

We move the furniture to do as if we were doing

Isabel de Naverán

In *THE SECRET LANGUAGE OF CINEMA*, a book written by Jean-Claude Carrière, screenwriter and frequent Buñuel collaborator among others, the author wonders if the manipulation of time organized in cinema (temporal ellipsis, editing) is not one of its subterranean obsessions. “To suppress time”, he writes, “to eliminate it, to create such an intense illusion that the audience stops getting old and leaves from the cinema rejuvenated”.

Without a doubt, one of the main goals of many of the 20th century stage creations has been to find out about the achievements of film editing and about the temporal “illusion” that cinema provides. Although theatre hardly survives this comparison, it goes on inventing new strategies, which drive the stage language to a delirium whose consequences are only now starting to be discerned. When *La Fundición*, a performance venue in Bilbao, staged *AGSAMA = All Good Spies Are My Age* (Juan Dominguez 2003), we could see how Dominguez, sitting in front of us in silence, was arranging some small cards on a table. One by one, the cards were projected on a screen at variable speeds according to their contents, thanks to a close-circuit video. Dominguez, dressed in a white suit as if he had an important date, wouldn't look up. He seemed to be inviting us to occupy the empty chair on the other side of the table. It was a table designed for two people: the artist on one side and, on the other, any of the spectators willing to get inside his thoughts, to appropriate them. This image of the table works as a metaphor for what was then about to happen in our minds: an intimate exchange between his way of thinking and ours. The invitation couldn't be more suggestive. There it was, Dominguez's creative process written on the cards and told in the first person singular in the darkness of the stalls: as we read, his doubts, his research, his questions, mediated by the camera, the projector, and the screen, slowly become our own doubts, research and questions. In fact, it is the simplicity of the device chosen (typewritten letters), always projected on the screen, that allows the viewer/reader to put him or herself in the other's shoes in such a comfortable way, that it borders perversity.

The inner voice that we hear when we read for ourselves, though it is our own voice, doesn't coincide with the voice we hear when we talk. This interstitial voice is half way between our

thoughts and the way these thoughts are expressed, a pre-materialization of our personal “view” of things. As soon as this voice exteriorizes, it comes across the limits of a clumsy and sometimes opaque, inaccessible language.

In fact, in order to shorten the distance between thought and praxis, we have to resort to invention. And if it is true that cinema, according to Carrière, pursues the suppression of time, its abolition, its disappearance... we can say that Dominguez’s proposal makes time and space appear because it builds other spaces/times that arise between the action of showing the cards, the reading time, the speed between one sentence and the next, and the colors attributed to the words – blue, green, red, yellow – depending on their condition – identity, space, movement and time.

Dominguez’s pseudo-scientific desire to understand the creative process through formulas combining space, time, movement, and identity – always approached with humor and a critical sense – is comparable to the film editors’ fascination for binding together unconnected shots while keeping a certain coherence. What is fascinating here is not the result of a perfect continuity from one shot to the next, but the action of stretching the limits of continuity as far as possible, until the space between shots imposes itself, possibly opening the way to unknown perceptions. But, unlike what happens in cinema, in *All Good Spies Are My Age*, time – and space – is not suppressed but invented. It is built from the combination of three simultaneous times: the performing time (Juan Dominguez sitting at his table), the cinematographic time (cards passing on the screen) and, say, the real time, double as it is: chronological, objective on the one hand (the piece takes place from eight to nine); biological or subjective on the other (it varies, stretches, and contracts, depending on the individual mental and emotional experience). So, when Dominguez puts a new card on the other side of the table asking HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU BUY WITH AN ENTRANCE TICKET? time or, more accurately, the duration of the piece turns out to be indeterminate because it is inseparable from all the factors that go with the situation. A situation, namely, that becomes completely subjective and personal for all the spectators in the room. Time becomes something incalculable because we cannot separate the form of expression in the cards from our inner voice while reading. We are being affected by these new space-times, sometimes imaginary, created by the uncertain tours of our thoughts.

This question also introduces more delicate and uncomfortable issues, such as the value we give to time, in this case its economic value in terms of utility and profit.

In spite of all the evident differences between them, both cinema and theater are opportunities to re-think our relationship with this unstoppable “measure” of events, with its economy, with the aging process that worried Carrière so much – and perhaps also Dominguez –, and therefore with death. They are spaces of resistance where it is possible to experiment what is apparently useless. They are spaces of change, as they participate in a re-formulation of perception and question the “use value” of leisure time.

Looking up the definition of the word “to do” (“hacer”) in the dictionary, the artist Amaia Urra found this sentence as an example: *we move the furniture to do as if we were doing*.

By that time, Urra was just in the middle of the creative process of “El eclipse de A.” (2001) (“The eclipse of A.”), a piece motored by these questions: what is the movement of waiting? What kind of activity takes place in those moments that prepare the doorway to events? What is the direction of our thoughts and which spaces do we recreate in moments of apparent inactivity? The sentence *we move the furniture to do as if we were doing* alludes therefore to an aspect of the verb *to do*, that paradoxically contradicts its own meaning. “To do as if we were doing” can be understood as “to pretend that we do” but still keep on doing, uselessly, to do without doing or to do and undo, like Penelope weaving and unweaving the same shroud during more than twenty years while waiting for her husband, the king of Itaca, to return from the war. Penelope unweaving during the night what she had weaved during the day.

“El eclipse de A.” also takes place between light and darkness in a twilight atmosphere where the only reference to the external space is the projection of moving clouds in a blue sky on the ceiling.

The eclipse, as a metaphoric figure, refers to the change of direction of stars, as well as to a momentary alteration in the flow of things: the day becomes night, anticipating or postponing its own movement.

“The eclipse” is also the title of a film by Michelangelo Antonioni on which Urra based her work in order to create the time of her piece. The whole piece, as in *All Good Spies Are My Age*, is a continuous interweaving of times that overlap and cross each other – performing time,

cinematographic time, real time – generating a “space in phases” or “phase space” that, as Mårten Spångberg pointed out in his talk “No te das cuenta” (You don’t realize) (In-Presentable festival 2006, La Casa Encendida), is a space where one can become non-human because it doesn’t produce identity. They are elastic space-times that *vanish* forward while looking backwards and the other way around; tending to reversibility, they rush to their own future.

In an arid zone of the city, surrounded by inscrutable concrete blocks, Monica Vitti waits for Alain Delon. This is the final scene of Antonioni’s film.

In the room, Amaia Urra, sitting in front of the TV, looks at Monica Vitti who waits for Alain Delon. This is the beginning of the piece.

Sitting in the stalls, we look at Amaia Urra who looks at Monica Vitti who waits for Alain Delon.

With the remote control in hand, Urra operates as a vector between the film and us. She manipulates the speed of the video and our perception of the cinematographic time.

Monica Vitti is waiting while Urra, eyes fixed on the movie scene, drinks a coffee that instead of going into her body, flows slowly down over her white t-shirt. She keeps on manipulating the scene of the film, she rewinds-fast forwards, rewinds-fast forwards... Monica Vitti is waiting and the coffee stain grows bigger and bigger. We are also waiting.

After ten minutes, Alain Delon arrives and a dialogue begins:

“Been waiting long? I thought I was late”, Monica Vitti and Amaia Urra (letting the coffee flow out of their mouths) answer in unison: “ten minutes”. The temporal ellipsis is re-constructed in the piece by means of the repetitive action of doing and undoing, weaving and unweaving centimeters of celluloid.

As in the film where Antonioni decides to hold a minute of silence (a chronological minute of film silence) when a stockbroker colleague of the main actor dies, Amaia Urra also decides to link the different combined times in her piece. So, while fictitious stockbrokers hold silence as a sign of respect, Antonioni dedicates a long celluloid fragment to showing this act where nothing but waiting happens. He doesn’t resort to a temporal ellipsis and Urra, whose image is projected on the back wall, looks towards the audience as if she was watching a film, waiting her minute of silence. We also wait and we also look. The space turns upside down and time

is questioned, suspended, stretched. In the same way, the performing space is not a fixed immobile place where things happen, but the event itself.

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