

VISUAL SPECIES OF TACTILE CODE

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*"What is expressed free of camouflage would be closer to imposture than to sincerity."*¹

1.

Since "15/20 OK"², the exhibition where the system of thought that has guided his artistic project coagulated, a large part of José Maldonado's production traverses the boundaries of blindness and the questioning of our gaze. Many of his works lucidly go deep into the sphere of allegory - "vanitas" being a special interest- and its codes and difficulty of reading, addressing the baroque issue: "*Painting from the fact of vision (...) giving the insinuation of the fleeting temporality of living.*"³

The intellectual sagacity of Luis Francisco Pérez recognized, in the mid-nineties, Maldonado's early, but already mature strategy: "*We must not forget that the use of allegory as an approximate resource to a particular creation carries a notable component of interpretative will, understood not as an alternative reading, but as a reproductive element of its substance. Maldonado, following Arendt, understands that allegory must be explained before acquiring its full meaning, so it must be previously "rhetorized" in order to later acquire the natural dimension of its own universe, of its natural voice. Now, Maldonado's use of allegory is a partisan, fragmented and inconclusive use: an allegory, in short, that is honestly contemporary*"⁴.

Such contemporary honesty is also manifest in the inference that the dream of Painting - I write "Painting" with a capital letter to refer to the metaphysical condition that is so often given to it, so different from its practical and material reality - produces doctrine and blindness: representation as a problem, as blinding.⁵ In the baroque world, "*painting is a problem: the relationship with the outside world is as difficult as it will soon become for philosophy with Descartes. Even the painting I and the looking I, losing their community of point of view, become even more questionable than the Cartesian I, who believes without any doubt that, just because he thinks, he exists*"⁶

¹ Sergio Chejfec, 5. Jekyll & Jill, Zaragoza. 2019. Page 17.

² 15/20 OK. King's College Foundation. Oidor Chapel, Alcalá de Henares. 25 January- 25 February 1990. Catalogue with texts by José Manuel Costa and José Maldonado. ISBN 84-87153-13-5.

³ José M^a Valverde, *El barroco*, Ed. Montesinos, 1981. ISBN 978-84-85859-02-3, page 33.

⁴ Luis Francisco Pérez, *La melancolía del virtuoso*, in the catalogue of the exhibition *El gran teatro del mundo, de Pedro Calderón de la Barca. Version by José Maldonado*; Galería Juana Mordó, Madrid, 8 April -14 May 1994; page 4. The quotation from Hanna Arendt to which L.F.P. refers is found on pages 3 and 4 of his text: "*The allegory must be explained before it acquires meaning, a solution must be found to the riddle that is presented, so that the often laborious interpretation of allegorical figures always makes us think of solving a puzzle, even if no more ingenuity is required than the allegorical representation of death by a skeleton*".

⁵ 2 blindings was the title of Maldonado's exhibition at the Antoni Estrany Gallery in Barcelona in 1991.

⁶ J.M. VALVERDE, op. cit., page 26.

We could speak of the end of Painting in the black paintings of Malevich, Reinhardt, Rauschenberg, and in the white ones, also blind at first sight of the latter and Ryman. Two series of unfathomable black in our country come to mind, those of Darío Villalba and Gonzalo Cao. Another Darío, Darío Corbeira, states that if, as it is theorized or trivialized from time to time, Painting is dead, he works with its corpse beside him. Painting, then, only in spirit. But we also know that painting, in lower case, is like the ibis: "*Feeling its belly congested, fills its neck with water, puts its long beak up its backside and swells its belly with water, with which it purges itself, rinsing it and washing it with it*".⁷ Painting has not ceased to purge itself, and Maldonado has been contributing to that purging with his works, from the closed down altarpieces titled *Don de lágrimas* (The Gift of Tears) and his series of windows blinded to all exterior from the 1990s (the latter taken up again in the last decade), to the recent canvases of *Atlas Elipticalis* (2018). In his *Limbo* project, a quote from Beckett made this explicit: "*And there is no more; no reward, no punishment; only a series of stimuli to allow the kitten to catch its tail. And the partially purging agent? The partially purged*."⁸

This aforementioned dissociation between the looking I and the painting I brings us back to Beckett, through his commentary on Arikha's painting: "*Siege laid again to the impenetrable without. Eye and hand fevering after the unself. By the hand it unceasingly changes the eye unceasingly changed. Back and forth the gaze beating against unseeable and unmakeable. Truce for a space and the marks of what is it to be and be in face of. Those deep marks to show*".⁹ And also, about that *Limbo*, Maldonado wrote: "*The place of the conceived image occupied by the image still unmade even*".

2.

"*Art is -among so much else- a meditation between life and death, a means by which both individually and collectively human beings can be brought to contemplate with honesty the thought of their no longer being*", writes Christopher Ricks, in his indispensable study of Beckett and language. He continues as follows "*Art is as mortal as man, but it is a stay, though not triumphantly against mortality, yet enduringly against confusion or consternation about mortality*"¹⁰

"Aftermath" what awaits the human being after life. According to Catholicism, they are Death, Judgment, Hell, Glory. The "Hieroglyphics of the afterlife" by Valdés Leal - the paintings entitled "In ictu oculi" and "Finis gloriae mundi", both in Seville - show us the transience and futility of the worldly. They are magnificent paintings, but their exemplary nature seems to block any reflection, any narrative, other than that of terror and punishment so dear to the Counter-Reformation under which they were made. Let us say that it closes the matter, cancels the questions, and causes that, due to the expiration of the codes used, Painting appears to us as a language, if not dead, then rusty.

In that stay of which Ricks speaks, and in this convulsive present of ours, inhabit these new paintings by Maldonado, a renewed source of questions about the Great Tribulation, questions that have also generated a set of poems where language contracts in the tension of its unspeakable limit, in the thinking of inevitability. "Death", Deleuze writes, "is reducible neither to the negation of opposition nor the negation of limitation. It is neither limitation of mortal life by matter, nor the opposition between immortal life and matter, which gives death its nature. Rather, death is the last form of the problematic, the source of problems and questions, the mark of their persistence underneath every answer, the where? and when? which designates this (non)being where every affirmation grows"¹¹

⁷ Sebastián de COVARRUBIAS, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*. Edition by Martín de Riquer. Editorial Alta Fulla, Barcelona, 1993. ISBN: 84-86556-35-X, page 327).

⁸ In the brochure of the exhibition *Limbo*, Galerie Denise van de Velde, Aalst, Belgium, December 1997- February 1998.

⁹ Samuel BECKETT, *For Avigdor Arikha*, in *Disjecta*. John Calder Publishers Ltd. London, 1983.

¹⁰ Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993 (reprint 2011). ISBN: 0-19-282407-4. Page 107.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, quoted, in English, in C. Ricks, op. cit., p. 109. The paragraph, which Ricks does not reference and which I have not had time to locate in its English edition belongs to "Difference and Repetition".

For Juana Inés de la Cruz, the deception of the senses with false syllogisms of colours "is a foolish erroneous diligence, it is an expired eagerness and, at closer look, it is corpse, it is dust, it is shadow, it is nothing"¹². In these "Aftermath" by Maldonado the senses are not deceived; they are invited to an encounter with the vapor of light and the dread of the dark, to a rubbing that pulverizes retinal painting, that painting that enters through the eyes and gets stuck in them, without generating thought, because "if there is any impediment in the eye, the visual species cannot pass through the optic nerves to the common sense".¹³

This impediment is often the oxidation - and let us remember, with Neil Young, that rust never sleeps - of codes, which, having become customary, ideologically blind us to what we have yet to see and know. Every code has the potential presence of its possible reading. Every unknown code contains, like death, the imminence of a non-immanent knowledge. Implying a re-looking, a re-reading, Juana Inés de la Cruz's "at closer look" allows the eyes to go beyond appearances and read nothing less than the future: dust, shadow, nothingness.

In a beautiful and lucid book, Stefan Sulzer recounts his mother's reaction to Robert Ryman's paintings: "Unknowingly, she placed greater value on looking for something that was not there, than on seeing what was. So, in a move that seemed so inexplicable to her as to anyone who might have witnessed it, she ran her hand vertically from the top of the painting towards its lower rim in a slow and concentrated manner" She clearly felt how the porous surface of the paint scratched the inside of her hand."¹⁴ Her eyes, rusty from the habit of seeing pictures, sought something other than what they saw, a code unreadable to her. Her eyes blind to the illegible, she transferred her need for interpretation, for reading, from sight to touch.

In the words of Gómez de Liaño: "An image - every image - is, considered as such, a phenomenon alien to any "convertible" fickleness, because its essential nature is its statism, its immobility. Only when that image is connected with the psychic process of apprehension and with the discourse of semantic interpretation, or becomes part of that process and that discourse, can it be said to be itself and, also, something else. In other words, it is only when the image engages in a poetic process - giving this term its full breadth - that it becomes, without ceasing to be what it is physically itself, a pictorial text that must be read, that presents itself as an enigma to be deciphered".¹⁵

What cipher, what enigma, do these white paintings, these black paintings by Maldonado contain, where apparently "nothing can be seen," where immediate meaning is blinded to the eye? As Sulzer writes, white in Ryman -and in these paintings by Maldonado, also black- functions "not as a signifier, but as a condition of (in)visibility". But that (in)visibility, "at closer look" does not deny the persistence of a code, of a tacit message in the protuberances of its monochrome surfaces, which implies a change not of focus, but of reading system.

¹² So says the complete poem by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz:

"This one that you see, colourful deception,/ that, of art flaunting the primors,/ with false syllogisms of colours/ is a cautious deception of sense; / this one, in whom flattery has pretended/ to excuse the horrors of the years,/ and overcoming the rigors of time/ to triumph over old age and oblivion,/ is a vain artifice of care,/ is a delicate flower in the wind,/ is a useless shelter for the fairy tale:/ it is a foolish erring diligence,/ it is a lapsed eagerness and, well looking,/ it is corpse, it is dust, it is shadow, it is nothing."

¹³ Sebastián de COVARRUBIAS, op. cit., 399.

¹⁴ Stefan Sulzer. "The day my mother touched Robert Ryman", Edition Taube, Zurich/Stuttgart. 2016. ISBN: 978-3-9814518-7-0. Unpaginated.

¹⁵ Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, *Dalí descifrado*. Ediciones Asimétricas, Madrid. 2021. Pages 70-71.

In the Braille alphabet - an illegible script for the vast majority of sighted people, non-existent until 1825, when Goya was still alive - the blind eye transfers its function to touch, to the fingertips, which run along the rounded reliefs of the six points that make up, with their ordered variations, the code. The inversion proposed here by Maldonado - the ocular reading of a tactile code - points to a radical adjustment of the perceptive level of the eye to the abstract level of the code. It could be said that here we are witnessing a *retinal detachment*, where it would be the cornea, the skin of the eye, establishing *contact* with the code, with the protuberances of the pictorial surface, that would capture the meaning. Now tactile codes for a haptic eye, in the Braille constellations of these "Postrimerías" - in some paintings, dispersion of signs, decomposition of language; in others, the precise legibility of the code - we reread, that is, we remember, in a blink of an eye with which the world vanishes, the ultimate form of the problematic.

Perhaps José Maldonado's continuing work as a producer of aesthetic meaning - an investigation that, like his employment of the allegorical, is honestly contemporary - can be summed up in these words from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "*What watchful cares do interpose themselves betwixt your eyes and night?*"
