our very way of seeing, describing, and narrating.¹¹ We need only recall the title of Chapter 1—*Seeing, Not Seeing, 1*—which is continued in Chapters 16, 20, 24, and 27: *Seeing, Not Seeing, 2, 3, 4, and 5*. So we should not be surprised if the book concludes in front of a painting, a painting by Caravaggio.

Compared to the curators and authors of the aforementioned projects, Leogrande neither asks nor refuses to physically move a painting, nor does he revive the myth of the cursed artist who travels the Mediterranean. In the final chapter of the book, Chapter 29,

entitled “The Violence of the World,” the writer himself enters the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, where two famous paintings by Caravaggio are preserved. His entrance is described in simple words as an experience he finds himself sharing with a handful of tourists. His gaze points straight to the *Vocation of St. Matthew* (1600) and the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (1600). The reasons for this interest do not lie so much, or only, in the biography of the painter, in what he was doing at the time he made that specific works. Nor is the iconographic theme of the martyrdom of the saint the specific reason for Leogrande’s visit:

It has been years since I have seen the *Vocation* and the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, although those paintings made between the end of the sixteenth century and the dawn of the seventeenth have always accompanied me and have remained in a corner of my mind, at the bottom of many conversations. So I find myself enchanted looking at the *Martyrdom*, which as always captures my thoughts even more than the *Vocation*. In that scene of raw, absolute, sudden violence, our weaknesses in the face of the mystery of evil crowd in. Between the folds of the work hides the enigma of not acting.” (Leogrande 2015, p. 309; translation is mine)

This passage from the book opens up a reflection on what it means to see, to look, to bear witness, and on the ethical and political limits underlying such verbs, somehow devoid of “action,” which identify something as problematic as it is precious, never taken for granted.¹² In front of the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, the writer is interested in the formal *dispositif* of the image itself; in the orchestration of an extraordinary number of bodies in space; in the gesture of violence in the foreground that tends to take over the suffering of the victim; in the system of gazes of those who are attracted by the spectacle of violence and, at the same time, seek shelter by pushing toward the margins of representation.

As we know, the painting is the spectacular staging of an event recounted in the apocryphal Gospels, according to which the saint was killed on African soil in the midst of his mission of Christian evangelization. In the center is the half-naked and fully illuminated body of the assassin, just a moment before mortally attacking the saint, defenseless, wounded, and lying on the ground. On the left, a cluster of men in seventeenth-century dress struggle as they try to protect themselves from the violence. While an angel hands Matthew the palm of martyrdom, on the right side of the painting there is the plastic gesture of a novice who is walking away. In the foreground, some figures lying on the ground seem to observe the scene, only partially surprised. Like the hired man, they are mostly naked. They are catechumens waiting to be baptized. The composition of the figures in space is centrifugal: the spectator’s gaze moves progressively away from the center of the composition, passing from one body to another.

As Leogrande points out, in the background of the painting one can recognize a figure characterized by a particularly intense gaze that seems to stare at the violence in front of him. It is the man with the beard who leans out from the black background, behind the assassin. That man is Caravaggio. Before and after *La frontiera*, many art historians and theorists have proposed such an identification.¹³ But Leogrande’s intuition is to enhance the absolute modernity of this self-portrait:

There is a pain mixed with pity in his gaze: an infinite sadness. Unlike the other spectators, Caravaggio does not flee, he looks at the victim because he cannot do anything but stay on his side and see how what is about to happen will end. He has already guessed everything, but does not intervene. He knows he cannot intervene, he cannot stop that sword. His commiseration is even more painful because he is totally powerless. The lucid interpretation of the facts, and even more the genius of art, will not stop the massacre. He can only feel pity. (Leogrande 2015, p. 311; translation is mine)

Concluding his inquiry with a theoretical reflection on violence, the writer investigates the powerlessness as much as the power of this figure present in the painting:

more than an image of himself to be handed down to posterity, in the half-light of the church broken by the spotlights that portion of the canvas seems to me a manifesto. An incandescent reflection on the violence of the world, and on the relationship it establishes with those who observe it. (Leogrande 2015, p. 311; translation is mine)

This is a clever description that enhances the anachronistic and anatopistic character of Caravaggio's work: its ability to look at the present by questioning it, and its capacity to decentralize Western art.¹⁴ In his pause in front of the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, Leogrande expresses the importance of reconceiving the historical-artistic heritage and the disciplines that take care of it as a tool for critical interrogation of contemporary visual culture; but he also proposes an approach, a way of looking and a style of writing that make all this possible. The question is no longer whether or not to authorize a transfer of the material good at the expense of its original context, but how to manage a plan of comparative interrogation and inaugurate new paths of critical reflection.

"By painting his own gaze," the author writes, "Caravaggio defines the only way he can look at the horror of the world. He geometrically establishes the right distance at which to place himself in order to stare at the beast. Inside the canvas, manifestly next to things, not outside with brush in hand" (Leogrande 2015, p. 311). Caravaggio, therefore, is the author and character of this representation—inevitably outside the painting as a painter and, at the same time, inside it as a witness of the facts. I would like to conclude by trying to continue and, in a certain sense, to force this interpretation offered by Leogrande in order to use it as a possible key to understand contemporary forms of artistic engagement.

4. Regarding the Image of the Pain of Others

In an interpretive gamble—at least in part legitimized by Fried (2010, pp. 201–19)—one could say that the representation of Caravaggio in the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* is not a generic self-portrait, but a "self-portrait as a painter." To support this hypothesis, I would like to emphasize the inclination of the figure's head to the side to observe the scene as if he had a canvas in front of him. One could also conceive of the left hand reaching forward as a transfiguration of the palette, while the right hand holds the brush. The artist's sad gaze might then be reconceived as a concentrated, absorbed gaze. If this were the case, it would be an anticipation of some of the traits that characterize the extraordinary visual dispositif that is *Las Meninas* (1656) by Diego Velázquez, notoriously and masterfully analyzed by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*:

Now he [the painter] can be seen, caught in a moment of stillness, at the neutral centre of this oscillation. His dark torso and bright face are half-way between the visible and the invisible: emerging from that canvas beyond our view, he moves into our gaze; but when, in a moment, he makes a step to the right, removing himself from our gaze, he will be standing exactly in front of the canvas he is painting; he will enter that region where his painting, neglected for an instant, will, for him, become visible once more, free of shadow and free of reticence. (Foucault 2002, p. 4)

In both Velázquez's and Caravaggio's masterpiece, the self-portrait takes on a theoretical and critical function; it explicitly invites the spectator to reflect on visual representation, on the point of view that structures it and on the limits of the composition. By carefully observing the figure of the painter and comparing it with other self-portraits by Caravaggio, it does not seem entirely improbable to argue that the one proposed in the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* is not only an image of himself "in front of the pain of others," but also and at the same time—transforming Sontag's famous formula—an image of himself "in front of the image of the pain of others." On the one hand, in this painting, Caravaggio's self-portrait invites us to observe a real event and suggests an emotional attitude to take in front of the violent gesture. On the other, with his spatial positioning and posture, he urges us to observe the composition of the entire scene "from a distance" or rather "from outside," precisely as if it were just an image.

From the seventeenth century through the tradition of twentieth-century reportage and up to the new millennium, a self-portrait of the painter, photographer, director, or writer is certainly not enough to validate the authenticity and effectiveness of the testimony or its ethical value. The risk of a self-referential drift is also discernible behind this trend: why represent ourselves when we are faced with the pain of others? At least since the publication of Spivak's famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, this question has occupied a central position in scientific and cultural debate. In this way, it has been possible to observe and question asymmetries of gaze and speech, which until then had been invisible or indisputable.¹⁵ At the same time, the questioning of such asymmetries and the assumption of a completely new role by the "subalterns" in the telling of their conditions cannot coincide with the removal or disengagement of external points of view. Starting from the awareness of the asymmetry between the "self" and the "other" and of the ethical and political problems it has caused, the photographic reporter, the journalist, the writer or the visual artist who want to assume the function of witnesses must activate a process of critical and self-critical questioning of their own gaze and position.

Rather than glibly promote all self-reflexive tendencies, the self-portrait of Caravaggio in *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* is useful and interesting to the extent that it is a manifestation of the fact that, although this painting represents an event that is definitely worthy of note, it remains an image among many other possible images of this event and does not claim to coincide with it and reproduce it through the media for the spectator's benefit. Observing that an image is an image is therefore not part of a process of "derealization;" rather, it constitutes a way of recognizing the positioning of one's gaze and reflecting on its perceptive but also cultural, moral, and political limits. This is a way of honoring the duty of narrating and showing the most shocking events of our present time, even if they do not seem to concern us personally, and even if speaking on behalf of "others" or portraying their discomfort and suffering always risks being a form of appropriation, the umpteenth expropriation.

In the pages of *La frontiera* dedicated to the Lampedusa shipwreck of 3 October 2013, Leogrande wonders about the most suitable term to describe the work he has done in the field, in an attempt to handle memory and to put the pain of others in written form: "Witness is not the right word. It is now such an affected term, so conventional, that it appears suffocated by rhetoric and the boulder of officialdom" (Leogrande 2015, p. 146). If Leogrande concluded the book in front of a seventeenth-century painting, this is not because Caravaggio himself was a migrant in the Mediterranean, nor was it because of a generic love of painting. On the one hand, Leogrande's book expresses a profound interest in and analytical capacity for visual representation. On the other, it consists of a diagnosis of the journalistic discourse and of his own writing practice, on the risks involved in "speaking for the other," and on the necessity of reconceiving the practice of reportage as an interweaving of paths and narratives, as a crossing of gazes capable of investigating the "line of the frontier," always on the move.¹⁶ It is precisely by focusing on the relationship between the presumed transparency of the event and the forms of its representation—be they pictorial, photographic or literary—that I think we can understand the book's ending and the homage to Caravaggio. Observing the painter's self-portrait—his simultaneously transitive and reflective gaze—becomes a way of recovering and regenerating the very idea of "witnessing," beyond any simplistic conception, beyond its institutionalization. Witnessing is understood here as a continuous questioning of one's own position, and of the images or stories that are produced from it. In this sense, the witness is the one who reflects on the discursive and iconographic stratifications of his or her testimony at the very moment in which he or she produces it, always seeking to evaluate its appropriateness and effectiveness. This is a critical and self-critical process that makes it possible to continue to denounce marginalization and suffering without becoming the accomplice of those who produce and reproduce it.

Caravaggio, Sontag, Leogrande: these are the three names of a path of reflection on the forms of ethical and political imagination. While Caravaggio is displaced beyond the

field of art history, the investigation on the arts is called to enrich itself with theoretical and methodological tools to study the aesthetic, social, and political issues involved in painting. Sontag's thoughts, the quality and transversality of her writings, the many ideas she threw at her readers and perhaps liquidated in a few sentences, remain some of the critical reflections of the present; it is only necessary to have the patience to collect, verify, and eventually push forward—in the practice of analysis, in the confrontation with images—the intuitions of the American essayist. Leogrande's writing crosses physical and imaginary geographies – however political—and overcomes the boundaries between genres and forms of expression, until it finds in an old painting with a religious theme a way to reflect on what it means to be a writer and a journalist, a cultural worker in twenty-first-century Europe.

These are three ways of looking, at once transparent and opaque, ancient and contemporary. They are names and approaches for a history and a thought of the arts that can suggest paths to orient us and force us take a position in the sea of images we refer to as visual culture.

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Notes

- ¹ The literature on the topic is vast and constantly expanding at the crossroads of sociological studies, communication studies, political science, art history and theory. Here, the reference is restricted to (Boltanski 1999; Bennet 2005; Chouliaraki 2006; Reinhardt et al. 2006; Grønstad and Gustafsson 2012; Di Bella and Elkins 2012).
- ² For all content regarding these campaigns and initiatives, please refer to the webpage of the Caritas pavilion during Expo Milano 2015: <https://www.caritasambrosiana.it/expo-1/strumenti/una-sola-famiglia-umana-cibo-per-tutti-i-materiali> (accessed on 6 March 2022).
- ³ (Un Caravaggio all'Expo ma scoppia la polemica 2014).
- ⁴ For a reflection on the idea that the Jubilee Year of Mercy was an invitation to rethink the iconographic repertoire of Mercy in relation to current events, see (van Bühren 2017).
- ⁵ (Merone 2016).
- ⁶ (Signor Presidente, Roma rinunci alle 'Sette Opere' del Caravaggio 2016).
- ⁷ For more details on successful or failed attempts to use Caravaggio's painting for humanitarian public events, see again (Zucconi 2018).
- ⁸ See (Cole 2021).
- ⁹ On the relationships between religion and the contemporary migration regime, see (Mavelli and Wilson 2016; Meyer and Van der Veer 2022). More explicitly on the relationship between the themes and forms of Christian art and contemporary humanitarian communication, see (Careri and Zucconi 2019).
- ¹⁰ On the relationship between migration and colonial history in Leogrande's work, see (Santoro 2017, pp. 133–38), and (Poli 2019, pp. 201–19).
- ¹¹ On this point, see (Milani 2018, pp. 191–216).
- ¹² The reference is to the classic study by (Wieviorka 2006). On the testimonial potential of photography, film, and multimedia arts, see (Azoulay 2008; Dinoi 2008; Montani 2010; Demos 2013).
- ¹³ On the presence of self-portraits in Caravaggio's paintings and especially in the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, see (Careri 2017, pp. 207–9).
- ¹⁴ On anachronism, see (Didi-Huberman 2000). On anachronism as a theoretical problem and a methodological tool in the history and theory of the arts, see also (Nagel and Wood 2010). On anachronism as a form of "preposterous history," see again (Bal 1999). Although closely related to the previous one, the reflection on the idea of "anatomism" is less developed in current literature; I have developed this idea in (Zucconi 2018), especially pp. 199–206 and (Zucconi 2020, pp. 33–41).
- ¹⁵ For a critical reflection on speaking in the place of others, and therefore on the possibility of subaltern subjects taking the floor, the classic reference is (Spivak 1988). For a reflection on these issues in the field of humanitarian communication and, more generally, contemporary visual culture, see (Perugini and Zucconi 2017, pp. 24–32).
- ¹⁶ On the problem of speaking on behalf of others (as on the risks of victimization of migrants), with reference also to Leogrande's book, see (De Capitani and Sbrojavacca 2020, pp. 23–45).

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