

TIAGO BAPTISTA

A pequena realidade | *The small reality*

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POTEMKIN VILLAGE

The poet urges, powerless in the void, for the creation of a civilized state increasingly remote, glancing sideways to an extinct revolutionary fire.

“In the central halls there are fair goddesses; An air of perfume moves with each charming figure. They clothe their guests with warm furs of sable, Entertain them with the finest music and pipe and string, Feed them with the broth of camel’s pad, With pungent tangerines, and oranges ripened in frost. Behind the red-lacquered gates, wine is left to sour, meat to rot. Outside these gates lie the bones of the frozen and the starved. The flourishing and the withered are just a foot apart—It rends my heart to ponder on it.”
Tu Fu (year 755¹)

Russian Empress Catherine II, enlightened tyrant, arduous defender of the privileges of Russian Nobility; sworn enemy of a peasantry reduced to the worst of slaveries, poisoned her husband, Peter III, so she could live in concubinage with Prince Grigori Alexandrovitch Potemkin. This prince, overcast eminence of the czarina’s warfare and expansionist policies, omnipresent in the boudoir as much as in secret diplomacy, he is nominated general governor of Ukraine, and he conquers the lands of Crimea condemning the people to abject poverty.

In order to appease European power’s possible doubts, Potemkin decides to disguise the dismal view of the region by covering the wretched shacks along the river Dnieper behind wooden sets painted with magnificent facades. This way, the riverbank is filled with villages as quaint as phantasmagorical. To the set, the minister, adds extras dressed as peasants to play happy and dancing muzhiks. The diplomats fall for the farce returning home delighted with this *partie de campagne*.

“Make believe that...” is today a standard that infects the deontological feeling of governing. To the voluntary blindness of rulers we can add the way in which the administration – as a mediator – edifies a barrier between dominant and dominated, forging ways to stop the information flowing from the bottom to the top. If in Potemkin’s mythical fable we can observe the awakening of a political-fictional set, it’s in the perpetuating of this “facadism” that today we process the covering up of the misery perpetuated by the governance.

Painter Tiago Baptista, in this group of works, summons two enunciatory strategies. On the one hand, he frames sets within the set, showing the device that breaks the spectral illusion, suggesting to the viewer a distancing effect in the old Brechtian way. On the other hand, through the idea of tracing, he refers to the copy (present in many forms: cast, auto-representation, mask, projection, negative, etc), to the copy of copies, a notion of hyper-reality as developed by Baudrillard.²

Western faith reinforced the sign as substitute to what it refers to, making the whole experience hostage of simulacrum, a simulated reality unable to interchange itself with the real, where the reference and its meaning will never meet.

As in the film “Un Chien Andalou” [An Andalusian Dog], Tiago Baptista, recreates in his cast-hand the invisible reference, maybe a peasant rump, maybe an autocratic tit. “Read my lips”.

Natxo Checa, 2015
Translation: Susana Pomba, 2015

¹ William Hung, *Tu Fu: China’s Greatest Poet* (Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 88

² J. Baudrillard, *Simulacros e Simulações* [Simulacra and Simulation] (Relógio de Água, Lisbon, 1991)