

Llámame Mariachi (2009)

A multitude descends on the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris. Throughout the day citizens and visitors have been queuing in the square in front of the glass doors of the great structure, later they mill around the vast foyer, undecided what to choose from the many things on offer, or simply looking for the best way to pass a long Saturday of idleness. It's a day for sharing public culture. And *Le Nouveau Festival* provides an addition setting, a permeable setting for the coexistence of the permanent and the ephemeral, the artistic and the non-artistic, the reflective and the playful, the popular and the sacred. In the area set aside for video-choreography *La Rencontre* is being screened, a documentary about the collaboration between Mathilde Monnier and Seydou Boro in 2000. A bit further along, in the Grande Salle, they are announcing *Llámame Mariachi* by La Ribot.

The spectators are gradually taking to their seats; here too a multitude has gathered. On the bare stage a table filled with books and a few objects: a teddy bear, a cake, a trumpet ... three chairs behind it. And in the background a movie screen, not nice at all. The space looks more like a conference hall than a real theatre.

The lights go down and a movie is screened. It is a twenty-minute single shot successively filmed by each of the three performers who will later appear on stage. What you see is the image of an interior space, an old theatre. The camera shows the images produced by its movements, its displacements, of an attention that is directed not by the eye but rather by the belly, against which the hand clutching the camera is pressed. Sometimes it shows fragments of the body that is filming: a foot marking time, the left hand pointing the way, a leg, part of the trunk

When the camera changes hands it also results in a change of body, visible in the feet, the clothing, but above all in the body itself, the calligraphy of the body, in its rhythm, in its weight, in its attention ... The first camera is light, fast, agile. The second a little more calm, confident, attentive. The third is subtle, elegant and accurate. All three are movements of a unique composition, almost perfect, amazing, which excites the public's gaze without plunging it into chaos, but which effectively breaks down its notion of space, forcing it to dance imaginatively with the invisible bodies and penetrate the mechanism of construction.

The space has been relativised; as viewers of the video we are unable to get our bearings and have to entrust ourselves to the body that is guiding us and which with its

seemingly capricious development carries us from one room to another, from one corner to another, pausing momentarily to study some detail, entering monitors or photographs and architectural plans. Euclidean space is visible only in those secondary images: in the photographs, on the camouflaged monitors showing old movies edited at will, and less in the architectural photographs, because these are shown in oblique planes, always mediated by the hand that caresses them, which runs over them. Real architecture arises from other objects: from the stacked boxes, the grated screens ... The drawn or moulded lines may constrain the movement of the camera, and a sign or object can fix it momentarily. The experience of space is in contradiction to the architecture: the body, its movement, succeeds in fixing the attention imposed by all the architecture. But the body also attacks the narrative of the cinema and displays its own logic, or rather its illogic. An illogicality which, paradoxically, produces a composition that is consistent, relentless, almost urgent. Fragments of old movies mark the transitions between the three cameras: this is a play within a film within a play within a film. And the fundamental references are of theatricality, but submerged beneath an artificial, cinematographic treatment.

Shifting the spectator's gaze to the belly and the hand modifies the gravity usually associated with the construction of space. By modifying our sensation of gravity, we become aware of its importance and the artificiality of a visual construction of space: the artificiality of the Renaissance perspective and the artificiality of the absolutism of sight to the detriment of the foot, back, belly.

The hand, almost invisible in the footage, is one of the key elements of this work. "La vraie condition de l'homme", Godard assured us, "c'est de penser avec ses mains." Film has traditionally attempted to erase from view all traces of manual intervention involved in its process in the same way that the dramatic device of dance attempted to erase the traces of gravity from the body by placing the physical and capricious body in a geometricalized and artificially empty space. There are echoes of the Godardian montage in those brusque travellings performed by the dancer-operators that take us seamlessly from a room to a poster, from a foot to a building, from a film to a line, in the transition from stolen fiction to constructed fiction, from graphics to the body, from movement to the word.

In *Eloge de la main*, Henri Focillon stated : "L'art se fait avec les mains. Elles sont l'instrument de la création, mais d'abord l'organe de la connaissance." In the "collages" of Godardian cinema the hand becomes visible in the same way as it does in

the shots of the performer-operators of *Llámame Mariachi*, the difference being that in this case the hand is not free, the hand is attached to a body, and is not permitted to stray from the body, which is the condition of visibility and never the object of visibility, and so is only seen fragmentarily: in partial shots of itself or through crystals (mirrors, magnifying glass, fish tank). Recovering Focillon, Païni (in his book *Le temps exposé*) suggests that just as “montage is one of the key tools for sculpting a sense of duration”, making time the subject, slow motion produces instantaneous, “malleable sensations of reality”; slow motion is the procedure used by filmmakers to produce a sensation of plasticity: it enables us to imagine the artist's hands, and in this sense is an *aberration*.

Despite the multiple exchanges and coincidences that have existed between the theatre and cinema throughout their history, the space-time of the two has remained quite different. Put simply, we might consider that cinema takes place in time, whereas the theatre takes place in space. The space occupied by the screen is irrelevant in the cinematographic process: its spaces are always in time, and time is constructed by the editing process, subjecting the vision to a multitude of perspectives that are only possible in a temporal structure. For the theatre, however, the space taken up by the stage (regardless of the kind of stage) is crucial, and determines a present time that can only be altered or moved by an internal stage design which is much more like a sequence of shots than film editing, alternating of fading; the playwright cannot multiply the panoramas or spaces because these belong to the audience and only by moving the audience and letting them talk amongst themselves could the time also be moved.

In *Llámame Mariachi*, therefore, two *aberrations* are produced. The first is cinematography, and it has to do with the use of the sequence of shots directed not by vision but by the belly, producing an altered perception and understanding of space. The second is scenic, a consequence of the slowed-down movements of the performers, a “slow motion” that makes the hand of the author visible, but not by the cinematographic medium, rather via the bodies of the performers themselves: they manipulate themselves as if they were objects. In doing so, they challenge the actual presence of the theatre and introduce into their actions a temporality that is different from that of the spectators. It is not a ritual or perceptive “slow motion”, but neither has it anything to do with expanding the consciousness: it's about altering the temporal awareness of the spectators and forcing them to move forward and backward in search of an action (and

this is the surprise) that escapes more easily from the grasp of the spectator than if it occurred in everyday "tempo".

To remove traces of the hand, cinema uses montage. To remove traces of gravity, dance uses speed. But how can a body jump and fly in slow motion? No, these bodies cannot fly: these dancers have definitely unlearned their role on stage. To be clear, barely on stage, the first one of the performers absurdly falls from the chair interrupting the gracious flow of the others and thus affirming one of the characteristics of style of La Ribot : her choreography of falling.

Nevertheless, the slowed down movements of the performers could suggest to us the real, and anything but artificial, weightlessness of space travellers and people who have had access to zero gravity chambers. They are the only ones to have actually experienced zero gravity. Perhaps then the absence of gravity has nothing to do with the speed necessary to fake it, but with the slowness the body experiences. The weightless body is not light, but very heavy! It can fly without momentum, but finds it difficult to obey its own instructions to move!

These weightless and slow bodies inhabit a theatre that is just as *unreal* as the space revealed by the heavy and agile bodies that operated the camera in the first part of the show. And they are also located in an abstract space in which books, words and objects float in the same way that the walls, monitors and legs seem to float in a space deprived of static references as an effect of the filming in motion. The theatre abandons its present physical place and moves to a non-place of textual references. It's as if the paragraphs were floating and the performers were briefly appropriating them before turning to a trumpet that is also floating or a pie which as it slides, ends up, nevertheless, falling down (hadn't we decided that gravity had disappeared?) And so high culture ends up in the bathroom, self-help books laid out on the academic's table, the history of dance is read in the kitchen and cakes are looking for the words written by the "great masturbators".

This spinning culture causes vertigo, this playful *Auto da Fe* in which the three performers seem to take revenge on the misogynistic character of *A Wordless Head* and *A Headless World*, replacing anxiety with disorientation and fire with weightlessness. In what direction is the fierce digitization of culture going? Are our bodies ready for it? Peter Kein's body wasn't because he didn't recognize in himself the body of others. The performers of *Llámame Mariachi* could be considered explorers of a new embodiment no longer constrained by the physical relativization of space-time, but by the distortion

provoked by the host of bodies in our consciousness of the present. The theatres are turned upside-down, their walls become thin and turn to cardboard; the libraries are open, the shelves are disintegrating and the books are expanding into open space; the museums, in astonishment, implode, and art in its entirety can be concentrated in a grain of coffee.

José A. Sánchez

Madrid, 30 November 2009