

## WARLIKE. ATLAS OF A DIFFICULT WORLD

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[...] I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural  
Then yes let it be there are small distinctions  
Where do we see it from is the question

Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas Of The Difficult Word, II* (1990-91)

The series of exhibitions held under the name of *Warlike. Atlas of a Difficult World* have a common theme within their diversity: the historically, politically and philosophically irrefutable verification that seems to consider the West –our social, economic and cultural universe– has been shaped over the last five centuries based on preparing for possible –and often actual– deployment of actions of war. This use of violence has and has had different intensities, various justifications, and also numerous perpetrators and victims. That is, the scenarios where these can be implemented may be several: either in the various political agencies, ethnics, nations or social classes which share or have shared the geopolitical area defined as Western, either asymmetrically aimed at other peoples or societies that were or are considered to be beyond the sphere of the self-proclaimed First World. In short, a political and military complex takes on the initiative as the hegemonic centre and coerces huge areas so as to achieve economic and geopolitical profit.

Coercion also takes on quite complex shapes. Hence, the central zone has historically attempted to legitimise its power by building a cultural and moral discourse based on an alleged superiority which would be effective on all areas of life. Based on this thought, this nucleus is seen to be the cradle of certain values and activities which would have shaped the modernity confronting other countries and people seen as backward and, therefore, liable to be «civilised» or would even pray to be taken over so that they could prosper<sup>1</sup>. Behind the achievement and expansion of modernity there is, therefore, a dense, long history of violence which reached its zenith during the first half of the previous century. Following the great world wars, aggression did not disappear but rather persisted in other more subtle and forms of low intensity or masked by humanitarian rhetoric which has even invalidated international law among states. Thus, the postmodern break up of the last quarter of the 20th century, which was supposed to lead to the (happy) ending of the story, did not provide the expected results for those followers of ultra-liberalism. In fact, in September 2001, the Islamic fundamentalist attacks on Manhattan showed that the closed univocal story of liberalism was far from congealing worldwide. Despite this, the aggressions against the neuralgic heart of the city also provided new perspectives to keep on working on the old chimerical project of American militarism which would be legitimised with an alleged moral aim –even with the use of a massive launching of deadly *Tomahawk* cruise missiles– to spread peace, order and democracy throughout the world. Thus, the «civilising» activity has been a synonymy of aggression and domination, and this has meant entering into the dynamics of permanent limitless wars<sup>2</sup>, worsened by the incoherence and limitations of an empire with no possibilities of consolidating a new world order<sup>3</sup>.

So, far from confirming the benign representation of the political programme of the American

century of neo-imperialist falcons in Washington, the result has been to subjugate vast regions of the planet into chaos, terror and suffering. By contrast, it is worth noting that, despite the political fiasco, the economic interests of these elites, who are bent on privatising even military resources, have been extraordinary. Thus, what appears to be a «great story» of political failures and economic success for a minority, also becomes a series of tens of thousands, even millions, of «small personal stories» struck by pain and horror. From Mesopotamia to the desert in Darfur, from the jungles of Africa to the mountains of Afghanistan, the fear, hunger and brutality of combat take on a shape which, despite constant coverage in the media and the humanitarian character of the victim<sup>4</sup>, we will never manage to grasp the damage caused morally and physically by technical war on human bodies and spirits<sup>5</sup>. Euphemisms, subtleties and manipulations of publicity tend to impair a reliable communication of desolation to which human beings are subjected in military operations.

Thus, if we go back to the basis of our argument which lies at the birth of the driving force of modernity in the late 15th century, it is relatively easy to guess that modernity and war have for centuries become inseparable companions. From an anthropological and social-political angle it could be said that the political units which ended up as the cornerstones of the capitalist and colonialist Western world, adopted a marked *warlike* character<sup>6</sup>. This terminology in the English language is different from its antonym *warfree*, and defines certain human groups who, so as to consolidate the huge imbalances derived from inequalities, exploitation inflicted on these other countries and the will to dominate for one's own interest have employed their *modus vivendi* aimed at preparing for military action. Thus, for centuries, war has been built on, and is still construed as, a basic part of a cosmivision on which the system is located, despite often being justified as a necessary evil to fight the alleged backwardness and savagery of other people, frequently with a *warfree* character.

As mentioned earlier, the *warlike* attitude in the 20th century achieved its high points. The First World War, the Russian Revolution, the rise of fascism, several civil wars, the Second World War, the wars to free nations in the former colonies, the Cold War. The latter was surely an almost perfect *warlike* order which was used in a balance provided by the mutual deterrent between the opposing blocks. The fall of one of the blocks, the Soviet one, did not signal winding up the preparations for war. On the contrary, once this corset had broken, military conflict broke out polymorphously when the implosion of «actual» socialism occurred and along came the proclamation of a fake *pax americana*. Its consequences have already been highlighted: a large part of the world was turned into a limitless battlefield where military actions are treated as if they were international police operations. The aftermath of all this takes on the shape of an oxymoron: chaos and imbalance constitute the backbone of the ruling order<sup>7</sup>. As you may know, achieving control over the sources of finite energy for example, which enables western comfort, requires maintaining a constant state of war. Despite these circumstances, for the first time in many European countries several generations have not directly witnessed a war, i.e., the bloodshed of combat seen at first hand or the suffering caused to the public. An undoubtedly perverse paradox which is kept up by sophisticated technology –the remote activation of the war machine– and due to the fact that the protagonists of armed conflicts are often third parties (the Others), poor and dependent people with low incomes provided by the same exertion of violence on other less fortunate beings.

The outbreak of the order of modernity –so linked to colonialism– and the purpose of restoring it from its neoconservative angle has meant a rise in injustice, inequality and, therefore, resentment and fanaticism among all the more disadvantaged countries. Since 1991 the first Gulf War, as the opening act of a new era, has led to a type of deregulated global military situation. The implication of conspiracy on the list of economic and geopolitical interests, the

progressive interventions into strategic areas, have provided western societies with quite a peculiar *warlike* character. Thus, one may say that wars constituted in a certain culture are present all over: in the media, various fictionalisations (cinema, video-games, literature, the internet), in revising history and recovering these events of the past in museums, organising security of social relations... Hence, while the cultural ramifications of war are ever more likely to become a subject located close to the field of tourism or simulated adventures, the real war is by contrast seen as strange, removed from our comfortable lives.

Thus, to quite an extent, –and the proliferation of sophist discourses and ambivalent words in exerting military violence (collateral damage, intelligent bombs)– war becomes a constituting cornerstone, a bastion, of dominating social and economic order and the symbolic, cultural universe. Sometimes the essence of this system becomes visible after applying a kind of well intentioned exorcism of recent wars which may form a remembrance, harvesting the grief, sacralising the victim and condemning totalitarianism. It is clearly quite a characteristic phenomenon of the turn of century, which has gathered great energy, and signals the controversial appearance of memory in the public arena. On other occasions, the latent threat of a military or terrorist attack serves to influence the construction of certain non-critical social behaviours, obsessed with security and protection against the hypothetical enemies of freedom and democracy.

Clearly the fighting spirit is spreading all over: against international terrorism, and also with a different degree of intensity against the phenomenon of migration, against underprivileged classes from poor neighbourhoods, against everything that is thought to be different and destabilising. Dissidence is condemned and ridiculed. In sum, war and its language impregnate many spheres of our daily lives and also, contrarily, the ordinary languages, literary or from other areas, with the use of metaphorical articulations replete with cynicism, disfigure and soften the brutal, criminal nature of war.

Despite this, no matter how fallacious the arguments, in the background there remains a pitiful, fragile situation. Actually, today's situation may be called a «difficult world», where many aspects must be deciphered and denounced if one means to create and find at least some ways of coexistence. Thus, the configuration of the atlas, seen not only as a set of maps but also as a compilation of criticism is increasingly necessary, even if it means the «atlas of a difficult world». The critical approach to this social militarism– frequently dealt with confidentially and at times prone to building a myth in the *prime time* of the media– in the ever more impoverished rich Western world has several paths to take. One feasible one is the positioning of today's art works which use the tools inherited from the avant-gardes closest to the modernity between both world wars as a form of ethical expression and which, recovered and readapted, are circumscribed in the theory and practice of critical post-modernity: montage and visual recycling, deconstruction and documentary work, reconsidering and ironic distancing.

Faced with this situation of global deregulation, choosing sides is no easy matter. It means, as Georges Didi-Huberman<sup>8</sup> points out, following in the wake of Bertolt Brecht, wishing, demanding something, placing oneself in the present and aspiring to a future. The critical sharpness characterised by a certain art production today –which includes works by María Ruido, Marta de Gonzalo and Publio Pérez, Cristina Lucas, Immo Klink, Monika Anselment, Raúl Roncero and Toni Giró– may be added to the attempt to enlighten the kingdom of darkness in which all that has to do with military experience is immersed. Thus, with the aim of uncovering, exhibitions are held which focus on different subjects within the unifying concept of *warlike*. A concept which seems ideal to use it as one of the defining themes of a time in which the

imposition of global peace<sup>9</sup>, carried out by preventive operations, seems that it might become even more horrific than total war.

- 1 See, for example, Edward SAID, *Culture and Imperialism*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1993.
- 2 See Daniel BENSÂID, *Éloge de la politique profane*, Éditions Albin Michel, Paris, 2008.
- 3 See Michael MANN, *Incoherent Empire*, Verso, New York and London, 2003.
- 4 See Philippe MESNARD, *La victime écran. La représentation humanitaire en question*, Les Éditions Textuel, Paris, 2002.
- 5 Regarding this subject the following books are indispensable: Paul FUSELL, *Wartime*, Oxford University Press, Inc, New York, 1989; and Joanna BOURKE, *An Intimate History of Killing*, Granta Books, London, 1999.
- 6 On this subject, see for example: Stéphane AUDOIN-ROUZEAU, *Combattre*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2008.
- 7 See Francisco VEIGA, *El desequilibrio como orden*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2009.
- 8 See Georges DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Cuando las imágenes toman posición*, A. Machado Libros, Madrid, 2008.
- 9 Assertion by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari collected by Daniel BENSÂID in *Éloge de la politique profane*, *op.cit.*