Silence, echo, theory

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The echoes that Andrés Guerrero hears and shares with us here are strictly inequivalent: the one is an echo of an archival silence, the other of sensational newsflashes. The newsflash conjures more telling silences, and perhaps a film (*Biutiful* comes to mind); but the echo of such silences demands not film but theory. How so?

It is I think this repeating demand for theory that silences make that unnerves the historian whose business it is to “fill in the gaps.” Unable to do business as usual, Guerrero makes a virtue of the post-colonial state’s vice, proposing instead a hermeneutics of the gap. More precisely, a hermeneutics of the gap named “citizen.”

Guerrero now reads the repeating shadow of this gap (or is it the other way around?), found first (or last?) in the gaps of the southern archives and gaping lives of Ecuador, in his adopted home in Spain, where he too is an immigrant, albeit a naturalized one “with papers.” These “sub-Saharan” gaps or *sinpapeles* that now invisibly and visibly populate Madrid (or any other city in the north) are his neighbors on the street, are lifeless under the Atlantic or Mediterranean Sea, or rounded up in a camp. Not unlike them, here he would cross seas, plumb depths and leap over the barbed wire fences that cordon off the academic camps of historical detention, leaving a piece of his “pres- tige” hanging on the barb. And this hole in his shirt will not be filled except by the flash of “value-adding adornments.” No doubt we are to read this article as just such an adornment, just such a flash, hanging on the barb. For it is “the return of the original as an imitation to the place of origin [that] produces just such a flash.” And what is writing but the return of the original as imitation to the place of its origin? And so we are led surreptitiously to that founding gap between words and things, archives and bodies; to that gap that, can only be bridged by high-flung suspension cables and a trapeze act of interpretation.

Guerrero has sketched himself such a bridge back and forth in time and invited us to walk along the “detours of content” that his thoughts have “incorporated during the equatorial or tropical phases of their life.” The equatorial historian is now the southern anthropologist in “second-hand clothing” whose “field” is the north. What does this post-colonial anthropologist hanging at the metropolitan airport have to say? That would depend on the reader’s north or south. For my part, I will venture one or two things.

First, Guerrero’s trans-historical “flash” shares with the Heideggerians (and Benjamin) the critique of the historicist and humanist subject, in this case the citizen. As Rancière and Chakrabarty remind us, the political “principle” of this subject is the “not yet” of official liberalism and Marxism, both of which would postpone or suspend “the now” of being for a certain future. And yet it is precisely this now of being in the Benjaminian form of “bare life” that disposes *alter pares* to be administered by...
“natural citizens” or the state. It may be worth noting here that Agamben argues, against Foucault, that this bare animality of the human political subject is not modern but Aristotelian, and so it is foundational to Western bio-politics and the concept of the sovereign.

Second, if “citizen” is to be thought as the small shadow of the sovereign then “state of exception” is an inherent or immanent aspect of it. This aspect would be “historical” in the sense that its face of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, would respond to specific conditions and possibilities of being, and these conditions and possibilities in turn should be readable as a “repetition” in time and space. I take this “repetition” to be the “not yet” of our times. And yet it is precisely this repeating “not yet” that already is (a “non-degradable plastic”) that opens up history to the flash of theory.

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