

Txuspo Poyo's *U.N(inverse)* can be experienced on several levels: it is, first of all, a tour de force of video construction, thrilling in its visual effects; second, it is a witty exploration of the United Nations building as architecture and as mystery; and third, it is a sombre meditation on global politics in the 21st century, making its points indirectly and allusively. And surely on first viewing it is as puzzling as it is dazzling –as if we are viewing a dream filled with obsessive imagery of pendulums, flags, broken glass, light bulbs, a heaving river, smoke, drapery, and the covering and uncovering of the model of the U.N. building itself; equally puzzling, perhaps, are the allusions to works of art (by Dürer, Picasso, and others) that flicker here and there, inviting us to the threshold of meaning. But what does it all mean?

I like Neus Miró's<sup>1</sup> description of Txuspo's work, borrowing the concept from Gilles Deleuze, as "rhizomatic"; rather than the typical linear structure of cause and effect, a rhizomatic structure is one in which any point on the network might be connected with another. Such a structure is like the internet, with its inter-connecting links, and it is one that Txuspo has adapted for his own uses in his video works, as Miró argued almost a decade ago, anticipating aspects of *U.N(inverse)*. I would say in this case, however, that there is a linear structure to Txuspo's newest video work, a "plot," if you will, that is signalled by the four acts into which the artist has divided his work. There is suspense, there are moments of ominous anticipation, and there is a conclusion in which everything is brought to an end. And yet within the whole, and within each act, the structure is rhizomatic, based on the "quotation" of existing works of art, that are brought into *U.N(inverse)* quietly, allusively, sometimes almost invisibly, and yet function with an ideational power to provoke the viewer's response, interacting with the visible symbols in the video, yet enlarging their conceptual meaning beyond their literal surface. In this sense these quotations are like "hyperlinks" in constructing a larger network of association and meaning.

As contemporary in sensibility as Txuspo is, there is also a current that ties him to the great artists of twentieth century Modernism, not only to his beloved Duchamp and Picasso, but to the work of modernist poets like T.S. Eliot. One could liken Txuspo's compositional strategy in *U.N(inverse)* to a poem like *The Waste Land*, for example, which features a five part structure, dense with allusion, and comprising within each part a paratactic structure of scenes. *U.N(inverse)* has that density, and, like some of the modernist masterpieces, it also has a rhythm that alternates between a precisionist aesthetic and an aleatory aesthetic of joy.

As I have mentioned, Txuspo has divided the work as a whole into four acts, each with its distinct thematic and aesthetic motifs, revolving around that most optimistic of buildings, the United Nations, a symbol of the possibility (if not the necessity) of a new world order, designed by that most optimistic of architects, Le Corbusier, who dreamed of a world made rational by architecture. Yet from the initial title frames of *U.N(inverse)*, we have a hint of Txuspo's mischievous approach: to take the United Nations, which represents the totality of the political universe, and "invert" it –turn it upside down, alter its axis of rationality by methods of reversal that will both reveal and conceal. Indeed, revelation and concealment form the main aesthetic motives of the video, as it unfolds in time.

The opening frames –the word *U.N(inverse)* wrapped around a black globe (anticipating already the dark meaning of the video)– are also, of course, an

allusion to the Universal Studios logo, reminding us that Txuspo has been fascinated by film as an artifact in various works over many years. We might also recall, as scenes of the United Nations building occupy the screen in the early minutes, that one of Universal's great directors was Alfred Hitchcock, whose *North by Northwest* (released in 1959 by Metro Goldwyn Mayor at the height of the Cold War) opens with a scene at the U.N. building, where the hero (Cary Grant) finds himself by chance holding a freshly murdered diplomat in his arms, only to find himself immediately accused of committing the murder. He is on the run, innocent, throughout the film, trying to make sense of a world suddenly thrown off its axis. Txuspo's U.N. building has these Hitchcockian overtones, and the whole of *U.N(inverse)* is a brooding postmodern descent into the madness of our contemporary world, where madness itself is taken as sense ("I am but mad north-northwest," Hamlet says). In the end, it is a dirge for our world and our Tinker Bell illusions.

Txuspo's *U.N(inverse)* is immediately engaging to the viewer, but there is more here than immediately meets the eye, and I will attempt to read Txuspo's work act by act, uncovering –if I can use Txuspo's metaphor– the drama of this intriguing work as well as its dense and meditative meaning.

Two images are central to **Act 01**, which is called *Meeting point: Pendulum in the Hall. Looking for Eleanor*: the model of the U.N. building and the Foucault Pendulum that is housed inside. We "enter" the film via a flight of steps –our access point as viewers– in the first moments, taking us to a basement area, where a pendulum is swinging, while nearby is a shrouded object. We are in a workroom of some sort, and soon the thick gray cover is removed (or rather removes itself), like a strip-tease, with oddly erotic overtones. Txuspo's surrealist intentions are announced thus early in the video, since the covered object refers us to Man Ray's 1920 photograph of a similarly covered entity, *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, an unknown object wrapped in an army blanket and tied with string. Man Ray's title was a tribute to Ducasse's line, "He is fair ... as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella!" (*Les Chants de Maldoror*, 1869), and one presumes Man Ray had concealed those two objects<sup>2</sup>, but the line by Ducasse and the photograph by Man Ray soon came to epitomize the incongruities of the new movement of Surrealism.

But it is, after all, the U.N. building, not a sewing machine, that is uncovered before our eyes, and the pendulum therefore is a representation of the Foucault Pendulum that does indeed swing perpetually in the Public Lobby of the General Assembly Building. (It is named for its inventor, the French physicist Jean-Bernard-Leon Foucault, no relation to Michel, though Txuspo must surely savor the association with the author of *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*.) Txuspo has been interested in exploring architecture and mechanics in his work before *U.N(inverse)*, but this new work is his most sustained rumination on these themes, and the two central objects –the one in space, the other in time– though obviously quite different in opposing stasis and change, are at the same time linked by their shared geometry: the U.N. building has a spherical dome on top of the General Assembly Building and a representation of the round earth on its flag; the pendulum is itself a globe that swings in a constant plane above a rotating earth, thus measuring the movement of the planet beneath it as the lines describe a complete circle. (The time it takes the earth to rotate under the pendulum varies according to the latitude of the spot; at the North Pole, it takes 24 hours; in New York city it takes 36 hours and 45 minutes.) Both the U.N. building and the Foucault Pendulum are thus symbols

<sup>1</sup> Neus Miró, *After 2001*, [http://txuspo-poyo.com/txt\\_engl.htm](http://txuspo-poyo.com/txt_engl.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Man Ray later photographed a sewing machine and an umbrella, uncovered.

of universality, political and terrestrial, each implying the multiplicity of the earth within their respective theoretical constructions. Each is also, philosophically, a symbol of perfection and of a rational universe, one where man can take the measure of the earth and can construct a political organization that can govern it in peace.

This first Act establishes, one might say, the utopian dream that is represented by the U.N. building, a dream that is embodied in the architecture of the building itself, which is lovingly visualized, as we move from the basement model to the full-color fresh air of the “real” world, here presented in a series of striking angles and aerial shots that celebrate the architectural geometry of the new building and the new world that it symbolizes. All of this is presented against a sound track that produces a babble of languages and voices, out of which emerges the singular voice of Eleanor Roosevelt –the sub-title, “Looking for Eleanor” is thus fulfilled– intoning the U.N.’s founding document, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose articles provide a blueprint for a world that wanted to believe that World War II and the atom bomb had changed the whole game and that mankind must start again on universal principles of mutual respect. The thirty articles of the Declaration (how many have read it, ever?) proclaim the right to freedom of person and freedom before the law, to privacy, to travel, to seek asylum, to property, to education, to an adequate standard of living, to work, to leisure, along with many other “rights”, including the one expressed in Article 28: “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.” How noble this all was, we must admit. And, in retrospect, how naïve.

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Only one brief moment toward the end of Act 01 gives us a flicker of the more pessimistic direction the video will soon take: the pendulum passes over the word “Melancolia” for a second, and the word will come back to haunt the entire work, most obviously in Act 03. Act 01 ends with a black flag covering the U.N. model, another anticipation of the funereal conclusion.

**Act 02: Breaking off and Celebration. Glass and Pamphlets** begins with the glass façade of the U.N. building, a symbol of rationalist perfection and also evoking, as a slab form, Stanley Kubrick’s monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a film that has attracted Txuspo for years. (The enigmatic monolith in the film seems to communicate messages to the earth that promote human progress and evolution.) But as Act 02 begins, the perfect glass surface of the U.N. building begins to blow apart, window by window, until there is a perfect chaos of glass shards littering the air in descending patterns. We cannot help thinking of Duchamp’s *Large Glass* (recalling also Txuspo’s own *Delay Glass*), with its fractured surface, the result of an accident, but so pleasing in its new shattered form –seeming now inevitable as a part of the work– that Duchamp elected to leave things as chance dictated. But we also cannot help thinking of the blown out façade and fracturing of the World Trade Center, along with the changed world that we have all inhabited since then, a thought that colors the whole of *U.N.(inverse)*, which is nothing if not a post 9/11 work.

Once again, we are reminded of the dream of perfection that the building embodies, when the pendulum reveals in its reflection in several arcs a press photo of Le Corbusier showing off the model of the building. But the façade is doomed, as we hear in the background a droning sound, as of an approaching bomber plane, and the swinging pendulum now swings in front of the glass

building like a wrecking ball; only the globe has turned into a light bulb, ‘bombilla’ in Spanish (associated with bomb), and evoking the light bulb (with a similar pun intended) that Picasso placed at the top of *Guernica*. Now the movement changes in this Act, and instead of glass, pamphlets fly out of the windows of the U.N. building, creating fantastic celebratory images of dancing movement in the air –schools of fish, flocks of birds– an abstract movement of great beauty. What are these pamphlets? They are masses of U.N. logos –including the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission, NATO, and even Anti-U.N. pamphlets; and as the sound track now grows threatening, drawing upon Hollywood musical codes, we remember the great and ominous black birds that came out of the sky to settle mysteriously on the landscape in Hitchcock’s *The Birds*. This is not good.

In fact, in **Act 03 The Messenger: From the Melancholy Monolith to the Tinker Bell’s Ark**, we are entering into the darkest heart of the work, which begins with a spectacular transformation scene: the chaos of floating papers (from Act 02) gradually assumes the appearance of floating trash driven skyward by the upward drafts that surround tall buildings; here they begin to coalesce into a grey sheet that begins to emerge from the top of the U.N. building, gradually forming a luxurious drape, a rich tapestry, huge enough to cover the entirety of the façade as it unfurls down the length of the building: it is Dürer’s *Melancholia*. We can see why Txuspo connects with Dürer. If Dürer lived in the 21st century he would be a video artist. Txuspo loves the brooding figure of Melancholy, the sense of despair and depression that expresses the vanity of all human effort: the winged Melancholy sits surrounded by the debris of architecture and construction, hammers, nails, planes; there is even a globe, anticipating Foucault’s invention. In her hand is a compass, and poor Melancholy stares forlornly at the weird trapezoidal shape, as if trying to make sense of it. The angel by her side has also given up. The balance scales hang on the pillar behind the figure, a bell, a calendar, an hour glass, all measuring time, measuring quantities of matter, all human efforts to make sense and order out of the chaos of existence. No wonder a bat flies off in the distance proudly holding a sign (in advance of the airplanes that float over beaches with their advertising) –“Melencolia.” As if that’s not enough, Txuspo’s Melancolia, the beautiful symbol of futility covering the U.N. building, morphs into a common plastic trash bag, torn at that. And finally, a last nail in the coffin: a banner headline from the *New York Herald Tribune*, December 12, 1946, reads, “Rockefeller Offers U.N. 8 ½ Million Gift for East River Site from 42nd to 48th.” A good cause. *Pecunia non olet*, as Vespasian said.

In the second part of Act 03, Txuspo turns to the river as image and metaphor, with the flags of China, the United States, and Russia (the three most powerful members of the five-country permanent security council) imposed upon the heaving waters, which turn into a shiny black vinyl surface, still heaving, and finally into a black surface –read oil– that is covered by a black flag of the United Nations. It’s hard not to think that Txuspo is reflecting on the imbrication of money and oil in world politics, virtually since the founding of the United Nations. And of course Rockefeller’s fortune came from oil to begin with. The point is driven home in the next sequence, when the beautiful blue of the U.N. flag changes to black and blood red, and finally to an oily black. Le Corbusier’s slab is bathed in a waterfall, a vain effort to wash it clean, perhaps, but the imagery is succeeded by a shot of a multitude of flagless flagpoles, behind which are two opposing images, mostly covered, but revealing enough to let us see on the left Picasso’s *Guernica* and on the right Tatlin’s visionary *Monument to the Third International* (1920).

The latter, never built, is a mystical embodiment of the Bolshevik revolution, a structure that would house space for the arts, broadcasting, and government and that would also, like a giant machine, slowly revolve on its axis. Picasso’s *Guernica* is of course, an opposing symbol –of the absolute horror of war, a painting done in memory of the Basque town of Guernica, attacked in April 1937 during the Spanish Civil War by German and Italian forces, who were supporting Franco’s insurgent fascist Spanish Nationalists, and causing the death of hundreds of civilians. The Soviet Union was supporting the Republican side, and thousands of Americans also went to Spain to aid the failed effort of the Republic. These two images, only on screen for seconds, reverberate throughout the whole of *U.N.(inverse)*, opposing a vision of order to a vision of chaos, a vision of peace against a vision of war. The original painting, which was on show at the Museum of Modern Art for many years, was returned to Spain in 1981, following Franco’s death and the transformation of Spain into a democratic constitutional monarchy. *Guernica* is also, of course, a part of the United Nations, thanks to the gift of a tapestry version (in shades of brown, as opposed to the original black and white), commissioned in 1955 by Nelson Rockefeller and loaned to the U.N. in 1985. (It was moved to London during U.N. renovations in 2009.) What *Guernica* evokes as well, especially in the context of the U.N., is the fact that in January 2003, when Colin Powell argued the cause of Bush’s war against Iraq at the U.N., Guernica was covered with a blue U.N. banner. Whether the shrouding of *Guernica* was the result of a request by the United States government, or whether it was at the request of the news media, who wanted a background free of distraction, is in dispute. In either case, it was an event that reverberates ironically in the context of Txuspo’s *U.N.(inverse)*, providing a major inspiration for the covering and uncovering that is one of the main leitmotifs of the work.

In the remainder of part 3, the mercurial and temperamental Tinker Bell is drowned in a sea of oil. Alas, poor Tinker. Txuspo leaves the fairy and brings out the light bulbs next –symbols stolen from the single bulb shining in *Guernica*– swinging them like a menacing phalanx, a coil in the shape of “U.N.” inside each bulb. We return to the contemplation of the aesthetic wonder of the building itself as part 3 ends, a black shroud drawn over the model of the U.N. complex.

The final act of *U.N.(inverse)*, **Act 04 Building an empty rectangle. Moving a full circle. Official colors**, introduces a new major image –the smokestacks that are adjacent to the U.N. building. We had a glimpse of them in an earlier act, but now they are foregrounded, and seen from above we might feel we are looking into the barrel of a cannon. Txuspo’s smokestacks evoke Charles Sheeler’s similar subject matter, painted as part of the American artist’s ironic celebration of the new machine civilization and industry. Here, Txuspo uses the smokestack/cannons as symbols of the war machine that looms over the U.N.

What else is there to say? As a contemporary Basque artist looking at the political failures of this great body of world government which has lent its uneasy support to the regime of the Bush administration and now the seeming continuation of these misguided ventures in Afghanistan, this can only look very bad. If the world is in a sad state, it is at least partly a reflection on the failed dream of the United Nations. As *U.N.(inverse)* concludes, the powerful black limousines drive into the United Nations courtyard carrying the actors to the world stage, and their transit there has overtones of a funeral procession. Whose cars are these? A U.N. flag appears on the lead car, but as the Foucault Pendulum makes a last appearance, it discloses in its reflective globe, swinging

across the limousines, an American flag, along with what may be a reflection of the Jefferson Monument in Washington. These are fleeting images, hints, suggestions. Who can be sure? But a final irony, a final critique of American power in the world –a world little imagined by Jefferson, who wanted nothing more than a country of yeoman farmers– seems hinted at here.

In the video’s final moments, Txuspo offers a reprise of his narrative: we go back to our starting point, the glorious building, now beautifully veiled and unveiled in bright red, in bright blue, with the glorious Foucault Pendulum swinging above it, the whole a kind of sublime mechanism of power and order. But “Melencolia” reappears under the swinging pendulum, we leave the world of color and return to the stark reality of black and white, the reality of current events, of newspapers, of limousines in the courtyard, waiting patiently, while clouds of smoke –remember those nearby smokestack/cannons– cast their shadows over the space. Txuspo leaves us with these clouds, darkening to black against the wall, abstract shapes that recall the shape of the tail on the bull in Picasso’s *Guernica*, the black smoke of industrial power, the smoke from the mouth of a cannon, the black shapes of mushroom clouds. It is the end.

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001. Logo of Universal Studios.

002, 003, 004. *North by Northwest* by Alfred Hitchcock. 1959.

005. *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* by Man Ray. 1920.

006. Still from 2001: *A Space Odyssey* by Stanley Kubrick.

007. *Le grand verre* (The large Glass) by Marcel Duchamp.

008. Image from the video of the 9/11 disaster.

009. Model of the U.N. headquarters building by Le Corbusier.

010. *Melancholia* by Albrecht Dürer. 1514.

011. *Monument to the Third International* by Vladimir Tatlin. 1920.

012. *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso. 1937.

013. Kofi Annan and Colin Powell in front of the tapestry of *Guernica*.

014. *Fugue* by Charles Sheeler. 1940.

015. The Jefferson Memorial.