

Blindness and Enlightenment in Alfredo Jaar's 'Lament of the Images'

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The Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar is an example of an unusual documentary photographer who seems to be in contradiction with his own practice for he denies presenting the viewers his photographic images. According to Jaar, photography itself is not sufficient for communicating with the public because people have become oblivious to pictures. This “blindness effect” or incapability of being emotionally captured by photography is a consequence of the overproduction of visual icons in a world dominated by commercialized images. In addition to being abundant, the pictures that we are overly exposed to are controlled by the media, social, and political apparatuses. Jaar, therefore, refuses to present documentary photographs following the lines of photojournalists. Instead, Jaar opts for using new mediums of representation in order to involve his audience. He replaces photographs by texts, lit boxes, or bright screens in order to establish a deeper emotional dialogue with his viewers. In this way, Jaar's art offers the public an alternative opportunity to reflect and meditate upon the lack of photographs in order to restore their “lost sight”.

In his series of works called *Lament of the Images*, which was completed in 2002 after his famous *Rwanda Project*, Alfredo Jaar reinforces this idea of “blindness”. He first introduces the viewers to three breaking news related to different subjects in a dark room and leads the public to another space with nothing but a bright screen. The aim of the strong light is to literally blind the viewers for a moment exposing them to their true condition as sightless beings in relation to the real world. Light, thus, plays an important role for Jaar as a tool of unveiling the truth. To look at Jaar, brings to mind the Greek philosopher Plato who, in *The Republic*,

introduces his *Allegory of the Cave*, in order to discuss light – in this case, sunlight - as a device for blinding and revealing reality at the same time. According to Plato's myth, ordinary men can be compared to prisoners inside a cave who only see the shadows of objects against a wall. The only way of knowing the Truth is by leaving the cave and experiencing the real nature of things which are present in the world but only visible through the illumination of sunlight. Hence, my interest in this paper is to compare Jaar's use of light in *Lament of the Images* with Plato's symbol of light in *Allegory of the Cave* and to demonstrate the connections that exist between the philosopher's concept and the photographer's aim. Additionally, I would like to illustrate how both philosopher and artist have the same purpose of acknowledging the ignorance present in society and how they portray light as being perhaps a type of solution to the "blinding effect".

Before describing the symbolisms behind the *Allegory of the Cave*, it is important to recognize the core of Alfredo Jaar's *Lament of the Images* in order to understand his use of light. First of all, since the *Rwanda Project* in 1994 – a documentary series on the massive genocide that happened in the east-central African country - , Jaar has been producing artworks that completely deny the exposure of images. As mentioned before, the absence of photographs in his exhibits demonstrates his frustration towards the ownership and control that the media has over the images. In an interview to the newspaper *El Mercurio*, Jaar mentions his concern for photographs nowadays because in his view, we live in a world where pictures are commodities which can be bought, sold, altered, and kept (Valdés, 2002). Images that proliferate in photojournalism and in the public sphere create, thus, a tension between what is real and what is portrayed, between representation and simulacra. His grief towards the suppression and distortion of public photographs becomes even more powerful through the choice of the title *Lament of the Images* for this particular series of works.

Jaar, in fact, goes in opposite direction of the media for he chooses to work with mental images through the use of illuminated texts on the wall. This is the first part of his exhibit which consists of glowing white words against three symmetrical black boxes in a dark room (figure 1). The words are not only the focal point, but also the only source of light which invites the spectator to approach them. According to Margaret Sundel in her article *Alfredo Jaar at Gallerie Lelong*, they all have in common the “absence of the image” as a theme. Additionally, as Sundel



Fig. 1 Alfredo Jaar, *Three Illuminated Texts Mounted on Plexiglass*. From *Lament of the Images*, 2002
 Documenta 11, Kassel
 Source: alfredojaar.net

describes, “Instead of explicitly depicting the situations they document, these texts force viewers to conjure the pictures in their mind’s eye,” (Sundel, 2002) which actually can be more striking than the solely act of gazing.

The first text box refers to Nelson Mandela. The words emphasize the fact that no photographs were taken of his act of weeping while being exposed to the sunlight on the day that he was released from prison.

During his exile in Robben Island, Mandela was sent to a limestone excavation site and because his eyes were never protected by the strong reflection of the sunlight through the white stones, his retina was damaged. When he was released, therefore, he felt the pain of gazing at the “outside” world which was illuminated by the sunlight. Photojournalists were able to capture the moment of his freedom, not his lamentation.

The second text box makes allusion to Bill Gates’ purchase on the world’s largest collection of historical photographs - that until that date (April 15, 2001) was part of the Bettmann and United Press International archive – and it is now buried inside a limestone mine in Pennsylvania. This decision was justified by Bill Gates as an act of preserving the images.

However, by being sealed in the mine forever, they will no longer be accessible to the public. In other words, this text illustrates the authority and control that a man like Bill Gates has over the space of social visibility.

The third and last text is also about possessing the power over images. It applies to the case of the U.S Defense Department purchasing rights to the satellite photos of Afghanistan and of the regions surrounding the country. This occurred during the United States' invasion of that area after 9/11 in 2001. It shows the control and manipulation of pictures in the hands of a powerful organization. By having the rights of these satellites images, the U.S Defense Department prevented the global media from revealing the negative effects caused by the bombing in that area avoiding possible repercussions of what the truth could trigger.

After reading the three texts on the walls, the viewers are conducted to the next room through a dark hallway. Instead of attracting the public with images, Jaar seduces them through the reflection of light. By the time the viewers arrive at the next room, they are confronted by a big lit screen that blinds their sight for a temporal moment until their eyes start accustoming with the amount of brightness (figure 2). As Nancy Princenthal describes in *A Language of Light Amid Darkness*, the screen has the purpose of not only making reference to the gaps or blind spots encountered within the means of communication, but also to the three previous texts which all imply that society is gradually in the process of being prevented from seeing the true images (Princenthal, 2002). In other words, Jaar's goal seems to be that of making the viewers conscious about their blindness and altered gaze caused by the media.

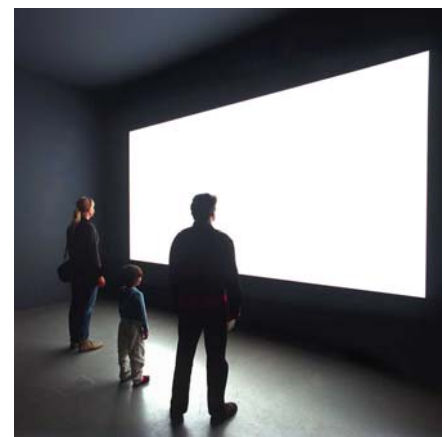


Fig. 2 Alfredo Jaar, *Light Screen*. From *Lament of the Images*, 2002
First version, Documenta 11, Kassel
Source: alfredojar.net.

Moreover, he wants to make a statement that due to the suppression and control of institutions the images are missing.

In addition to the bright screen room, Jaar finalizes his exhibit with another dark space where one comes across two tables. They both have light boxes embedded in their surfaces and they are placed on top of one other in reverse positions (figure 3). The tables are the same size but one is suspended and movable while the other one is grounded on the floor. When the two tables are on top of each other, the room becomes completely dark. As the suspended table is



Fig. 3 Alfredo Jaar, *Two Light Tables*.
From *Lament of the Images*, 2002
Second version, Galerie Lelong, New
York
Source: alfredojar.net.

pulled upwards by strings tied on its legs, a rim of light starts to appear until the space becomes dominated by the bright lights that irradiate from the surfaces of the two tables. The viewer, thus, experiences a similar effect of becoming blind by the light, but this time it occurs gradually. After being suspended all the way, the upper table slowly goes back to its initial position and the room is filled with darkness again.

Through the description of *Lament of the Images*, one can notice that light plays an important role in revealing the reality behind the means of communication. In an article dedicated to Alfredo Jaar, Christopher French mentions the artist's great ability of using the essential component of photography, which is light, to generate a great impact on his viewers (French, 2006). By providing the public with the glare of light instead of visual images, Jaar invites people to reflect upon the questions raised on the texts presented. He gives us a sensorial experience which affects our stereotypical vision. Additionally, he reinforces the absence of the images by giving viewers a glimpse of emptiness through the bright screen and lit tables. As French states, Jaar adopts the strategy of hiding the

image in order “To raise troubling questions about its content, its impact, and who controls it,” (French, 2006).

Similarly to Jaar’s way of thinking, Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* points out to the question of how society has its eyes closed to reality – or to the Truth - and how people are condemned to ignorance if they are not able to liberate themselves from their current human condition. Many scholars have interpreted the allegory as being “about the philosopher and his relationship to the political order he inhabits,” (Huard, page 1); however, my interest here is mainly to draw a parallel between the imagery of the myth and Jaar’s practice. My concern with Plato’s allegory is related to his ability of explaining how society takes the appearance of things as truths, and they ignore that there is a reality behind these mere appearances.

The *Allegory of the Cave* is taken from Book VII of Plato’s *Republic* and it tells the story of a dark cave located underground where prisoners are trapped in a sole seated position facing the wall. They are not able to move or turn around to gaze at anything else for their arms, legs, and necks are bound with chains. Directly behind them, there is a road that crosses the cave where animals and people walk by talking to one another and carrying objects in their heads. However, there is a freestanding low wall which blocks the passers from seeing the prisoners but allows the objects in their heads to reach beyond the height of the wall. These objects cast their shadows on the back wall of the cave through a man-made fire which is located behind everything else. The prisoners who are staring at the back wall see the casting shadows and since they have never seen the real objects, they take the shadows as being their true images.

According to Plato, there is a point when one of the prisoners is released from the chains and is dragged outside of the cave with the help of someone. The prisoner is then exposed to the light of the sun which blinds him temporarily because his eyes are only used to seeing shadows in the darkness of the cave. In Plato’s Socratic discourse, the process of coming out of the cave

and being exposed to reality is a very painful experience and it requires a period of time for the prisoner to get used to the change. He says that when the prisoner encounters the sunlight, for a moment his eyes become “filled with glare, and [he] would not thus be able to see any of the things that are now revealed to him as the unhidden,” (Heidegger, page 159). Plato goes on by saying that as soon as the prisoner gets accustomed to the light, he starts recuperating his sight and slowly recognizes the shadows of the objects until he sees the objects themselves, the people, the animals, and the rest of the natural world.

After he is able to experience reality, the prisoner realizes that what he had seen until then was not equivalent to the truth, but to the apparent truth, or to what Heidegger refers to as the “mere aspect,” (page 164). The sunlight, thus, is responsible for illuminating the real world or the world of “ideas” (Heidegger, page 164), and this for Plato is the source of all things. The sun, as a metaphor of *logos* or reason, provides the freed prisoner with the Truth and this act becomes a synonym for intellectual illumination. In other words, the prisoner discovers the true meaning of the things and his next step is that of returning to the cave in order to tell the others what he has experienced.

The prisoner’s descent towards the dark cave is also a painful process because his eyes now need to get used to the lack of light. The other prisoners who are still trapped while contemplating the theater of shadows in the wall also make the process difficult because they do not accept the freed prisoner’s story as being real. As Huard describes, “The [freed] prisoner sounds to his fellow prisoners more like a lunatic than a sage. Moreover, there are others in the cave who have acquired power and influence because they are adroit at knowing and interpreting the shadows as they appear on the wall,” (page 8). As a consequence, the freed prisoner will be put to silence and will not have his voice heard among the rest of the prisoners.

Since this is neither a theoretical nor the space of platonic exegesis, I will not go further in explaining the nuances of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. What is importance to learn, however; is that Alfredo Jaar uses his bright screens in *Lament of the Images* in a similar way in which Plato uses the sunlight in his myth. In both cases, the freed prisoner and the viewer in Jaar's exhibition follow a dark path before they encounter the strong light. They both suffer pain and a momentary blindness because their eyes have to get accustomed to the sudden brightness. In addition, they agree that the effect of blinding is necessary for one to understand his or her own reality. In this sense, Jaar and Plato think that in order for one to discover their human condition and reach enlightenment, he or she has to undergo a process of suffering.

In Plato's myth, the sunlight helps illuminate the visible world where the prisoner encounters the truth. This tale, as mentioned previously, is a metaphor for a type of intellectual clarification because the prisoner becomes aware of "the concrete illustrations of the 'ideas'," (Heidegger, page 163). For Jaar, similarly, the light of the screens produces enlightenment on the viewers for they begin to realize how they have been ignorant and blinded by the power of the media. The lit screens bring to the public's minds the missing photographs, so, the absent images are mentally created by the viewers themselves and they become in existence inside the viewer's mind. In other words, the light of the screens in Jaar's work do not physically illuminate the real world, but it encourages the spectator to produce what could account for a real picture in his or her head. The reason why the created images could be taken as the true ones in Jaar's case is because they would be embedded with the viewer's emotions and free from any type of commercial manipulation. According to Jaar, the truth is found in the feelings and in human solidarity, not in the tangible pictures (Levi Strauss, page 5).

There is another interesting similarity between the use of light in both Plato's myth and Jaar's work. The philosopher's choice for using the sun as the illuminating agent relies on the

fact that in his opinion the sun is the essence of life. In his book, Plato emphasizes the sun as the commander of seasons, years, landscapes, and the responsible for the existence of people and things (Heidegger, page 162). As much as the sun is the core of life, light is the soul of photography. In this sense, Jaar's choice to use bright screens in his work could be seen as a reference to what is the essence of the medium that he uses. Light by itself is the pure form of photography as well as the sun is the pure form of light.

Many other comparisons can be made between Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* and Alfredo Jaar's *Lament of the Images*. Perhaps the shadows in Plato's cave could be associated to the manipulated images that circulate in newspapers and magazines because they are only apparent truths. Additionally, the fire that casts the shadows in the cave's wall could well speak to the media who has control and produces the distorted images. The freed prisoner who discovers the truth might stand for Alfredo Jaar himself who was able to be free from the norms and rules of photojournalism and experience photography in his own way.

In conclusion, one can say that Jaar's art invites us to meditate and question the industry of communication. *Lament of the Images* induces us to mourn over the reality in which we live. As Stefan Jonsson says, the "images [are] lamenting that they have been buried alive and prevented from bearing witness," (Jonsson, page 147). In addition, by showing us nothing but texts and light, Jaar plays with our expectations of visibility and opens the door for the limits of representation. We are prevented from actually "seeing" but we definitely recuperate our sensibility for gazing.

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