

JUAN CARLOS NADAL. MECHANISMS FOR A FLIGHT

ÁLVARO DE LOS ÁNGELES

I.

A personage who relentlessly pursues unattainable re-vindicates his right to be wrong. He needs to understand that the void is full of nothing; a consistent and frothy nothing, like an illusion created with laser beams. A relentless pursuit of the unattainable does not try to recover, but rather forget the need to continue remembering; where what was acquires the inevitable presence of that which is constant-present. However, does a personage always refer to fiction? Can we talk about ourselves as real personages? According to the definition, a personage is either considered to be “an important person” or the players in a film or especially a play. We are either eminences or we are not real, that is our fate as personages. If we situate ourselves in any limit situation, it can surely only be taken to the end by either a dramatic event or by fiction, which will -in turn- include drama. In a way, we already know that the end always repeats itself, as the final ending, the very last, is always the same.

In Peter Greenaway's film *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982)¹, the main character carries out his commission immersed in a spiral of events, where we gradually become aware that the end of the contract may lead to his own end. He has been asked to make a series of twelve drawings to give form to twelve views of his clients' splendid mansion. He will impose a series of rules, not only to be sure of carrying out the commission successfully in the period stipulated, but also to obtain other, more carnal benefits. However, what in the beginning are perquisites become evidence against him. As the drawings take shape, created together and grouped and developed at certain times of the day, objects that were not there before appear arranged on the scene, breaking the strict demands of the draughtsman to a certain extent. These are the details, being included in the scenes and therefore accepted in the final drawings, which will determine the ending. A ladder that indicates stealthy entry into a bedroom, different articles of clothing and sheets left along walk between bushes, the presence of a dog behind a closed door, etc... are evidence that will later incriminate him in a conspiracy that he was unaware of.

Leaving the complex plot to one side, the development of the story itself, the fate of the main characters, the fantastic baroque setting, the pictorial shots with long takes from the front, etc., it is the use of drawing that requires special extra attention here. One the one hand, everything produced by the British director (especially that developed in the eighties and early nineties) alludes to an exacerbated baroque pictorial-ism; full of details and references, allusions in certain directions, as well as physical and psychological games.

On the other hand the allusion to artistic techniques, such as painting, drawing, architecture, photography, direction of exhibitions, town planning, stage design, theatre, etc., is constant in his film production, where the main characters often represent artists within the stories of their lives. In this context, what is worth pointing out about the film is that the use of drawing is here a preamble to the use of photography, as physical proof -recording- of certain events. The action takes place at the end of the XVII th century, about one hundred and fifty years before the appearance of the first work carried out using photographic media and, perhaps for that reason, drawing and painting continue, on the one hand, referring to the precise description of the surroundings; whilst on the other and, due to the above-mentioned, they continue to be precise arms for comparing with reality. They are trustworthy evidence; technique, as in may other cases, places itself at the service of the specific need of man. In this case, the technique is not only the artistic capacity itself of the draughtsman, but also the help of a mechanical device that acts as a window. Made up of two rectangles, one closer to the draughtsman's position and smaller than the main one, both are joined together by a transverse element that keeps the precise distance between them so that the eye can focus on the details without losing the overall perspective. It really does not differ much from the graduated viewer and magnifying glass set that half-format cameras are fitted with.

1 “El Contrato del Dibujante”, 1982, Peter Greenaway. Versión VHS: Manga Films S.L. Colección Biblioteca de Cine - Edición Especial. Barcelona, 1999.

The device, which rests on a tripod in the same way as a camera does, is an essential element for transferring the image seen through the calibrated or squared window to the paper itself, also containing identical squares, simplifying and organising the task of the draughtsman in areas such as framing and proportion.

At times this film has been associated with the film "*Blowup*" (1966)², by Michelangelo Antonioni, with respect to the involuntary discovery of a crime through the work of an artist.³ However, the difference in the discovery of the fact between one film and the other can almost be associated with the very differences between the artistic techniques used. The draughtsman creates -and unfortunately for him and unknown to him- the evidence disappears, the artistic object in question only seems to be important insofar as it represents and denounces (allegorically or more faithfully) a fact; but in neither of the two examples does it obtain anything that provides definitive evidence of the truth. In this sense, art does not seem to be able to affirm anything more than that its presence is useful for representing, not for being.

What both practices do share is the use of their corresponding tools. The draughtsman does nothing with the device apart from through it to record data manually on paper; as for the photographer, he uses the camera as a prolongation of his body, as he cannot record what he is looking at through the viewfinder, but is using it mechanically. In this respect, when the main character of Antonioni's film uses the camera inside his studio, always to take fashion photographs of women, he uses it as a tool for seduction and, occasionally, almost violating their identity, coming too close to the models, placing himself on top of them like a hyper-curious eye that wants to see and record everything. What leads the main character to discover the crime is not the camera itself, an essential component but the enlarger, which he uses as a tool to get closer to the evidence. This process of continuous enlargement arises from the look of terror of the fortuitous main character of the photograph who looks towards the bushes where the anonymous murderer is hiding.

The word-title of the film written together (*Blowup*) means enlarging photographic images and/or exaggeration (blow up or inflate) a fact or event; but as separate words it also refers both to the physical explosion of a bomb or object and to human behaviour, in the sense of exploding or shouting at someone for some reason. Although of course the valid interpretation and meaning is that associated with enlarging photographic images, the analyses that can be made of the film over a quarter of a century later, expand and leave their meanings more open-ended. All this description of similarities and differences between the two feature films is logically mainly aimed at the comparison and contrast of drawing and photography. Between the immediacy that both languages have -rapid recording of certain facts- and their differences; as while drawing is manually limiting, outlining and shading of a reference, photography is a mechanical act and, in principle, one that is more objective.

II.

The "*Notas, 1964-1965*"⁴ by the artist Gerhard Richter with respect to the similarities and differences between what is photographic and pictorial is a text that even today, after four decades in existence and with the major changes that have influenced the conception, production and exhibition of photographic works, continues to be an interesting testimony. The barely eight pages that make up the text are a collection of paragraphs conceived as thoughts and small discoveries that follow the thread of the technical and conceptual development of his work itself.

2 "*Blowup*", 1966, Michelangelo Antonioni. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Versión VHS: Turner Entertainment Co. y Warner Home Video, 2000. Colección British New Wave.

3 *Esteve Riambau, "Peter Greenaway: La ordenación del caos"*, page 6. Manga Films S.L. Colección Biblioteca de Cine. Edición Especial. 1999.

4 *Gerhard Richter, "Notas 1964-1965". "Indiferència i Singularitat, La fotografia en el pensament artístic contemporani". Colección Llibres de recerca-ART. Museu D'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. Barcelona, 1997. (Editions in Catalan and Spanish)*

These notes give off an air of trying to take a load off, to remove ballast from the transcendence of art, as if the use of photographic references perhaps made the creative act more frivolous. At the same time, there is a fantastic sense of freedom, as basing the paintings on pre-existing photographs relieves them of the enormous weight of having to invent.⁵

So the major difference that Richter points out between drawing and photography is that while the former maintains consciousness and obliges the artist to think about proportions, light, shapes, etc., photography eliminates consciousness, offering what can be seen, not what it believes to be seen or interpreted.⁶ And this is a decisive factor, a differential characteristic that justifies all possible interpretations that are made of his artistic work. For this individual freedom of action (which, paradoxically, is no such thing for the German artist)⁷ implies giving a different meaning to concepts like creation, artist, and individuality. The artist does not want to bear the weight of individual creation, of the brand that being a creator means; he prefers to copy, trace using a projector, as in this way he stops being conscious of the reference or model so as to see nothing more than images to be copied, painting them. Of course, whether one wants to or not, this finally becomes a revolutionary attitude; as by denying that one is one, one is one all the same.

Meanwhile, Juan Carlos Nadal combines drawings, painting and photographic images in the same space; also objects that give us back a reality that is not always as we imagined or remembered it, where the sharp, bright edges have given way to a time that did not take good care of its objects. Or where glass is associated with tragedy and never again with the distant protection of a document. But, specially, the surfaces on which he works are like meeting places between opposites. No longer battlefields, but something like jigsaws that are completed when the pieces, far from fitting in, find their similarity and coexistence through physical inequalities and their dissimilar connotations of meaning. Like a game where the loser wins.

In this sense, the drawings are used in his world as a whole as bases on which to construct assembled hybrids, that end up becoming drawings as well, although they now appear masked with whitish, grey or dun-coloured remains of paint; like camouflage for an existence portrayed in black and white.

Turning to the qualities of the themes, the works are hard, making no aesthetic concessions (although any anti aesthetic is in itself aesthetic), contained, left at a point where it would be easiest to continue redoing them. There is an unexpected end, abandoned suddenly, like a musical composition that, after the loudness of its central movement, abandons itself to the silence that is its definitive ending. And we can only ask ourselves if the characters who wander through his works have lost something or not, if they are aware of this loss or not; if, on the contrary, far from losing, they are finding themselves through the discovery of their failings and needs, or whether they let themselves drift because there are no guidelines to point them in the right direction. The eternal dilemma of the personal decision to abandon or the overall abandonment by a society personalised by each of them. In this sense, they are characters who relentlessly pursue the unattainable, revindicating their right to be wrong. Except that here, although we see them full of brushstrokes, full of anonymous references, served on a silver tray to a fiction that does not stop reinventing itself, the characters are, in reality, real characters. With their own stories, single-minded and untransferable, however much their similarities appear to group them together in the same unit and the images can steal an identity that they never wanted to give up.

Although it may well appear to be true that there is no concrete interest in personalising each of them, in explicitly telling each of their stories, it is almost impossible not to ask oneself why they are there; and, even more, what relationship is created with us, from the insurmountable distance that is representation, being as we are, continuous spectators of certain shows that do not appear to have an end.

5 "You know what I loved? Realising that something as stupid, as absurd as simply copying a postcard could lead to a painting. And also the freedom of being able to paint everything that I like most: deer, aeroplanes, kings, secretaries. Of not having to invent, of being able to forget everything that painting means -colour, composition, space- and everything one knew and had thought. All this suddenly stopped being a precondition for art". Ditto. Page 19.

6 Ditto. p.17.

7 "Freedom doesn't exist. I wouldn't know what to do with it either!". Ditto. Page 23.

If previously we tried to compare, from their differences, the feature films *The Draughtsman's Contract* and *Blowup* to give shape to the technical characteristics and the historical-artistic setting of drawing and photography, this comparison now seeks to delve into the use that the artist makes of each of these media. Because the union of both of them in the same support, like a play of forces seen from the existing perspective, concedes defined roles to each of them and at the same time creates different and third interpretations.

In one of **Juan Carlos Nadal's** paintings, we can see a black and white image that shows a group of black children. They have all gone to where the photographer, camera in hand, has appeared to record the situation. They all show their best smile, happy, rapid, one could almost say happy. The point where the photographer has placed himself has become a new sacred place where the happy practitioners crowd together to see more closely; even to touch, tasting the honey of an anonymous and brilliant popularity.

Different objects are strewn over the broad surface of the canvas; a relationship of forces between them; a great drawing based on the photographic scene homogenises the whole composition, leaving some elements undefined, outlining others more, unfocusing the limits and their outlines. Playing with the shapes and what they refer to.

At first glance, the similarities between the photographic image and the drawing are so evident that the viewer does not even take the small differences into account. Bearing in mind as well that the photographic image is much smaller than the drawing, the differences are only appreciated when one looks at it for longer and more closely. The open, free style of the drawing contrasts with the logical abundance of details in the photograph, although that is self-explanatory. However, the gestures of the children in the drawing resuscitate all the theory developed by **Gerhard Richter** in his "Notas. 1964-1965". The happy gestures, their smiling faces, the running postures as they approach the camera lens have given way to faces with grimaces of pain, of uncertainty; the drawing, by making references disappear and leaving the figures unfinished, can be seen as an anticipated mutilation; a death based on anonymous forgetfulness, far from that brilliant collective popularity. The bodies and the faces have aged; there is no longer any unthinking happiness, and there never will be again.

The unthinking act that copying a photograph might be has given way to a drawing that does not copy, but rather interprets. All interpretation implies conscious work; by creating a drawing from the photographic image, the artist is supporting his representation with all that data that he knows well. The drawing is no longer only a drawing; not only because of the appearance of different objects that divert the attention towards other nomenclatures and labels, but because it has become a social weapon. More or less committed, more or less identifiable, a personal opinion exists behind its artistic appearance, a certain political posture.

This conduct is common in his works; when the drawing appears unobstructed, without references to any photograph, without the company of satellite objects rotating around it, the viewer continues forming a specific opinion about its use. For the drawing is used in a rapid way, like a sketch disguised as the final work; not too far from the attitude of the photographer who takes quick snaps and from which one can be used to describe the situation, synthesising all the others in the same way.

The characters who wander across the canvases, between the objects, masked behind a real fabric like a collage of life, spreading out in the wide white fragments of blank paper, are characters who are demanding their right to exist and, as such, to make mistakes. A relentless pursuit of the unattainable that intends both to recover that which was lost and also to forget that which it was no use to have present. A last final ending, inexorable, like a white sheet of paper that, however, can also be a new beginning.

