

Replicating and Inverting the Ritual: Digressions on Holy Week in Andalusia

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In *Coreografías para la salvación* (*Choreographies for Salvation*), Pilar Albarracín pursues her artistic concerns through the details of the world of *cofradías* — the confraternities of Seville’s Holy Week processions — and through social inversion, two themes that have previously been present in her work. Indeed, when asked what prompted her to tackle this latest project, she tells us that she is aiming to go “back to her roots”, both her social roots — the rituals and choreographies of Andalusian vernacular culture expressed in festive activity: Holy Week, bullfighting, flamenco — and also her artistic roots; hence she is once again creating inversions, of women, the dialectic between order and indeterminacy, and a return to the questioning of the predominant aesthetic and symbolic references of her social world.

In this case we are presented with three disparate though related ventures: the installation of the inverted *paso* or processional float; the interplay of photographs of sacred images of women (Virgins and other female Saints, some of whom are the object of processional cults in Ceutí); and the combination of large-scale photographs and a video installation that direct their gaze towards the world of the *costaleros*, the men who carry the processional floats in the city of Seville and other places in Andalusia. So the connection lies in the fact that ritual is the axis running through this artistic project. It is therefore a proposal that connects up with other previous ones, such as *Recuerdos de España* (*Memories of Spain*, 2008-2010),* in that it is based on a ritual exported ad nauseam — on that occasion, flamenco; this time, Holy Week — and in the artist’s attitude: forcing viewers to be interpreters, from their own perspective, of meanings, values and expressions that have been exported in a falsified form, and putting them in a position to discover the complexity and the rich multiplicity of meaning that they nevertheless contain.

Rituals are expressive forms of social action, through which the fundamental values and meanings of a society, and the system of social and power relations that identify and produce them, are brought into play, in a new perspective (from being reinforced to being questioned). Ritual is performative action, a form of “doing by saying”, which transmutes the ordinary into the extraordinary, in a new idiom. Contrary to popular opinion, the strength of rituals lies in their adaptability; in other words, in their ability to absorb, create and reproduce new social models, the expectations of those involved,

their concerns. On this basis, Holy Week in Seville, the example of the Andalusian festivity that is the object of the exhibition, cannot be conceived solely according to the historical and cultural assumptions of the past, but also, and above all, it must be understood in terms of its intimate connection with Andalusia as it is in the present. There is therefore every justification for presenting it as an object for reflection in this show. The boldness of this approach lies in the fact that Pilar is also once again reflecting — and making us reflect — on a highly stereotyped ritual, with the object of discovering new realities under its surface, those those emanate from the artist's skin, from her memory, from her emotions and intuitions — precisely that sensory, hypnoetic memory that is shaped particularly strongly in childhood and in ritual contexts, and that she modestly reveals to us through the exhibition.

Given that the Renaissance concept of art was a figurative replication of nature, and that rituals are a culturally coded dramatisation of social life, replicating the contemporary world, we might conclude that Pilar Albarracín's aim is to replicate — and also invert — the Andalusian ritual in order to generate, not a world that reflects it, but a new level of experience: that of viewers/interpreters who find themselves obliged to rethink their world, to reexamine their aesthetic, religious and social experiences, both emotionally and intellectually. That, I think, is where the expressive power of this exhibition lies. What is most surprising about it, however, is that her project is not the result of a shrewd process of intellectual analysis, but of intuition (“I sense things that I find interesting”), arising from her ordinary experience of the world, and then she applies herself to creating expressive devices that can provide an outlet for that initial impulse, which is emotional rather than rational.

It is an admirable plan: when she discovers elements that she finds particularly powerful, worth knowing, or at least questioning, she sets about producing a new creation that can “change the way we look”, or at least “open our eyes”. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz used to say that culture is a symbolic system, a set of meanings articulated to create a social world that is only accessible to ethnographers capable of gradually deciphering them, in the way one peels away the layers of an onion. The result of this exercise is not the kind of anthropology that can “answer our deepest questions”, but one that helps to “make available to us answers that others [...] have given”.¹ In other words, Pilar Albarracín is not attempting to provide a definitive

¹ Geertz, Clifford: “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”. In Geertz: *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York, 1973, Basic Books: 3-30.

reading of the underlying meanings of Holy Week in Seville, an intellectual task that would be beyond her aspirations, and indeed the requirements of artistic endeavour; what she is doing is to put them in a new light, so that the viewer reconsiders them, the questions multiply and the answers remain open in a permanent dialogue: a much more modest enterprise. If, as Max Weber said, human beings are enmeshed in webs of meaning that they themselves have woven, when we confront Pilar Albarracín's work we find ourselves faced with a disquieting exegete of that network of meanings, a hermeneut, from the street, who does not confine herself to interpretation — far from it — but has the ability to create a new discourse that establishes a dialogue with the original and inverts and reformulates it by replicating it. We must admit that this is a thoroughly political enterprise.

In *Capricho (Caprice)*,* far from presenting a (satanic) countertheory to Christian discourse and values, Pilar Albarracín is content to create a unsettling image. First I want to stress that an inverted *paso* (processional float) does not have to violate Christian symbolism. On the contrary, we could imagine that it reinforces it: god in heaven descending to tread the earth, god condemned and sacrificed. In this sense, we must not forget that the Christian myth of Jesus's sacrifice is in itself a complete inversion: god made man, the almighty dragged to his pain and suffering. The focal point of the installation is the top of the cross, which is touching the ground and seems to be trying to wound it. Here the play of inversions has various aspects: the mobile, dynamic architecture of a processional *paso* is turned into a static sculpture; up and down are reversed, without losing the splendour and solemnity of the usual ritual forms: a curved float in dark wood, flamboyant seven-branched tree candelabra with glass shades, a mound of red carnations, velvet skirts that conceal and also caress the wooden structure of the float. What is grave and weighty becomes as light as the step of a ballerina. And the most striking thing is that Pilar uses the tactics of popular religiosity — which she knows from their deep-rooted presence in Andalusian society — as raw material for her intuition, but on a new scale, since inverting figures of saints is a traditional way of obliging sacred beings to look after those who pray to them (and invert them). In short, her respect for the religious forms of her social world allows her to play with the formal and symbolic inversion of a iconic reference central to Andalusian culture — the cross — in an unorthodox but socially well-established gesture. In other words, one has the impression that Pilar *believes* in the Christian god (in God), and that she either wishes to draw His attention to a bewildering present and

an uncertain future, or else she wants to condemn society's current relationship with Him: the abuses that are committed, the inappropriate use of His word, the way the message is emptied of doctrinal content, the excessive ritualisation of our dealings with the divine.

The anthropocentrism characteristic of the prevailing worldview and patterns of behaviour in Andalusia is expressed particularly strongly in relation to sacred images, as is clearly evident in the collection of photographs of images of the Virgin and female saints entitled *Virgenes a pie (Standing Virgins)*.^{*} The Andalusian anthropologist Isidoro Moreno expresses it thus: “from being sacred symbols, representations of remote beings, the Images become personalised, individualised figures, which are not interchangeable and are humanised, yet without ceasing to be religious Images.”² This is why they are dressed and solemnly prepared for the most splendid festivity, and are imagined in everyday human situations in the most natural way — and that naturalness reinforces their supernatural power. This is the anthropocentrism that Pilar has known since childhood and expresses in this set of photographs: the *human* relations between women grieving over the death of loved one, consoling each other through a bond of communication, as mothers, companions, sisters, neighbours, wives, friends or girlfriends of the brother, husband, father, neighbour, friend or boyfriend. What is arresting — I would say sacred — about these images is their immediacy, their proximity, the way in which, despite their supernatural character, they express the down-to-earth nature of the grief brought on by death, the heart-rending silence of the deceased. This paradox forms part of the artist's hypnoetic memory, since it belongs to the web of meanings through which she has looked at and understood the world since childhood. Hence her determination to show them brought “down to earth”, at ground level (the ground again), to knock them off their pedestals. She herself acknowledges that looking at one of these images in a local embroidery shop made a great impression on her, and this sight sparked off a fascination which gave rise to the idea of this collection of photographs of holy women in communication, seeking each other with their eyes, touching each other, sighing to heaven, those women.

However, Andalusia's characteristic ways of understanding the divine are not all we can discover through Pilar Albarracín's eyes. Her recurrent personal concerns, which have appeared over and over again during her career as an artist, return once more: I refer to

² Moreno Navarro, Isidoro: “La Semana Santa en la cultura andaluza”. In Moreno Navarro, Isidoro (coord.): *La Semana Santa como Patrimonio Cultural de Andalucía*; Sevilla, Tartessos, 2006, p. 15.

the presence of women, women as mediators, women as an invisible mesh that holds life together day by day. Women — and here is another antithesis — in relation to whom one presupposes the presence of the man who is no longer there and whose silence becomes eloquence through the women's dialogue. And in order to understand these images in all their profundity we must bear in mind another of the keys to Andalusian popular religiosity: the figure of Mary, promoted as the *Mediatrix* from Baroque Counter-Reformation Catholicism onwards, but already revered in the Mediterranean area for her characteristic matrifocality. In this series of photographs, therefore, the sacred and the profane are presented as indissolubly linked. Pilar has taken these articulated religious effigies, and like a steward of a Holy Week confraternity, manipulates them to produce a vivid effect, a sense of communication, of human grief for the loss of a son. She decontextualises them from their sacred setting to enhance the religious effect of contemplating their earthliness, with the aim of reproducing the Baroque humanisation of the sacred, a quintessentially Andalusian theme.

The configuration devoted to the men who carry the Holy Week processional floats, in *Coreografías para la salvación*,* places us in a very particular social world, that of the bearers whose anonymous, egalitarian efforts achieve the cohesive effect of the movement of the floats. Here, once again, the inherent contradictions of the ritual are demonstrated. Pilar plays with scenes from the past: the *capataces* (overseers) from the docks of Seville, and the meat, fruit and fish markets that organised and ran teams of bearers, passing seamlessly from their despised working world into the ritual sphere, in return for payment. Brute strength was temporarily placed in the service of the city's ritual drama. Nowadays those involved come from different walks of life: doctors, builders, lawyers, students, salesmen..., people from a whole range of backgrounds who are attracted by the physical effort and the ordeal of carrying the float, and especially by the social traditions commonly associated with it: the camaraderie, the meeting places, the shared meals... They want to lose their everyday identity and recover it behind a mask that makes them the leading actors in a majestic ritual drama, where they are able to create a collective experience.

The customs and practices of the new overseers, who no longer come from the kind of background they once did, are still the same: in the *igualá* (the process of "equalising" the bearers), the overseer, using just his visual acumen, measures to the millimetre the distance from the ground to the seventh cervical vertebra of those who are to support the

frame. It is deeply impressive to observe the calm submissiveness of people who in their ordinary lives would not put up with someone subjecting their bodies to such cold, calculating appraisal. It is the overseer who equalises the bodies of individuals who occupy such varied — and even opposing — social positions in everyday life, who irons out the discontinuities and disparities of the social structure. He is the one who calls them to order and articulates the brute mass that carries the float, an order that enables the disparate will of each individual to be temporarily suppressed and converge in a common, unanimous, rhythmic sacrifice. Pilar wants to show us, to make us see, the total absorption of these men who have surrendered themselves to a common task. They do not seem to be of this world, she is trying to tell us. They are the best possible metaphor for what the sociologist Jesús Ibáñez called “subjected subjects”, shackled in their girdles, struggling with the beam, locked up in their heavy wooden prison. Nowadays, moreover, the work involved in the ritual is no longer a mere extension of the job of teams of *stevedores* carrying loads in docks or warehouses, and the bodies of the bearers are not inured to the friction of the beam on their necks and to the physical effort, since they have to rehearse periodically before setting out on the procession itself.

Pilar Albarracín directs our gaze to that physical world, so different from the brilliant spectacle of the visible part of the ritual — the dazzling floats, the powerful images, the music, the scents and the lights, the floral decorations; that underworld which needs to be discovered and which, during the procession, can only be sensed. She wants to introduce us to some of the social customs that are also ritualised, such as the meeting of the bearers in the *igualá* (“equalisation”), the rehearsal, that backstage world of wholly profane knowledge, relationships and meanings which also help to uphold Holy Week, along with many others, and work behind the scenes to create the sumptuous product that less experienced viewers tend to perceive from the *outside*. It is that world of preparing the ritual that Pilar wants to make us look at: the preparation of the clothes and the *costal* (the headdress with a neck pad), the preliminary meetings, the recovery of social bonds of primordial solidarity — a mere phantom nowadays, perhaps — whose point of convergence is a Durkheimian collective consciousness.

But what she is attempting to achieve in the video is, if anything, even more profound. Film enables us to visualise the movement, the dance. She is greatly struck by the unanimity of individual wills commanded by the voice of the overseer, the subtle dance performed by the “chain gang”, the choreography traced in the air by the rhythmic

movement of these “dancers”. The metaphor is more far-reaching than you might suppose. Nietzsche identified Passiontide processions, in which the living spirit of the community still persists, as surviving examples of the Dionysian arts that have practically vanished nowadays.³

In short, we must admire the polyphony of images that Pilar presents to us on the common axis of a triple comparison/inversion: that of the supreme icon of Christianity (heaven/earth; above/below); that of holy women who converse and console each other in relation to the deceased son (man/woman; male supremacy/matrifocality; divinity/humanity; sacred order/worldly order); and that of symbolic egalitarianism in a markedly hierarchical social order through physical effort (hierarchy/egalitarianism; individual/collective; work/ritual). Pilar Albarracín’s insight lies in a carnivalesque interpretation of her experience of the world, in her ability to play with the cultural influences of her surroundings, imprinted on her memory since childhood, and invest them with new meaning through images that force viewers to examine the symbolic foundations of what is familiar to them. They are images — and this is her explicit intention — that demand to be interrogated, questioned, and not necessarily in order to conclude by placing the viewers/interpreters in diametric opposition to the sacred symbols, but in order to unsettle them and force them to become aware of the complexity of the network of meanings that we accept on a daily basis. To make the invisible visible, to turn what ordinary common sense has accustomed us to think, feel and perceive into something extraordinary, to provide knowledge of what is usually regarded as unknown. And she does all this using the raw material of cultural codes accessible to everyone, in all their earthliness, their immediate experientiality, without seeking to intellectualise them or stylise them to the point of rendering them unrecognisable.

So Pilar Albarracín does not fall into the trap of opposing the traditional to the modern or the popular to the universal. She opens up her Andalusian experiences and identity to universal debate using a new artistic idiom, she recognises the values and meanings of those forms of cultural expression that fall outside the stereotypes, that lie unacknowledged behind “off-the-peg” tourism and the cannibalistic consumption of dessicated images of otherness. She focuses our thoughts on those same hackneyed, phony cultural elements that are regarded as the antithesis of modernity, as skeletons in

³ Nietzsche, Friedrich: *The Will to Power*. New York, Vintage Books, 1968. Vol. I (1869-74).

the cupborad of present-day Andalusian society. And she does so precisely because she knows them from the inside, because they are firmly embedded in her memory, and she is able to grasp, and to enable us to grasp, the plurality of experiences, practices and values that are associated with them and that explain why they survive and prosper in the modern world.