

The Curse of Bearing Witness

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Perhaps, the real pain lies in our collective witnessing of a time of monsters.

Screen in our hands with morning coffee on the side, some of us see how these monsters slowly awaken throughout the world. We are a generation of eyewitnesses to a genocide being streamed live, of atrocities and traumas systematically erased, of fascism hiding under our bed—yet, however resilient, we are powerless, are we not? Our heart breaks over six impossible things before breakfast.¹

In *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay distinguishes between the passive spectator and the active witness through the experience of a museum visitor.² Strolling around the sterile exhibition hall at a safe distance from the artwork, all visitors are asked to refrain from certain actions—do not touch the artwork, do not use a flashlight, and be mindful of where your body moves.

A spectator and a witness both see the same exhibit, but for a spectator, the act of seeing occupies a passive position, gazing at art objects or images of atrocities without engaging with the violence behind them—consuming images without taking responsibility. In contrast, to bear witness is to engage ethically and politically—to recognize the ongoing effects of imperial violence, resist erasure, and insist on shared

responsibility for the past.³ A witness is not a neutral consumer; it hosts ongoing political relations with the past and aims to activate suppressed narratives. Though pain is ultimately unshareable, the story, image, or feeling stays within you.

Regarding the pain of bearing witness, it is essential to acknowledge that witnessing injustice is a profound experience—a quiet grief, a poignant clash between empathy and powerlessness, thrill and despair. The gap between moral urgency and systemic inertia breeds despair. Slow violence wears us down not with shocks, but with daily complicity. To see clearly is to ache alone, knowing the world is neither just nor easily changed.

That is why, perhaps, the real pain lies in our collective witnessing of a time of monsters.

2/ *A time of monsters*

In my opinion, the unassuming storybook can be both the beginning and the end of this exhibition. *The Guest* (Agung Kurniawan, 2025) is a storybook about a night when two monsters came into the child's home. Only Mother and the Child were home when the two monsters came. The artist has a choice to let the two monsters leave after they drained all the resources in the house, or to finish off with a bleak ending and eventually eat Mother and the Child to satisfy their insatiable hunger before moving to another house. The artist decided on the first ending while leaving the storyline open, inviting the audience to create their own versions.

Children's storybooks often feel relatable to socio-political conditions because they distill complex realities into simple, symbolic narratives—making them surprisingly powerful mirrors of society. These metaphors enable authors to address difficult topics in a safe and accessible manner. It tells the story of insatiable hunger that leads to the extraction of resources and drains them dry before moving to the next target. This book may metaphorically reflect the horror of abrupt upheaval—“monsters” arriving uninvited and disrupting safety, even to the point of invading one's domestic space, creating chaos amidst an already difficult life.

In the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci wrote from a fascist prison that “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”⁴ Gramsci's “morbid symptoms” are often rendered as “monsters” to capture the emotional weight of emergent, distorted forces that arise in times of breakdown. The interregnum—a gap between powers when a ruling order loses moral authority but still holds power—is a time when monsters lurk, carrying fear, violence, propaganda, and things rising from the dark.

But when exactly is a time when the monsters lurk in? In popular culture, monsters lurk when there is a crack between worlds and when dimensions collide—among which are Halloween and the night of 1 Suro. The dates of the interregnums are scarier in real life: 30 September 1965, May 1998, 24 February 2022, 7 October 2023 and 1948—to name a few.

In one way or another, *The Guest* tells another story of a soft interregnum when monsters abruptly enter one's home—outcrops of how the old democratic reforms are eroding before fully reformed, while a new political order is on the way, though not yet fully formed. Though still in the early stage, one can easily recognize the playbook, including the state-commissioned history books with the revisionist narratives that deny past atrocities and “focus on the positive”—sanitizing and downplaying “sensitive” events, replicating an epistemological error that might eventually rewrite collective memory.

The narrative that focuses on the positive resonates with Milan Kundera's contrast between “angelic” laughter—harmonious, naive, and conflict-erasing—and “demonic” laughter, which mocks, destabilizes, and reminds humanity of its fall.⁵ Totalitarian regimes favor angelic laughter: a collective positivity that silences dissent and erases violence. When everyone politely laughs in unison, the pain of censorship, disappearances, and executions is conveniently forgotten.

¹ Paraphrasing the White Queen from *Alice in Wonderland*—Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984. (Quote reference: Queen's line “Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”)

² Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London: Verso Books, 2019. p.498

³ Ibid. p.501

⁴ Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. & trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971)

⁵ Kundera, Milan. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Translated by Michael Henry Heim. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

3/ A battlefield against forgetting

Agung Kurniawan turns memory into a battlefield against forgetting, offering a counter-history, rejecting silence, and questioning who carries the burden of memory. *Whoever Stays Until the End Will Tell the Story* looks back at decades of artistic defiance. Each medium is chosen not for style but for necessity. His works insist on seeing what the state has tried to erase.

Some works stare at you in the eyes—like resurrected death that refuses to be forgotten—and forgotten shall they not! They demand you to see, keep the gaze steady, no matter how hard it is to witness, as a reminder of why their lives were taken in the first place. The question isn't whether to feel despair for those figures on the wall is valid—it is—but what we do with it. Many are trained not to see. Yet your witnessing, your ethical clarity, is already an act of resistance. Their stories shall continue to live within you.

For the artist, his drawings, installations, and prints function like pamphlets—urgent, accessible, and rooted in resistance. Inherited from underground visual traditions, these works carry the immediacy of protest and the raw honesty of xerographic lines, refusing elitism. Those lines are gathered like a fieldworker gathers traces—fragments of a nation's breath held in trembling moments. The medium was embraced as a vehicle for ideas, struggle, and transformation—however vain and most probably doomed to fail.

Nevertheless, the artist believes that “En route a failed struggle, you need daydreams.” The moment of daydream, for the artist, is the special moment of creating a painting on canvas. These paintings are poetic counterweights to his activism, offering spaces of resilience and humanity amidst the curse of bearing witness—a piece of joy immersed in shades of red. In this fog, beauty, joy, and poetry are not luxuries—they are how we endure, resist, and remember.

4/ To remember is an act of resistance

Prior to writing this essay, the artist asked me to read Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red*⁶. I took the task gladly, fully

immersing myself in the combination of a sense of thrill and melancholy throughout the novel. That novel begins with a corpse found by a well; then, the plot unfurls—interlaced characters, sub-stories, grand scenes in an imperial court, and voices given to even the most inanimate things, such as color, a miniaturist's depiction of a horse, and a drawing of a tree. The aftermath of the book leaves a trace of subtle despair upon recognition of one's own situation. Both the book and today's politics touch upon how power controls narrative—whether through illuminated manuscripts or an official textbook. What is remembered is what flatters; what wounds are brushed aside. Art becomes obedience, history a hymn to power. Dissent vanishes—sometimes by sword, sometimes by silence. The patron dictates what may be seen or remembered. To erase pain is not to heal it—but to let it haunt the walls of every silent room.

What we must understand is that forgetting occurs in layers—first erasure, then revision, and finally silence. Over time, absence becomes proof that nothing happened. Without records, youth lose touch with dissident memory; martyrs vanish without a trace. When history is rewritten, it severs solidarity across generations—and shapes what people remember, mourn, or believe,

While Pamuk's novel begins with imagined corpses, Agung came from a generation that had stood beside the real ones, lived through the telegrams that arrived like storms, and the silence before a knock at the door. In days when reading felt like theft, he inhaled the sweetness and rot of the republic in one breath. His work unfolds as an ethno-line diary: sorrowful, mischievous, unfinished. Drawings, daydreams, soundscapes, a cha-cha-cha danced through history—each a whisper from the margins. Speaking from the brink of failed struggles, memory endures, glowing like a stubborn ember. Not a monument, but a memory still warm in the hands.

In times when truth is systematically blurred, art stands like an open wound. It is an unflinching witness—painful, unpolished, and unwilling to heal until the past is confronted. When it comes, do not flinch and let it wound you.

Some people might inherit a world so sealed, they float untouched—forever spectators, never witnesses. When nothing wounds you, nothing needs to change. But to remember is to resist. To carry pain is to press against forgetting. And sometimes, a single act of seeing can crack the shell of inherited ease. In *Whoever Stays Until the End Will Tell the Story*, every line, every shade of red, dares us to witness what power would have us forget.

“But let's not forget that color is not known, but felt.”

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“What does red mean?” the blind miniaturist who had drawn the horse from memory asked again. “The meaning of a color is what is in front of us and what we see,” replied the other. “Red cannot be explained to those who cannot see it.”
— Orhan Pamuk

⁶ Pamuk, Orhan. *My Name Is Red*. Translated by Erdağ Gökmar. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.