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Against Oblivion Aesthetic Experience. Josep Maria Cabané's Memory and Blindness

It is necessary to take the risk of exploring the past, discovering it and giving it meaning as well as drawing conclusions from it. The process is indispensable, painful and full of pitfalls.

The first pitfall is the fact that the past – both private and social – cannot be retrieved unchanged. History cannot be excavated or dusted. The very fact of recovering it, as Paul Ricoeur so aptly put it, is a kind of appropriation, which means nothing else but reshaping the past. And this means that stored up data and documents do not constitute the lowest level of memory. As Andreas Huyssen has observed, similarly to an eyewitness, each consecutive generation appropriate the past by means of “creative” memories, which gives them the impression of living the past which they never directly experienced.

Another obstacle that has to be tackled is the use of language. This is especially true in the case of mediated reception of the past, “second-hand” reception, as no language, just because it is more “realistic”, becomes immediately more real than the language which draws upon imagination. In accordance with Siegfried Krackauer's concept, if we use these two kinds of language reliably and following all the rules, then both uses are equally justified and needed, as each of them expresses a different version of the past that is complementary to the other. It is only when we make this assumption that we can discuss the foundations underlying these accounts and their attitudes towards the victims and victors.

Even though the aforementioned obstacles are nothing new within the debate on memory, one of them – the one connected with the trauma of the West, i.e. the Nazi extermination plan – is still a problem. What I have in mind here is creation of images and their use in the process of re-appropriation of the history of the Shoah, which still evokes fervent disputes leading to serious misunderstandings. Undoubtedly, some reconstructions of the Holocaust have been guilty of emotional banalisation of the past, by relying on inciting the scopophilic drive, which is so deeply rooted in our visual society. An example of such an approach is *Schindler's List*, as well as the American TV mini-series *Holocaust*. This kind of representation prompted a response and revival of the contrasting iconoclastic tradition, which in some cases falsified the tragedy and pain of

the victims: from the perspective of Claude Lanzmann and Judy Wajcman, among others, any depiction of the Holocaust, including documentaries, belies the truth about its absolute evil.

The paintings of Josep Maria Cabané – born in 1963 in Barcelona – is an extensive project governed by the imperative of attentive observation of the tragic past: the Nazi extermination of the Jews and the Spanish Civil War. Cabané bases his work on the identification of the causes of events and a sense of justice, from which there is no escape; at the same time he bears the high risk of appropriating the past through the creation of new images which enable the reanimation of memory about it. The artist's project forces viewers to define their own emotional stance and to reflect on the greatest enemy of memory, namely forgetfulness. I would like to stress here that the artist has succeeded in overcoming this obstacle without either resorting to unhealthy banality or falsifying the image of the victim.

Cabané had painted portraits for many years when he came across the writings of Primo Levi at the beginning of 2000. He experienced a profound internal shock, which many of us shared after reading this author. As a result, the artist decided to concentrate entirely on studying the barbarism of the Nazis. His study led him to re-evaluate his own ethical attitude as an artist and to devote his work entirely to the memory of the Nazi annihilation. Within the project, which has lasted ever since 2000, the Spanish Civil War constitutes the last stage of his work.

The evolution of Cabané's work began with his rejection of figurative painting techniques; he is aware that every artistic gesture in its pure form is closely linked with the acquisition of knowledge, and any knowledge is determined by ideology. For this reason, the awareness of the danger of committing falsehood resulting from the use of well-known techniques compelled him to search for his own means of expression, which would be suitable for the project's essence. His artistic gesture manifests itself here as violation of the integrity of the canvas, e.g. by hitting or tearing it or by wiping off paint or damaging the frame. Such physical aggression against the material space of a work expresses pain and anger. However, it has nothing to do with the aesthetisation of somebody else's pain or with fear in the face of death. In fact, it is easy to see that violence as a means of expression does not stem from aesthetic pretences, but rather conveys profound pathos whose source is a complex relation with history as such and the desire to regain it.

Cabané uses signs referring to space and events. These are usually topographical signs, or even complete maps, but not only, as the artist also makes use of names and surnames. In his first works, Cabané drew the contours of Jewish ghettos. In subsequent works, e.g. in the painting devoted to Ebensee, he copied the topography of a concentration camp engulfed by new urban development. In his works reflecting on the Spanish Civil War he outlined the river Ebro river, which marked the frontline during the Battle of the Ebro, and the line of the border formed by the Pyrenees, which the refugees had to cross. In turn, in his series of works entitled *Els noms (The Names)* he listed the names and surnames of the Catalan republicans killed in Nazi camps. Cabané employs signs used today in order to explore the past. We look at maps, we read biographies, we search for the surnames of our ancestors... We break through the thicket of signs, and these are meant to help us name and imagine the absence, which in an invisible and idiosyncratic way still very strongly affects our present.

The signs in Cabané's works do not seem familiar to us, at least not at first glance. They are unclear and contradict the assumed transparency of realism conceived of as a denotative style. Their very indeterminate presence necessitates references to historiography and records, to original and painful experiences that survived hell and have supplied us with its description. The indeterminacy of the signs appearing on Cabané's canvases in a certain way forces us to fight amnesia and oblivion, often intentional and institutionalised, and still present in our society. When the memory of history is evoked, the violence against the work of art attains a new dimension.

An example of such an effect is the series of works entitled *El Front (The Frontline, 2010-2012)* showing a long, sinusoidal cut on the canvas. The cut has been stitched up forming a scar. The title, together with a short description of the work, explains that the scar marks the line where two contingents clashed in the Battle of the Ebro, one of the bloodiest of the Spanish Civil War. It is here that the process of recovering memory begins. It is necessary to see the very location, or any other location where a bloody battle took place, in order to recognise the traces that struggle leaves behind in the earth itself. It is necessary to see the ruined villages and feel the pain of the soil, which still spews machine gun bullets and cannon shells from its viscera. It is necessary to renew the past in oneself in order to discern the pain of the canvas and its unhealed wound.

It is impossible to see the artistic power of Cabané's painting without engaging in exploring the past and recovering its memory. It is due to this power of his work that

memory turns into something more than mere intellectual cognition. Cabané's works activate a play between the senses and reasoning (conceived of in accordance with Kant's terminology), which leads to an aesthetic idea, and "what I mean by this aesthetic idea is this kind of imaginary representation which is highly thought provoking, but no single thought, i.e. concept, can be adequate, and consequently, no language can either express it entirely comprehensively or render it comprehensible."<sup>1</sup> In this way Cabané's paintings help establish a sensual and emotional relationship with intellectual knowledge of the past, due to which the past becomes more present.

In my view, the most interesting aspect of Cabané's work is that it reminds us that this presence is impossible to regain, and that the past aims to be lost in time. In *Esborrament (The Erasure, 2005)* the contours of the map showing the Warsaw ghetto drawn on a chalkboard have been erased by the artist's hand. In the polyptych *Divuit ghettos I (Eighteen Ghettos, 2008)* the plans of ghettos in Krakow, Minsk, Kielce, Łódz, Riga and Vilnius, in black on the white background, delineate a space of alienation, and the sections of the work which have been damaged by the artist's fist are marked by chipped off paint.

Another example worth mentioning here is the painting entitled *Lager III (Nazi Concentration Camp, 2006)*, where the map of the no longer existing concentration camp in Ebensee has been crossed out. At the site of the former camp a new town has been built and its dwellers react with indifference to the accusatory looks of visitors. The topographical signs of the map, such as the indication of elevation, buildings, boundaries and roads, were not drawn but engraved with a stylus in the black background. It is the plan and not the place in itself that constitutes here the only matter of memory, trying to resist the black invasion prone to the amnesia of the present aiming at oblivion. Moreover, the painting has been violated by strikes and scratches, the frame has been deprived of its corners and paint has been scraped off.

In *Els noms II (The Names II, 2007)* the painter listed the names and surnames of republican victims of Nazism, which he then cut, erased, rewrote and then erased again. Other names have almost disappeared under the traces of his punches. As in his previous works violence against the sign refers to various layers of meaning: it can immerse us in the pain of the victims, or feel the powerlessness of an individual fighting to retain memory, as well as expose the tendency to suppress the past that is still present in Spain.

The aforementioned examples allow us to understand how Cabané's project stimulates reflection on forgetfulness by its very connection to the past. It compels us not only to revise painful representation of the past in response to the questions posed by his work, but also to realise what suppression of memories is and how it works. Indeed, faced with the pain and effort that overcoming the trauma of the past consists of, some prefer to erase its traces, build upon mistakes, instead of realising them and learning from them. Negating the past is another kind of violence against the victims; it is also rejection of understanding, which can only lead to preserving conflict. The fury expressed by Cabané's destruction of his canvases and frames also draws on the aggression stemming from the wish to forget, which is still all too common in the Spanish context.

In effect, the indignation depicted as the artist's violence against his own works allows us to feel the tragedy of double barbarism: towards human beings and towards memory about them.

Let us bear in mind that the risk that Cabané took, namely the appropriation of the past, has been conducive to creating a kind of emotionality which – despite the use of such aesthetic measures as putting the colour red on black – draws on both the spirit and imagination, and for this reason it adds sensual experience to our exploration of the past. The emotions that are evoked are inseparable from the brutality of the past events as well as reflection on memory and forgetting. Due to this awareness, contact with the work leads to participation in the act of collective regaining of memory and to implementation of the irrevocable moral imperative which I mentioned above. It is only after our subjectivism has granted a new, audible voice to the victims and witnesses of barbarism that memory may be able to defy forgetfulness.

*Translated from the Polish by Ewa Kowal*

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1 Immanuel Kant, *Krytyka władzy sądzienia (Critique of the Power of Judgment)*, trans. into Polish, Jerzy Gałeccki, trans. revised by Adam Landman, Warszawa 1986, § 49, p. 242.