

## HELENA CHÁVEZ MAC GREGOR

### Apropos of *Cercanías*, a Reading of Representation

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The exhibition *Cercanías* [Outskirts] by the artist Rogelio López Cuenca that is on show at the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo is a work of criticism which, in various ways and via different works, permits us to reflect upon one of the most violent forms of domination of the West's civilizing logic: representation.

From a complex cartography of a territory consisting of symbolic centers and peripheries, López Cuenca puts together a route map of the region that relies on history, memory, Orientalism, migrations, tourism and iconic personalities to draw attention to a fabric created by policies of domination. *Cercanías* lets us focus on the territory, not as localism but as a way of exploring the epicenter of a political formation based on the epistemological and theological forms of Spanish modernity. Aesthetic and political formations that cannot extricate themselves from the Reconquest and the Conquest, and which, as the philosopher Eduardo Subirats<sup>1</sup> claims, involve a series of political, linguistic, religious, intellectual and ethnic expulsions and exclusions that we cannot overlook.

In a *mélange* recalling the labors of the archaeologist and the archivist, the work of Rogelio López Cuenca permits us to encounter, in art, a device for cultural critique that at the same time as it analyzes the conditions of possibility that prop up the system of representation in the Western world, and in particular in the Spain of today, causes its real condition to vanish. By working, on the one hand, with the obsessive compilation of images and documents, and on the other, with the repetition of signs and signifiers, López Cuenca interferes with the index of representation in order to question the supposed correspondence between what is presented, the sign or the image and its meaning. *Cercanías* may be thought of as a political act, not only due to the subject matter it addresses or the place the artist occupies as a producer, but because it works with the materials and signs of this politics in order to dismantle the logic of

representation itself. It is in this space of tension that López Cuenca's work—in which art can still be used for political ends—situates us.

## I. Representation.

Representation is undoubtedly a point of intersection in the logic of modernity, since at the same time as it constitutes a subject, and thus the forms of presentation of the object, it also determines their system of relations. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida suggests:

In the re-presentation, the present, the presentation of what is presented comes back, returns as double, effigy, image, copy, idea, as a frame of the thing available in future, in an absence of the thing, available, disposed and predisposed for, by and in the subject. *For, by* and *in*: the system of these *prepositions* marks the place of representation or of the *Vorstellung*. The *re-*marks the repetition *in, for* and *by* the subject, *a parti subjecti*, of a presence that, in another way, would be presented to the subject without depending on him or without having in him its proper place<sup>2</sup>.

The importance of representation is that it constitutes an epistemological and political form not only of perception but of situating oneself in relation to the object: *for, by* and *in*. The condition of representation marks not only the place of the “Same,” but of the “Other”. A strange duality of violence that is practiced upon the subject, from the forms of subjectivization, and to the object from the forms of representation that not only make the absent available but produce it, from the actualization of its double, as truth.

Beyond insisting on locating this connection in a specific form of modernity, which is a lengthy debate between the German and French philosophical tradition, what we can point to as regards the representation typical of this era would be, in the words of Derrida, the authority and general domination of representation:

It is the interpretation of the essence of the entity as an object of representation. All that becomes present, all that *is*, namely all that is present, is presented, all that happens is understood in the form of representation. Experience of the entity becomes essentially representation. *Representation* becomes the more general category for determining the understanding of any thing that might be of concern or interest in any relationship. All of post-Cartesian and even post-

Hegelian discourse, if not precisely modern discourse as a whole, has recourse to that category for designating the modifications of the subject in relation to an object. For this era the big question, the core question, is, then, the *value* of representation, that of its truth or appropriateness to what it represents. And even the critique of representation or at least its delimitation and its more systematic overflow—in Hegel at least—does not seem to place in question the very determination of experience as subjective, that is to say, representational<sup>3</sup>.

Following Derrida, we can posit that the problem of representation is that the subject is no longer defined in his essence as the locus and the site of its representations. He himself is determined as that which represents. As an image, copy, object that becomes present in its absence. The logic that is imprinted, then, of presence will be the experience of the thing disposed, that which is presented in a politics of visibility. And so, a feature of our time is an experience of representation. *Of, for and in* representation.

This logic of experience does not simply imprint an epistemological order but instead determines the forms of distribution and production of identities, which is always of a political order.

## II. The Representation of the “Other”.

An ever-pending task is undoubtedly that of violating these representations by renouncing any purism that hopes to accede to an essential identity in order to show its condition of production. Identities are fabrications that in a complex system of exclusions create forms of neutralization and control based on a civilizing logic that insists on sameness as a register of totality. Thus, not only representation but representation of the “Other” is presented as a space of critical endeavor and of political dismantling.

In his book *On the Postcolony* Achille Mbembe, the Cameroonian philosopher, offers a warning that must be taken into account when one seeks to address the problem of “Otherness”:

We should first remind ourselves that, as a general rule, the experience of the Other, or the *problem of the “I” of others and of human beings we perceive as foreign to us*, has almost always posed virtually insurmountable difficulties to the Western philosophical and political tradition. Whether dealing with Africa or

with other non-European worlds, this tradition long denied the existence of any “self” but its own. Each time it came to peoples different in race, language, and culture, the idea that we have, concretely and typically, the same flesh, or that, in Husserl’s words, “My flesh already has the meaning of being a flesh typical in general for us all,” became problematic. The theoretical and practical recognition of the body and flesh of “the stranger” as flesh and body just like mine, the *idea of a common human nature, a humanity shared with others*, long posed, and still poses, a problem for Western consciousness<sup>4</sup>.

The problem of the “Other” is fundamental to understanding contemporary policies of representation. It is not just a question of political forms based on “representation” typical of an era that has caused politics to disappear as a form of discord (Rancière) and that has instead instaurated a representative order from a practice of democracy that maintains abstraction and exclusion as a structure of the *demos*, but of the policies that determine the forms of distribution of functions and places for the subjects. Policies of representation in which some form part of the *demos* and others only form part on the basis of their exclusion. The forms of otherness and sameness make up a perverse system of productions in which, on the one hand, a system of domination is established based on the negation of the “Other” and, on the other, which creates a violence in which the existence of the negated, which exists despite its negation and, in many instances, in negation.

### III. Representation and Art.

The rupturing of the device of abstract inclusion and concrete exclusion is one of the interventions suggested by the work of Rogelio López Cuenca. Starting out from the obsessive compilation of images and gestures that accumulate in the press, literature, advertising, art, film and other systems for the circulating of information, López Cuenca manages to reveal, in the repetition of representation, the forms of production of the thing disposed, that which at the same time as it fixes meanings structures a reality based on the copy and mimesis.

In the case of *Gitanos de papel* [Paper Gypsies], a project realized with Elo Vega, the archive proposed is used to demonstrate how the exclusion of the gypsies is constructed from a representation of the “Other” which at the same time as it turns the features susceptible to being industrialized and commercialized into spectacle creates

the “primitive” characterization of the “Other,” on which the twin structure of desire and allergy is interwoven:

Gypsy “primitivism” has always formed part of the capitalist economy, from the accounts of Romantic travelers, the “impertinent onlookers” Mérimée, Washington Irving, etc., to today’s industry of the spectacle. The appropriation of the gypsy world by Andalusian culture (and in turn by Spanish culture) has been performed at all times under the logic of its economic profitability, and it is in such a context that, given their subaltern role in relation to the dominant society and culture, the gypsies have had no other option than to internalize the features assigned to them<sup>5</sup>.

Understood, as Mbembe suggests, in a more general way, colonialism is a power relation based on violence, and in that respect it is an epistemic logic that affects the very terrain of enunciation.

It is not my intention, here, to enter into a discussion of the colonial condition in Spain itself. What one seeks to do is to underline how, based on the extermination of the “Other,” colonial logic is not simply a historical moment that is overcome by means of pro-independence processes but is instead an epistemic logic that produces a system of signs that have been maintained in different periods of modernity and which go on determining forms of inclusion and exclusion that are propagated in terms of contemporary forms of representation.

Andalusia, an epicenter of expulsions, conquests, sackings, wars, historical erasures, repressions of memory and migrations is a territory in which the “Other” has been reduced to a vestige, to a monument, to an element of exoticism or quaintness that now, in its identity as spectacle and commodity, reveals to us the perverse dialectic between history and power that is interwoven in the representation of those who are superfluous in the calculation of the parts: gypsies, Arabs, Africans.

All of them form part of the representation of the region, inasmuch as a specific character is imparted, one that is quaint, happy and exotic but still within the bounds of sameness. In the colonial system the “Other” is characterized by an obscene and grotesque excess. As Mbembe claims in his critique of the position Mikhail Bakhtin accords to such concepts, these two elements are intrinsic to any system of domination, as well as to the media by which these systems are confirmed or deconstructed. Hence, the body and the personality of the “Other” are represented by categories of the monstrous—forever mad, passionate, sexual and violent. It is the fear

and thus the fantasy of a Western rationality that dreams of the obscene as freedom from the repression this system brings with it. That which borders on the boundaries between the human and the animal, what fascinates and thereby terrifies.

In the realm of images, the role of the gypsies is passive, too: the gypsy is photographed, he never photographs. He doesn't look, he is looked at. The photograph is the direct reflection of one society that never acts upon another, that uses images of the other as a warning signal about where the borderline of normality, of the acceptable, is; a boundary behind which are invariably found, as we have seen, references to the natural, the wild and instinctual, bestiality, promiscuity, incest, cannibalism—all the long list of taboos that define “us,” those on “this side of the line,” as a “civilized” community<sup>6</sup>.

The terror caused by the Arab world is also born of the fascination and projection of the Western world, of a negative portrayal that seeks to locate the form of the terror and the forbidden in the “Other”. In projects like *El paraíso es de los extraños* [Paradise Belongs to Strangers] López Cuenca addresses the construction of the image of Arab-Islamic world in the West and videos like *Haram* (2000) or *Voyage en Orient* [Voyage to the Orient] (2000) are works which in a series of repetitions and variations dismantle the figurations that have been established in order to assimilate certain features in the dominant culture, almost always from the glorious past of the Arab-European world, and by eliminating, via the figuration and radicalization of the “Other” in barbarism, the features that cannot be assimilated in contemporary European culture.

These problems are evinced in works to do with tourism and migration, two forms that given tension to and drastically change the territory. On the one hand, the Arab past is glorified as the historical inheritance of a particular place in the forms of industrialization and commercialization concentrated in tourism, and on the other, one is afraid of the aesthetic and political change that occurs in cities and towns with African-Moslem migrations, above all in the case of Andalusia. Works like *La Alhambra sobrevivió* [The Alhambra Survived] make a perverse intervention vis-à-vis this erasure, with an installation in the style of a souvenir shop that uses the souvenir in such a way that the act of recall is not produced by the “trinket” alone but also by the counter-information scattered all around, which enables the different meanings of the same sign to be brought together in a single space.

These works do not seek to make the “Other” appear—something which is obviously aporetic—but to evince the modes in which the politics of representation are executed through a policy of domination that establishes the cartography of the real in homogeneous formations that perpetuate the systems of expulsion and conclusion.

To be sure, López Cuenca’s work does not make for pleasure. One hopes that whoever decides to approach puts the actual system of signs into operation and is able to call into question the referent and thereby make the mobilization of signifieds possible and arrive at another production of subjectivizations and subjectivities.

*Cercanías* is a project that provides a cultural critique in which art is a device of destabilization and overspill. The territory it marks out is not that of the cartographer who attempts to describe what is and to colonize it, but that of the archaeologist who places on the surface the levels of the system of production that has made its description possible and so intervenes to transform the cartography.

**Text about exhibition *Rogelio López Cuenca. Cercanías [Outskirts]* (Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, 3 March – 15 May 2011). Translation from Spanish: Paul Hammond.**

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<sup>1</sup> See Subirats, Eduardo. “Siete tesis contra el hispanismo” in *Filosofía y tiempo final*. Madrid, Fineo, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, Jacques. “Envío” in *La desconstrucción en las fronteras de la filosofía*. Barcelona, Paidós, 1996. At <<http://www.jacquesderrida.com.ar/textos/envio.htm>>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> López Cuenca, Rogelio & Vega, Elo. *Gitanos de papel*. Jerez de la Frontera, Cajasol Obra Social, 2007, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.