

## THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE

DAVID G. TORRES

"That is how things are and that is how we've told them": every day Antena 3's newscaster would finish the programme with this statement. As if there was no other version of reality than this one, the version that he had explained, the one he had recounted: the reality we had seen; images that sum up conflicts, meetings, acts, political statements and cultural news. These images can obviously be no more than a mere slice of reality that has been isolated, edited and explained, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has already been interpreted for us. This type of authoritarian action of serving up "the things you need to know", "the absolute truth", rejected the slightest possibility or minimum veracity of all other images. As if channel hopping could only be a game for those who refuse to understand things, who refuse to accept that there is a story behind the facts: accept my message, my interpretation or you will be lost, adrift, you will understand nothing and sink in a sea of doubts, you will perish by being either overwhelmed or anaesthetised. The images will blow up in your face.

It is not by chance therefore that the protagonist of Mabel Palacín's most recent project, "The right distance", is a character who lives surrounded by images and who ends up making a bomb. A real and metaphorical bomb that could put an end to this type of laboratory for images in which he lives, as well as liberating them.

"The right distance" is a film that is projected onto two large screens upon which parallel actions, linked by the same setting, take place. The action occurs in some sort of workshop, in a cellar or a hangar with no windows or references to the exterior world: there is only a desk and chair and several objects scattered about. Most importantly there is a large screen showing different images, excerpts from films etc. Within this setting, someone moves and carries out various activities; sometimes he is absorbed, preparing something; others he appears on the screen itself, part of the images, crossing the frontier between reality and fiction, letting himself become engulfed by them, wanting to reconstruct some type of narrative plot – interpreting these excerpts and slices of action. Interpreting in the two meanings of the word: acting within them and simultaneously attempting to reconstruct a logical meaning. Yet sometimes he also moves with his back to us or ignores that other reality that is obsessively projected onto a screen occupying all of his living space.

Given the fact that he has to live with the images, he somehow seeks a correct distance from them: a place somewhere between his attempt to become part of them and his desire to destroy them.

### Dance, Dammit, Dance

Mabel Palacín's project, "The right distance", aims to express that right distance. It is the relationship between two extremes that come into contact: becoming engulfed in them and a state of anaesthesia. Each individual must find their own correct distance: between their inability to read the images, their approach to them, their interpretation of the world beyond mere superficiality and the absolute madness that results from losing oneself in them completely.

And in this sense the Antena 3 newscaster becomes a paradigm of the absolute opposite, a paradigm of how to apply a brake or indicate an incorrect distance: to bridge the gap between the gulf and anaesthesia with deficient interpretation.

Faced with this deficient interpretation, the protagonist of "The right distance" finds himself following the same pathway of destiny already trodden by such characters as Don Quixote or Madame Bovary. Like them, he also confuses reality and fiction and so he is condemned, literally, to interpret; inserting himself into actions that are not his – going into a car park, now in Times Square, now into an apartment as if he were a burglar and later into another house before once again finding himself on a street... - things that only exist in cinematographic screen, before later stepping back and trying to free himself from them. He is almost like Don Quixote, convinced that the windmills he sees so clearly hide a trap because they are really giants lying in wait, as if reality itself were not so simple, so flat, as if it did not speak with a single voice... as if one single explanation were not enough to support it. Or as if it always had to be interpreted.

The distance sought by our character is an interpretative distance. And so, from the moment he is prepared not only to see but to interpret, he falls into what Pierre Bourdieu has called an adolescent state. Like a child he is prepared to fantasise with what is real and to take fiction as reality. At a certain moment in time a child might think that a stick is not necessarily a mere stick but a sword, or he or she might empathise deeply with what is taking place on a cinema screen.

The opposite to this childlike readiness to fantasise with what is real and vice versa is the adult stance, characterised by a pragmatic and mechanistic state of being: a stick is merely a piece of wood and there is a well-defined distance between fiction and reality; the simple act of considering it as an argumentational example is itself "frivolous".

Therefore the adolescent state described by Pierre Bourdieu is that of an adult who presents childlike traits. In other words, he occupies the middle ground between the child's naïveté and the adult's experience. This is a place where it is possible to maintain one's ability to fictionalise reality while at the same time keeping an escape route open. This is the place where the character in "The right distance" fictionalises reality, takes fiction for reality and duplicates reality with action from fiction and vice versa; he is running with the fox and hunting with the hounds; he is located in this confusion; it is as if his acts and his presence in the world were determined by both what is real and what is fiction... but, isn't that what always happens anyway?

Indeed, our way of life is not only built upon our relationship with reality but also upon our relationship with fiction and, obviously, with the image as a both mediator with what is real and as a messenger of fiction.

Therefore our way of life depends on how we approach the mediation between reality and fiction. Like a place to think about, like an explanatory metaphor or paradigm, the adolescent state would be sufficiently naïve so as not to think further than how things are supposed to be, how they are presented or how they are explained and also sufficiently non-naïve so as not to believe that things are not as we are told they are, like the newscaster at the beginning claimed.

And it is not that I am obsessed by that newsreader but he is also a paradigmatic example: he can be used as an argument to explain the attempt to employ the image unidirectionally and therefore to explain an impositional use of images and clearly of reality, restricting both interpretation and opinion. When faced with this unidirectionality, artistic practises are characterised by their work on interpretative possibilities. "The right distance" speculates upon the possibilities of interpretative distance; it does not impose a specific distance. If anything is left clear, it is that this adolescent state is one of confusion or, if you prefer, a speculative state in which to move. Perhaps because of this our protagonist does not stop moving, does not stop searching and interpreting. In other words, there is no single right distance. What we could call the right distance is that which is characterised by its quest, by its temporary nature.

In this sense Mabel Palacín's project does not only represent a possible positioning of the spectator, this right distance that I have exemplified in the adolescent state, but precisely art's function with regard to the place in which reality and images of reality come into question. And, in case there is any further lack of orientation, it is also a political function.

The predisposition to fictionalise what is real, to go beyond appearances, to seek and reconstruct the logics of meaning, in sum, the capacity to fantasise – to develop the intellect if we thus feel happier – corresponds to the type of thought developed in art. Thinking, discussing, writing and taking on both the intellectual and vital importance of structures so complex or so simple as a urinal is only possible from a stance that assumes an interpretative distance, or one that contains certain keys from an adolescent state. An attitude that seeks a way of thinking and seeing beyond appearances (like Don Quixote) yet one which always has an escape route to prevent us from falling into fanaticism, to remind us that the windmills are really just windmills.

It is at just that spot where I believe that the thinking behind today's art is indispensable; because of what it contains that is dispensable, precarious, because of those elements, like a teetering construction, and because of the burden of meaning that this adolescent state, necessary for the ability to think, offers the individual.

### **Watching shadows on the wall**

Gustave Flaubert once wrote that his ambition was to place the whole world between quotation marks, to quote the whole of reality. Thus if his "Madame Bovary" was an attempt to quote, to extract

what was real, from the life and desires of a provincial woman of the period, "Bouvard et Petuchet" was even more ambitious as its author sought to extract from reality the greatest number of slices of life that two people of leisure could dedicate themselves to. Flaubert's supposed naturalism was at heart an attempt to apply this action of putting reality into quotation marks. An action which is nothing more than a device to draw our attention. Drawing attention to the world, to reality, to objects, and to things in order to think them. Or perhaps to be able to interpret them. In other words in order to think them and to question them, far removed from the vital continuum, from the prose of what is real, in order to see behind them, in order to give them meaning so that a simple stick, a windmill or a urinal can be much more than what they are... to reveal that reality is neither flat and nor does it speak with a single voice

Although perhaps Flaubert was not able to count upon the fact that this desire to place the world between quotation marks could in fact one day happen and perhaps he indeed might have suspected that an excess of quoting reality could in fact make that reality even more invisible.

The truth is that in "The right distance" confusing reality and fiction is not so difficult, it carries out no great feats of speculation, just like we do not, just like Don Quixote, inspired by his reading of novels of chivalry did not or Madame Bovary, thanks to her romantic novels did not. Similarly, today our confusion is fed by images served up on a silver salver. Therefore our protagonist's confusion between what is real and what is fiction is nothing more than a habitual confusion: the portrait of our times.

At the end of the day, this closed cellar or studio in which he lives is not so peculiar or strange. Perhaps it is not that different from our own surroundings, from the very world in which we live. Perhaps this studio might be a summary or metaphor of our own contemporary reality: a world awash with images, probed, filmed and projected to excess; a world that is placed entirely between quotation marks, quotation marks that are none other than the overwhelming flood of images. According to Baudrillard, the world is no longer beyond its hyper visibility, it no longer exists beyond its own image.

What "The right distance" comes to mean once again is the stance that we can adopt as spectators of this world-as-an-image. Somehow what slips by on the periphery of our senses, this distance and that necessary adolescent state is the need for criteria, in other words the need to adopt a critical stance.

When Flaubert spoke of his desire of placing the world between quotation marks, what he was saying was that reality without quotation marks means nothing, that attention needs to be drawn to it in order for us to think it. Then there is the spectator, we the spectators are those who can construct reality because it is the spectator, we the spectators, who interpret, who construct a possible logic of meaning.

But only one of the many possibilities. Perhaps the correct distance comes to mean the huge gulf between the definite article and the indefinite article: between believing that a report of events exists, the logic of sense, and that we can move or dance between the several possible logics and meanings.

Mabel Palacin's, project does not narrate from a single viewpoint on one screen how this character enclosed in a workshop or studio behaves and finally ends up making a bomb, it uses two. Action between the two screens is superimposed, intermixed. Sometimes one screen explains the other, sometimes, they work in parallel, other times one seems to be a flashback of what is happening on the second screen. And in the middle is the spectator's eye, both eyes flicker back and forth, also attempting to interpret, to reconstruct a logic of meaning from a project that aims to establish an intellectual state in which we can exercise our minds reconstructing different logics of meaning; provoking a critical, interpretative stance based on images that aim to show what is the necessary correct difference in order to adopt this critical, interpretative stance.

And it could not be any other way. The right distance is not a definitive state, it is not a destination; it is rather a place that is constantly moving, elusive and ever-changing. It is as if the definition of the only correct distance possible were defined by the search itself – as in the case of the film's protagonist – or in some way by its definitive non-existence... in other words it is defined by its very inexistence... that is to say, it resides in the action of doubting as a vital, and adoptable existential position.