

SPEECH ACTS

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"Mortal, whate'er, who this forbidden path
In arms presum'st to tread, I charge thee, stand,
And tell thy name, and bus'ness in the land.
Know this, the realm of night- the Stygian shore:
My boat conveys no living bodies o'er;
(...)

The ghosts rejected are th' unhappy crew
Depriv'd of sepulchers and fun'ral due:
The boatman, Charon; those, the buried host,
He ferries over to the farther coast;
He ferries over to the farther coast;
Nor dares his transport vessel cross the waves
With such whose bones are not compos'd in graves.
A hundred years they wander on the shore;
At length, their penance done, are wafted o'er."

Virgil, *Aeneid* (trans. John Dryden)

Treno (funeral song) makes the event of death present. To put us in the presence of that event, Clemencia uses metaphors of death that are deeply rooted in Western culture: death as a frontier, as the limit of truth; and the river in itself as a passage to the other side of that limit.

These two metaphors are charged with cultural significance, as has been repeated in the history of our relation with the rites of mourning and with the history of thinking about existence and about death ever since the oldest philosophical and religious reflections.

The deafening sound of the waters of a river in spate in the shadows of the night, and the installation of three large-format screens on the opposite side of the room with images of the torrent that drown the exhibition space, submerge us in its flow and place us in between the extremes of its banks, on the frontier.

Greek mythology contains various references to the river as the only communication channel with the underworld. Virgil relates at length in his *Aeneid* how the dead cross the surging river Acheron and its banks, ferried to the other side of its shore by Charon, the ancient boatman, who took the coins that had been placed beneath their tongues. Dante follows the same story in the third canto of the *Inferno*, the first part of the *Divina Commedia*. These images have been recreated in the history of art, above all in painting, down into

the twentieth century, even permeating Christian religious iconography and its churches.

'The subject is a host who should welcome the infinite beyond his capacity to welcome'.

Emmanuel Levinas

In **Treno** the echo of a call passes from one shore to the other. 'The installation has two shores, we cannot cross, we cannot get to the other side'. 'The voices call from one side to the other', Clemencia explains.

Is it possible to cross that frontier, to reach that shore that leads to non-existence? In the middle of the river, able to see its shores, its limit, without any way of knowing what is on the other side, without even knowing whether that other side is possible: the possibility of the impossible, in death the passage to non-being.

The voices call in the middle of the torrent. The language of a funeral rite is operating at that moment to put us in the presence of the act of mourning. Perhaps mourning is an act of welcoming the other in me, a meeting. For that meeting we confront the future of our own death which brings us to the shore, the frontier where we hope for that meeting that may perhaps take place. That perhaps is taking place. That perhaps repeats itself on and on. In the frontier we hope for a meeting with our own death, a meeting in the arrival of myself.

Another image accompanies the cultural metaphor of the frontier of this river: Orpheus, the only living mortal who manages to cross death in Charon's boat in order to bring Eurydice, his love, back to this side. He loses her once more on the way back. 'What will I do without Eurydice?' C.W. Gluck's aria still asks today. This meeting – in love, in death – is marked by a mishap: there is no synchronism between departure and arrival.

Here we should recall Derrida's reflections on 'hospitality', which will be essential for thinking about the event of death and other events that are crucial for an understanding of the themes that he tackles in his many texts and lectures: love, friendship, pardon, the gift, the testimony. All intimately related to one another. The meeting in these events is the impossible itself.

The event is not only what happens, but the arriving, the arrival... Who should not be only an invited guest whom I am prepared to welcome, whom I have the capacity to welcome...

In so far as the arrival of the other exceeds me, seems bigger than my house, it will throw my home into disorder... The unexpected, unforeseeable arrival... For which there is no horizon of expectation... The arriving of the arrival falls on top of me. I insist on the verticality of the thing, because the surprise will be bound to come from on high.

(...)

Speaking is left disarmed, absolutely disarmed by that very impossibility, forsaken before the always unique, exceptional, unforeseeable arrival of the other, of the event as other... The arrival will only constitute an event there where I am not capable of welcoming him, where I welcome him precisely where I am not capable of that.

(...)

It is impossible to maintain the discourse that I maintain on verticality, on absolute *arrivance* (act of arriving, of immediate coming, of something happening) unless the act of faith has already begun. Without a certain space of faith without knowledge, beyond knowledge.

Jacques Derrida, *Certain impossible possibility of speaking the event*

Love, death, hospitality, the gift, pardon, testimony are only possible where they seem impossible. The category of perhaps, that Nietzsche was to announce for the philosophy of tomorrow.

In the frontier let silence fall in the encounter with the finitude-infinity of man. The disarmed silence in the unpredictable arrival of every event that loosens the fabric of what is possible and of what I myself can do. The secret of a promise that as such is traversed by the perhaps – the possibility of an impossibility.

The unspeakable condition of the event in language is a constant preoccupation in the work of Clemencia, which is visualised through these metaphors, as in the case of **Treno**, putting us in the situation of a substitute rite, almost invented by her, full of cultural significance.

Only if I am not always and uniquely in the act, but am assigned to a possibility and a potentiality, only if in what I experience and understand, my own life and understanding are at stake at every moment – in other words, if there is, in this sense, thought – a form of life can become, in its own facticity and thingness, *form-of-life*, in which it is not possible to isolate such a thing as a bare life.

Giorgio Agamben, *Means without end. Notes on politics*.

Since the potency of human thought cannot be activated integrally and simultaneously by a single man or by a particular community, it is necessary for there to be a multitude in the human kind through which the full potency can be achieved... The task of human kind, considered in its totality, is to incessantly activate all the potency of the intellect possible, in the first place with a view to contemplation, and, consequently, with a view to action.

Dante, *De monarchia* I, 3-4 (cited by Agamben)

The water in **Treno** keeps on flowing. The river turns red – in our imagination traces of the violence and brutality of a war that we witness and where we know that the dead are thrown into the rivers, in this case into the River Cauca in Colombia, from where these images are taken. It is 1350 km long and has a deep bed that crosses the Andes to the River Magdalena which pours its waters into the Caribbean. Hundreds and hundreds of dead thrown in with weights for them to sink in the current of this river and of so many others in the world at this same moment. It might be called the mythical river Acheron mentioned in the first century BC. A piece of clothing appears in the current – testimony to a body that wore it – that a witness collects as one recovers a lifeless body for its funeral rite, for mourning.

Every society has felt the need for burial and mourning ceremonies. The presence of death in culture is so transcendental that it is essentially what defines a culture. The way of dealing with death and its event implies a priori a concept of existence, of the form-of-life. It is at this point that death, the way it is dealt with, is conceived as political. Because what is at stake is life, or rather, the form-of-life.

Life and its form are inseparable. This debate is at the centre of politics today. These cast-offs, these bodies 'depriv'd of sepulchers and fun'ral due' were stripped – when they were alive – of the attributes of humanity, of their dignity. Of their category as beings-in-language, of beings-for-death, in their category as subject hosts of the infinite! And therefore, evidently violated in the indignity of the way they died, by the filthiness of war. Is **Treno** perhaps also, and above all, that substitute rite to give them burial and to mourn those who have died as the victims of barbarism, barbarism itself?

A mourning at the arrival of my own death, in the encounter with the other, the radically other, in me. There where I cannot welcome him, where he exceeds my capacity and where I welcome him. Mourning in the event of pardoning the unpardonable, there where I cannot pardon. Perhaps.

With *Apetitos de Familia* [Family Appetites] Clemencia leads us likewise into a ritual situation. In this instance the rite utilizes metaphors extracted as well from the common cultural patrimony of the West. The theme here is the butchering of a pig. The slaughter of a hog recalls for us the narratives of Greek and Roman mythology regarding sacrificial ceremonies in honor of Demeter, goddess of fertility and patroness of the unifying links of kinship and marriage.

The first image to appear before us is a broad one of blood filling up the entire space of the projection at the base level of the ground. Blood impregnating the earth stands as an allegorical occurrence of the eternal life-and-death cycle – the cycle of perpetual rebirth.

Such is the nature of fertility: it is the succession from one generation to another and, consequently, the link with the ancestors that is inherent to fertility and blood. This is a constituent and primary symbol of culture; from ancient times, along with animal sacrifices and slaughters, it has been a part of the ritual traditions of all peoples; and it is, moreover, the central symbol of Christian ceremonies. Sacrificial blood and death are elements of an atavistic language that speaks of the belief in a rebirth: Christ himself on the cross, and the consecration of his blood. At play here is a cult of the ancestors, which renews the promise of a common-cause cohesion for life.

The “feast” of the slaughtered swine has persisted up to our own days in the rural zones of Latin America and Europe. Such rites are performed in and by the congregation. The family – as a core emblem of union, of the notion of a people, of community – comes together on the occasion of this performance that gets replicated year after year.

As recreated in *Apetitos de familia*, the blood, the slaughtering, the extirpation of innards, the making of sausages, the scenes of familiar congregation with their physical expressions of affection, all of those are proven to be part of the western iconography of the still life. In the aesthetic treatment of this video, the use of the chiaroscuro sharpens with preciousness the emotional proximity of the piece with the tableaux of everyday home life – which is, ultimately, the locus for the still life as symbolic representation. The sound of heartbeats, which has a central role in the scene, underscores the vital pulsation of the moment as well as the intimacy of the – perchance womb-related – bond whose renewal is attempted by means of this ritual.

In *De Doble filo* [Double-Edged] we come once again face to face with performatory language at work. Performatory language – as stated already – is a constant concern in Clemencia’s work. The language that appeals to her is one that is not useful for telling, for

narrating, for describing, for theorizing; it is rather a language that functions, that makes, as it speaks: a voiceless speech. And this is because her work gravitates around the retrieval of *the event*. The event refuses to be spoken. It runs against learned knowledge, against certainty. It resists the act of "making known", as Derrida would put it. It unfolds itself within the secret, in the promise – which is the very basic principle of language – and it is always the possibility of impossibility. We cannot master the occurrence consciously and, therefore, we are not able to pronounce it..

This language meant for silence, how does it work?

That is perhaps a question that the artist asks herself over and over. What we find in the works displayed in the exhibition *Actos del habla* [Speech Acts] is something quite close to the experience of the ritual in language, and that is how I have addressed those works. This operative process of language has to do with the body, with the gesture, with repetition.

Repetition is fundamental to language. In order to have speech it is necessary to have repetition. This would be one more contradiction that is difficult for us to negotiate by way of the knowledge we have in regards to language: How can we experience *the event* – which is always exceptional and stands apart from every rule – on the bases of language? Is there for us perhaps another possibility for relating to this experience of the occurrence aside from language?

In *De doble filo* we see writing being iterated once and again – literally so – as a house is drawn on the screen, and later that house is sketched over and over on a surface of mud. This writing is displayed as a trace of the passing of a flood whose residual waters keep erasing the lines that had been drawn. Already we can see the avalanche making its appearance. We listen to the violence of nature as it demolishes. Then there is a blank space and then the sound and the image of a slash produced by the stab of a cutting edge.

There is no doubt, then, that this subject who draws with his/her body upon mud is witnessing the passage of the death of others (his/her own); confronting the ultimate loss of a habitat; standing before an unarmed and torn forsakenness (as in the gash made by the cutting edge on the screen), given the impossibility of harboring whatever comes upon him/her vertically from above and without warning: that which leaves him/her destitute, "homeless."

The experience that we are led into by means of the clues that this performatory process provides is one that cannot be assimilated on the basis of mind comprehension, of erudition, of learned knowledge. We stand before an experience that cannot be sensed but through the speech of silence. It is such *scripture* which generates a *personal experience*. And just as in *Treno* [Funereal

Song] – in the sense that they arise from the act of mourning – these end up being “*actos del habla*,” speech acts.

This *mise en presence* of the occurrence that Clemencia attempts in her video-installations is made possible and indeed effective through the use of video media, a strategy that has come to span the entire production of this artist. The fact is that in these *stage settings*– which use moving images and sound, warily handled from the bases of their profound cultural meaning and, thus, of the effects they have on our psychic life – a labor of the unconscious comes into play (in the psychoanalytic sense), which acts upon the spectators who come face to face with these works.

Audiovisual media – the one closest to filmmaking above all – is a challenge that must be addressed with a fresh analysis and included in the field of visual studies. It is a matter of interest, now – once again calling upon him in this brief text – to consult Derrida’s reflections on filmmaking. Let us quote from one of his interviews, where he speaks about filmmaking – from the perspective of the cinematograph – as a phenomenology:

Both the vision and perception of details in a film stand in direct relation with the psychoanalytical procedure. The enlargement not only enhances details; it gives access to another scene, a heterogeneous scene.. There is no equivalent for the cinematographic perception, since it happens to be the only one that is capable of making one understand, by way of the experience, that which is a psychoanalytical practice: hypnosis, fascination, identification, all of these terms and procedures are shared elements of filmmaking and psychoanalysis; and there we have the sign of an “ensemble thinking” that appears to be primordial.

The emotional proximity of the spectator, which arises in the event of personally experiencing such works, is what actually makes it possible for the pieces to have an effect upon us: the work comes into being just at the moment when an encounter takes place between the spectators and their own obsessions, their phantoms. That is where performatory speech acts upon the spectator’s present personal experience in a – so to speak – ritual situation; and that is Clemencia’s main concern. The spectators create – complete – the *apparitions* in visual images as well as sound, and those return to them as an echo (of their memories and of their unconscious.) “... Apparitions in their memories, in their bodies, in their desires (in a mode that no representation could bring about).” Within the relationship that we establish with the piece, which hangs on a return of the very self, there is an added one that is established: a relationship of belief – almost child-like, total – in whatever happens there, in that which we are “seeing.”

In *Voz /Net*, Clemencia has separated voices from the bodies that once uttered them. In this piece, which is part of *Voz/resonancias de la prisión* [Voice/Prison Resonances] – an *in situ* installation at the *Museo Nacional de Colombia*, which used to be a house of detention – fragments are gathered, phrases from conversations and monologues of Colombians serving prison terms in jails in England and Colombia. Those voices no longer belong to anyone. They have been deprived of their character as interview material, as testimonials, confessions, openings of the prisoner's "self". Throughout the ample and solitary halls of that museum, duplicated as though in a mirror by a projection on the background of the halls themselves, the passing of the visitors' bodily warmth would gently activate the voices.

Voz/Net preserves the ghostly condition of those voices. They are voices that come back in a return that resembles the journey of an echo – which is but a fragment, a final word or a concluding phrase. Much like "Echo," the nymph condemned to muteness yet allowed to repeat the final remains of what she heard from *others*. ... Computers and electronic links are themselves a media that turns the relation with voices into something phantasmagoric. Detached from any entity, save their own sounds, those voices travel through that obscure site which is located nowhere. They are indeed akin to the "self" of psychoanalysis, which is a crypt enclosed within the folds of a cortex.