



Tótem & Co. Avelino Sala and Project A

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Symbol of supreme power, the eagle. Its kingdom is and is not of this world, its domain is found above the earth where mortals live and beneath the inaccessible sky inhabited by the gods; its blue empire evokes the sacred foundation of all empires: uranocracy. Of angels, it only has their wings, with which it rises to the sky from where it establishes a vigil, with its practically panoptic sight, over the slightest movement of prey which it can effortlessly paralyse and dismember with its claws, from where it observes the busy or monotonous ant-like movements of the creatures who live on the ground, unaware of the shadow which majestically and avidly soars above them and suddenly attacks with fatal precision. The eagle, the most powerful of our ancestors, Jupiter's atrocious pet, the king of all birds which, according to the *Physiologus*, had the virtue of staring at the midday sun and which, old and decrepit, was capable of renewing its feathers and the fine membrane of its eyes by contact with the sun's heat, is now part of our taxidermic imagination as a dissected beast adorning an obscure gallery of the memory of other mythical and historic times, when it is not reduced to a sad animal relic which, on the way to extinction, is limited to live on nature reserves.

An eagle's effigy, however, is still an eminent archetype of the symbols of sovereign power: *potestas absoluta* of politics, of immemorial royalty or a millennial empire whose theriomorphic and even fossilised attributes, buried beneath the enormous iconographic rubble of modern mass society, continue to awaken the fascination due to the sudden appearance, against an empty or strange background, of the continuous and undifferentiated flow of all sorts of fungible or trivial images. In its primitive forms, in its totalitarian forms, political power, from patriarchal tribes to absolutist states, was manifest for centuries in symbolic ceremonies which deferred or disguised the immediate presence of the sovereign subject. The latter, the depository of an omnimodal power, itself unrepre-





sentable, could only be incarnate in the figure of a ferocious and invincible beast, a huge snake, a dragon, a rampant lion or a *monstrum horrendum ingens*, like Hobbes's Leviathan or in some abstract things which could be ubiquitously represented by emblems, ensigns, heraldic motifs or fetichised objects - the sceptre, the sword, the crown – before which subjects became prostrate as a sign of unconditional reverence and submission.

Between World War II and the end of the so-called Cold War, when liberal democracies and post-industrial societies attempted to liquidate the ideological remains and terrorist symbols of totalitarian regimes, there was a historic turning point in virtue of which a gradual but inevitable trend emerged aiming at *desymbolising politics*. If traditional, not to mention ancestral, political symbolism showed a tendency to fossilisation (aimed at the ritual perpetuation of personal and sacral, hereditary or transmissible power), a symbolic fossilisation inseparable from the heroic monumentalisation of political unity, the new practices representative of advanced western democracies appear to be discarding the old symbolic unitarianism in favour of a syncretic iconic pluralism, atomised in the irreducible multiplicity of social, and particularly, economic interests. Power, metastatically disseminated in non-reabsorbable corporate interests in what was once conceived as the unity of the State's *corpus mysticum*, is becoming constantly fragmented in a polysymbolic set of industrial corporations, technological companies, registered trademarks, globalised logos, abundant pop icons and metamorphosis of the value of use in repetitive compulsion to the pseudo-ritual consumption of designer objects copied or plagiarised in geometric progression – according to the exponential and universal growth of consumers – by exotic emerging economies.



Avelino Sals's Project A is a lucid and risky, impressively concise reflection and clearly shrewd criticism, of admirable figurative coherence and rhetoric, of the relationship between art and power and, even more so, the possibilities of today's art invading (we avoid deferring to engagement or commitment) the public spaces of the collective memory through dialogue with our monumental legacy. It is, then, an examination of the memory housed in the monumental symbolism of political power, with signs of clarity and risk. Risk, because Avelino Sala offers, in times of sterile controversy, a review of our historic



past, Franco's totalitarianism and his monumental delirium of imperial grandeur, from which nearly all contemporary artists have fled. Clarity because, far from approaching this wounded and dying common memory, resorting to simple partisan solutions, he places all his technical and aesthetic talent at the service of a study of the ambiguous validity of ancient symbols of power, taken over by triumphant capitalism and its new political supporters. In this respect, the procedures applied by Avelino Sala are consistent with his project's aesthetic and critical motivations: photography, mural interventions with paper and paint, adherence to a legend in red neon on a sculpted piece, video images, a fragile sculpture in an empty vacuum. The monument is there, inert, silent, in a way invincible, submerged in its eternity of stone or the solitude of the past and oblivion. But, however tenuous, it contains a spark of symbolic memory which calls for dialogue, reading, exegesis, intervention, to bring it closer and back, for just a moment, to the world of the living.

Avelino Sala's eagles, in spite of their apparent silence, are referring to *us*; in spite of their dead eyes, focused on a horizon of ruins, they contemplate the *present* from which they have been inevitably expelled by history. In the photograph of the eagle on a pedestal in front of the "Ministry of Aviation" in Madrid, the bird, diminished yet solemn, is like a ghostly shadow profiles against the turbid immensity of a cloudy sky threatening a storm. Like Goya's half-buried dog, the eagle seems to be scrutinising the sky with a gesture creating a question mark on the dark, impenetrable and possibly sublime shadows that the immobile bird observes with something between cautious and open nostalgia. Much different is the "Roman-Gothic-Nazi" eagle appearing on "Imperial McDonald's", an item designed for the Banco Herrero Exhibition Centre. Instead of standing on the banner with the imposing letters of Roman sovereignty, SPQR (*Senatus populusque Romae*), on glorious occasions carrying the bird, this eagle, losing none of its severe symbolic-imperial solemnity, acts as a hyperbolic attraction for a chain of fast food establishments, paradoxically monumentalised by popular culture as the "gastro-nomic apparatus of the State" (if Althusser allows this formula), the idol of the hegemonic economic-imperialist status of North America. This shocking image says a great deal about the desymbolisation of politics and its decontextualised transposition to never mind which public place, full of advertising tricks and commercial traps. Avelino Sala's strategy could appear to be somewhat ingenuous, considering the imperialist *American-*



ismus of which the company in question represents the diet of the lower middle classes, if its simplicity was not a mere illusion: “Imperial McDonald’s” presents a meta-iconic, self-critical image in its emphatic anachronism, close to Walter Benjamin’s idea of a dialectic image, in as much as that it suggests the ironic coalescence of past symbols of imperial political power and a neo-pop sign of postmodern transnational gastronomic power. Past and present thus meet and collide in a picture revealing anomalous continuity in the background, which may be unsuspected or forgotten, but which is as real as it is paradoxical.

The emblematic tactics used by Avelino Sala are evidence of his deconstructive – not merely destructive or demolishing – capacity in the intervention planned for the “Universidad Laboral de Gijón”. This construction, one of the most conspicuous pyramids built under Franco’s dictatorship after the war, aimed at sustaining the not very pacific peace of mind of the victors, was projected by Luis Moya with the megalomaniac and megalithic skill of someone paying homage to the children of the dead or beaten (Orphanage and Occupational Training School) while proclaiming the clemency and generous magnanimity of the victor. “THE ENEMY IS INSIDE, SHOOT AGAINST US”, reads the inscriptio or motto which, like Alciato’s *emblemata*, Avelino Sala engraves in a bright red neon light at the feet of the imperial eagle which, with its head surrounded by a sacred halo, the peak open in a bitter or angry gesture, its large wings half open to create perfect symmetry, clasps its claws to the country’s coat of arms and towers over the new building from the top of the “fasci-neoclassic” facade of “Teatro de la Laboral”.

The motto, supposedly pronounced – possible with extreme anguish or a heroic accent - by Colonel Pinilla, from the national band, when the Simancas military barracks in Gijón, under siege by the reds, started to be attacked by the enemy. These certainly dramatic words are like an explosion sparking the obscure memory of the war, the fight between brothers, the martyrdom on both sides, the senselessness of a war in which the enemy – father, brother, neighbour, anonymous compatriot – is always inside oneself. It is each individual inside each other individual. The explosion of the neon legend of Avelino Sala, can confuse our memory so that we more clearly see the enemy’s location, the radical questioning of the perfidious logic turning friends into enemies and executioners into victims. After all, *Hostis* in Latin meant “enemy”, “foreigner” and “guest”, and this mul-



tiple significance shows why strangers are not necessarily enemies, but the guests who can suddenly and unexpectedly shoot us down. To which enemy and which friend, after that disaster, does the motto with which Avelino Sala opens an imaginary crack in the stone from which this eagle is made refer?

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The intuition presiding over *Project A* is as simple as it is profound. Culture is consummate in savagery because savagery is consummate in culture (there are reasons to believe that W. Benjamin would have agreed.) Eagles – which, together with dogs, represent Avelino Sala's personal bestiary – remind us of the totemic foundation of social life and its subsequent hypostatisation in animal emblems privileged by theological and political power. Totemisation was the primitive process of social cohesion, symbolising the genealogical unity of power by reference to the pantocratic and inevitable authority of an ancestral beast. It is well known that the word totem is the English translation of the Algonquin *doodem*, "clan". The Ashinaabeg, so called because they believed they were the "first inhabitants", ethnic groups originating on the east coast of Canada, formed by the Ojibwe and Odawa people, subsequently mixing inland with different Algonquin tribes, were organised into clans (*odoodeman: totems*). The "Eagle Clan" (*Migizi-doodem*), for instance, included all those who recognised Americans as their ancestors. In any event, the totemic symbol of the Ashinaabe nation was an eagle with open wings which used to adorn the headdresses of the clan chiefs.





Avelino Sala's eagles, late epic and monumental, fatally autocratic, beautifully sinister, displaced or deconstructed ruins of memory which in its real places (places of unreality) remain intact, are totemic images of a clan-based past which, close or remote, converted in the corporate, social and consumer dispersion of late capitalism, continue to refer to us: *Totem & Co*. They are like the Simurgh, the giant regal bird from Persian mythology, whose name means "thirty birds" and whose body comprises all birds. They are like Dante's eagle of *Paradise* (XIX, 7-12), whose body was formed by the souls of the just, and whose prodigious voice says "io" and "mio" when it should say "noi" and "nostro". They are like the artist or poet who, beneath thousands of masks, believes he has discovered his desires in the solitude and madness of the eagle soaring on high, fixing its sight on the abyss where it only sees the empty, devastated or deserted places growing inside. These eagles are also the descendants of the one sung by Nietzsche in his "Dionysius Dithyrambos":

Or like the eagle that, for a long time,
a long time gazes with a fixed stare into abysses,
into *its* abysses...
Oh how they spiral downwards,
down, down under,
into ever deeper depths!
Then,
suddenly,
plummeting straight down, wings pulled out,
to pounce on lambs,
right down, hot-hungry,
lusting for *lambs*,
hating lambs,
hating all lamb-souls,
grimly hating whatever looks...

But what if the lambs watching the claws and peak of the eagle soar down to destroy their flesh were really wild dogs? And what if the eagle misses its prey and has to face a



crowd hungry for meat or a brutal horde for which it is no longer a venerable ancestral figure and the sacrosanct power of its totem is no longer recognised? Following Frazer and Robertson Smith, in *Totem and taboo*, Freud says that totemic animals cannot be hunted or eaten at an individual's initiative. Only in the context of a collective ritual was it possible to sacrifice (and, if applicable, devour) a totemic beast, which was solemnly mourned like a deceased or murdered relative. The eagle of "Imperial McDonald's" only announces the worldwide exquisiteness of the (its own?) minced meat which is compulsively and automatically devoured every day by millions of tame "lamb" houses in the fast food establishment found all over the planet.

Take a look at Avelino Sala's "canine" photograph taken from the video edited for the intervention in Universidad Laboral. The ravenous pack eating the remains of minced meat which spell the word CULTURE (too carnal a word by far) can be seen as breaking the taboo which prevents feeding on dead totemic animals, or represents the archaic rite of the clan which eats from the cadaveric body of a ceremoniously sacrificed totem. In the video of the dogs, squalid, homeless, orphans, the sad and somewhat wild guests of the pound, thanks to an elementary technical loop in the tape, they are swallowing the flesh of culture; lamb-dogs who blindly eat and regurgitate the carnal remains of the Imperial McDonald's totem. Imagine: that meat with which Avelino Sala has written the word CULTURE on the ground, the language of what is now a neoimperial culture, is that of the eagle, carefully minced by the grinders of a global fast food chain whose secret corporate trademark could well be *Totem & Co*, or better still:

**EAGLE'S CULTURE.
FAST FOOD. GOOD FOOD:
FOR DOGS !!**