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The Missing Face | Paulo Faria's private archive (courtesy of Paulo Faria)



US, THEM, WHY?

(by way of Paulo Faria)

Felipe Cammaert

“What does this guy know about Africa, the psychiatrist asked himself [...] what does this fifty-year old hack know about war? He didn't die there, he didn't see death [...] what do I know, who lived for twenty-seven months inside the anguish of barbed wire [...] who left and came back with the shell of a uniform hanging on my body, what do I know of Africa?
António Lobo Antunes, *Elephant Memory* (1979)

In a recent piece in the newspaper *Público*, “[O rosto que falta](#)” [The Missing Face], Paulo Faria wrote about a photograph from the colonial war that an ensign showed him during an interview. The photo, cutting the middle of the double-page spread of the article, shows Portuguese soldiers in Guinea holding the body of an African man they have killed. It is a highly theatrical tableau. The body is in the foreground, and out of focus. The image, like all war photographs, is charged with the violence of the context in which it was produced.

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‘The Missing Face’ is a powerful reflection on the war, and above all on the ownership of traumatic experiences of conflict, specifically at the end of Portuguese colonialism in Africa. Paulo Faria’s piece is a continuation of an investigation begun in the novel *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* [Strange War of Common Use] (which I have written about [previously](#)), and developed in relation to places of memory of the First World War, which Faria has also written about in *Público*.

Faria confronts the difficulty not only of writing about a horrifying picture, but also the complexity of describing an experience that he himself did not directly live through. He has long interrogated the question of *a posteriori* representation; what Catherine Coquio calls “the witness of witness”:



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“This is war”, he said to me when he showed me the photograph [...] As if this image would supersede words and make them superfluous. Or, worse, noxious. But I, who was not in the war, only have words to set against the image. (1)

For Faria, the photograph symbolizes the distance that separates himself as a writer from direct testimony. He can only approach the colonial war through others’ accounts – from a position of post-memory. He thinks about the “moat that photography digs around us”, about what the image shows, and what it has to say about the experience of violence.

In his position as the inheritor of a reality that he did not live through, Paulo Faria tries to understand, through writing, “the why of the photograph”. He seeks to explain why it represents, for the ensign, “the limit point of the inhuman”. As a writer he wants to “understand what it is that is led [the ensign] to draw the line here, at this boundary, and not further ahead, or further back”. However, Faria recounts the difficulty in getting beyond the obstacle of (non) belonging. Referring to Michael Herr, a photographer of the Vietnam War, Faria concludes, of photography:

I cannot speak of “us”. [...] “What if, before pressing the shutter, we asked someone to hold the body up, so that we could get a better photo?” Makes no difference. There remains between me and the ensign the moat that the photograph digs out. I seek a common ground between me and the grammar of this photograph.

Here, the distance that separates the ownership of experience is measured in language. There is an “us” of those who witness a situation that belongs to them, and a “them”, of those who can only speak about facts as displaced observers. Between these there is a gap so wide that questioning fails. “Because yes, it happened. It took place. There are no whys”, writes Faria, using the ensign’s words.

Do we come up, here, against one of the limits of post-memory? That is, in the end, are the words available to the writer not sufficient to cross the gap created by the photograph? Can nothing, therefore, substitute for real lived experience, in this case, of death and the war? Is it therefore impossible for the heir of post-memory, to transmit testimony, bring it back to life and become part of the “us” of history? In the words of Catherine Coquio:

With the “passing on of testimony”, it is as if one would in turn seek *be a witness*, as if the *effort of relaying* would become a *desire for incarnation*. To perform the relay implies an internal transformation, almost a *conversion*. The “witness of the witness” owes this moral transformation to his sense of responsibility, as well as to the virtue of testimony itself, that transforms its receiver into a *witness*. (2)



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However, Paulo Faria's writing does not wholly align with the idea of the literature of post-memory as moral transformation. Indeed, when Faria approaches the question of who experience belongs to, he turns back to literature. Paraphrasing a Borges short story, he writes:

The destiny of the ensign appeared to me as the symbol of something that I almost understand. I proceed, falteringly, through the less painful twists of when and how, forgetting the why that the photograph demanded of me when I first saw it...

If the "why" cannot really be achieved by the testimony of the witness, if the desire for affiliation cannot be completely achieved, the "when" and the "how" nevertheless persist. That is, according to Faria, the writer will seek out the details that symbolize, for him, the materialization of transmission. Paulo Faria concerns himself, therefore, with the "missing face" in the ensign's image: the soldier, Penedo, not in the frame, holding the dead man for the photographer, in the African bush.

In artistic representations of post-memory, moreover, the ownership of experience passes through other forms of testimony that themselves become sites for the re-elaboration of a traumatic memory. Memory is renewed from the position of the one who inherits and re-interprets it. (3) In this case, the archival image of the colonial war is the point of reference from which the writer, receiving someone else's experience, proposes to reconstruct the past. Through this reformulation his words add a personal dimension to the primary memory of direct testimony. However, Faria is conscious of the limits of his authorial gesture. In a text about the place of memory of the Great War in France, printed in [Público](#) on the 19th April 2019, Faria asked himself:

How is that the experience of war is transmitted? The horror of war, the emotions of war? Through words? Through images? And what does it serve to describe them, represent them, show them? Is it so that they are not repeated? But has passing on knowledge of war to those who have not lived it ever averted new wars? Has anyone ever become a pacifist, having read the *Iliad*, or having watched *Apocalypse Now*?

For the writer of post-memory, words – language – are the point that marks the distance between first-hand testimony and its inheritance. They are also the only way to move beyond the limit of the singular ownership of experience.



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(1) Unless otherwise indicated, the citations of Paulo Faria are taken from the texto “O rosto que falta”, published on pages 22 and 23 of the P2 supplement of the newspaper *Público* on the 6th October 2019.

(2) Catherine Coquio, *Le mal de vérité ou l'utopie de la mémoire*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2015, p. 149.

(3) In *Strange War of Common Use* Paulo Faria's narrator reaches a similar conclusion in the last of his letters to his dead father: “And so, yes, when I bid farewell to the man I went to meet, that man that you knew so many years ago, and I head for Lisbon in the dead of night, with two, three, four hours of road ahead of me, I know that I have gone to the bottom of the history of the African war. I did not respond to any questions, I did not resolve any problems. I went to the bottom of the bottom.” Paulo Faria, *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum*, Lisboa, Ática, 2016, p. 293.

Translated by Archie Davies

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