

Kader Attia, “The Field of Emotion”

Our contemporary world is haunted by wounds from the past.

Over centuries multiple inequalities have arisen—between rich and poor, between men and women, between races, between cultures. From the dawn of Humanity, one hundred billion humans have lived on the Earth. The trace of their existence remains in our psyche. But the traumas resulting from the worst moments in history such as wars, famines, and genocides have left lasting material and immaterial scars which, like a phantom limb of an amputated part of the body, are still there. They demand reparation.

The Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama made this observation in the film *Reflecting Memory*, “In modern countries (...) in Europe or elsewhere in the world, (...) the streets are named after dead people. We travel through arteries of the dead. The world in which we live is a kind of psychological tomb where dead people live on as ghosts.”¹

It’s this permanent proximity to the world of the dead that requires us to listen to their calls. Of what traces are the dead the name? What are these traces asking? Why are these mental phantoms not at peace?

The exploited of the capitalist mechanism applied to slavery to develop modernity. The humiliated and the dispossessed of all forms of occupations claimed through colonisation to bring progress after slavery whereas they were but a modified version of it. The victims of genocides, of fascism, from the Nazis to the Khmer Rouge, and all the deported and victims of communism’s famines—all have common denominators, namely to have undergone and succumbed to Western scientific modernity, and to have fashioned with their disappearance this call to Reparation. These common denominators interact, from extraordinary wounds to intimate wounds, from social groups to individuals.

It was by extending to the human psyche the body of my political research on the concept of reparation that I fathomed the importance of the immaterial character of wounds, and the silent cry that they emit between official History and the one lived endlessly in the secret of family and community stories. Mass traumas and injustices or those of simple individuals last far longer than the initial act; they are maintained by the dominant power’s stories while the mind imposes, troubles, and hides the necessity of their denunciation. This absolute, quasi-religious conception of science as a factor of modernity dominates the human psyche by the universalism of its conception of progress. This hegemony has led inevitably to the production of opposed reactions.

Already in his seventeenth seminar from 1970, Jacques Lacan cautioned us about the victory of science associated with a universal, global capitalism after the collapse of communism that he felt was near at hand.² For him the twenty-first century was to be one of belief in science and of global capitalism. But inevitably this universalisation of belief in science would produce contrary

¹ Kader Attia, *Reflecting Memory*, 2016, single channel HD vidéo projection, colour, sound, here : 13’:45”–14’:13”.

² Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre XVII, L’envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

reactions: communitarianism, inward turning, individualism, radicalisation, fundamentalism, jihadism, and so forth.

As is pointed out by the majority of psychiatrists who have worked with radicalised subjects—that is candidates for suicide bombings whether in conjunction with a terrorist cell or as a lone wolf—nearly all of these individuals have passed through psychiatric services many times and/or through the prison system where they are radicalised. Of course it is customary to explain every Islamic attack by an action related to psychiatry or delinquency. However the mentors of radical Islam, from Al Qotob (...) to Al Zawahiri, the mentor of bin Laden, are far from being irrational subjects. On the contrary, they have constructed perfectly ordered discourses and strategies that recall those of officers in wartime and take inspiration from a specific history. Far from isolated, these leaders are at the head of immense networks, and the fascination that they exert on solitary fanatics through different media channels recalls the master as described by Jacques Lacan and before him Etienne de la Boétie in his essay on submission to the tyrant.³ Their propaganda techniques manipulate lost souls living in poverty and emotional misery and who are turned inward while yet seeking to belong to a social group. But even though there is a great chasm that separates the brainy leaders of radical Islam from the small groups and lone wolves who decide to act at a precise time and place, there is a guiding thread that links them, namely the desire for reparation for the loss of the golden age of Islam. The call of the phantom Caliphate, the Muslim empire that ruled the world and the sciences for centuries, acts on the Muslim social body like a phantom limb of an amputated body. It is clear that the rise to power of Occidental France, England, and Spain signals the gradual end of the grandeur of the Caliphate.⁴ It's also clear that modernity in the Orient is achieved with canons not with the spirit of the Enlightenment. Indeed, reason will be violently refused by the ulema guardians of Islamic tradition who look with suspicion on the idea of “equality between all beings” claimed in one instance while elsewhere force is used to impose its will as Napoleon will do in his 1798 Egyptian campaign.

The phantom Caliphate is always calling ever louder within the Muslim psyche for the recovery of the Caliphate's grandeur. It's calling on the group and the individual, while the emotional, economic, and political inequalities of science and of neoliberalism daily make it grow across the world. One of the paradoxes of this quest is that it adheres to tradition and the past while also using all of today's technological means (the Internet, cell phones, and so forth) to federate its attacks.

Modernity cultivates paradoxes. Indeed it's modernity's permanent Achilles heel. It preaches one path, but it never goes in a straight line.

While it praises the merits of equality that have come with progress, it deepens inequalities in order to progress. For example, take speed, one of the most celebrated technical criteria for

³ *Discours de la servitude volontaire ou le Contr'un* [1576, Discourse on Voluntary Servitude, or the Against-One] (Paris: Flammarion, 1993).

⁴ This becomes very clear from the simultaneity of the Reconquista and the Exploration of America under the flag of the kingdoms of Portugal and Spain. The first phase of the Reconquista in the 11th century coincides with the end of the Caliphate of Cordoba in 1031 after Berber uprisings, which was a precondition for Alfonso VI's conquest of Toledo in 1085. The Reconquista finally culminated in the fall of the Islamic State of Granada and the triumph of the Catholic Kings: Muhammad XII's surrender took place on January 2, 1492—the very year that is generally identified with Columbus's discovery of America and the beginning of the Spanish and Portuguese expansion on the South American continent.

progress. However, what roads and especially trains have brought to the world releases a succession of counter-reactions. As the Senegalese philosopher Sulemane Bachir Diagne has noted in my work his study *Reason's Oxymorons*, the most striking and paradoxical action of modernity and colonization in Africa is that they have contributed to the Islamisation of inaccessible sub-Saharan African interiors that were still animist. This detail of modernity has gone totally unnoticed by European ethnologists who are more preoccupied by their desire to collect the remains of authenticity to elaborate their identitarian classification of peoples.

On the American continent the development of railroads led to the conquest and transformation of immense tracts of land, wounding forever the natural landscapes that had existed unchanged for millennia. All this while alienating with alcohol and poverty the peoples that had lived there for so long, humiliating them to the point of requiring them to live in open-air prisons—the reservations.

It is also fundamental to recall the role played by rails and trains in the deportation of millions of human beings from Stalin to Hitler, humans who have left lasting phantoms that call for reparation. If there is an element of scientific modernity and Western technology that ought to be held to account before humanity, it is transportation systems. From slave ships to locomotives, speed remains at the heart of our blind obsession with progress, at the peril of the life of millions of human beings who haunt our present, because their wounds are there—the past is there. One must only look at it straight on.

“Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real,” Cormac McCarthy tells us.⁵ Haunted by this idea, I have walked through the forest alongside the abandoned rails here in Germany. Alone with my camera I have tried to understand why and see how the wounds persist. From a landscape wounded in its entirety to the intimate traces it carries within itself, I have perceived the silent cries that inhabit it.

They appear in the abnormally hilly land, on the wood of deformed trees, and especially on the railroad ties where each crack, a gaping wound, makes one's glance stop to wonder and calls for reparation.

The rail lines in Germany, Africa, Asia, and America all incarnate the wounds of a conquering modernity subjugating nature and culture. At once poetic and political, their identical alignment seems to annihilate all humanity, and yet each piece of wood, like each human being, ages in its own way—from one railroad tie to another, the wounds of time are always different.

I undertook to repair these wounds by pursuing what my research into reparation taught me was fundamental—that reparation is an oxymoron that also includes the wound: to deny it is to maintain it.

Whereas ancient societies from Africa to Japan repair while leaving the wound still visible (with kitsugi, for example, which consists in painting in gold the repaired crack in a ceramic object), the modern West applied to the letter the etymology of the word (from the Latin *reparare* which means “bringing back to the original state”) by totally erasing the wound and claiming to return to the original state of the wounded thing. Keeping the wood's wounds visible, by repairing them with metal staples that allow the wound to look at you is to accept the real. What Western

⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *All The Pretty Horses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 135.

modernity denies by forever erasing the wound is the history and therefore time. These cracks, wounds deep in the aging wood, are testimony to its history, as tragic as it is, and define it as such in our correlative relation. To suppress or replace them with concrete railroad ties in order to go even faster produces the opposite effect: the stagnation of a certitude.

A society's certitude is amnesia that pulls it sooner or later toward the repetition of its mistakes. The title of the installation, "*J'accuse!*" revives not only the headline of Emile Zola's article publicly engaging him in the defence of Captain Dreyfus who was condemned for spying because of an overlay of anti-Semitism, but also the film by Abel Gance who after World War I decides to make an immense pacifist work that will describe the disasters of war. When in 1918 Gance decides to film actual broken faces to make visible the horror of war and terrify crowds to dissuade them from repeating the unimaginable, all the soldiers he invites to take part refuse. So he's forced to make the film with actors wearing make-up. Almost two decades later at the time of the rise of Nazism, Gance decides to reconnect with the broken faces to show to the world what war produces in a scene where a character calls to the dead of the Great War from every nation so that they return and dissuade man from starting all over again.⁶

With my assistants in Dakar who are descended from Senegalese colonial infantry, the Tirailleurs Sénégalais, I sculpted into hundred-year-old trees the broken faces I found in hospital archives in France and Germany. To play the phantoms of the war of 1914-1918 as the film of Abel Gance is projected on a screen in front of them, I constructed the silhouette of a marching column of broken faces frozen in time and space staring at those who file past.

The work of art plays a crucial role in the reparation process. Besides the fact that it constitutes itself a reparation, it also questions a political horizon touching all the categories of society. It is always discussed, even hated, but never meaningless. Why? Because it incarnates the field of emotion! It is both a projection and a necessary mirror of society that seeks to exorcise its evil in order to find inner peace—"to purify oneself," said Aristotle, and thus to restore peace in the community. He called that catharsis.⁷ I call it the field of emotion.

Works of art—written, painted, or performed—are mirrors, for better or worse, of histories past, present, and future.

The History of thinking on power, the inheritor of slavery, of colonisation, and of genocides, writes tirelessly a hegemonic, universalist story, and denies by its certitude that of the phantoms of wounds that it generated, and which ceaselessly grow, despite the distance in time from the trauma. Like a phantom limb, these wounds are there and the works are a means to recall the necessity of their reparation even when they are irreparable.

⁶ Abel Gance, *J'accuse*, Pathé Frères/United Artists, 1919 ; Abel Gance, *J'accuse*, Forrester-Parents-Productions, 1938.

⁷ Aristotle, *Peri Poietikis / Poetics*, chapter 6.