After 2001

Neus Miró

Tapestries, enormous ‘tissues” and/or nets are some of the objects that come to mind when comparing Txuspo Poyo’s early work from the nineties. The resulting images were the fruit of a painstaking process through which strips of photographic paper were braided like handcrafted pieces, so that the piece only acquired a specific appearance when completed. Since it was made up of a succession of many fragments and strips, the image only became a unit when the viewer saw all of it, when he looked at it as a whole. Other works, however, were made with celluloid strips, contrasting with their transparency the opaqueness of photographic paper. Poyo has commented, “Celluloid interests me for its transparency, as something in transit. This interest first began in 1989, following a visit to London, where I’d pick up the rolls of film I’d find in the rubbish. At that time, I had an exhibition on at the Casa de Cultura of Basauri in the Basque Country, and I prepared a giant three-by-two-metre curtain I’d made during some get-togethers organized in Mondragón. It kept coming unfastened from the wall, something that brought out the celluloid’s transparent quality. Since then I’ve returned to this idea of transparency as transit, as the feeling of everything passing. Celluloid provides you with information but this information is abstract because it’s in motion. It’s like an absence, or a presence that has passed...1

The tissues manufactured with this material lose the level of concretion of those made with photographic paper. Because of its transparency, celluloid permits superimposition and hence a simultaneity of images. This is an aspect that prompts ambiguity and confusion in the viewer, with regard to the perception of the work. In this case, each fragment, each piece of the “tissue”, of the net, is finite. It is not part of a whole but rather a whole in itself. There is no beginning or end. Each fragment is both at once.

In more accentuated fashion, the celluloid “tissues” emphasise the presence of the cut, the border, the interstice in the Deleuzian sense: “The cut or interstice between two series of images no longer forms part of either series. Instead, it is the equivalent of an irrational cut which determines the non-commensurable relations between images.2 Linearity thus disappears in these works. Similarly and as a result of the superimposition of images, the work takes on a physical density, a certain thickness, a superimposition of layers that resembles the hypertext. The concept of the net, the ellipses, the cuts, the interstices and so on are aspects that T. Poyo has maintained as fundamental elements of his later work.

The videos that he began making in 1992 should be understood as moving pictures in which he applies and recovers the formal aspects employed in his previous work. Like that of many other artists using this means of expression in the nineties, Txuspo Poyo’s visual work recalls the interests, concerns and strategies of early video expression from the sixties.3 In the nineties we once again find a deliberate emphasis on the expansion of image technologies, and the same social awareness; there is also a similar interest in multiple projections and a new treatment of the narrative derived from this technical I and/or expository incorporation. The nineties artists stand apart though because they bring about a deconstruction of the film code in a way that is more controlled and less subjective, applying strategies that are more methodical and closer to social questions. The building of narratives is not subject to the pattern based on the cause-effect reaction. The repetitions, the suspension of linear time, the asynchronous expression of space and time destroy the “classic” sense of chronology. Time becomes an artificial and artful measure that reveals and reflects the constructed reality to which it refers. The adoption of new narrative forms that blow apart the classic scheme and contribute to different parallel arguments in a single work allows for the coexistence of different viewpoints. This multiplicity of simultaneous arguments has developed in reference to what are known as rhyzomatic structures, which are like those of the hypertext. According to Gilles Deleuze’s definition, the rhyzome defines a network in which “any point of the rhyzome can be connected to any other, and must indeed do so.4 This definition alludes precisely to the communication method established by the Internet and the text and image systems that this network generates. Txuspo Poyo made use of this rhyzomatic network structure in still image works, as we have seen previously, in which the net is not only extensive but also thick, and this structure becomes the matrix of the later video pieces.

Monkey Honky Town is a videotape that does more than make ironic references to Stanley Kubrick’s film 2001: A Space Odyssey. We could even call it a tribute to the American director. 2001 was first screened in New York on 1 April 1958. Four years before, Stanley Kubrick had contacted the renowned science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, and together they created what would be the film script. The novel appeared a few months after the film premiere. During the writing of the script, Kubrick and Clarke consulted dozens of specialists and scientists, and many details of the film indeed presaged what actually took place.

Although the film puzzled critics, everyone agreed that it was an unquestionable triumph in terms of film language. But what was the plot? After all, it lacked a logical beginning, development or end. No one spoke for the first half-hour, and the dialogue of the rest of the film, which lasted little more than 40 minutes, was completely irrelevant and redundant.5 The film's enthusiastic reception was thanks in large part to the youngest members of the viewing public, for whom: "the message was not something that used the envelope of the medium to travel in, but actually was the medium, they received it with extraordinary sense of involvement.6

In fact, the public's reaction was not far removed from what Kubrick had intended: "I wanted to create a visual experience, an experience that would elude verbalised pigeonholing and directly penetrate the subconscious with a content that would be both emotional and philosophical... I wanted the film to be an intensely subjective experience that would touch the viewer's interior consciousness the way music does... There is room to speculate as much as we want about the philosophical and allegorical meaning of the film...7

2001: A Space Odyssey is base on the plurality of the meanings and the notion of ambiguity.8 Monkey Honky Town includes visual and sound references to 2001 in its editing but it resembles the Kubrick film, above all, in the way it takes the plurality of meanings and the notion of ambiguity somewhat further to reveal the impossibility of communication. The building of a story begins with the configuration of spatial and temporal parameters which the viewer obtains from on-screen data. Thus, the temporal continuity, the ellipses, the simultaneity, the linking of spaces, the space leaps and so on make up the information with which the viewer builds a story. In classic narrative, the stylistic elements, which is to say the formal treatment of spatial and temporal parameters, make the viewer construct a coherent time and space in which the action takes place. Yet, whereas 2001 hinders the construction of a spatial and temporal coherence, Monkey Honky Town renders this impossible. The viewer finds himself faced with a print-over of information that successively furnishes space and time co-ordinates: "Mailwood Park / 7:00 pm", "Midtown Manhattan / 1:00 pm", "Hall/ 2:00 pm", "Downtown 4:45 pm", "Downtown 5:00 pm", "Midtown 3:00 pm", "Stadium parking! 3:45 pm", etc. Yet all this information lacks clarity and makes the viewer tend to wonder about the simultaneity of the action, space and time since it generates non-stop contradictions. The viewer is confronted with a glut of visual information and an organization that does not facilitate the drawing up of narrative hypotheses, of stories.

For his exhibition at the Sala Montcada, a porch has been built that recalls Falling Water, the house that Frank Lloyd Wright designed in Pennsylvania. There, the porch is the element that enables one to obtain a combination and an integration of the inner and outer space. The one built in the Sala Montcada welcomes the viewer and works as an external frame of the projection. It also parallels an element that appears repeatedly in the video, and shows the viewer images of evolution. It is like a tunnel in time, establishing coexistence between two distinct temporal parameters: that of the viewer in his porch-tunnel and the time tunnel in Monkey Honky Town.

Monkey Honky Town has no dialogue. A narrator's voice is heard only twice and, on a third occasion, the viewer can read a text printed over that says: "for in the long run a species, like an individual, has to stand on its own feet and find its own destiny...".

The ambiguity caused by the almost exclusive use of visual and sound elements prevents the viewer from obtaining a clear reading. Moreover, the visual experience and the negation of dialogue emphasize the spectacular aspect of the film. The visual power of the images, the soundtrack that sets the bounds of the different scenes absorb the attention of the viewer, rendered incapable of concentrating on the possible meanings of the piece. This glut of information is also reinforced by the constant presence of double images, of superimpositions, of reflections in mirrors or other reflecting surfaces that together impede the construction of a single linear reality.

Yet the element that unquestionably confirms this ambiguity is the absence of "characters" in the classic sense of the word. The characters that appear and perform the different actions all have the same appearance. There are no individual features. Beginning with the scene in the car park, the viewer can deduce that there are at least three apes. But are they always the same ones? Are there any more of them? These "characters" act as agents of the activities they carry out; they are used as elements of a mise-en-scène. The apes lack individualism, physical traits and clearly differentiated personalities. This structural element, the non-identification of the characters, constantly frustrates the viewer's expectations regarding the creation of any narrative logic and, obviously, his identification with just one of them becomes totally unviable. The editing, moreover, accentuates this confusion. One clear example of this is the overlapping of the scene in the car park with the one in the sand dunes. The final shot of the car park scene shows us one of the apes lying flat on the ground and the next shot, which belongs to the scene of the dunes, also starts off with an ape lying in the sand. We know that the places are different.., but is it the same ape?

The ambiguity created by the lack of spatial and temporal coherence, together with the impossibility of identifying the characters, may prompt a certain passivity on the part of the viewer, who may conclude that there is simply nothing to understand. The viewer can perceive a certain narrative scheme, is able to establish a beginning, a sequence of

actions and an end. There is a certain narrative quality in that a series of events takes place. Yet on account of its formal characteristics, this narrative quality - as we have seen previously - generates neither communication, nor a clearly unequivocal message. In any event, the message is confused and pools several aspects. We discover a series of elements, such as the flag and the pistol which, on account of their repetition, emphasise possible contents having to do with questions related to power, territory, conquest, mastery, control... thematic ingredients which, if the truth be told, we have already found in previous works, both in the photographic pieces and in the videos. Nevertheless, and in spite of the “clues” that this work offers the viewer, numerous questions are put forward that cannot be answered, such as what sense can be made of the journeys, what is their aim, what does the flag symbolize, and so on.

Monkey Honky Town, like the early plot pieces, rejects the establishment of a single meaning, thus denying the viewer the chance of obtaining one that is definitive.

Notes

1 Atlántica, No. 11, Autumn 1995, p. 100.
2 Deleuze, G.: La Imagen-Tiempo. Estudios sobre cine 2. Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1996, p. 283.
3 Video cultures. Multimediale Inscutationen der 9Oeriahre, Ursula Frohne ed., Museum der Neue Kunst/LKM Karlsruhe and Dumont Buch Verlag, Cologne, 1999, p. 31.
4 fleleuze 6./Guattari F: Rizomo, Pre-textos I, Valencia, p. 19.
5 Bizony P.: 2001 filming the future, Au rum Press London, 1994, gathers a series of replies to the criticism made at the time of the film premiere.
6 Walker A.: Stanley Kubrick directs, Davis.Poynter, London, 1971, p. 241.
7 Agel, Y: The Making of Kubrik’s 2001, New York, New American Library, 1970
8 Luis M. Garcia Mainar offers an analysis of the narrative structures used by Kubrick in Narrative and Stylistic Patterns in the Films of Stanley Kubrick, Camden House, Rochester, 1999.