

Witness of the Century

2007

Here the usual image of the victim.

I had several avenues of thought to address the image of the victim. One of them was a phrase that I have always retained as one of those perfect landings of psychoanalytic theory on a socio-historical issue: "The Germans will never forgive the Jews for the Holocaust". It was pronounced by a Jewish psychoanalyst at the time when there were heated debates going on about placing a monument "to all the murdered Jews of Europe" at the very center of Berlin; that is, as the foundation of the new city. That monument, a labyrinth where children play at getting lost, has been in place for a couple of years now.

The following text concerns an artwork that came to be realized now, in 2007, upon the invitation of Jan-Erik Lundstrum for the Thessaloniki Biennale, although it was conceived in 2003 when the brand new concentration camp of the United States in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba came into existence. The project, as I had previously described it, is simple: a caged parrot is placed in an exhibition space and next to it a cassette player repeats three words that he is supposed to learn. The words are "Guantánamo, Guantanamera, Guantanamero".

Guantanamera is a woman from Guantánamo, Guantanamero would be the male inhabitant of Guantánamo. *Guantanamera* is also a song that everyone knows, that everyone easily associates with tropicality, and afternoon parties amongst sunny palm trees and parrots. The song is composed of some verses of José Martí, the main actor in Cuba's independence from Spain, a larger than life hero on the island, a tireless anti-imperialist revolutionary writer and poet. The song is a kind of celebration of Life with the political undertones of independence.

The parrot piece is bleak and gray, it's unbearable; it comes from thinking of the materialization of a horror that was already so palpable everywhere. The parrot is a witness to his own misery, to the misery of the cage. He is not a representation of the detainee. He is not the *image* of the victim, he is an entity whose condition becomes itself a witness to the horror. Not a proxy, not a surrogate, but a sign that speaks in many tongues about that which cannot be shown, which is essentially *suffering*. The parrot leaves the image of the victim suspended, the image that can't tell what it shows; the image that hides what it shows, or that hides what it shows *as* it is shows it.

The horror is *horror* in that it cannot be spoken, repeated, re-told, memorialized or evoked. The parrot is taught the word, the vacuous word to be parroted, the proper name of a site where Life has been turned into life; in front of our appalled and impotent eyes, again. He may learn the word and repeat it, just as we are all capable of doing. We are in constant

cohabitation with Guantánamo.

There is Murder and there is murder. Society is precisely founded on the difference between the two. Between a cage and a prison. This is the place that the camp (the outside of the city of man that is both cage and prison) blurs in front of our eyes. As grade school professor José María Capdevila would endlessly repeat to his students: “man” is nothing in essence but a continual process of differentiation from animality. And as Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben endlessly repeats as well, the inhabitant of the camp is in a paradoxical relationship to the law of men, which applies to him in no longer applying. That is, the legal use of force is unleashed on him, free of constraints, through a mechanism that is intrinsic to law (which is to suspend itself); unleashed on a body that doesn't count as anything else than its biology, its animality. The parrot is a witness to this too.

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