“Ah! For we Belgians”, Anneke told him, “this is a very important part of the Exposition. It will be the section devoted to the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. On the other side, there is a tropical garden with a native village inside. All very authentic, with little huts and grass roofs! They’re even bringing some of the natives over to live here, for the time of the Expo. I can’t wait to see them. I have never seen a real black before. They look so strange and funny in photographs”. Thomas said nothing in reply to this but it gave him an uneasy feeling. There were plenty of black faces on the streets of London these days, and while he knew people who felt unhappy about it […] he prided himself on being free of skin prejudice. If what Anneke said was true, he considered that this part of the Exposition struck the wrong note […] She [Anneke] and some of the other hostesses had spent two hours looking for the little girl, only to find her sitting outside – of all places – one of the straw huts in the pavilion of the Belgian Congo, staring as if hypnotized at one of the half-naked natives as he stood and shivered in the unaccustomed chill of a North European summer evening […] Anneke at one point asked him: “So you never got to see the pavilion of the Belgian Congo?”. “Not yet, no. I was planning to visit some time in the next few days”. “But you can’t”, she said, “They’ve gone home”. “Who’s gone home?”. “The Natives from Africa. Hadn’t you heard?”. “What happened?”. “Well, I read in the newspaper that they were complaining about the way that some visitors were treating them. They were sitting all day in their straw huts, working on their…native crafts, and so on, and apparently some of the people were shouting bad things at them, and sometimes they were trying to – (she giggled) – feed them bananas and things like that. They said they were made to feel like animals in a zoo. So now most of them have gone home and the huts are empty”. Anneke
frowned. “I thought there was something wrong about it, the first time I went there...It felt somehow...not kind, making them sit and work like that while the Europeans just stood and watched”. “Yes”, said Thomas, “I thought so too, when I heard about it. On the other hand – perhaps it’s not so different from what Emily has to do in the American pavilion”.


This contribution discusses two questions which were touched upon but not fully analyzed in the monograph I just published *Umanità in mostra*.¹ The first question regards how the living ethno-exhibitions related to colonial policy and propaganda, to the formation of a ‘colonial culture’ and a ‘national identity’ in late nineteenth-century Italy. The second question concerns the return or re-proposition (or false disappearance) of the living ethno-exhibitions in contemporary society, both in the traditional forms of exhibitions of human, racial and savage diversity and in a whole variety of typical practices of the twentieth and twenty-first century society of exteriority, public events and performances, self- and collective exhibitions, the publicizing of privacy or the overbearing irruption of the private on the public scene. I shall consider the first question by referring to some publications, and one in particular,² which deserve fuller consideration than I was able to give them in a book that did not engage directly with questions of ‘colonial culture’ and ‘national identity’. I shall discuss the second question by citing a series of human exhibitions held in the second half of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century, as evidence of the surprising tenacity and resilience of the practice of objectifying human beings in the multiple configurations of the exhibitionary complex.³

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I.

The contribution of African colonialism to the formation of Italian public opinion and cultural awareness at the turn of the twentieth century, and the problem of how a ‘colonial culture’ contributed to the construction of Italian national identity, have been attracting increasing attention among historians recently. *Umanità in mostra* did not set out to enquire into this order of problems specifically, even though it was inevitable to ask which sort of ‘colonial culture’ (ideology, propaganda) was detectable behind the ethno-expositions, and what type of specific contribution the latter made to the formation of a national identity. Although these are undoubtedly important problems, they were bound to remain in the background in a piece of research which aimed primarily to reconstruct certain events as they actually occurred, as life experiences of protagonists with their own intentions and reactions, and in the discourse structures elaborated at various communicative levels to identify their meanings.

Among the numerous works to have enriched the historiographical panorama regarding ‘colonial culture’ in Liberal and Fascist Italy from various points of view in recent years – investigating the role of the scientific societies, explorations, missions, legislation and the law, literature – I shall merely cite two collections of essays edited respectively by Patrizia Palumbo (2003) and Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2005) and a monograph by Giuseppe Finaldi published in 2009, making some comments on the latter work in particular. These are studies taking different approaches which nonetheless all feature the richness of cultural expressions and mentality that can be recognized in a ‘colonial culture’. In fact this is as far as the common ground goes, because there is a notable divergence as to what ‘colonial culture’ should be taken to mean. In the collection edited by Palumbo the expression ‘colonial culture’ typically denotes expressions of ‘highbrow’ culture: official and institutional speeches concerning the colonial experience, colonial historiography, the contribution of disciplines such as anthropology, legislation which regulated inter-ethnic relationships in colonial society in racist terms, and more overtly literary textual representations, both in the version destined for a more cultured readership and in the form of colonial subject matter for mass consumption.

Turning to Finaldi, he approached the problem of ‘colonial culture’ and the part it played in the formation of an Italian national identity with a particular aim. Taking issue with those historians – the majority – who have emphasized the poverty of ‘colonial culture’ in late nineteenth-century Italy (the period of the *First African War*) he sought to highlight the very rich presence of colonial themes in several forms of expression of the mentality and cultural awareness in the late 1880s (above all) and 1890s. To this end he drew on sources of considerable interest and impact which to date have undoubtedly
been largely overlooked: commemorative speeches, funerary orations, ceremonial rhetoric of various types, popular ballads, broadsheets, puppet shows, activities that went on in schools (making only minimal reference to textbooks), popularising publications, monuments and toponymy, epigraphs and national expositions – although he actually only referred to the one held in Palermo in 1891-1892. From this considerable range of minor textuality, which nonetheless excludes such higher brow expressions as political commentary, essays, historiographical elaboration for popularising ends, fiction, ethno-anthropological, geographical and travel literature, Finaldi draws two rather categorical conclusions. Colonial topics attracted a great deal of attention (indeed were practically omnipresent) in Italy at the time of the *First African War*; and – of even greater significance – the colonial experience tended to be integrated in a national-popular rhetoric which took the place of the patriotic nationalism of the Risorgimento, transforming the myths, epics, language and values into a factor of cohesion for the newly unified nation. Finaldi concludes that the pervasiveness of colonial topics, images and memories played a decisive role in the construction of Italian identity: the colonial experience became the object not so much of propaganda but of a pedagogical program of nationalization designed to transcend class barriers and produce a major impact in terms of geographical, political and cultural integration.

We might start by observing that Finaldi focuses on a very limited time span: 1887 and thereabouts, rarely extending into the early 1890s, before Adowa. He concentrates above all on the reactions to the events at Dogali and the way in which this episode was at the center of an authentic process of myth-making designed to reverse its significance: from a terrible defeat at the hands of an African nation to the proof of military virtues able to resist the savage aggression of African barbarians. Furthermore this process drew on a whole series of myths – from the revival of the classical heritage to the civilizing mission in the name of progress – fostering Italy’s self-representation as a nation that could claim a place at the international table alongside the major imperial and colonial powers.

If there is little doubt that the celebratory and commemorative rhetoric concerning the defeat of Dogali drew on batteries of subjects and images with a highly nationalistic and patriotic flavor, and that these subjects and images featured largely and repeatedly in a whole range of minor textuality responding to popular sentiment, it is not so legitimate to go on to deduce the existence of a widespread ‘colonial culture’. It is hardly surprising that an episode like Dogali should have caused numerous manifestations of public hand-wringing and mourning, nor that a particularly painful colonial military experience should have been interiorised by associating it with the fundamental values of nationhood in a country engaged in consolidating its identity and infrastructures as
a state. What is striking is the intensity, transversal nature and social pervasiveness of manifestations of cultural awareness that took place on a large scale and with a singularly common focus. Yet nonetheless it has to be said that such repetitive and stereotyped forms of justificatory elaboration of the facts does not necessarily prove the existence of a ‘colonial culture’. And furthermore, the other side of the coin never gets a showing, meaning the amount of opposition, criticism, repugnance aroused by these events in a country that by and large was little inclined – if we are to believe the historians of Italian colonialism – to support a colonial policy seen as alien to the true interests of the nation. Anti-colonial pressure groups were to be found across the political spectrum, and they undoubtedly received a boost from the fatal events of the years spanning 1887 and 1896.

The image that emerges from Finaldi’s book of a nation taking comfort in certain foundation myths and a rhetoric designed to exalt the colonial experience is unquestionably rich and variegated, but nonetheless one-sided and unconvincing if, as I believe, ‘colonial culture’ has to be approached as a set of notions and forms of consciousness based not on mere celebratory rhetoric but on the information made available in the public domain, debates and capacity for argumentation. It is undoubtedly important to recognize, as Finaldi does, that there was a transversal ‘popular’ awareness able to formulate its feelings about a tragic African experience and to speak a language and elaborate images enabling that experience to be absorbed into the framework of national life. But this is only one aspect of the emotional reactions of a public opinion that cannot be said to have embraced those values unanimously; just as it cannot be denied that many of the ingredients detectable in the emotional internalization of the colonial experience did not by any means surface only between Dogali and Adowa, but had been circulating widely in a multiplicity of forms – in some cases with an undeniably ‘cultural’ nature – right from the pioneering years of the first travelers and apostles of expansion in East Africa in the late 1860s, such as Sapeto, Issel and Licata, who manifested a true conceptual elaboration of the colonial theme. To put it in a nutshell, no one would deny that the existence of an Italian ‘colonial culture’ is a crucial element in the history of Liberal Italy and in the process of national construction. But it is surely debatable whether its most significant manifestations can be identified in the rhetorical expressions that were solicited by a single, albeit undoubtedly important, episode. One is left with the impression that, for all the plethora of texts produced by Finaldi, Italian ‘colonial culture’ has to be sought elsewhere. In any case, at the end of the nineteenth century it remained a generally weak and relatively superficial phenomenon restricted to a few elite circles, reflecting the undeniably limited economic interests supporting a policy of military expansion in Africa in those years. The divisions in the political class, public opinion and social forces over the sense of a colonial future for Italy remained profound.
Historiography has invariably viewed Italian colonialism as reflecting policies that were factitious, modelled on foreign examples and imposed by those at the top of the hierarchy, in contrast with the thesis of “social imperialism” used by Hans Wehler to interpret the expansionist policy of Germany under Bismarck. According to Battaglia, Del Boca and Labanca, in Italy there was no proper colonial culture that could be deliberately fostered so as to mold public opinion and orient it toward colonial objectives that would reinforce the nation’s internal unity. Indeed, in the 1970s an even more radical interpretation took hold, with Romain Rainero as one of its leading exponents, that was to become virtually axiomatic. According to this view African questions were fundamentally unpopular and seen as an imposition on the part of a ruling class cut off from common sentiment in an Italy that was grappling with much more pressing problems than launching a colonial enterprise in Africa. The widespread existence of a grassroots “anti-African” sentiment was in fact common knowledge in the colonial era: one only has to think of Vico Mantegazza’s diatribes against an attitude portrayed as anti-patriotic and “philo-French”. Although Finaldi’s study adds elements of indubitable interest – starting from his perfectly justified call to establish what ‘colonial culture’ in Italy at the end of the nineteenth century really consisted in – which render this historiographical tradition considerably more nuanced, it does not seem to alter this interpretation in any substantial way.

Besides, it is surely rather difficult to speak of a ‘colonial culture’ while deliberately leaving out of the picture all those authors, venues, agents and means of communication which did indeed give expression to an authentic ‘colonial culture’, seeking to root it in the Italian society and to make it indeed a component of ‘nationalistic’ discourse. It would take too long to name all the politicians, scholars, men of letters, travelers, war correspondents, political commentators, merchant bankers, but between the launching of Italian expansionism and the Libyan war the list would include Giuseppe Sapeto, Manfredo Camperio, Giovan Battista Licata, Pasquale Stanislao Mancini, Guido Cora, Attilio Brunialti, Antonio Annoni, Pippo Vigoni, Vico Mantegazza, Felice Scheibler, Mario Morasso, Achille Bizzoni, Adolfo Rossi, Edoardo Scarfoglio, Alfredo Oriani, Mario Bassi, Gualtiero Castellini and Enrico Corradini. And then there are the journals, from Assab. Gazzetta italo-africana illustrata to the Rivista coloniale, which still await proper study. It was through the initiative of men like these, and many others who backed them up, that a ‘colonial culture’ began to form in Italy at the turn of the nineteenth century, being disseminated in parliament and the universities, the press, travel literature, fiction, war reporting, in historical, geographical, economic and juridical studies, and in commercial, trade fair and popularizing initiatives. It was

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on this basis that, from the first years of the new century, Italian colonial discourse underwent important evolutions, taking on ever more aggressive tones of civilization, militarization and empire building.

What can the history of living colonial ethnic expositions in Italy add to this picture? First of all we have to point out that the relationship between colonialism and ethnic-colonial expositions should not be seen exclusively in terms of cause and effect. The great exhibitionary and performative productions featuring the colonial, exotic, African- and Oriental-style themes fulfilled a demand for spectacle, inducing curiosity and astonishment in the general public, and entertainment based on the exhibition of the unusual and the alien which went well beyond the contingent requisites of colonial policy, propaganda and ‘culture’. Those productions sought to fulfill an escapism, fascination with and subjective abandonment to the experience of the alien which surpassed any ideological or propagandistic objective. I do not mean that this did not also involve a complex discourse on the world as a whole. On the contrary, these productions were modelled on value hierarchies and precise ideas concerning ‘civilization’ and ‘progress’. But this type of discourse provided a world view rather than a political program, even if the world view in question was eminently suited to making the program convincing.

With this premise in mind, the history of Italian ethno-expositions can be seen to supply conclusions which limits the effectiveness of the political and cultural ‘colonial’ discourse. This is true in particular for the period that features in the documentation assembled by Finaldi, i.e. the close of the nineteenth century. And this appears to be the case even if there was an undeniable tendency – visible also with reference to the great expositions – to reinforce the colonial-imperial ideology, above all once, by the early years of the new century, the trauma of Adowa had begun to be assimilated, leaving scope for expansionist issues to be dressed up in all the pre-existing rhetoric that inevitably came to the fore at the time of dramatic and traumatic events like those of Dogali.

There is no doubt that the national and international expositions contributed, also in Italy and above all in the twentieth century, to formulating an idea of the nation dedicated to enterprises overseas. No one can deny that a ‘colonial culture’ can be identified in the adoption of the discursive and representative schemes of otherness that characterized the colonial and ethnic expositions. Inevitably these manifestations presupposed and enacted, in both initiatives and symbolic or linguistic expressions, a hierarchical relationship of material or immaterial domination over human, social and natural realities perceived as ‘alien’. Within this relationship the ‘other’ is automatically inferior, doomed to subjugation, subject to a power which derives not only and not necessarily from political or military conquest. The power which appropriates the ‘other’ also derives from a cultural gesture. It is expressed in linguistic and representative acts
of an “appropriative” nature, in “acts of supremacy”.\(^5\) It is, in fact, what can be called an “identity-generating narrative”.\(^6\)

And yet, the question as to whether there existed an Italian ‘colonial culture’ that can be seen in the colonial and ethnic expositions and to which we can attribute a function of nationalization of the masses or creation of an “imagined community” cannot be answered with an unqualified affirmative. Certainly, such an objective was attempted by the architects of colonial propaganda. But we have to recognize that these attempts, particularly during the first thirty years of Italian colonial history, were ephemeral, sporadic, amateurish, belated, inadequate, of limited impact, incapable of enhancing, and being enhanced by, experiences of success in the field of battle, government and the exercise of power. And what is more, these attempts were constantly frustrated by political and military reverses and by the persistence of substantial sectors of public opinion which remained profoundly skeptical or defiantly contrary, as can easily be seen if one leafs through a daily newspaper such as *L’Avanti*! for the last decade of the century. Besides, the implausibility of any idea of ‘race’ underpinning the national ideology bears out the fact that in the culture of Liberal Italy there was no overtly racial and racist attitude which could have backed up the colonial enterprises, although undoubtedly the experience of the ethnic-colonial expositions reveals the presence of expressions of a racist nature, although more in the mouths of individual observers than as a form of ‘official’ ideology.

Things changed somewhat with the advent of the new century. In the build-up to the events in Libya more significant efforts were made, even though they were inevitably sporadic and temporary like the expositions, to confront the public with a more structured image of the Italian colonial world, as was the case in the manifestations for the 50\(^{th}\) Anniversary of Italian unification in Turin. And yet, also in this different political and cultural climate, the historian is obliged to paint a picture full of shadows and nuances.

Alongside stylistic and lexical features which were overtly and authentically colonial-expansionist, linked to a reality of colonial or even racial domination, the Italian ethnic expositions staged complex representations of the exotic and the ‘Oriental’ which were in fact imported wholesale from France. Furthermore the persistence in public opinion of contradictory reactions, at times skeptical and indeed hostile toward the ethnic and human expositions – even though the same can be said also for European nations with a much more solid colonial-imperial vocation – makes it problematic to postulate colonialism and ‘colonial culture’ as a fundamental component of Italian national

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identity. We have to remember that this identity was still encumbered by the presence in the country of serious economic, social, cultural and religious structural rifts which were far from being overcome. It is in fact hardly a coincidence if colonial and ethnic expositions were put on in Italy by such public organs as ministries and bureaucracies or business and economic associations, but never by a private business sector possessing the necessary specialization to undertake – financially but also culturally – such ethnic exhibitionary projects as those which could be admired in the great European expositions and indeed in the same Turin celebration of 1911.

II.

The second question I wish to touch on is the historical trajectory of the particular form of public spectacle represented by the ethno-expositions, questioning the thesis of their decline and possibly cessation and asking whether it may not be more correct to speak of their metamorphosis and, in the long term, survival, reproposal and hence continuity in post-colonial times.

The starting-point is what Nicola Labanca has affirmed in essays produced in collaboration with myself. With the advent of fascism, Labanca argues, the living ethnic expositions in Italy disappeared from the panorama of forms of communication and propaganda of a nation intent on transforming itself into an empire. Although I at first endorsed this interpretation, I have had second thoughts. Labanca is right to affirm that in the fascist era there continued to be an emphasis on propagandist spectacle, above all involving colonial topics, in order to reinforce the African dimension of the ‘greater Italy’ preached by the Duce and the Fascismo. But he believes that this involved a general renunciation of forms of human exposition. For example, the colonial exposition held in Turin in 1928 featured the traditional colonial villages, but Labanca sees them as mere remnants: “On close inspection, however, the African villages smacked of old, Liberal Italy, and of cheap exoticism”. Labanca asks “why progressively fewer Africans were seen in Fascist era colonial Italy, while the regime spoke increasingly of colonies”. He believes that this type of ethno-exposition was merely a relic from the past, incompatible with an atmosphere that was undergoing radical change. But in what way exactly?

In the first place, he maintains, a sort of “primary education in ethnography”, albeit still insufficient and incomplete, had made it less compelling for the regime’s subjects to

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see for themselves and marvel at colonial and exotic villages. This was also the effect of the development of the mass media, the picture press, the cinema, and publicity techniques which were domesticating the image of the African. Then there was the increasing accessibility of colonial Africa, involving trips and tourism: the African in flesh and blood could be seen in his native environment, without the need for fake villages created in Europe. All this caused a “saturation of the Italian collective imagination” to which Labanca adds other elements. In the first place the lack of involvement in, or indeed attention to, the expositions on the part of Italian anthropologists, together with the discipline’s overall weakness, seen in its failure to undertake any scientific expeditions in Africa. In fact the really rather anaemic Italian colonialism simply did not have much to display, and the coup de grâce came in 1937 with the race laws. The sole exception, according to Labanca, were the conquered askaris and chieftains: these were the only examples of native bodies put on show, although he does not consider them comparable to the physical presence of Africans in the ethnic expositions. Yet immediately afterwards Labanca himself recalls the enormous effort that went into mounting the Overseas Exhibition (Mostra d’Oltremare) in 1940, above all for the recreation of African villages and environments complete with the physical presence of natives who were not just askaris and zaptiè.

No one could argue that the elements Labanca has highlighted are not true or authentic, but there is one concrete fact that has been left out of the picture. In fascist Italy the ethnic expositions maintained an incontestable continuity – 1928, 1930, 1936, 1940 – which appears to justify speaking of the transformation of the expositional discourse rather than the passing of the nineteenth-century forms of human exposition.

Besides, the elements that Labanca defines as characteristic of the late 1920s and the ‘30s were actually present in the closing years of the previous century, and in particular from the turn of the century onwards. The militarist and expansionist vocabulary, the imperial rhetoric of ‘Grande Italia’, the image of the civilizing nation, the representation of a colonial Africa under domination, the object of programs of civilization, and the material presence in Italy of African civilians and military personnel as tangible evidence of domination. In fact there seems to have been an intensification rather than a complete mutation in the discourses, also because, on closer inspection, Italy had never known the really brutal ‘human zoos’ found elsewhere in Europe, and had always preferred to mount its colonial expositions according to paternalistic and reformist schemes. Obviously this does not mean that the Italians were inherently ‘better’; simply that, right from the start, the Italian ethnic expositions were conceived primarily as a means of vindicating what was undeniably a weak colonial power, in order to boost a fragile economic initiative and build up the prospects for a civilizing and evangelising activity. Rather than featuring representations of Africa as a distant, savage and brutal continent,
preference had always gone to presenting reconstructions able to evoke processes of civilization set in motion by the munificent colonial power, emphasizing initiatives of integration in an imperial and colonial context and images of concord and brotherhood.

If, however, we extend the time span to arrive at the present, it is possible to identify numerous indications suggesting a profound continuity in the way in which the West has had recourse to and exploited the bodies of ‘others’ (non Europeans, non Westerners, non whites) by inserting them into various forms of “exhibitionary complex”. These are forms of reification that consist in the appropriation and control of the movement of physical bodies, setting them within and making them pass through multiple and alien contexts – from their own native realities to multiform stages designed for their exhibition. Fundamentally these bodies are exhibited not in a static condition but in movement and mutation: they are moving bodies because their situation, context and identity all change and because in this movement – in their propensity for a movement comprising transfer, gestures, postures, attitudes – lies the attribution of sense to which they are subjected. At the same time they are moving bodies also because their exhibition in the West has never been detached from the expression of forms of sympathy, compassion and humanitarian protest. They are in fact bodies artificially set in motion which are nonetheless able to trouble people’s consciences.

As I have argued elsewhere, appropriation, transfer, transport and exhibition of the bodies of ‘others’ endowed with skills and movements belong to the history of European encounters with human otherness from the very first, and have been perpetuated for a whole variety of reasons and goals down to the present. Surely it is not overstating matters to compare the first natives brought back from Mexico to Spain and Italy by Columbus and Cortéz and put on display for their physical, artistic and ‘sporting’ prowess to the many performers originating from Africa and Asia who appeared in, and in some respects invented, the ethnic show in Europe from the first half of the nineteenth century onwards, through to Josephine Baker, the Globe Trotters, and troupes of ethnic artists or family or tribal groups representing ‘exotic’ cultures or ethnic groups facing extinction in the context of expositions or cultural events featuring folklore or conservation. Of course one might object that there are great differences in terms of consensus or ability to exert an autonomous control of one’s body, in short of agency. Nonetheless, in all these ‘alien’ bodies in movement, transported and exhibited in the West, one can recognize the accumulation of extraneous meanings. Their movement is apparently autonomous and voluntary, but there is a layer of direction, re-collocation, re-definition

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of significance and identity, irrespective of the cause in the name of which meaning and identity are articulated, or of the verbal and gestural vocabulary of their description. These movements betray, and are governed by, a mechanism of expropriation which is manifested in the reification of the exposition events and the domination of those bodies, quite prosaically, at the hands of impresarios, agents, organizers and managers. These movements, whether in the exhibition venue or throughout the geographical space of the tour, are the immaterial envelope of a subjugation concealed behind the appearance of consensus: the scrutiny and applause of the public denote appropriation and depersonalization.

It is extraordinary to observe how the phenomenon of human exposition has persisted since the Second World War and into the twenty first century, recurring in a multiplicity of guises. It still exerts a remarkable attraction, not to say fascination, in the world of communications, entertainment and the experimental performing arts. One is obliged to conclude that there is a mechanism profoundly rooted in human behaviour which pursues the possession and reification of the body of the ‘other’. This mechanism is certainly responsible for such events as the so-called ‘human zoos’ or living human expositions and ethnic shows put on in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it appears to go on producing a broad range of acts, gestures, movements, inventions and productions which throng the current spheres of communications, art, entertainment, cultural dissemination and political action.

III.

The first evidence for this can be very easily found in an article on Wikipedia.fr which lists some most unexpected forms of “contemporary human zoos”.

The examples given enable us to outline a history of the phenomenon which has clearly not yet come to an end. In fact we are obliged to view it in the long term and to seek deep-lying reasons, rooted in human nature, which govern our relations with the ‘other’ and determine hierarchies of superior and inferior, dominant and dominated, actor and acted.

The first exposition to be held in post-war Europe, the Brussels Expo of 1958, was planned as a celebration of the renewed concord between peoples, in the spirit of peace, well-being and development, with the promise of putting atomic energy to pacific uses. In this spectacular event, for which contemporary film footage shows swarming human

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11 See for example the film by Pascal Legrand, Une visite à l’Expo 58 de Bruxelles, both parts accessible on YouTube, last accessed 1 June 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9fZakfKI64 and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_USRYSrri48A.
being conveyed by all sorts of means of transport to the various national pavilions, a substantial space was set aside for the Belgian Congo. In the relevant pavilion – boasting no less than seven exhibitions featuring various aspects of life in the colony – a Congolese village had been set up: exactly as in the previous universal expositions held in Belgium in 1885, 1894, 1897, 1910, 1913, 1930 and 1935,\(^{12}\) as if the clock had been put back. Complete with natives in flesh and blood, including *watussi* dancers from what was still (although not for long) a Belgian colony, the village stood as tangible evidence that European colonialism in Africa – in Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Congo, South Africa, Rhodesia – was still alive and well, conveniently excluding any hint of a crisis that by this time was in fact inexorable. Without making the slightest reference to the conflicts then in course between the Belgian colonialists and the *hutu* and *tutsi* ethnic groups, a version of the reality was coolly presented in a context of teeming and uncontainable exaltation of Western progress in the interests of a pacific reconversion of nuclear energy. However, the persistence of such a relic of the imperialist past in the years of post-war reconstruction could not fail to appear in strident contrast with events characterising the independence movements, revolts, wars of liberation and de-colonialization processes in progress in Africa. When word got around that the Africans in the village were being treated in a totally unacceptable manner, there were strong protests at the diplomatic level. The reports of visitors throwing bananas and peanuts to the villagers merely repeated what had gone on in practically all the “human zoos” during the previous hundred years; at the colonial exposition of Tervuren in 1897 it had been necessary to take official measures and put up a sign proclaiming: “It is forbidden to give food to the Blacks, they are properly fed”.\(^{13}\) The official complaints obliged the organizers to dismantle the village and repatriate the natives before the end of the Expo. But the positive effect of the protest actions does little to diminish our incredulity at the persistence of practices which one would have thought were a thing of the past, even though in his literary reconstruction of the episode Jonathan Coe has acutely identified the affinity with aspects, roles, figures and functions to be found in all the pavilions and, when it comes down to it, with the very essence of the Expo, conceived as a gigantic living ethno-exposition.\(^{14}\)

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14 See the excerpt from Jonathan Coe quoted at the outset.
However, it would be a grave mistake to think that this episode in Brussels in 1958 marked the swansong of human ethno-expositions. A rapid overview shows that there have been many subsequent cases of expositions, albeit laying claim to ‘progressist’ and ‘humanitarian’ aims, behind which it is not difficult to recognize the sinister imprint of ‘human zoos’, and indeed some of which have actually been stigmatised as such by public opinion.

In 1994, for example, in a nature reserve called “Planète sauvage” at Port-Saint-Père, near Nantes in France, an African village was erected, based on an original in the Ivory Coast. Sponsored by a confectionery firm, it was styled “Bamboula Village” using the name of the biscuits it was designed to publicise (unwitting heirs of the “assabesi” created in 1884 by a Turin-based confectioner’s as souvenirs of the Africans displayed in the Turin Exposition of 1884). Some 25 men, women and children from the Ivory Coast were housed in the village and employed to perform dances and ceremonies in traditional costumes, and the public were not denied the cheap thrill of seeing young women dancing bare-breasted. The guidebook, printed in thousands of copies, betrays the organizers’ intentions, which were in no way different to those of the impresarios of ethno-expositions dating back a hundred years and more: “the Bamboula village, built by the people themselves, is protected by fetishes who defend the entrance to the sacred wood. This mud village with its round huts takes us to the heart of black Africa”.

In spite of the organizers’ assurances that the Africans were participating in the exposition on an entirely voluntary basis, and that an agreement stipulated with the Ivory Coast ministry for tourism ensured that they received fair treatment as employees under the ministry’s supervision, there were negative reactions at the level of public opinion, echoing the polemics that invariably accompanied this sort of initiative. In April 1994 *L’Humanité* carried the headline “Safari park transformed into a colonial exposition”, highlighting the continuity with ethno-expositional practices of a century earlier, asking indignantly whether in the dual spectacle consisting, on one hand, of Africans staging their own way of life in front of tourists, and on the other of spectators indulging in a “shocking voyeurism”, the clock was not being turned back to the era of the colonial expositions.\(^\text{15}\) A few days later the same newspaper gave vent to increasing indignation – once again without giving the scholar of ethno-expositions cause to raise an eyebrow. An article highlighted some aspects inviting criticism not only from the

Humanitarian perspective but also in terms of labor laws: the onerous and underpaid nature of the work being done by the Africans in the village, the failure to ensure the security and welfare of minors, the lack of social security payments, the limitations on personal liberties. Of course the organizers were at pains to insist on the voluntary nature of the commitments and the fact that the individuals were to be considered as “artists”, not as workers, and were in any case being paid and safeguarded according to the laws of the Ivory Coast. In the end, however, the wave of protests, together with the campaign of awareness raising carried out by unions and humanitarian organizations, succeeded in leading, if not to the village’s closure, at least to the repatriation of the Africans. The whole episode was accompanied by a wide-ranging socio-anthropological and politico-juridical reflection concerning human rights. And in any case the affair came before the French Senate, with a question bearing on a “violation of human dignity” tabled, in May 1994, by the senator Marie-Claude Beaudeau: “in order to put an end to this type

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of spectacle and ensure the respect of the French laws against racism, on the protection of minors, and the labor legislation”.

We have to add that in his reply the French justice minister, while on one hand undertaking to verify the regularity of the Africans’ situation with respect to labor laws, with particular attention to the minors, on the other sought to play down the affair and replace in a normal framework what had after all been

a manifestation organised by the authorities of the Ivory Coast in the context of touristic and cultural exchanges with France in order to promote the image of the Ivory Coast in our country. The installation of this village was also decided in view of the institution of a new direct air link between Nantes and Abidjan.

An episode that occurred some ten years later confronts us with another contemporary brand of living ethno-expositions, providing more evidence that the persistence of this type of initiative was no mere coincidence. In July 2002 eight Baaka pygmies from Cameroon were exhibited at Yvoir, in Belgium, in a park usually used for animal shows. Their presentation as an ethnic group under threat of extinction was ostensibly motivated by humanitarian concern for safeguarding human rights. Soon afterwards La Libre.be, online version of La Libre Belgique, published an article by the Belgian anthropologist Ariane Fradcourt with the title “Pygmées: du parc naturel au musée”. Having previously worked as ‘ethnographic consultant’ for a documentary made by Francis Dujardin entitled Boma-Tervuren. Le voyage (1999) featuring the exposition of 267 Congolese nationals at the Brussels World’s Fair of 1897, and Deputy director of the Service du Patrimoine Culturel et des Arts plastiques for the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Fradcourt had no hesitation in denouncing “an exposition that is degrading for its primitive and animal-based references conveying a paternalistic naïvety with racist overtones”.

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19 Beaudeau, “Atteinte au respect de la dignité humaine dans le parc Safari de Port-Père (Loire-Atlantique)”.


21 That the memory of “this barbarous and inhuman story” is still alive is seen for example in F. Duja, “267 Congolais dans un zoo humain à Bruxelles en 1897”, Afrochild.com, 1 février 2012, last accessed 1 June 2014, http://afrochild.wordpress.com/2012/02/01/267-congolais-dans-un-zoo-humain-a-bruxelles-en-1897-by-francois-duja, where one can also see, on YouTube, the whole film by Dujardin referred to in the text, last accessed 1 June 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=TkMOi_L2mVw.
An opinion campaign was organized to highlight the unacceptable material conditions, detrimental to human dignity, in which these human beings were kept. The humans on display were Baaka pygmies from Cameroon, like those exhibited at Yvoir, summer 2002. Picture coming from the article by Hugues B. Seumo “Que sont devenus les pygmées Baka exposés dans un parc animalier en Belgique en été 2002?”, *Prisma Canal International*, 12 July 2007, blog indépendant animé et dirigé par Hugues B. Seumo, <http://prisma.canalblog.com/archives/2007/01/15/3694254.html>.

justifications adopted by the organizer strike a very familiar chord: the aims of the initiative were educational, humanitarian and promoting solidarity. Yet this betrays the evident incapacity to recognize what was bound to be the degrading significance of an exposition put on in a venue usually reserved for animal shows. Both the event itself and the violent reactions it provoked seem to revive past experiences. And the fact that on this occasion the initiative was undertaken by people responsible for humanitarian projects does not make it any less serious that once again we are confronted by a case of reification of human diversity as a spectacle.

In order to appreciate that this was not in fact an isolated episode, we can recall what had happened a year earlier, again in Belgium, when an NGO, with the backing of the Direction générale pour la Coopération internationale, put on a “live exposition featuring the Masai in the Domaine des Grottes de Han, in Wallonia”. Once again the declared intention was noble and untainted by any suggestion of economic exploitation. The aim was to foster reciprocal knowledge, tolerance, the encounter of different cultures and respect for diversity. There was certainly none of the ‘animalising’ tendency detectable in Hagenbeck’s business model. Indeed, there was an attempt to contrast negative stereotypes – savage Africa and the Masai as proud warriors, hunters of the savannah and drinkers of blood – replacing them with the true image “of real Masai who have come specially from Kenya” and an “authentic Masai village”, to the point of producing positive counter-stereotypes. However, the best intentions could not cancel out the profoundly ambiguous nature of a radically Euro-centric initiative in its claim to represent the “authentic Masai culture” and make this the object of conservation and ‘musealization’. And it went even further. This conservation project did not just concern the particular ethnic group it had chosen to adopt. It formed part of a more general project concerning the conservation of a supposedly authentic and pristine ‘nature’. In the name of so-called “ecological equilibrium”, the Masai culture was elected guarantor and custodian of this virtuous condition. This culture was charged with taking on direct responsibility for ensuring sustainable and compatible forms of ethno- and eco-tourism, which would in turn contribute to the welfare of the local culture: and tant pis if this culture was invoked not in its own terms but in subordination to something from outside, extraneous and superior. In a word, the operation involved formulating programs for the humanitarian protection of the Masai, education and awareness raising among white Western tourists, affirming ideas of what is natural, typical and sustainable, having recourse to expositional artifacts steeped in ethnocentrism, exoticism and Euro-centrism.\footnote{J. C. Mullens, “Des Massaïs à Han-sur-Lesse. Du bon usage des stéréotypes en éducation interculturelle”, Antipodes, 155 (décembre 2001), available on ITECO - Centre de formation pour le développement et la solidarité internationale, last accessed 1 June 2014, http://www.iteco.be/Des-Massais-a-Han-sur-Lesse.}
In another example of enduring bad practices, with aims which were certainly less noble, a living human exhibition was set up as part of an ethno-artistic multicultural festival. This case had at least the merit of stirring up “a wave of controversy that received widespread media coverage: a global protest developed”, fuelled by the rapidity of mass media and e-mail communication, “with concern voiced by African-German organizations, rights organizations, academic associations, a Nobel Prize winner, and concerned individuals from many countries”. The occasion was a festival of African culture held at the Augsburg zoo in July 2005. Several individuals were brought from all over Africa and put on show in a fake native village in order to give the public a “taste of Africa”. Not only did anti-racist campaigners, as in the Yvoire case, protest against what was readily perceived as a revival of the ill-famed \textit{Volkschauen} so popular in nineteenth-century Germany, but anthropologists from the Max Planck Institute actively intervened in the debate. After a four-day visit making an on-the-spot enquiry, they drafted a detailed report analyzing the event in all its complexities. They concluded that the initiative, irrespective of the organizers’ intentions, replicated practices dating back to the times of German colonialism and reproposed “images dating from those times [which] contribute to contemporary exoticizing, eroticizing or stereotyping of Africans and are sometimes promoted as multiculturalism”.

The Max Planck Institute researchers concluded that they had identified forms of “marketing of cultural difference” which could be considered “incentives toward racialization”; and ended their report with words of clear condemnation: “The racialization processes facilitated by the Augsburg zoo and other zoos are not benign because they can lay the groundwork for discrimination, barriers to social mobility, persecution, and repression”.

Another variation on the living ethno-exhibition theme took place in a bizarre way at the London Zoo in August 2005. On that occasion, the purpose was didactic or, better, provocative. Paradoxically, the exhibition set out to display not otherness but common origins and identity. The protagonists were not exotic, colored savages. “Caged and barely clothed in a rocky enclosure, eight British men and women were on display beginning Friday behind a sign reading ‘Warning: Humans in their Natural Environment’”. According to the Zoo spokesman, live – white – humans were exhibited to teach zoo-goers that “the human is just another primate”.

One further example brings us to the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle. Here the “Masai Journey” exhibit, which opened in May 2007, was set up in the zoo’s permanent “African Savannah” featuring animals indigenous to the East African grasslands. An 

“African Village” was built including four Masai men as “cultural interpreters”. In this case too academics stepped into a discussion of the initiative, relating it directly to the Augsburg precedent and keeping alive a debate on twenty-first century living human ethno-exhibitions, most remarkably with the direct participation of Masai cultural representatives and the very persons taking part in the show.25

A still more recent case took place at the Zoological Gardens in Eberswalde, Berlin, in June 2010. Organized by a humanitarian association, this event was planned as an initiative in favor of the San ethnic group, “the last surviving original people”, with the aim of facilitating their smooth integration into modern life.26 Once again the


organizers adopted modalities of ethnic exhibition which were remarkably similar to the mainstream tradition of the expositions, featuring craft objects and rudimental art works, dancing and music with drums and original musical instruments, fires, religious ceremonies and the preparation of typically African foods. All this relying on the self-congratulatory philosophy, again by no means new, that it was the interests of the African protagonists which were paramount, being the first to benefit from it.

There are other examples of how the form of the living ethno-exposition has taken on a new lease of life even without such rallying calls as protection of ethnic groups facing extinction, of human rights threatened or denied, or of authentic cultures to be preserved. Instead the watchword for these initiatives has been the Western idea of ‘biodiversity’ and programs of environmental safeguarding and cultural conservation implemented by agencies and organizations like the Italian “Slow Food”. When it came to promoting traditional agricultural crops in certain regions of Africa (known as “A thousand market gardens in Africa”) in the most recent in a series of trade fairs entitled “Terra Madre”, the organizers felt obliged to exhibit representatives of the ethnic peoples in flesh and blood. For all the obvious differences with respect to the traditional ethno-expositional practices, surely we are not very far here from the missionary ethno-expositions, where clever natives capable of absorbing the instruction imparted by Europeans and of participating in a process of acculturation according to Western criteria were seen giving a public demonstration of the skills they had acquired and of their successful integration into the process of Christian civilization.

One also has to ask whether the survival of human ethno-expositions in today’s world is in fact a prerogative – even an exclusive heritage – of the European or Western community. There is some evidence suggesting that it is not, which obliges us to consider either that practices which had been invented by Europeans were assimilated and reproduced further afield or, perhaps more probably, that there exist deeper impulses which, superseding any temporal or cultural limits, inevitably force any form of power, domination or indeed business practice to subjugate, enslave and depersonalize the individual. The examples we have come across show that, in an era of mass Western tourism to exotic locations, ethno-expositions show no sign of disappearing: at most they are perhaps changing in nature. Their perpetuation is not only a matter, in Europe, of the forms we have recalled above, linked to humanitarian and eco-ethno-conservationist initiatives. They can also be reproposed, with modalities that are no less crude, precisely in those non European countries which represent the favored exotic, tropical or primitivistic locations. They reflect a tourism rich in voyeuristic impulses which do not in fact appear to have exclusively Western connotations, the heritage perhaps of an indomitable colonialism, but which seems to derive from more profound instincts.
In Thailand in November 2007, for example, women belonging to the northern ethnic group of the Karen Padaung, comprising refugees who had fled Burma in the 1980s, were put on display by Thai businessmen in a commercial show. The audience was supplied by tourist organizers and is likely to have been largely, but not exclusively, European, while the impresarios in this commercial venture were Asian. The main attraction was the physical peculiarity of the ‘long necks’, due to the traditional Padaung practice of procuring abnormally long necks in their womenfolk by the application of rings. In this case too some exponents of public opinion, but also the “Long Neck Padaung” women themselves, protested at the exploitation to which they were subjected in the villages, being forced to undergo an authentic internment in what was explicitly referred to as a “human zoo”.\(^{27}\) In spite of the public protests and even the intervention of the UN refugees agency, the economic interests at stake ensured that even in subsequent years highly debatable forms of ethno-expositional tourism continued which evidently had positive spin-offs for the local economy.

At the same time, in other parts of the world there have been other examples of living ethno-expositional practices. At a pan-African Music Festival in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo, July 2007, a group of twenty pygmy artists, including ten women and a three-month-old baby, were given one tent to share in the city’s zoo instead of hotel accommodation like all the other guest artists. Here, as they went about preparing fires and cooking their meals, they became a visitor attraction. “They are used to living in close contact with nature” was the official reply to the protests of civil rights militants, and “the organizers say the grounds of Brazzaville zoo are closer to the pygmies’ natural habitat”.\(^{28}\) In fact a pan-African cultural event failed to safeguard minority ethnic groups against exactly the kind of abuse they suffered at the hands of Western science and show business.

This kind of story can conjure up further developments and variants which may seem surprising, but are not for the scholar of ethno-expositions familiar with the great range of individual behaviour associated with these expositions, above all when it is a question of the re-appropriation of subjectivity by the humans who are exhibited and reified. In May 2008 the African independent news agency Afrol News reported initiatives by African national park administrators in Congo, Cameroon and the Central African Republic designed to provide supplementary revenue sources for marginalized human groups like Baaka pygmies. The pygmies were induced to undertake income-generating activities in the context of ecotourism projects, as tourist guides and native arts performers, becoming involved in ethno-cultural conservation schemes with native


empowerment as a collateral benefit. Actually of course the natives’ indigence begs the question of consent, and it would be hard to deny that these are contemporary, postcolonial forms of recruiting “professional savages” under the direction, in this case, of African rather than European impresarios and managers.  

A final example brings us up to the present. At the beginning of 2012 a press campaign which immediately found an echo on the Internet, becoming a global issue, denounced episodes that could be identified without hesitation with the typology of ‘human zoos’ in their most brutal guise but whose scenario – as we have already had occasion to remark – were not the European metropolises with their florid universal expositions, nor were they staged for a public of exclusively white spectators, but were set in tropical forests and were visited by people coming from all over the world. The event involved the tribe of the Jarawas, natives of the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean, under Indian rule. The Jarawas are an *adivasi* population technically classified as “Negritos” reduced to a few hundred individuals descending from an African ethnic group which inhabited these islands for millennia. However, as a consequence above all of the construction of a road system in the 1970s, contact between the Jarawas and tourists has become much more common, thanks to private tourist operators of various nationalities. In 2008 the Indian government had to adopt measures to safeguard the aborigines, prohibiting vehicle traffic and direct contacts in the settlement zones which are home to the few surviving Jarawas. In spite of these measures, mass arrivals of tourists continued, driven by the interests of the private companies, until in 2012 a news story hit the headlines. It featured a video taken by a tourist showing half-naked Jarawa women being persuaded by tourists in a Jeep to dance with the inducement of food and other offerings in what was actually styled not just a ‘human zoo’ but a “human safari”. There were of course notices such as “Don’t give any eatables to the Jarawas”, “Don’t indulge in photography, videography. Otherwise you will be liable for legal action, including seizure of camera”, but they obviously had no effect whatsoever. The local police were not only disposed to turn a blind eye but actually participated in the activities of the local organizers, and columns of vehicles were allowed to enter the settlement zones, with hundreds of tourists not only photographing and videoing the Jarawas but treating them like animals on display and curiosities, exactly as had occurred for decades in the ‘human zoos’ in the European expositions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What makes episodes of this type particularly intolerable is the fact that for some time now the Jarawas – like many other aboriginal ethnic groups in various parts of the world – have been at the center of debates and initiatives aimed at safeguarding their culture and pursuing all possible modalities of a gradual and balanced coexistence with a society subject to the pressing solicitations of globalization.

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I would like to conclude by referring to some contemporary cases of intersection between living human ethno-exhibitions and experimental performing arts. These examples show how the historical experiences of exhibiting the human body as something ‘savage’ and ‘diverse’ continue to inspire present-day artists and installation makers, suggesting a post-colonial critical re-visiting of such vestiges of the colonial world.

The first example is the traveling performance conceived and realized by Cuban-American artist, writer and academic Coco Fusco with Guillermo Gómez-Peña in a direct and explicit reference to the forms of public exhibition of savages. In *The Couple in the Cage: Guatianaui Odyssey* (1993) Fusco and Gómez-Peña exhibited themselves in a public, open-air show as caged Amerindians from an imaginary island. This dumb show, ostensibly featuring caged savage bodies, turned out to be a provocative experience between fiction and reality. The artists’ intent was to elaborate a satirical and critical commentary on the way human beings’ bodies have been treated in history as mere objects of curiosity. It was an ironic re-enactment of the imperialist practice of displaying indigenous peoples in public venues. But the street performances in North America and Europe unexpectedly made clear how many viewers misunderstood the fiction and believed the artists were real ‘savages’, giving vent to reactions ranging from curiosity and interest to wonder and overt disapproval.\(^{32}\)

The second example consists in a series of interesting installations conceived and mounted by Brett Bailey, South African playwright, designer, director, installation maker, author of iconoclastic performances which interrogate the dynamics of the post-colonial world. “Exhibit A” and “Exhibit B” are part of the *Exhibit Series* produced between 2012 and 2013 consisting of a series of composite *tableaux* or scenes such as “Trophies of Eden”, “A Place in the Sun”, “Dr Fischer’s Cabinet of Curiosities” and “The Enlightenment”. The latter features Angelo Soliman (1721-1796), who was brought as a slave from Nigeria to Vienna where he became a courtier and confidant of Maria Theresa and Emperor Joseph II.\(^{33}\) At the height of the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ his social ascent, secured by his exceptional intellectual gifts, did not save him, on his death, from ending up as an exhibit in a cabinet of natural wonders. Two centuries on, an actor lying motionless plays Soliman’s corpse in period dress. In fact Bailey stages museum-style installations of living models in static poses designed to highlight the troubled history

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33 Abbattista, *Umanità in mostra*, 69 and 414.
of European colonialism in Africa. As fellow South-African Anton Krueger, teacher of performance studies and creative writing, states:

These productions replicate and parody ethnographic spectacles of the nineteenth century, interrogating European colonial atrocities in Africa, as well as contemporary xenophobia. They consist of a series of installations housed in individual rooms that audience members enter one by one. Inside these rooms one is confronted by beautifully arranged spectacles referencing historical atrocities committed in Namibia by German speaking peoples, as well as atrocities under the Belgian and French colonial regimes in the two Congos. The ‘exhibits’ also include references to more recent incidents of European racism against migrants from Africa. The work has been both applauded and derided. In Berlin, for example, activists called it ‘a human zoo’ and protested that this was ‘the wrong way to discuss a violent colonial history’, while others have called the work ‘haunting’, praising the production for its ‘dignity’ and ‘beauty’.  


The outbursts from the general public against what were seen not as forms of art but rather as actual re-enactments of living human exhibitions prove the highly controversial nature of practices that, far from being confined to distant memory, are still capable of arousing emotions, protests and repugnance even if re-interpreted in a critical or ironical outlook – or when, as some critics have it, forcibly reproduced by white Western art directors giving orders to voiceless black actors.

To the highly controversial, contradictory, multi-faceted exhibitionary phenomena like the ones recalled here, I would like to add a final one, which is particularly apt to demonstrate how the several forms and variations of such phenomena can offer inspiration to the witty, creative vision of film-makers. The case I am alluding to is

Australian film-maker Dennis O’Rourke’s (1945-2013) documentary *Cannibal Tours* (1988), a very provocative and disturbing satire of the commercial group tour up the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea by German, Italian, and American tourists, taken as an original example of double-meaning and bi-directional living human exhibition ‘on the spot’. This episode is particularly interesting as it shows all the infatuations, ambiguities and voluntary self-exposition to deceit on the part of white, bourgeois, well-to-do Western mass tourism. The protagonists of this film are the more recent examples of the classic category of European visitors overseas under the form of the so-called ‘Third World tourism’, the twentieth-century version of human ethno-exhibitions

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Humans on Display

organized not on European soil, but directly in the exotic and savage territories of uncivilized peoples. Emotions are guaranteed when the case in point is not just 'Western tourism' overseas, but properly speaking 'Cannibal tourism', that is to say when the objects of observation are the pretended remnant of cannibalism, even if such a practice has been banned and does not survive in pacified New Guinea. But, in the words of anthropologist Edward Bruner, the tourists are there for being induced to believe. They are conscious actors of an exhibition of which they are integral part:

They seek the titillation of a vicarious brush with danger. They want to see first-hand the ultimate savage Other, with penis sheath, painted face, and spear, but only from the secure and safe vantage point of luxury tourism, and only after the disappearance of the original object. Tourism prefers the reconstructed object, and indeed, this preference for the simulacrum is the essence of postmodern tourism, where the copy is more than the original.37

Dennis O’Rourke’s documentary has re-enacted the exhibition exploring all the ambiguities of a showing off where tourists and native peoples share the script as explicit negotiators of the event.

All the stories related here are as many confirmations that not only racial, but more generally human inequalities tend everywhere to exert their influence and power through the control and manipulation of the human body. It does not matter if the final results are social practices or artistic expressions, or whether the intention is not visual and commercial exploitation but denunciation and satire. The human body and human life are still treated as objects of appropriation. When the physical bodies of human beings are set in motion under others’ control and direction, transferred elsewhere and offered up to the curious, greedy or voyeuristic sight of ‘others’, the setting may be an exhibition, a festival, a reserve, a theater, the cinema or TV: in every case the spectre of the living ethno-exhibitions, with sinister throwbacks to ‘human zoos’, rises up cruelly with a mocking sneer. *


* This text has been translated from the Italian original by Mark Weir, whom I would like to thank.