

Fragments of a conversation

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Fito Rodríguez —It is significant that the first thing you did was with the Fisher Price toy camera, using it firstly with a certain fascination for the object, rather than for the moving image.

Txuspo Poyo —Actually, I had a relationship not just with that camera toy, but also with music tapes (as a means of recording), with cassettes, which was the only contact we had with music; live concerts didn't even come into it. There was a fascination for the machine, but what was really enthralling was how, on a tape cassette via which you'd always heard music, on a magnetic strip, you could also see pictures. Now that was fascinating!

F. R. —The thing about the medium is interesting, but what's significant is the journey from the "primitive" medium towards others of a more professional nature, until you arrived at the synthesis image. Until you yourself, through immersion in the technological possibilities, got to control each of the stages. One might say there was a qualitative increase when you got involved with image.

T. P. —I think that is the technological part, which in this case is like the "manual" part whereby you gain access and can complete the process. At the start, with the pieces I made using interwoven films, the concept of editing made its appearance: then the first piece of video I did was a documentaRY about cartoons, but in fact what I found interesting about cartoons was the mental and social provocation they involve, and it shows itself once more in my last animation work, *Hostile Environments*, 2005: The use of technology reduces everything to a hammer and a nail, which constitute the essence of two aspects that particularly intrigued me; cartoons and mechanics.

F. R. —You've actually traced a thread stretching from the Cartoon documentary to your own 3D Cartoon. Starting out as socio-cultural analysis until arriving at "total control" over the product in *Hostile Environments*.

T. P. —Yes, it's interesting because it's a process. The Fisher Price-Pixel Vision is a camera for children, I feel that it worked as a very direct relationship. Then again, it meant talking about something that's made an impact on us, in the case of cartoons. I've been influenced by American culture more than by any other, as it's what I -(we)- grew up with from an early age, via Television, not just in the form of cartoons, but telefilms, and so on.

Pixel Vision is a toy from the 1980s. This camera has made it possible to execute pieces of work with a good measure of intimacy. The quality of image has very little definition, endowing the content with great plastic expressivity. Accompanying that, having immediate access to what is around you, forms part of the personal domestic inventory.

F. R. —Let's talk about the interlaced film pieces. In your image "weave" pieces (or pictures) I detect a certain disequilibrium. On the one hand, there are the film weaves, pieces executed with interwoven film and comprising an abstract web, and on the other hand, there are those made up of a single image from the interweaving of two identical photos. Two opposite extremes. They seem to contradict one another.

T. P. —I think one leads to the other. There was the idea of collage -cutting and pasting-, but then there's the idea of editing, close to Eisenstein's montage idea, creating a narrative. In this case the narrative is this abstract weave, that generates the idea of sequence. To break up pieces, I mean, to take a film and cut it up, is almost irreverent, cutting it into little pieces, joining it all up again... it brings to mind William Burroughs' cut-ups using literature... But what I liked about the sequence idea was the use of abstract fragments from which, once they are inside the work, you could recognise the sequence. I liked the narration that was present inside the abstraction. What happens with woven images that make up a photograph? It's like taking a frame or a photogram from a film, and keeping the same structure: you cut it, but keep the image...

With the digital medium came the pixel: the information came across as little squares. It seemed interesting to me at that time because of the enlarging produced by the Fisher Price machine, giving it the appearance of a mosaic, and that mosaic was created, not by pieces pasted one to another, but where one piece concealed the next one. Like in these woven film pieces.

F. R. —*Herrorismo* is a very specific piece. It could be called a “condensed” installation.

T. P. —*Herrorismo* requires not just the image, but it also needs the object that produces it, which, in this case, is the projector and in some way has to do with the idea of absence. Mentally we have those two joint images: image and projector. This has changed now, with the silent presence of the video projector, but we have the idea of the projector going from Super-8 to CinExin, etc. We still sense an association with the mechanisms and a fear of losing the object. I feel that *Herrorismo* in a way talks of that, of loss, of the impact on the psyche: the MGM lion is connected with our childhood and if we have to sum up cinema somehow we do it with the film iconography of that lion, though something else might do.

The mechanism of the film genre also arouses my interest and I was already using it in woven films and in photos about the different typographies used at the beginnings and ends of films, all loaded with symbolism, as if there were a code involved. It's connected with our mythology: the idea of the mountain, of the goddess or of Orion, of the stars, or even “Universal”, which preceded “the global”. Universal elements that appear at the beginning of the projection. And then the idea of the “Fin”, when “The end” comes, where the typography encapsulated the kind of film we had seen: a drama, a love film, a war film...

F. R. —In this sense *Herrorismo* is a sort of piece “about cinema seen from cinema”.

T. P. —I would associate it with the cut film pieces, with the various film typographies and, at the same time, with the idea of the mechanics of obsolete things, which is also shared by the Fisher Price work, but at a conceptual level. And now it might call up the hammer in *Hostile Environments*.

The hammer is not just a tool: we know that it has exerted its presence as a highly ideological element, while in turn it has been an object for construction and deconstruction...

F. R. —There are other themes in *Hostile Environments*, there is mystery beneath the wooden flooring, there's a lot of tension... But there is a certain similarity too between what goes on beneath the wood and what happens in the billiard pockets in *Eight Full Kane*.

T. P. —It really is like our subconscious. What I liked about *Eight Full Kane* was to start out from billiards as a popular game that is in all the bars, and to go on to build a whole plot around the table. Through the reflection of the balls we knew what was happening around them. This was happening on the surface, but then there was another reading at a “vertical” level, which was to do with the baize and what went on inside, the people who lived inside, underneath the baize. A “hidden” plot.

F. R. —In this video I find something that is also there in *MHT*. Of course, in both cases there is a reference to a very specific film, but in both, at the same time, it is interesting how the video theme is looking for, or at least opens up, a route, via the mystery that contains certain passages of that film. So, in *Eight Full Kane* it would be *CitizenKane's* ball, and in the case of *MHT*, the story of the monkeys and the monolith in *2001: Space Odyssey* ... I got the impression that it's that mystery that the two videos start out from. Is that right?

T. P. —Everything in *MHT* comes from Arthur Clark's book, published at the same time as the film, and not so much from Kubrick's work. In the book he makes a series of observations (you know he was the joint scriptwriter of *2001: ...*) about the system of symbols Kubrick had employed in the film. Some religious, socio-political and cultural elements filtered into the film at the time in a poetic or symbolic manner and were kept in. I thought it was worth analysing how those biblical elements appear, like “the bone of Cain”: one monkey kills another with a bone. Or the presence of the monolith that calls to mind the UN building.

F. R. —I think that everything in *MHT* proves to be extreme, though I don't know how to define very well what “extreme” means. It strikes me as a piece of work that “pushes the limits”, in the sense that it breaks just about all the rules.

T. P. —It is almost narcotic. That feeling of being in a state of anxiety, of near explosion, which is why it can produce unease, though it may also seduce. It might be a symptom of the psychedelic era.

F. R. —But it's got rhythm, it has staying power. There are many things to discover, which keep you on your toes. The way it's played is really interesting, very disturbing: sometimes the protagonists interpret their role as monkeys, at other moments they don't.

T. P. —It gets to a point where it doesn't matter what they are... You can clearly see they are actors dressed as monkeys and that they perform actions that don't have to be monkey things, because they drive, are armed with a pistol or carry a flag. They are really employing the whole territorial system of symbols and all the socio-cultural and political symbols we have for a space that identifies itself through a flag, through a monolith ...

F. R. —The most interesting thing for me is to attempt to understand the meaning of the character: to what extent is there performance, to what extent does it matter whether they are disguised or not? How far are they responsible for what happened in the preceding scene? Because they might be different monkeys, not necessarily the same ones... Did you direct their actions?

T. P. —Yes, but in a very intuitive way. There was a lot of improvisation, there was a script but then we always improvised during the shoot. There are anecdotes to tell: on one occasion the police appeared and I thought they were going to deport me. In the parking lot scene they thought we were preparing a bank robbery... We were shooting this in the year 2000. Just imagine doing it now! It's very complicated these days to shoot in New York.

F. R. —How did you go about the editing process in *MHT*? How does one weave such an abstract tapestry?

T. P. —I remember that when I was editing I was seeing a still life from the 17th century, I had in mind a vanitas still life. All the symbols that emerged were like a painting for me: I saw the dice as chance; in the anthropomorphic skull I saw the idea of the ephemeral, the human being as something ephemeral. That series of elements was, for me, what composed this great still life.

F. R. —The *MHT* exhibition in the Sala Montcada has a display that is worth mentioning.

T. P. —The exhibition actually consists of two pieces. One is the video, but I was drawn towards building something "structural", stripping it of architectural meaning, and creating ambiguity between the architectural and the sculptural. This way, it functions at one and the same time as a kind of enormous seat, like a space ship you can go into, and reminds one of the balcony of Fallingwater (F. Lloyd Wright), a magnificent symbiosis between architecture and nature. This is the area I found the most interesting, more than the construction per se. I liked the negative that was created with the profile of the balcony, a space where the projection was physically unified with the place the video is seen from.

The video is seen from inside the porch. It was like a window onto the natural space. The structure was there to be sat on and people could see the projection whilst sitting on it.

F. R. —On other occasions you have also created structures for viewing video...

T. P. —The platforms appeared for the first time in the year 2000 in the Sala Montcada (the balcony in *MHT*). Later, in the show *Stalker, Cruzando Puentes* (Galería Pérez de Albéniz) I made a staircase. The staircase cut off access to the exhibition space, it was a wall that you couldn't go beyond but which also raised you to a level that allowed you to see the projection. And it worked pretty well with the idea of the bridge as a transit zone, there was something sculptural about it, as well as having the air of a scene from a film.

F. R. —Creating a device to "access" video is something you also use in the installation *The blind house* which you made in Costa Rica.

T. P. —The houses in Costa Rica are very influenced by the Yankee concept of a dwelling. The houses are not very high as it is an earthquake zone, with seismic movements, and they are enormously well-protected, not just the house but the surrounding terrain too, with surveillance cameras, wire fences, the lot. This whole montage is the result of an extreme cult of private property. The American influence and the nearness of Nicaragua have allowed it to develop into a tax paradise.

The blind house was a construction that closed off the door and the kitchen window of the centre where the exhibition was happening. Some peepholes allowed the spectator to see the inside and the video projection.

F. R. —The peephole as an "artefact" also appears in *Room 237*. You use it again as a device for "private" viewing, almost for voyeurism...

T. P. —Sure, it also has another phantasmagoric side to it, that element of seeing without being seen, of voyeur Buñuel style. *Room 237* takes place in a hotel. I have always associated hotels with a dose of terror, fear and superstition. Firstly

because it's a place of transit, disturbing due to its impersonal appearance. It is like the "non-place". It is a reference to the film *The Shining*, which talks of that room, it proves to be a kind of "warning".

F. R. —How did you organise the installation for the show *Gaur, Hemen, Orain* in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum?

T. P. —I was doing a documentary about Dionisio Cañas, and out of it there emerged the possibility of producing some work about the figure of Charles Manson, whom both he and I had already dealt with.

I was drawn by the notion of tackling the figure of Manson, but not from the idolised perspective that exists in popular culture about "the dark side": it was more a question of presenting him as a poet, as a criminal of words, of language. *The Charles Manson chicks* is structured from the prose and poetry texts of Manson himself. The state of anxiety and hypnotism that there is in all his poems is incredible, I found them brutal. I created a kind of cinematographic element, something like a script. I translated his poems, adapting them to this script, in order to place them in a relationship with photographs. It wasn't a cinema script I wanted to make, but a photograph script. And I incorporated the infrared idea that I was already working on with photos, along with the superposition of images (two images that are reflected one on top of the other), to strengthen the composition. This project must be understood as having Manson's writings as the source.

F. R. —There is another project we can mention that you keep "open" and go back to on certain occasions. I refer to the mosaics (maybe weaves too), made with matches.

T. P. —The project really began with a proposal from Octavio Zaya, in the shape of a specific project for the journal *Atlántica*. At that time (1993), I was working on all the iconography from the cinema, I was using Twentieth Century Fox logos, from Orion too, this came up earlier on... and it was then that I thought of constructing something similar but that would have a sense of "combustion". As it was a project for a journal I wanted it to have a filming feel, in a sequence mode. The process consisted of the deconstructed "warning" image; from the Twentieth Century Fox icon... It was actually the combustion of a single word, which went through a transformation and turned into another language.

F. R. —These actions also have a certain tapestry flavour, both in the construction and in the combustion sense.

T. P. —Yes, very kind of pixel, with points to make an image. I've used it on various occasions, it has some connection with the 1960s, with ephemeral pieces... Somehow, through these elements, you get to talk a little about obsolete technologies, about history, to be precise. It's interesting that one can speak of history with just a match. This piece, when it was presented in Cuba, proved especially interesting. More than the actual symbol that had been constructed with matches (and which was the Superman symbol), it pointed to the unnameable: it inevitably had to connect up with Fidel. But at the same time I was attracted towards doing something that involved the conflict that exists between the USA and Cuba. And that took place with the matches. For one match to burn you needed another to burn. They were matches burning in unison, American matches and Cuban matches. In fact, from outside all the matches looked alike, but they came from different origins, some from the States and some from Cuba. And in the end what was left was a shadow, a utopian landscape.

F. R. —Cruzando vías seems to me to be a more "contained" exercise, maybe it turns out to be a video-creation in the orthodox sense. I think what plays the lead here is the editing and, therefore, once again, the weave.

T. P. —Yes, it starts with a poster in the New York Metro saying "Si ves algo di algo"/"If you see something say something". The ambiguity of the text has something to do with the idea of a gaze, which has somehow been "deflected".

Now the gaze that was previously seductive has changed into a warning of precaution and mistrust. The piece came about not only because of the message created by the Government but also because -for the first time- it was a bilingual message, using both English and Spanish.

F. R. —From Fisher Price to 3D, including your work with cinema projectors, there is an involvement with machines in all that you have done, but I personally would not like your work to be understood to be subordinated to a technological decision.

T. P. —I'm interested in the idea of the mechanical, of a search for alternatives that have been rendered obsolete and in some way are subject to re-examination. Mechanics is like "pre-technology", the concept that existed when we were studying in primary school, when we were told how machinery operated: this is something that has now disappeared, because we are unfamiliar with machinery and how it works. My work seems to have pursued that line of involvement

with technology, but that doesn't mean anything other than that it belongs to my time, to my era, and that from that premise I freely use the ideas both of obsolescence and of the future.