Lobo

by Iván Ruiz

> The image is not the duplicate of a thing. It is a complex set of relations between the visible and the invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the unsaid.
>
> Jacques Rancière

At a press conference in early November 2010, Gabriel López, the president of Ford in Mexico, reported that sales of the Lobo pick-up truck—the best-selling truck for thirty consecutive years in the United States [under the name F-150], which has also enjoyed considerable prestige in Mexico—had fallen drastically because of the vehicle's association with the flamboyant personality of assassins from different drug cartels, particularly in northern Mexico, and with the ominous criminal acts they have been involved in. López not only reported this unfortunate fact, which had affected the Mexican automotive industry's economic situation, but also offered explicit details as to why the Lobo had become stigmatized under the banner of drug trafficking: "It is a very popular vehicle for committing crimes because of its size and ruggedness; up to four or five people holding weapons can enter it easily," and furthermore: "there is plenty of room inside the cab to put more guns" (*El Economista*, 2010). Assassins thus tend to prefer this vehicle because it combines impressive automotive design with a space that facilitates the transport of heavy weapons. However, we must also consider the other way the truck has been used by drug traffickers, which was left unspoken by the president of Ford, as it condenses one of the most unbearable images of Mexico's recent violence: the bed is used as an ephemeral coffin for numerous battered corpses, which—as was observed at the time in different journalistic coverage—were "prepared" as a sadistic message, with a bodily-textual composition, according to their distribution in different urban settings: some were left with the truck, others dumped on land in the suburbs, and still others hung from overpasses.

In a bloody period triggered by the "war on drugs" begun by former president Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), the Lobo projected an image of evil, where power, virility, eccentricity and cruelty intertwine. Without abandoning its objectual status, the truck was transformed into one of the diseased symbols of a process of social decomposition, which left 101,199 dead and 344,230

indirect victims, such as children, spouses, parents or relatives of the deceased, according to figures from México Evalúa, Centro de Análisis de Políticas Públicas [Mexico Evaluates, a Center for Public Policy Analysis] (*Excélsior*, 2012), just a few months before the end of what the magazine *Proceso* called, in a special photography issue, "El Sexenio de la Muerte [The Sexenio of Death]" (2012). Precisely because of its paradoxical engagement with reality (functioning as a vehicle where desire is bound up with with disgust and, of course, power and impunity), the Lobo was—and still remains—a malaise in contemporary visual culture, which, as Georges Didi-Huberman believes, might be able to appeal to a poetics "capable of including its own *symptomatology*" (2013, 11). The Lobo, therefore, as the symptom or "secret signal" of an imaginary that is burning and demands the image, does not directly resolve its link with reality, but rather suspends it, in order to renew "the ways of asking, translating and working with the incomprehensible or the surprising" (García Canclini 2011, 47).

In her exhibition *Colateral: una exploración en torno al peligro y al control* [Collateral: an exploration around danger and control] (Galería Enrique Guerrero, November 2013), Adela Goldbard (Mexico City, 1979) presented different pieces made across disciplines; more specifically, photography, sculpture, actions for the camera, cinema and video. One of the pieces took its title from the iconic Ford pick-up, in order to establish a link between the exhibition's two central axes: on the one hand, different present-day events where power struggles, conspiracy and circumstantial evidence about tragic events in the political arena converge, and on the other, the manipulation of information in terms of how these events are *framed* by the media. To reflect on these axes, Goldbard created different *replicas* (copies or repetitions) of key objects and situations from this political crossroads, to thus construct a rarefied discourse about the conditions of representing truth and objectivity; this estrangement was produced by a complex construction of a series of metaphors about reality. As García Canclini believes, metaphors are susceptible to destabilizing meaning insofar as "they want to say something about the empirical and the observable in relation to the figurative" (2011, 66). Goldbard extracted the stigma of the Lobo from the collective imagination and transferred it to a cinematographic *staging* that was recorded using both photography and video,[1] thereby reversing a collective

[1] To achieve this transfer of meaning, it was necessary to construct a situation that unfolds on two levels: first, creating the replica, and second, recording the event. Constructed by master craftsmen in the

perception of infamy into a strange process of contemplating the destruction of an object housing evil. Thus, rather than enunciating a direct critical stance, *Lobo* (2013)[2] moves into the field of uncertainty by proposing a symbolic micro-story about the extinction of the evil incarnated in drug trafficking, insofar as the staging concentrates a burning and somewhat unexpected *impasse*: during the course of the cinematic narration, the truck is transformed into a symbolic entity of the pagan tradition through which evil is purged,[3] although in a recording that nullifies the festive component to instead focus on the inflammatory process where the fictitiousness of the truck's artisanal construction is revealed as a decisive component of the visuality enunciated there. Here there is a stance that allows us to think about this piece within what García Canclini has defined as an *aesthetic of imminence*: not relapsing into what, at least in the northern states, was already a blatant fact, but generating an estrangement regarding what is about to be or happen (2011, 12). The pyrotechnic explosion of the Lobo is a metaphor—or a burning symptom—that destabilizes the meaning of both the collective imagination that associates it with evil, and its real condition through a fictitious investiture. Metaphor is therefore a procedure that contributes to thinking about the paradox of fiction entangled with reality.

Although Goldbard had already explored the link between what we conventionally recognize as reality and fiction in her previous work (her series *Ficciones* from 2006 and more recently *On the Road* from 2010), the process becomes more complex in *Lobo*; not only because of the

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municipality of Tultepec, in the State of Mexico, under the direction of Osvaldo Hurtado and based on an original sketch by the artist, the Lobo pick-up is supported by a full-size structure of reed, wood, cardboard and newspaper, covered on the outside by black and silver latex paint, and also loaded with artificial pyrotechnics. All the pieces in *Colateral* were constructed using the same artisanal sculpture techniques, based on real diagrams of crashed aircraft and helicopters; the only difference is that this vehicle contained an explosive device that ignited during its "activation." The recording took place in a natural setting, at night, with lights directed toward a wide shot. The truck was pulled from one end of the frame to the other to make it look like it was moving slowly, while a professional film camera recorded its passage through the fixed frame. The pyrotechnic explosion occurs unexpectedly, marking an *impasse* within the narrative from the moment that the vehicle's movement stops to focus our attention on the burning mass of flames, until the moment it evaporates, revealing the vehicle's artificial structure

[2] *Lobo* can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRazWqdDCFA

[3] The artist herself has explained her interest in creating an allegorical reconstruction of the Burning of Judas as a (critical) exercise disguised as a celebration: "In my work, I'm interested in using the meanings and aesthetics of these traditions in order to—just like what happens during them—remember and expose through reconstruction and destruction, by staging a scene. I'm interested in how the community expresses their political beliefs and their anger through festivity. Reconstructing to remember; destroying to not forget, even though it appears to be just a celebration." Interviewed by Hernández Vargas, 2015.

aforementioned cross-disciplinary collaboration, but through the strategy of "post-production" in the use of her "raw material." As Nicolas Bourriaud explains it, since the early 1990s, different artists have manipulated a raw material that is no longer raw material [in its earlier artistic sense], for it comes from objects that are circulating in the cultural market and thus already have a form and a content; what is interesting in this process—according to the critic—is to observe the creation of "new relationships with culture in general and the work of art in particular" (2007, 9), based on different modes of postproduction. When Goldbard appropriates a stigma from the collective imagination to make it burn in a cinematic story, she activates a process similar to that described by Bourriaud: a form that has already been produced by culture is used, not to explain or unravel its perverse entanglement with reality, but to accentuate an artificial condition that it already possesses. For Jacques Rancière, this would be *the work of fiction*, "which consists not in telling stories but in establishing new relations between words and visible forms, speech and writing, a here and an elsewhere, a then and a now" (2010, 102).

The rarefication to which I have referred within *Lobo*'s construction process can be better explained in these terms: it is not a literal obfuscation of meaning, and even less a projection of illegibility regarding the significant articulation underlying its composition; rather, it is a disturbance of reality that operates by establishing a different relationship between the stigma and its visibility, between the attribution of the evil and its extinction, between a present starved by the war on drugs and a device for visibility that becomes taut at the moment of recording and contemplating the inflammation. From this perspective, unlike the video whose sonic component is determinant, the series of photographs that were taken when the truck was burning have a disturbing silence: in them, the burning mass concentrates pyrotechnic plasticity in a moment that seems to be the symbolic extinction of evil; however, the annulment of the festive aesthetic produces another mediation between the perceptible and the intelligible, which emerges from an image that denies its real condition only to complicate its own link with reality; finally, as Rancière believes: "the real is always the object of a fiction, that is, of a construction of the space where what can be seen, what can be said, and what can be done are joined together" (2010, 77).

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