

The political status of mourning: an archeology of absence

On the work "Duelos" by Clemencia Echeverri

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"Duelos": an archeology of absence

There is a stain close to the top of one of the mountains that frames the Comuna 13 in Medellín. The stain interrupts the dark green of the mountain, introducing an ocher of varying shades and appearing elongated from afar, scaly; a silent presence, from the top of the mountain it imposes itself on the vast territory of this corner of the city. This mysterious stain has been ploughed for years and the rubble of the city's constructions poured into the site. The dump trucks that empty the remains of buildings here have colored this location with earth, with stones and with ruins. The stain seeps into the mountain like a trace of something unknown; yet it is recognized by the inhabitants of the Comuna 13 in Medellín. This earthy site evokes an episode of violence from which the residents of this part of Medellín cannot free themselves. The disappearances that occurred after Operation Orión in 2002 provide the backdrop to this scar that, from the top of the mountain, accompanies the daily life of the Comuna 13 in Medellín.

Duelos evokes this stain and its hidden character of a tomb, of a holy field that we all know exists but which only endures as a mountain of rubble in an anonymous corner of the city. The work deals with a burial. Stones, soil, remains and debris make up the movement that constructs a mountain that is never seen. It evokes the sensation of the earth that fell, that falls, that hides, that buries something, but we do not know what. Until finally, through the effect of the work, we seem to have been buried in the space created by the piece. What the spectator does not expect is for this reference to be directed at an unfinished funeral, at a mourning repressed in the absence of a loved one who never returned.

Echeverri's work manages to propose an "archeology of absence" in relation to this episode. This expression is not unique to this text, it incorporates two fundamental meanings needed to develop the idea of the political status of mourning. First, the

methodological conception of historical analysis as found in Foucault's archeology of knowledge. Second, the expressions used in Lucila Quieto's work, the Argentine artist who relates this idea to the narration of forced disappearances within the context of dictatorship. The red thread of this idea is constituted in the interpretation of history as narration. That is, history as an accumulation of discontinuities and ruptures, and artistic praxis as a configuration of the search for these cracks and discontinuities in order to narrate them.

The possibilities of showing history via its cracks, of elaborating these ruptures through the language of art, is what allows us to build an archeology of absence. In the case of *Duelos*, the work presents an archeology (a search of the non-explicit strata in the case of the Escombrera of the Comuna 13 in Medellín) from an essential perspective: via a reflection on unfinished mourning and its social consequences. The very same configuration of the work seems to pose as a representation of archeology: the installation constructs three layers, or levels, of sound, while the succession of images and fragments evokes the multiple layers of soil that must be excavated to observe the cracks and ruptures within history. It is in this sense that I reflect on the political nature of this work which appeals to the awareness of the political dimension of unfulfilled grief.

The political status of mourning

What is the political dimension of grief? Can art express this political dimension? The development of mourning as a political event, that is, the rise of its significance to the level of the public sphere, provides one of the keys to answering the question of how to construct a language capable of expressing the pain of others. The way in which art answers this question forms the focus of interest in the following reflection and, in a specific manner, the way in which the work *Duelos* by Clemencia Echeverri approaches the problem. Clearly, the problematization of the political status of mourning occurs within the context of enforced disappearances in socio-political conflicts, in which uncertainty about the whereabouts of the body of the disappeared person prevents the act of mourning and perpetuates the personal tragedy. This state of uncertainty throws the lives of the mourners of this unfulfilled grief into a state of permanent anxiety: there is failure in their lives, they cannot develop their life project, they lose possibilities of

participation and empowerment in the public sphere as their time becomes frozen in their waiting for a response that doesn't arrive.

This topic, however, is not new: in the history of Western thought such loss is embodied in the figure of Antigone. In Sophocles's tragedy, the tragic destiny of Antigone is shown as a conflict between social norms and the private act: Antigone embodies the contradiction that I wish to raise in the case of unfinished mourning when she rebuffs King Creon of Thebes's order to deny her brother Polyneices a burial and instead throws him out of the city, where his body would be devoured by scavengers and dogs. By ignoring this order, Antigone embodies the power of private morality, that is, the law of nature, the mystery of the earth, understood as pathos, the law that dictates necessity, the private moral act. This is radically repressed by the sovereignty of the social law embodied by the figure of King Creon, thus presenting a contradiction that throws the lives of the subjects into a kind of liminal life of social abjection. Displaced from the normative place of society, these lives constitute part of what Echeverri's work locates and it is from here that the political dimension of mourning opens up through the piece.

The denial of the funeral as dictated by the King serves as a model for understanding the complexity surrounding the political suppression of mourning for the bodies of the disappeared. Taking a look at Antigone's motif allows us to outline the social model of mourning present in *Duelos*. Antigone's punishment of being buried alive for her determination to contradict the social norm and give her brother funeral honors, as well as her decision to commit suicide to avoid suffering, frames the contradiction between the individual and society that determines the existence of the relatives of those who never returned home. This contradiction is latent in the unfinished mourning of the relatives of the disappeared, since the uncertainty of personal tragedy is mediated by the complexity of the social context. Their lives are then relegated to liminality as they are excluded from social dynamics, and their roles become analogous to the two options embodied by Antigone: death in life (the punishment of being buried alive) or the social invisibility (suicide) of these tragedies. Hence the need to recognize the political character of mourning: the question of the pain of others and the way of narrating it so that it transcends the sphere of the private is the question that engages artistic praxis in

relation to this social phenomenon. It is within this framework that the work of Clemencia Echeverri reaches one of its multiple meanings.

Butler develops the argument that the most humane way to become human is perhaps to recognize the vulnerability of one's own body. Butler develops this intuition from the structure of pain or loss, not in the form of individual tragedy, but in its political dimension. In this sense, one of the central elements pursued by Echeverri's work arises in the construction of a language that allows for the expression of the experiences of loss. What is important about this is that the language that expresses such loss reaches an objective form that enables the issue of mourning to reach a political level; in other words, it is not restricted to mere complaint or the subjective display of the pain of loss.

According to Butler, mourning allows us to elaborate "in a complex way the sense of the political community", while it is the state of loss that allows the subject to become aware of their own vulnerability. This awareness of one's own vulnerability allows us to elaborate the language with which tragedy is expressed not merely in a logical way, but also as traversed by emotion and by the aesthetic capacity of individuals. It is within this context that Butler states in the book *Precarious Life. The power of mourning and violence* (2004) that "Grief teaches us submission, which dominates our relationship with others in a way that we can't always recount or explain" (p. 40). This uncertainty of expression is not captured by legal language or socially regulated language. Subjects can be recognized through legal language and they must even assert their rights in front of such institutions, but this language does not exhaust their identity, nor their pain.

The meaning of this distinction in modes of language brings into play the element that art develops when faced with the expression of the pain of others. Art creates an emotional but at the same time objective language that reconstructs the narration of the personal tragedy of the victims of violence in different contexts, and only is it in this way that the experience reaches a political level. This provides, therefore, a way of constructing an expressive language (and not one of scientific logic) capable of expressing the somatic or mimetic (non-rational) level of trauma through art. And this is the aspect that gives meaning to the idea of an archeology of absence: art pierces the layers of a social phenomenon so complex and painful as that of forced disappearance by means of the construction of an aesthetic language.

This form of expression does not work through the definition or definitive exposure of the social motive, but enhances the multiple cracks found in the memory that reconstructs this particular past. More specifically, the work *Duelos* locates the particular memories of the disappearances of the Escombrera of the Comuna 13 in Medellin. It does so by evoking impossible images and dynamizing through image and sound the memory that slips away as time stands still in the frozen lives of the survivors of the tragedy. It brings about a time that has been discontinuous since the moment of the disappearance. A time suspended in the impossibility of closing the cycle of death. A time that cannot be narrated progressively, but which requires archaeological excavation: a revision in layers, an attempt to delve into the accumulated strata of soil and debris that have for years buried the possibility of elaborating the mourning of bodies that perhaps rest therein.

Dissonant expression: a language for the pain of others

Mourning is, in cases of forced disappearance, an impossible image. It represents a labor that can only be assumed through fiction. The language of *Duelos* is an evocative language in which clarity rejects expression through logical concepts and arguments. It is here that we find the fleeting and fragmentary character of the images of the piece and the dissonance introduced by the sound of the soil falling, burying; of the voices that disappear in the abstraction of their tones; in the funeral song that from the lowest tones of the composition peeks between layer and layer of sound to form a constellation in which one or several truths appear as fiction.

The same can be said not only of the images that make up the video installation, but also the play on sound as it is distributed throughout the space. Divided into three levels, it invades the rhythm of the images and dissonantly introduces testimonies articulated via distorted voices. The dissonance that is presented in the work emphasizes a break in any potentially harmonious narration (or logical order with which the story might be narrated), thus locating us on a previously unexperienced level in the day-to-day of human experience: it presents an understanding of history from a fragmentary and disparate perspective. The importance of sound as a counterpoint to the image lies in the construction of “dissonant thought”, that is, as a way of assuming and narrating the

facts of history outside of mere logical narration that always seeks order and identity. The motifs of Echeverri's work install and configure just such a status in which the facts of history appear fictional, that is to say, as continuously variable narrations. In this way, such versions negate any logical reconciliation of the tragedy, instead exhibiting it with all its radical contradictions. Like the motif of Antigone.

It is in the dissonance of the works where the truth appears, as Theodor Adorno indeed affirms. In the breaking of the harmony that the piece introduces, the historical crack that serves as its motif opens up. And it is this very breaking of harmony through the dissonance of image and sound (so characteristic of Echeverri's work) in which the motif emerges and manages to connect the viewer with the most complex level of the historical episode through aesthetic experience. Yet communication with the viewer remains wanting. Instead we experience a communion through the most basic level of human experience, namely on an aesthetic level. The mimetic status of the body with its feelings, the vibration of the image of the soil, the movement of the avalanche and the stones that roll through the middle of the dark room, evoked by way of sound and images presented in a fragmentary rhythm. The expression here embodies dissonance, the element that makes possible a language that is a memento of the motif of the work. In this way, it is not the content itself that is created (which in this case would be associated with the Escombrera of the Comuna 13 in Medellín), but the language of the work that places the viewer in a fictitious space in which, through simulation, embodies the situation that the work evokes.

Perhaps the critical power of political art, like the work of Echeverri, is that the least important element is the punctuality of its historical motive. Language rises through the work to penetrate the viewer in such a way that, in the middle of the installation, the latter goes through a kind of mourning or "burial" without realizing it. This is done in a manner analogous to the experience of the relatives of those who disappeared in the Escombrera of the Comuna 13 in Medellín. These people live an experience of mourning that is suspended in the deployment of their daily lives, some without even knowing it. It is only here then that the fact or historical reason from which *Duelos* departs is narrated in such a way that it allows for the multiple layers that make up this social tragedy not to be reified through the language that names it. On the contrary, the work

names that which has no name. It moves within this contradiction: the historical motive only manages to appear in a fleeting manner through the layers that the work weaves between sound and image. In other words, the viewer isn't the recipient of a narrative thread about a particular event. Instead the work constructs a language in which the viewer becomes aesthetically immersed in an experience of uncertainty and emptiness, of waiting for something to happen that never does happen.

This is the moment that allows us to see the effect of the aesthetic experience: the work opens the possibility of a non-logical-discursive language through which the viewer explores experience on a mimetic level. Art constructs and displays this gestural or pre-linguistic level of language. The gestural level of language, says Kristeva, has a function that is not only expressive or communicative, but also productive. And it is in this productive capacity where the power of the work is located. The anthropological element of the structure of language expresses a form of subjectivity that is not separated from its "interdependence" with nature, that is, its constitutive relationship with the body. This refers to the "other" of reason through a language that is not based on the principle of the identity of logical-scientific reason. As mentioned above, this is the element that allows man to become aware of his own vulnerability and of the fragility of his own existence. The expression of this moment is that which embodies the plasticity of artistic language.

The language of art is not communicative but evocative. The contradiction that the work opens up in its "communicative" moment is a moment without speech, or a moment of silence, that mimics the historical motif from which the work departs. It is not a transcript of the facts. It is its trace located in the space that the work installs. It is about the power of the anthropological foundation of language elaborated by artistic practice to evoke or mimic a historical motif. This mimesis does not communicate a message through the material, but rather evokes a memory, allowing the spectator to connect his own experience with the experience of others. Redemption remains absent; communion is present. By means of its form the work opens up a space in which the mimetic moment reveals the gestural or pre-discursive level of language, allowing, in the case of *Duelos*, for a dissonance established by image and sound to weave a network

through which the viewer's experience is tied to this motif, instead of historical reason being the only element cited by the work.

This is the effect that enhances the political content of the work and which facilitates a reflection on the social character of grief and thus allows it to take on its full meaning. Indeed it is the recognition within the public sphere of the pain of the other that provides the decisive step for the social construction of dialogue. This is an acknowledgment that does not nullify the cracks nor the particularities of the tragic experience, but that is capable of recognizing that the liminality of these subjects (as I have indicated with Butler's concept) is the face that challenges, and that via this gaze it is possible to recognize one's own vulnerability. Only then is the tragic experience of the other not alien. At this point, the aesthetic converges with the ethical and political elements of the existence of the subjects in society. Therefore the tension that the aesthetic experience of the work introduces through a language that elaborates the pain of the other allows us to create a kind of bridge to understanding unfinished grief not as a particular tragedy, but as a social issue. The absence that marks the liminal existence of the victims of an episode like that of the Escombrera of the Comuna 13 in Medellín (and many others) demands not only our attention but also multiple approaches, in order to erect the impossible image of this episode and write the stories that the stain on the top of the mountain represents. Only is it with the constant re-elaboration of this reality that the possibility of opening the way to an elaboration of the trauma of those who feature in these episodes in their radical particularity becomes tangible. *Duelos* embodies this task.

Literature

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