

Art as a victim: the Isis's attacks

Quando la vittima è l'arte: gli attacchi dell'Isis

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Abstract

This contribution proposes a criminological perspective on the phenomenon of art destruction carried out by Isis: a “scorched earth” operation which has interested many areas of Syria, Iran and Libya with the purpose of annihilating the local feeling of belonging and the collective memory. In particular the article considers the damage inflicted by this kind of behavior which destroys unique and inimitable masterpieces and also damages the whole community, just as it happens in environmental crimes. Finally, starting from the assumption that, in spite of their seriousness, this kind of crimes causes a limited social reaction, attention is focused on the extent of the damages considered; their irreparability means that we are all deprived of the possibility of experiencing that which represents our history and our past.

Keywords: destruction • art • Isis • terrorism

Riassunto

Il presente contributo vuole introdurre una riflessione criminologica sul fenomeno della distruzione di opere d'arte da parte dell'Isis: un'operazione di “scorched earth” che ha interessato molte zone della Siria, Iran e Libia con l'obiettivo dichiarato di “annullare” il locale senso di appartenenza e “cancellare” la dimensione collettiva della memoria. In particolare, l'articolo considera i danni prodotti da condotte che cancellano capolavori unici ed irripetibili e che, alla stregua di quanto accade per i reati ambientali, colpiscono l'intera collettività. Partendo dall'assunto che, nonostante la loro gravità, questo tipo di crimini suscitati nella collettività una reazione sociale ancora limitata, si pone l'attenzione sull'estensione dei danni considerati, la cui irreparabilità fa sì che a ognuno di noi venga preclusa la possibilità di confrontarsi con ciò che rappresenta la nostra storia ed il nostro passato.

Parole chiave: distruzione • arte • Isis • terrorismo

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1. Introduction: we always start from history

The aim of this article is to analyze, in a criminological perspective, the relationship between criminology and crimes against cultural heritage, a subject that has become, in recent years, of dramatic topicality. This analysis will be carried out specifically concerning Isis' attacks against cultural heritage.

Everyone still recalls what happened in Raqqa, Palmyra and Mosul where Islamic State of Iraq and Syria affiliates systematically destroyed unique and inimitable masterpieces: bulldozers and jackhammers engaged in scarring and damaging statues and mosaics, representations of the culture of a people that had inhabited that territory some thousands years before. Such serious defacement has moved consciences and has brought to the attention of the world the subject of criminal aggression against the artistic and cultural heritage (see Ferri, 2005; 2015)¹.

There are numerous studies (Appignanesi & Paladini, 2016), coming from various disciplines, which give evidence of the fact that art has always been the victim of violent and criminal behaviors: over the course of history conquered territories and people have often had to endure the loss resulting from the destruction of their artistic heritage, as a phase necessary to reset or modify religious belief, memory and culture². This is a vicious circle of domination and destruction which has affected every age up to the present day, proof of a mankind able to create masterpieces and, simultaneously, to destroy them.

There are various examples of this victimization of art. We will only mention a few. In his book "Romani o musulmani: chi distrusse la biblioteca di Alessandria" (2009), Franco Cardini explains that "it is a fact that a tremendous and precious collection of books, which probably summed up the knowledge of ancient culture, was destroyed. It is funny how we do not know when, if in the first century before Christ or at the end of the third or during the seventh century after Christ." The historian R. Lanciani, when focusing on what happened in Rome over the centuries, sums up two decades of discoveries and massacres and points out that if on the one hand Rome becoming the capital led to the recovery of antiquities, on the other it also led to the construction works of the 1870 and 1880, as the result of speculation, which have caused the destruction of an equally precious heritage: medieval ruins, Ren-

aissance palaces and patrician villas. In this sense it is also interesting R. Sandel's contribution (2016) that widens the observational horizon to what happened in places far from us, such as India, Indonesia or Brazil. Men, in war, have always wanted to break down the symbol of the enemy: the violence perpetrated by the Dutch soldiers during the Indonesian War of Independence (1945-1949), was not directed, in fact, only against people. As for the Indian continent, the famous "International race for the treasures of the Chinese Turkestan" or Serindia³, was attended by British, Germans, Russians, French, Japanese and Americans.

A very specific scenario concerns what happened in the last century in Europe. We refer to the *entartete Kunst*, the so-called "degenerated art" as it did not reflect the values or aesthetics typical of Nazi ideology (Merzagora, 2018). Thus art, instead of offering free expression of thoughts and emotions, took on, for that ideology, the task of "providing an example to the people, such as to be able to guide them in the definition of pure race"⁴. Hitler's Germany even develops a series of "guidelines" that identify works of art that do not conform to the Nazi regime: the "Säuberung des Kunsttempels" (or "cleaning of the temple of art") is a real manual indicating all the artistic works to be censored. Once "recovered" from the various museums of the country, they were exhibited at the Institute of Archeology of the Hofgarten in Munich, so that everyone could understand what was meant by the concept of "entartete Kunst" or degenerated art. The flyer of the exhibition talks about "gequälte Leinwand" (tortured canvas) by "geisteskranke Nichtsköner" (incapable mentally ill) (Baratta & Giannini, 2017). As a result, the works of artists such as Cezanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Chagall, Picasso and Kandinskij, just to name a few, left the museum rooms to take different routes: to become an integral part of the travelling exhibition and be destroyed or disappear in private collections. The numbers are impressive. After the end of the Second World War the governments of East and West Germany provided for the partial recovery of about 17,000 seized works and the rehabilitation of haunted artists (Baratta & Giannini, 2017).

In other words, every age has its own violent action aimed at the artistic heritage. The reason is easy to understand and is well summarized by Durkheim, according to whom artifacts become an expression of unity of entire communities capable of transmitting an authentic spirit, perpetuating an

1 On the variety of these conducts see also N. Passas & B. B. Proulx, 2011; M. Durney & B.B. Proulx, 2011; K. Alderman, 2014; S. Manacorda & D. Chappel, 2011.

2 For a criminological perspective on vandalism and art theft see A. Brisman, 2011.

3 Name coined by the English archaeologist of Hungarian origin, Aurel Stein.

4 <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/entartete-kunst>

inheritance that transcends the community itself (Appignanesi & Paladini, 2016). In short, art becomes a dangerous enemy – and sometimes an incomparable ally – for anyone who wants to impose ideologies and cultural or religious approaches and must therefore be destroyed. This is what happened at the hands of Isis affiliates; we will deal with it next. It is, however, important to remember that in many other cases the destruction of artistic heritage was caused by massive and indiscriminate use of bombings used purely for war and strategic purposes, as, for example, in the sad case of the Montecassino Abbey during World War II (Biechi Fratadocchi, 2014). In short, it is an art battered both by terrorist attacks and by the lack of attention by the state in time of war (Nannipieri, 2015). The analysis in this contribution will only concern the Isis case, the Authors being aware that it constitutes a partial and limited vision.

2. The Isis case

Since the beginning of 2014, the Western world has been a spectator of the brutal actions of Isis, a terrorist group of Salafist jihadist origin, bearer of an extreme and radical anti-Western interpretation of Islam – a group whose aim is to create a “pure” Islamic state. This phenomenon has been widely studied also by Italian authors both in its collective and organized dimension and in the dynamics of radicalization (Gianfrotta, 2017; Giorda, Cuciniello & Santagati, 2017; Ravagnani & Romano, 2017; Merzagora, Travaini & Caruso, 2016; Gallino & Rutelli, 2017; Travaini, Regondi, Camisasca, Caruso & Merzagora, 2017). To achieve their goal, members of the organization use violence against everyone and everything they consider apostate, including art. The crimes of Isis against world heritage include the destruction of the ancient structures of numerous archaeological sites in Syria and Iraq, including the ancient cities of Nimrud, Palmyra, Hatra and Nineveh (Erimtan, 2015).

On July 4, 2014, Isis destroys and plunders the tombs of the prophets Jonah and Shayth of Mosul, two of the places most visited by Shiite and Sunni Muslim pilgrims. Twenty days later the mosque is razed to the ground because it has become, according to an Isis militant, “a place of apostasy and not of prayer” (Abdul-Zahra, 2014). At the end of February 2015, Isis publishes a video in which some terrorists, armed with pneumatic picks and jackhammers, demolish the treasures held in the Mosul museum; at the beginning of March, the Minister of Tourism and Antiquities of Iraq issues a declaration on the destruction of the ancient Seleucidic fortress of Hatra, already a UNESCO World Heritage Site and dating back to the third (or second) century before Christ.

From 2014 to November 2016, about 80% of Nimrud, capital of the Neo-Assyrian empire of the ninth century before Christ, is reduced to rubble: nothing but ruins remains of the imposing statues and of the majestic imperial palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II; the same fate falls, since 2014, upon the ancient city of Nineveh, not far from Mosul.

On the Syrian front, UNESCO has recorded, through its satellite system, damage done to 30% of the Syrian city of Aleppo, between 2012 and 2016. Historically known as a crossroads of the main trade routes, Aleppo owned a historical centre of the thirteenth century before Christ, a Great Mosque of the twelfth century after Christ, but also Christian places of worship of the sixth century after Christ, mosques and palaces of the Ottoman Empire. To date, it is estimated that at least 35,722 structures have been irreparably damaged⁵.

According to the New York Times, in 2015, in Raqqa Isis destroyed three shrines in the mosque of Ammar bin Yasir⁶, a landmark for Shiite pilgrims, as well as causing damage to the old city, in the area around the museum⁷. But the most dramatic defacement concerns the Syrian city of Palmyra, which is repeatedly the victim of the organization's horrible anger. In 2015, the followers disfigure the leonine statue of Al Lat, since the Seventies one of the most visited tourist destinations, dating back about 2,000 years. The museum, located just behind the lion, is also the victim of violent raids; although many antiquities had been moved elsewhere, the remaining ones were destroyed or resold on the black market. In the summer of 2015, the temples of Bel and Baalshamin, as well as the adjacent medieval tombs, were demolished; shortly after, in October, the Arch of the city disappeared. Between November 2016 and February 2017, Isis soldiers annihilate the ancient Roman tetrapyll and part of the nearby Roman theater (Buffensten, 2017).

It is a real war bulletin. Apparently nothing has changed compared to the past. However, there are some elements of extreme novelty: the actions are visually documented and claimed⁸. This allows us to highlight some essential points: for Isis the communicative moment has always been of crucial strategic importance, so much so as to create a real dedicated department; Isis has applied a rule common to terrorist organizations, namely that it is not enough to do, but it is necessary to let people know, involve and convince. It is very easy to find videos of these destructions on the web. Many are found by inserting the words “destruction, art, Isis” on a common search engine. They often refer to what happened at the Mosul Museum, Nimrud and Palmyra. The motivations behind these actions must be sought in the explicit desire to apply a program of “cultural heritage destruction” in the conquered territories. According to Omur Harmansah (2015), who has extensively studied the phenomenon, the organization's objectives can be

5 http://unosat-maps.web.cern.ch/unosat-maps/SY/CE20130604SYR/UNOSAT_A3_Aleppo_Damage_Density_20160918_v2opt.pdf

6 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/11/21/world/middleeast/inside-raqqa-capital-of-isis.html>

7 <https://www.aaas.org/page/ancient-history-modern-destruction-assessing-status-syria-s-tentative-world-heritage-sites-7#Raqqa>

8 On the visual dimension of crime see also Natali and McClanahan (2017), Natali and De Nardin Budó (2018) and Natali (2019).

summarized as follows: to annihilate the sense of religious and cultural belonging, to “educate” and to manifest a sense of power able to fascinate and attract new adepts.

3. Not everything is as it appears

Every criminologist learns, in time, that not everything is as it appears and that, often, things are more complex when read in their entirety. For example, terrorist organizations, from Al Qaida to Isis, have not only dedicated themselves to the destruction of art, but also to its illegal marketing. It is interesting to note that Al Qaida⁹ has been interested in it since the 1990s. In 1999 Mohamed Hatta, one of the twin tower bombers, had tried to sell artifacts from Afghanistan to a German university professor, and the involvement of the terrorist organization in the sale of works from Iraq, another land robbed of many masterpieces¹⁰, was significant.

Some might wonder how terrorist organizations finance their actions, which still need adequate tools to be carried out. In this regard, one of the fundamental aspects of terrorist groups that distinguishes them from other criminal organizations lies exactly in the function of money: if in organized and common crime it represents the ultimate goal, for terrorism it is only a means to achieve the ideological purpose (Travaini, 2008). And what is more profitable than an archaeological find, be it a sculpture of the Assyrians or a coin dating back to the Roman Empire? Certainly the demand is not lacking: in 2015, an entire community of sellers and buyers, active on the largest online sale platforms, was identified (Hardy, 2016)¹¹. This is because social media help to facilitate the solicitation of potential buyers, avoiding being tracked and therefore allowing more sophisticated traffic modalities.

Of course, from the archaeological site to the web, there are different steps: firstly, one needs to be equipped in order to identify and get hold of the finds. Individuals, criminal organizations and terrorists have armed themselves, over time, with metal detectors, bulldozers and official registers showing the maps of the places, but above all, with a real network of professionals, many of which are public officers, to share out the work. Among them are the looters who play a role in the excavations, those that materially carry the loot to the west and experts who provide all the documentation (obviously counterfeited) for the object on the market, the so-called intermediaries; final users can be collectors, museums or auction houses (Pipkins, 2016; see also Mackenzie & Green, 2009). It is important to note that

stolen artifacts are kept hidden for many years before being placed on the western market.

From 2014 to 2016 Isis has placed the looting and destruction of works of art and archaeological finds at the center of its propaganda. Although the sale of antiquities has been defined as one of the major sources of income for the organization, a recent study by the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) of King's College London, named “Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of the Islamic State's Financial Fortunes”, has denied this information, attributing the primacy to the looting of banks and shops, the confiscation of property belonging to minorities or those who have fled. Moreover, the fines imposed by Isis to those who remained on their territory are also very profitable. Finally, from an economic point of view it seems very difficult to estimate the income deriving to Isis from the illicit trafficking of works of art and antiquities, also due to the fact that they are traded on the Dark Deep Web, where transactions are almost impossible to trace (Gupta, 2016).

4. What to do?

The picture described opens up to some criminological reflections. It is certainly a case of crime with a widespread victim: in this regard the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Heritage specifies how works of art of particular importance become common heritage and must be “protected in order to be able to transmit the values they represent to future generations”¹².

Whenever a single “piece” of our artistic heritage is destroyed, damaged or subtracted from the whole community, each one of us loses something. This is due to the fundamental role that art has not only in the construction of collective identity, but also in the psychic development of each one of us. It is well known that the emotions and sensations that art is able to transmit also contribute to our personal growth. There is an extensive body of literature on the relationship between art and psyche, but that is not the topic of this contribution¹³. More specifically, from a criminological perspective, we ask: what to do to limit such a collectively harmful crime?

The question is not easy to answer. Systematic destruction has been and still is Isis' instrument of war and propaganda and it has not stopped in front of the spectacularization of executions with human victims; this leads one to think that the self-styled Islamic State will limit its destructive action only when it will no longer be useful for its strategic design¹⁴. Therefore,

9 Al Qaida is a Sunni Islamist paramilitary terrorist movement. Its birth dates back to 1988 during the war in Afghanistan. Led until 2011 by Osama Bin Laden.

10 National Center for Policy Analysis “Shutting Down Isis Antiques Trade” Issue Brief nr. 185, January 2016.

11 The complexity of the framework is also underlined by L. Nannipieri, *Arte e terrorismo. Sulla distruzione islamica del patrimonio storico artistico*, Rubbettino editore, Soveria Mannelli, 2015.

12 <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>

13 Many scholars have highlighted that the arts help the development of those empathic and listening skills necessary for our social life and that it is thanks to the sensitivity of the artist that we often find answers to our existential questions.

14 In this regard some authors (Smith, Burke et al., p.164) talk about “socially mediated terrorism” as “the use of social and networked media to increase the impact of violent acts un-

it will continue to affect men or works of art as long as it is functional. To prevent these harms, it is mainly a political problem. However, as we have seen, even in war not everything is destroyed and much is sold, and that is when it becomes interesting to move the reflections on to another level. The illicit art market is, in a nutshell, the meeting between supply and demand. On the one hand, someone “traffics” works and on the other hand, someone else buys them, knowing that it is an illegal transaction. The trafficker can close the deal only if he finds subjects willing to buy his goods.

We are therefore analyzing criminal conduct in which the role of the buyer is also of criminological interest. As for environmental crimes, in fact, the “secondary” actors¹⁵ of these criminal behaviors carry out neutralization and denial techniques; the difficulties and uncertainties encountered in tracing the existence of the causal link¹⁶ between action and damage to cultural heritage also provide a convincing incentive to perceive oneself as lacking responsibility, being morally disengaged. We refer, in particular, to the techniques of euphemistic labeling, to the appeal to higher loyalties and moral justification, to the advantageous comparison and to the distortion of the consequences (Bandura, 2015). In this regard, Brodie (2011) and Elia (2009) highlight the attitude of museum curators, collectors and art dealers who, by self-proclaiming themselves custodians of the past, justify their actions on the basis of the consideration that these assets have been subtracted from the dispersion and damage they were destined to as a result of looting; to a certain extent they have therefore been “saved”. Again, in this regard, it seems interesting the conduct of those who transfer the responsibility of looting to the victims (displacement of responsibility), of those claiming to have accidentally found the historical find¹⁷ or who, more simply, close their eyes in respect of the illegal provenance of the work of art (denial techniques).

The picture becomes more complicated if we analyze it in the light of the moral and value ambiguities and complexities that animate these phenomena (see Natali, 2015, p. 12). As Mackenzie points out (2017, p. 27), in fact, some traders seem to really believe in the justice of their actions. The question that arises is, therefore, that of the conflict between the values defended by the buyers and the art sellers and those values the archaeologists believe in and also that of the different modalities of these actors to own the past (Kersel, 2011): some would like to study it, others buy it or sell it, others still make it the object of fruition.

In parallel with what happens for environmental crimes,

dertaken to further a social, political and/or religious cause with the aim of creating physical, emotional, or psychological suffering that extends beyond the immediate audience”.

15 That is, intermediaries and buyers.

16 A. Cottino writes (2005): “We have to deal with a concept deeply rooted in our culture of the cause/effect relationship. [...] The model with which we are familiar is that of direct and linear causality”.

17 In this case R. Elia (2009) talks about the “myth” of the guilty source countries” and of the casual find.

in the context of cultural heritage, groups with power take responsibility and legitimize their actions on the one hand, and, on the other, they hide them and minimize the social damage produced, increasing the so-called “dark number”¹⁸. In a victimological perspective, again similarly to the environmental context (Natali, 2014; 2015a; 2015b; White, 2011), the problem is that the victims do not recognize nor perceive themselves as such. In this way we will have a sort of “two-track” social reaction: on the one hand we are shocked and on the other we buy.

5. The green criminology perspectives applied to art crimes. Towards a conclusion

Precisely the parallelisms highlighted between environmental crimes and crimes against cultural heritage lead us to borrow the possible solutions to the problem from “green criminology” (Natali, 2010; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2016). As for the environmental field, the reflection on art crimes cannot dwell only on criminal policies, but must extend its gaze to social ones. A response linked to the mere logic of deterrence and to the tightening of the sanctioning response or to the increase in the criminal penalties would, in fact, prove inadequate for this type of crime. If, on the one hand, it seems to be essential to carry out empirical-epistemological investigations in this sector, given the silence of Italian literature on the subject, on the other hand it is of fundamental importance to focus on prevention, working on a plan to sensitize and educate society precisely because only a slow transformation can make it more and more difficult for economic operators to deny or neutralize the precious value that characterizes the uniqueness and rarity of art objects. Even if there is large body of literature¹⁹ that discusses and criticizes the so-called economic-rational approach described by G. Becker (1968), in this framework it seems a useful instrument to analyze and face the phenomenon. According to this approach, the ethical variable, which is decisive in the cost-benefit evaluation that drives the decision to commit the crime, must be reactivated; in this way a greater sensitivity will develop with respect to harmful phenomena. K. Polk himself (2009) points out that even the illegal markets are guided by the law of supply and demand and that, therefore, an intervention limited to controlling only the offer will prove to be

18 On the “dark number” of crimes against cultural heritage see L. Natali (2015).

19 Some of the most important criticisms raised against the economic approach to human behavior regard the fact that it is incomplete and implausible (it would be too simplistic since people do not always act rationally) (Somers, 1998), that it covers only a limited realm of social life (as it reduces the complexity of social life in terms of economics calculation) (Munch, 1992) and that it lacks any consideration for non-instrumental motivations (Boudon, 1998). More recently Zafirovski (2014; 2018) underlines that the rejection of the premise of exclusive economic motivation suggests a move toward a more complex and in part irrational choice theory.

ineffective. Therefore, it will also be necessary to work on the demand, implementing a “top down” preventive strategy that works for a progressive cultural change in the demand worlds (Campbell, 2013, p.137).

L. Nannipieri (2015) also talks about the need to adopt a preventive strategy, pointing out specifically the important role that task forces, aimed at historical and cultural heritage preservation, would have in the army and in the security police. In particular, the author states that these operational groups composed by anthropologists, art historians, journalists and writers should be sent to the war zones, together with the soldiers and the military forces, to document the destructions and the lootings of the art pieces and to send the material to a competent institution, set up *ad hoc* for the issue; this institution would be in charge of analyzing the material provided to understand what has been destroyed and what has to be preserved, reconstructed, restored and catalogued and also how to rebuild a non-destructive, but constructive and proactive dialogue between the heritage and the surrounding community. These task forces should be included in the military contents sent in support of the most “amicable”²⁰ local governments (precondition for preserving the safety of the cataloguers and the archivists) to manage the conflicts in a diplomatic, respectful and mutual recognition way.

The need to adopt a preventive approach is also urgent in relation to the protection of the context (Polk, 2009): the plundering of cultural property irreparably damages the context in which it is inserted. Indeed, in relation to the context the damage is, in a sense, less remediable and the most devastating criminal action; a reaction exclusively repressive and aimed at the restitution of the individual asset is of little use, having necessarily to give way to a work of prevention and protection of the archaeological site.

The adoption of a preventive approach in the search for strategies to combat this type of crime is necessary, then, in relation to the character of “time crimes” (Clane et al., 2008; see also Natali, 2015b; 2017) of crimes against cultural heritage. In this regard, it is crucial to introduce the notion of intergenerational responsibility: that is, the responsibility, towards future generations, for taking away from them the possibility of benefiting from those irreparably lost artworks. Cultural and artistic goods constitute “traditions”, in the etymological meaning of the word *traditio*, “delivery, transmission” of a people’s culture and past²¹. With a view to solidarity between generations, therefore, our vision should be as farsighted as possible with respect to the future consequences of our present actions.

20 Indeed the author says: “There’s not just one Islam. There are many Islam. Between these different Islam we need to recognize which one is the less intolerable for us. We have to dialogue and contaminate us with this one [...]” (Nannipieri, 2015, p. 41).

21 M.A. Toscano (2008, p.18) writes: “Cultural heritage constitutes [...] ‘traditions’ that are not only ‘exterior’ but ‘interior’, traditions of things and thought and, in the succession of the ages, provides absolutely indispensable hermeneutical resources.”

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