

WARPED DISCOURSES: THE LOGIC OF ABSENCE IN DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE

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Two weeks after the death of Osama Bin Laden, more than twenty-seven million pictures result from a google search of “picture of the death of bin Laden”. Most of them show the face of Osama bin Laden himself, but none is the picture of his actual corpse. Fortunately, the public opinion in the free and oppressed worlds is not left alone to surf so many millions of fake Photoshop versions without a glimpse of some certainty. Shortly after, a White-House copyrighted picture of President Obama with the National Security Team was circulated showing them as they watched bin Laden’s death live. The picture should definitely illustrate a forthcoming edition of Baudrillard’s Simulations (1983), but it is not only a paradigmatic instance of Postmodern representation. In fact, the visual void left by bin Laden’s corpse is a logical necessity of democratic discourse that can be traced back to the very origins of American Democracy. In this essay, I will analyze the discursive mechanisms that provide the legitimacy and allow for the constitution of such democracy on the basis of absence and its expression by means of what I will define as “discursive warping”. I will do this by making a comparative analysis of “The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America” and the above-described “official” picture of the death of Osama bin Laden; first and last instances of democratic discourse in the United States.

The issue I am concerned with is at stake since the 1980s, but a Marxist approach permits to extend its shadow retrospectively to the roots of Western Capitalism itself as it might be portrayed by the birth of the United States of America. The hyperreal substance underlying the late financial crisis that served as the model of a non-existing American real estate in the early 21st century can well illustrate — and even somehow *re-present*— the absence of the *original* States that signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Thus, Baudrillard’s claim of the disappearance of the real America as it is replaced by its third-order simulacrum — Disneyland — might well provide the basis of a retrospective, critical reading of the United States Declaration of Independence. But its

applicability even extends to a further hyperrealization of the US that Baudrillard could have hardly foreseen in the 1980s: the virtualization of simulacra.

Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan on May 2, 2011. This undeniable victory of American political proselytism will have to be weighed against the economic difficulties of Barack Obama's presidency in the 2012 future elections, but before this it must face the question of its conditions of actual possibility. Compared to the hard images of the live execution of Saddam Hussein on December 30, 2006 during the Bush presidency, the visual representation of Osama bin Laden's execution is an exercise of visual decorum where the taboo of bin Laden's corpse is replaced by its simultaneous, official reception in the White House. This impeccable act of political propaganda of Obama's presidency adds up to the long record of similar hits that picture the public image of his political career, with the particularity that this one represents his government, and not just himself.

The official picture of bin Laden's execution distributed by the White House replaces bin Laden himself as the center of attention, and substitutes the face of his corpse by the faces of the National Security Team as they watch it. We take it for granted they are watching the live execution online as it is taking place in Pakistan as some kind of flashback to the futurist *1984*, with the leader of the free world peeping into the remotest latitude. The official picture of Osama bin Laden's execution is in fact the picture of the official reaction to it in the White House and even of the intended reaction of *the candid world*. With an official photographer in the room, the National Security Team must have been aware that *the eyes of all people would be upon them* at a very critical moment, which makes the act of posing not such a trivial matter to consider from a present and future historical perspective. In fact, their faces show a permitted range of decorous and respectful reactions to the event they are supposedly witnessing at that moment. The most powerful reactions are Obama's tension and Clinton's consternation — a rather sexist difference — but there is also the bored look of vice president Biden and even the background, tourist-like glances of National Security Advisor Toni Blinken and Director of Counterterrorism Audrey Tomason.

A web search of the topic shows the US National Security Team —or Osama bin Laden himself when alive — as the image that illustrates his execution. This fact has caused much speculation about the actual death or real circumstances of bin Laden's death. But even more interesting than that from a representational point of view is that the picture itself is an act of *speculation* or mirroring of bin Laden's execution where the actuality of the people living *through the looking glass* precedes the actual image of the live execution in the factual world, an image so long postponed, that it has finally been replaced by its reflection. The invisible screen supposedly represents bin Laden's live execution, but even this screen — the mirroring surface — has been replaced so that the medium of reproduction does not interfere with the precession of its final representation, namely; the official picture. Still, the immediacy effect is sustained with the freshness of a graffiti tag on a city wall as it bears witness of a painting-less

authorship. Did they have the time to turn the computers off before the picture was taken at that critical moment, or perhaps props just cannot be turned on? Anyway, *Yes, we could*. Some will argue that this occurrence is typical of postmodernity and a reality attributable to the phenomenon of the cyberspace. But the precession of simulacra is inherent to the performative function of certain seminal, political texts.



Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

The origin of the United States of America is often traced back to the signing of a document that was in fact previous to the actual American independence from the British Empire with the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Such document is known as “The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America” and was composed seven years before that date. The political relevance and poetic beauty of this text make it one of the most important documents in American history. But the Declaration of Independence also makes a most — politically and poetically — obvious simulacra of the origin of the United States as an independent nation.

Previous analyses of the Declaration of Independence (centering their attention on its content ¹ or form ²) merely focus on the enunciative/argumentative aspect of its text and forget the fact that the

1. Such is the approach in the works of Bailyn, Gerber, or Nash.

2. We can mention Becker's “The literary qualities of the Declaration”, Ginsberg's “The Declaration as rhetoric”, or Lucas' “Justifying America: The Declaration of Independence as a rhetorical document”, among others.

Declaration has a performative dimension. An analysis of the textual warping³ produced at the enunciative⁴ level reveals the argumentative invalidation of the text as a simulacrum that does not represent, but substitutes reality. However, such invalidation only affects the enunciative dimension of the Declaration; the level at which any text can be easily deconstructed thanks to the inherent economy of language and the necessary selection of information. At the performative level, the revelation of its simulated nature shows the most violent exercise of power through simulation: that of *producing* reality.⁵

The text of the Declaration of Independence is structured around a triple distribution that matches Montesquieu's division of political power into the three branches of government; the legislative (in the introduction and the preamble, founded on natural philosophy); the judicial (indictment of George III and denunciation of the British people) and the executive (the conclusion that finally performs independence).

Both the introduction and the preamble constitute what might be considered a rudimentary legislative frame that justifies the declaration — enunciation — on the basis of a moral imperative,⁶ and independence on the basis of a logical imperative — axiomatic self-evidence and subsequent necessity.⁷ However, it must be noticed that the whole corpus of British Law that any colonial authority was subject to is never explicitly mentioned. The indictment of George III and the denunciation of the British people stage a trial of the British King and the Parliament by which the direction of authority is reversed, making the river of justice flow upwards. The fact that no court has been previously established, or that there is no counsel for the defence of the accused are silenced too.⁸

3. Since the simulacrum precedes the real, the existence of the latter can only be ascertained by its simulacrum. However, its absence can be detected by the textual warping that appears to fix the discursive void left by its absence. This textual warping causes a certain discursive distortion or deviation that reveals the absence of the real, and whose calculation might lead to the revelation of the real. For a discussion of textual warping, see Fernández -Santiago (2005:263-273).

4. The term “enunciative” is used here in relation with Foucault's *The archaeology of knowledge*. At the enunciative level a statement “is linked rather to a ‘referential’ that is made up not of ‘things’, ‘facts’, ‘realities’, or ‘beings’, but laws of possibility, rules of existence for the objects that are named, designated, or described within it, and for the relations that are affirmed or denied in it” (103).

5. Baudrillard (1983) expresses it in terms that distinguish the specular function of representational imagery from the *nuclear* and *genetic* operations of simulacra.

6. “[D]ecent respect to the opinions of mankind”.

7. “[I]t becomes necessary”, and “truths [that are] self-evident”.

8. Were it not because the Declaration of Independence actually enforced American independence, these two sections could be considered the staging of a mock trial with obvious reminiscences of the celebration of a Feast of Fools in the sense that the Declaration uses legislative and logical formulae and style of legal and philosophical texts in order to subvert them. Harvey Cox reports that during the Feast of Fools, “[s]ometimes a Lord of Misrule, a Mock King, or a Boy Bishop was elected to preside over the events. In some places the Boy Bishop even celebrated a parody mass” (3). In his study on the figure of the Fool Willeford adds: “the Feast of Fools at Sens, in which the prescribed vespers were replaced by a medley of all the vespers throughout the year — clown patches of religious text” (16).

Finally, the conclusion appeals to an ultimate religious authority⁹ and a non-existent democratic representation¹⁰ to declare (perform) both the independence and the union of the colonies. Again, the text does not mention the fact that the “Representatives of the United States of America” do neither hold any religious authority nor are they elected by any good people of states that do not exist or are united yet.¹¹ Such textual holes or, in Derrida’s words, erasures,¹² leave some textual wrinkles in the form of terminological hesitations and inconsistencies, or persistent repetitions that are very obvious even to the most careless reader’s eye.

The piling up of sources of authority (other than the king’s) that justify the Declaration of Independence (including religion, natural philosophy, logic and democracy) without considering that they may even contradict each other (revealing what Foucault would call “spaces of differentiation”)¹³ suspiciously recalls Freud’s description of the slip of the tongue of the man who, after being accused of having borrowed a kettle and returned it with a hole, would answer with the triple excuse that he had returned the kettle undamaged, that it was already broken when he borrowed it, and finally, that he did not borrow it at all. George III, the legal authority who at that moment ruled over the American colonies, and who was also the representative of God’s authority for the whole extension of the British Empire, is absolutely ripped out of the text of the Declaration as a source of political authority. Convincing as all those alternative sources of authority might be, their “differentiation” becomes obvious when they are all gathered upon a not less obvious absence (the reference to the king’s authority), hiding the wound that the Declaration of Independence inflicts on the authority then in force.

There is also certain terminological inconsistency in the use of the words “Colonies” and “States” to refer to the same political reality. Such inconsistency reflects a conceptual hesitation of no little importance, since colonies would be subject to imperial authority whereas states would not. However, I would also hesitate to consider this ambiguity one more slip of the pen, and am rather inclined to see it as an enunciative necessity that is an integral aspect of its performative function. A more consistent use of the term “States” would make the Declaration unnecessary (if they were already free independent states, there would be no need of a Declaration of Independence), whereas the exclusive use

9. “[T]he Supreme Judge of the world” .

10. “[I]n the name of the good people of these Colonies”.

11. It must not be forgotten that the Declaration of Independence was approved by the Second Continental Congress; a *colonial* body of representatives appointed by the *legislature of the colonies* that were — or were supposed to be — under the control of the Governor’s Councils that the Continental Congress was rebelling against.

12. For a discussion of the connection between Derrida’s notion of “erasure” and my own vision of “textual void”, consult Fernández-Santiago (2005:359-372).

13. In relation with what he calls “the *enunciative* level of a formulation”, that he distinguishes from the grammatical and the logical levels, Foucault argues that “the description of this enunciative level can be performed neither by a formal analysis, nor by a semantic investigation, nor by verification, but by the analysis of the relations between the statement and the spaces of differentiation, in which the segment itself reveals the differences” (2005:103).

of the word “Colonies” would make it illegitimate, depriving the Declaration of any performative authority. Such terminological inconsistency opens up an enunciative gap of *undecidedness* whose void vacuums in the performative power of the text.

In his exhaustive rhetorical analysis of the Declaration of Independence, Lucas (1989) praises the tone, cadence, symmetry, dramatic appeal and rhetorical power of repetition in the text. In this sense, he pays special attention to the indictment of George III and accusation of the British brethren, remarking the distance created between third-person pronouns “he” and “they” and the first person pronoun “we” that separates the King and the British brethren from “the Good People of these Colonies” (*Declaration of Independence*). The political relevance implicit in the use of such pronouns was noticed by Thomas Hutchinson¹⁴ already in 1776. It is remarkable that Hutchinson perceived the performative violence silencing the fact that the colonies were not “distinct” from, but part of the British kingdom. However, although he perceives the revolutionary action implied in the use of such pronouns, he missed (perhaps because it was necessary) the violence of one more absence behind those pronouns. The most violent absence in the Declaration does not lie in performing independence through the distinction American vs. British created by pronouns, but in generating the power that silences such absence, or, in Baudrillard’s terms, the liquidation of all referentials.

The logical construction of the Declaration as it is advanced in the introduction (it is necessary that we dissolve the political bands because of the following reasons; the continuous injustices lead to such dissolution) runs opposite to the textual performative *effected* by the Declaration. In fact, the arguments piled up against both George III and the British people are not presented as a legal or political requirement previous to the Declaration, but as a requirement of another, different source of authority: “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind”.¹⁵ In this introduction, the Declaration is most subtle in its composition, since it meets one of the requirements of Independence: the rejection of British authority. Were it expressed in different terms, such as “We

14. Tomas Hutchinson was the colonial governor of Massachusetts from 1771 to 1774. He noticed that “[t]hey begin [...] with a false hypothesis. That the Colonies are one *distinct people*, and the kingdom another, connected by *political bands*. The Colonies, *politically* considered, never were a *distinct* people from the kingdom. There never has been but one *political band*, and that was just the same before the first Colonists emigrated as it has been ever since, the Supreme Legislative Authority, which hath essential rights, and is indispensably bound to keep all parts of the Empire entire, until there may be a separation consistent with the general good of the Empire, of which good, from the nature of government, this authority must be the sole judge” (1776:9).

15. The argument is not “we declare ourselves independent because we have suffered injustice from the competent authority”, but “we declare our independence because we respect the opinions of mankind, also referred to as ‘candid world’”. In this sense, either the authors of the Declaration miss the double — not merely declarative, but also performative — functions of the Declaration and simply pile up reasons (indictment) that justify it, thus implicitly recognizing the king’s authority; or they use such double function to distinguish between the enunciation of reasons: submitting to the authority of the opinions of mankind (possibly the French), and performative declaration of independence: the denial of the king’s authority over the colonies.

proceed to name the reasons that force us to reject British authority”, it would implicitly recognize the existence of such authority: it is required by such authority that we name the reasons before we declare our independence. But as I mentioned above, the rejection of British authority over the British colonies in America is not previous to their performative Declaration of Independence; it is rather a side effect of such performative. The performative itself, the *en-act-ment* of independence is in fact produced by the reference to the Thirteen Colonies as “one people”.

National identity is certainly an astonishing issue in the sense that it implies the construction of a most narrow common identity by virtue of the erasure of the widest local and individual differences. Neither geography, nor birth, nor marriage are exclusive arguments to determine national identity; it is rather something that you adhere or are adhered to as an individual that can be as inclusive of difference as multinational firms such as Benetton, Coca Cola or McDonald’s. But the adherence to a national identity that is non-existent until the very moment you adhere to it is just a performative miracle. At least, the creation of light by God was subject to omnipotent authority. American Independence is born out of the blue void of authority by virtue of spontaneous generation.

Strictly considered, the Declaration of Independence was signed ¹⁶ by colonial representatives who were so thanks to the same imperial authority they reject in the Declaration. Thus, the first simulacrum of American History, located at the very root of American nationality is the answer to the most obvious question that must have astonished both George III and the British Parliament most: “Where does the authority to declare the independence of the colonies come from?” The answer provided by the Declaration itself in the introduction is simply that “it becomes necessary”; a performative only comparable to the well-known “I Am Who I Am”, whose comparison adds an odd Satanic tone to this text. In the mouth of George III himself, the most prominent interlocutor of the Declaration, the question becomes rhetorical, and its answer can only be “nowhere”.

Such absolute lack of authority underlying the American Declaration of Independence would certainly be something worth being silenced by any (firstly) Colonial or (later) American government. However, such an absence is something that must have left a huge textual void around which the text of the Declaration might warp producing textual scars and wrinkles that should be not only perceivable but even obvious to the reader.

Its resulting textual void leaves the trace of a textual warping that reveals the nature of the text as simulacrum, and not as mere representation. In this case, the warping is as obvious as big is the need to hide this absence; an insistent repetition of the first-person plural pronoun. Lucas (1989:117) records twenty-six occurrences of the word “our” and eleven occurrences of the word “us” in the

16. In fact, the Declaration itself is dated before the actual signature. Most of the delegates signed the Declaration on August 2, 1776, which only piles up layers of simulation onto its textual performativeness.

Declaration. I have counted eleven more occurrences of the pronoun “we”. The first-person plural pronoun is also the first word of both the preamble and the conclusion. It is also remarkable that there should be seventy-two pronouns in the Declaration that refer to the American Colonies as “one people”.¹⁷

Such insistence on repetition reinforces the perception of the colonies as a united people, but it also calls attention to the fact that the pronoun repeated represents no pre-existing political reality at all. The American Colonies as a unity speaking with a single voice in order to declare (perform) their unity and independence, constitute an astonishing exercise of syncretism that produces a previously non-existent political reality. The writing of the pronoun “we” enforces a never signed treaty of union that fabricates the political authority of a new nation.

The argumentative flow of the Declaration of Independence focuses on the justification of independence, but the ultimate violence of its text rests not on the performative function of the declaration of independence, but on the spontaneous *generation* of a nation out of the pronoun “we”. The arguments that would justify independence can be refuted, the discursive basis working as their reference point — God, nature and logic — can be said not to pertain to the political character of the text; but the absolute violence of the pronoun “we” produces its own reality by itself and performs itself. One might question its authority to perform its independence (limit its action), but no one can deny its existence once it has been written.

The repetitions and cadence of the Declaration work as some kind of political *ensalmus*¹⁸ that would perform independence as its magical result on the basis of the structure “Let there be Independence”. But the writing of the pronoun “we” is even more Satanic since it does not parallel divine creative action, but divine essence: “I Am Who I Am”, or rather “we become who we are”. The significance of the number thirteen adds the cabalistic dimension.

Despite the hesitations, repetitions and inconsistencies revealing the occultation of the fact that there is no legal or political authority behind the Declaration to sustain it — revelation of the secret that would destroy the power silencing it —, such invalidation does not occur because the text performs/creates its own source of political authority (we) right before the writing of the action that performs independence. The “necessity” and “requirement” that are found in the introduction of the Declaration are thus *not only* a historical or political — enunciative — necessity, but the logical quality of the ultimate axiom of self-evidence, with the particularity that it “becomes” *in* the text and *as* the text.

Therefore, the rest of the Declaration, the whole enunciative frame of its performative “we” is not superfluous or unnecessary. The whole of its structure,

17. To these, we must add five occurrences of the pronoun “they”, nine occurrences of “them” and ten occurrences of “their” related (either directly or indirectly) to the same referent in the third-person plural.

18. Check Maggi (2001:8-56) or Fernández-Santiago (2005:196-198) for an explanation of the structure and mechanisms of *ensalmi*.

rhetorical force, argumentative progress and scientific, philosophical, legislative or religious background also serve a necessary purpose; that of erasing any trace of reality that might invalidate the power that sustains them. In that sense, the whole of the Declaration (it) “becomes necessary” at both the enunciative and performative levels. The most obvious absence in the Declaration of Independence, the one that lies behind and explains the mystery of the *acausality* of the American essence, is substituted by the logical and practical necessity of its simulacrum.

There is no more bin Laden after the simulation of his execution. The real corpse of bin Laden is cursed to roam the Arabian Sea and be devoured by carrion fish as a submarine, twenty-first century equivalent of the Sophoclean Polyneices. Contrary to the obscene exposure of Polyneices’ corpse, bin Laden’s corpse is hygienically absent from the representation of his death. Compared to the pale white, dead face of Sadam Hussein in a dark background at the end of his execution, bin Laden is denied the heroic pose and the invocation to Allah. His face can only be perceived by its reflection on the other side of a screen as it is filtered by one more lens on a picture. Like the face of God Himself, bin Laden’s death can only be directly contemplated by a few elect. The result might be more ephemeral, but just as effective as a horse-rearing, bronze statue of Barak Obama in the New York Zero Zone.

The miracle of the simulacrum is that even though it displaces the real, it still works. What is more, its effect lies precisely in the necessity of such displacement, in the fact that “it becomes necessary for a people” to take some action, and to show “a *decent* respect for the opinions of mankind”. But the action taken is neither independence from, nor the execution of a particular enemy. The action taken is an action of erasure and displacement, of the murder of reality by the sign that replaces it. Taken to the political sphere, simulation is found to be at the very root of democracy as a system based on representation, but also on the displacement of the people. It was the representatives of the people in Congress, July 4, 1776, who signed the Declaration of Independence, not the people themselves. It is also the eyes of the National Security Team that watch the execution of Osama bin Laden, not mankind. When a justification is sought, the only one provided leads back to Logical and practical *necessity*.

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