

A film session with Simon Zbell

(Which you, reading these pages, can join in)

ÓSCAR ALONSO MOLINA

I. [Anteroom]

Thus, the audience refused this politeness to the acrobat: to make the effort to look steadily at her when she brushes with death.

– And you, he said to me, what were you doing?

– I was watching. To help her, to salute her, because she had led death to the edges of night, to accompany her in her fall and in her death.

Jean Genet. *The Tightrope Walker*

WHAT SHOULD WE DO when faced with the works of Simon Zabell – open or close our eyes? What I mean is: should we give priority to the visual aspect of the *Idea*, allowing ourselves to be carried away by its expression of feelings, or, on the contrary, reflect on what we have seen, or could see, should we arrive to understanding them *in depth*? I fear that, when the deepest thing is the skin, so much wanting to see, wanting to see everything, wanting to get to the bottom of things, is modest ambition... Because compressed there below, beneath the atmospheres, beneath the layers of meaning stacked one atop another, the eye opens, bloats monstrously and, when it's about to blow out, sees unheard-of, inaudible things that would never be believable on *the surface*.

[*Post-script*: Everything that would like to be said is more seen than read in this artist's most representative work to date. And still, now, with this new series, his transfers (more in the sense of transport than translation) between word and image change meaning while continuing to go in the same direction: the one that links the territory of how much can be apprehended visually to what is manifestly verbal. In substituting his customary literary references – where the word is, above all, a worldly *form* – for cinematic archetypes, the optical dimension of his work becomes more noticeable].

So I insist: what should we do when faced with these works by Zabell? Truthfully, dear reader, I am not asking you this rhetorically. Ever since I have had contact with his pieces I have known that it is within this tight dilemma that the artist takes risks (and it's never been said better). And I know it from experience. I still remember with surprise the first thing I heard about him: it was years ago,

and it didn't come signed by *him*. "I'm one of those people who wants the most attention possible for his work (like all of us who create something, I suppose) and the least for his person", I heard him say at some point when someone was telling him: "I need to see you to write the text". In return I believe he sent a couple of photographs. In one he was facing a blank canvas and you could only see the nape of his neck. In the other he was facing forward, but didn't return our gaze...

I neither knew him personally then nor had I even heard mention of his work. On a morning like any other, upon receiving the mail, I opened an envelope with no return address – another muzzle on authorship – and read that "he had received something in the mail, opened the envelope, took out the card and read the text printed on it". I felt a chill, vertigo. I surely closed my eyes, or at least stopped seeing for a moment. The same would have happened to you. Terror invades the body and obscures the world. Together with the fit of laughter, this plunge is the most perfect example I know of the suspension of reason. To him I owe this privileged moment of perception falling away.

I closed my eyes, Simon. I denied you the right to a reward for having succeeded in boring through them like an arrow and leaving them driven into my brain, where this sentence, seemingly so innocent, reverberated. If my reaction had only been one of surprise, it's almost certain that – as is often said – I would have opened them wide as saucers, perhaps they would have even have left their orbits, which sounds yet more amusing. But after the perfect coupling you had triggered between the outside of the eye socket and the inside of the reading, *there was nothing like it!*

Just the opposite of the famous scene at the beginning of *Un chien andalou* in which the eye is sliced with the knife blade, a scene by which Buñuel quite clearly bares the nature of all reflexive movements, such as the instinct to close one's eyes before the unbearable, which is the first thing that we must overcome in order to allow ourselves to be carried away by this concatenation with no end or countenance that implies pure surrealism. Only in this way, with no sign of friction, with no intellectual resistance, is it possible for the wretched to mix with the picturesque, or for the grotesque to show through the interesting, or for the sublime to be superimposed over the ridiculous, or for the extravagant to come about in harmony with the trivial, the obscene, the wonderful, the amusing... literally anything! And so on to infinity... Precisely there is born the gloomy

combination that undervalues the discontinuous as a rhythmic element, organising what can be seen, or said, transforming the totality of what is visible into an uncut film – with no censorship, with no caesura – that is destined to make an impression on an eye that historically would not now be granted a respite for the rest of the century. Its concave, crystalline and precise interior would spill out into everyone's view in this face of heterogeneous disgrace and misery that is the cinematographic screen of the surrealists, pioneers in intuiting that this will end because it is the visual dunghill of our culture, the same as turning the act of watching into torture.

So I opened the envelope, took out the card, read the text printed on it *and closed my eyes...* It's the audience's discourtesy which Jean Genet spoke so lucidly about before the tightrope walker, when, during the most dangerous movements, to dazzle us, she dances on the edge of the abyss.

II. [In front of the screen: presentation, climax, dénouement]

Cherea (*shaking his head*): That young man was too fond of literature.

Second Patrician: Oh, at his age, you know...

Cherea: At his age perhaps; but not in his position. An artistic emperor is an anomaly. I grant you we've had one or two; misfits happen in the best of empires. But the others had the good taste to remember they were public servants.

Albert Camus. *Caligula*

BUT, AS YOU HAVE in all probability already realised, dear reader, this time the pictures don't coincide exactly with the screen; they *aren't* the screen... Sundry encoded remains poke out here and there, giving away any possible radical identification: the horizontal black borders that allude to the panoramic effect of projection; the area for the schematic subtitles at the bottom part of the image; the rows of seats in the theatre that tell us of our *withdrawn* position with respect to the plane of representation... The hyperrealism of the visual tautology (of the long Western pictorial tradition, of the *trompe l'oeil* of Escher's impossible figures) finds itself completely deactivated here. And

perhaps because an intentional deception at the base of our system of perception isn't even attempted, we are always conscious that, faced with the arrival of this card sent by post that invaded our privacy, generating a splice in the plane of infinity that was ushering in time or escorting it out, like the Christian *kairos*, we now find ourselves taking cover behind a barrier – another plane of vertical separation – that is reinforced by the history of our culture: that of fictional systems of representation. The picture – window or mirror – delimits a controlled space of intervention.

Shall you and I then open our eyes now and finally *watch*? I fear that however much we turn it over in our heads with this perspective, it will never be clear what something like this means alongside the series entitled REMA ("roam") that we are concerned with here, because to paraphrase Wallace Stevens, "The eye sees less than the tongue speaks. The tongue speaks less than the mind thinks", and in the middle of this constant sleight of hand, opposite the sum total of our synaesthesia, the image grows *conceptistically* in its formal decay to the point that, in the manner of Gracián, saying nothing might say everything... Or perhaps, in the same way, when there is nothing to see then everything can be said.

Thus when it comes time to analyse Simon Zabell's poetics, he has often stood out for critique of his base textual strategy, since almost all of his work consists in reproducing the visual experience of the spectator – often that of a spectator who derives from a literary original – in a sort of new formulation of the Horatian platitude *Ut pictura poesis* ("As is painting, so is poetry"). Félix Romeo summed it up perfectly when he interpreted this orientation as a neglected aspect; more than the relationships between fine arts and literature in classic style, it would be more about those that arise between what is seen and what is read. Perhaps this is why there is a presence of the written word, and of this same presence, so pronounced in his work over the last few years, as it is in this series being presented for the first time at the Contemporary Art Centre of Malaga; the subtitles I just mentioned a moment ago, as well as the credits at the end of the film, become geometric elements at the same syntactic level as the rest of the components of the scene. On the other hand, *everything*, the world of the film and the world of the film theatre, which we imagine as forced to coexist in an authentic *mise en abyme*, are filtered through the same sieve of encoded Bauhausian

airs that contain a presentation, a climax and a *dénouement* that the visitor to the exhibition or the reader of this catalogue will end up discovering with a bit of patience. Such a diegesis is articulated underneath classic Greek drama; that very one that the cinematic structure had taken as its own since its beginnings.

The fact of the matter, dear reader, is that it would be easy to convince you that what you see unfolding before your eyes, picture after picture, in this series, aided in good measure by a subtle *mise-en-scène* throughout the museum's halls (where the lighting enjoys a deterministic importance once again with Zabell), is your arrival to the film theatre, your viewing of the film and your return to the place where you began. Again, in short, the presentation, climax and *dénouement* of a stammering, faltering story where what happens doesn't matter so much as the subtle fact that it happens by matching up visually, under the gaze of the patient subject that is you yourself. Or, to put it in another way: the limits of the space of representation coincide with the frame of representation, and at the same time with the visual field of a hypothetical man-camera whose position we have to assume.

Such a scopic contextualisation of the biological into the technical leads, in this case, to the old archetype of the *Man-Machine* rather than to the "sex appeal" of the contemporary inorganic. This is something that I suppose will continue to please you, Simon; you who found the original inspiration for the REMA pictures in that point of Kraftwerk's unauthorised biography where they confess that their 1983 hit, *Tour de France*, was created from the attempt to recreate the experience of riding a bicycle – they are cycling fanatics, like you yourself – and the first version of which included recordings of the sound of the chain, the rider's breathing, the wheels on the asphalt and so on...

[*Post-script*: Similarly, the radical materialism of Julien Offray de la Mettrie led him to publish, in 1748, *L'homme machine*, in which he extended Descartes' concept of the automaton from animals to man, arguing from the idea of the uniform material dependence of the states of the soul upon states of the body. The brain and the eye are organs whose specific internal mechanics unfailingly produce thought and vision in the same way that representation, as Zabell seems to

indicate, involves in its transformation an absorption of the same mechanism that produces the real without rough edges or leftovers. This plane, unlike the imaginary or the symbolic, for example, is reabsorbed – in active mode – or subsumed – in passive mode – into its material “incarnation”, which is, in this case, pictorial].

But in the end, I can't find a better way to explain all of this to you than as another artist, his close friend, did a few years ago and whom I quote at length: “Simon Zabell's work is located in a strange terrain within the possibilities of narrative. He offers images that are as everyday as they are intimate, but with no poetical or categorical intention. His aim has always been to reform the image he starts with so that its constituent elements give shape to a new scene. There is no need for a literary plot or an array of symbols, only a description in the corresponding context – a context that can only be aesthetic. [...] Thus the famous pictorial 'pregnant moment' collapses in his pictures, giving way to a sort of 'continuous present' where the actual gaze and the represented gaze converge and create a cinematic frame. The narration is finally frozen and able to do away with external artifices and empower internal ones, meaning the three-dimensional values that belong to it.”

III. [Curtain]

I: Would your Lordship indicate or explain to me in what direction is the Third Dimension, unknown to me?

Stranger: I came from it. It is up above and down below.

I: My Lord means seemingly that it is Northward and Southward.

Stranger: I mean nothing of the kind. I mean a direction in which you cannot look, because you have no eye in your side.

Edwin A. Abbot. *Flatland*

ONLY THE FALL of a curtain that never comes could determine the exact positioning of what Zabell proposes for us; for you, insofar as you are a spectator; for me insofar as I am a *critical voice* – do you realise this, dear reader? But however much we wait, the wall doesn't give way,

allowing two parallel realities to merge; in no place does this margin appear from which to signal the final and extreme limits of representation, an *external space* in the text that helps us understand it and approach it climatically and *critically*. Thus there is nothing left for either of us to do than interpret a predetermined and static position as figures, a position from which we could also imagine a qualified stage director who, as I already pointed out at the beginning, has retreated discreetly here, but completely. "The actors look out into the theatre too often", Genet noted on one occasion during his theatrical rehearsals. In any case, they were mistaken in always looking at the seats in the orchestra section. He should have transcended the myopia that is traditionally imposed by the scenographic artifice of representation (as well as Zabell's depictions) and said: "If, unfortunately, they must look out there, may they understand its true dimensions and may their eyes reach the top gallery".

But here there is no *space* for such audacity. Everything has become compressed and time doesn't pass in the normal way, despite the logical and narrative sequence that is deduced from the specific order of these films, from which it would be possible by the way to suppose a kind of linear, chronological, causal or historical order. It's rather like in that unforgettable chapter about the "mad tea party" in which Alice makes to sit down to tea with the Mad Hatter, the Dormouse and the March Hare: "No room! No room!" they cried out, even though the table was immense and they were all crowded together at one corner of it. As you will surely remember, it was almost the same as what the hare had been saying as he hurried through the pages of the book at the very beginning of the girl's adventures: "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" Time had arrested the absurd dinners at six in the evening "forever", forcing them to move from one place setting to another to have their tea since they couldn't even find a moment to wash the dishes.

Such dislocations are customary in the time and space of all logical dimensions (aesthetics, Wonderland, the other side of the looking-glass) with their specific coordinates. Perhaps you end up feeling a bit of the same anxiety, dear reader, faced with this story where you are invited to go to the movies and, having arrived on time, the session ends up getting delayed, then becoming timeless... Maybe, even, with a little luck, you will never be able to leave *that place*.

IV. [Following the session]

- Are you before, behind us?
- Are you above?
- Are you below?

Edmond Jabès. *The Book of Questions*

SIMON, I ALSO NEED to see you to finish the text. Where are you, where do you find yourself, where do you see yourself in this work? I need to see you, because what end point could we imagine if it isn't in the presence of the author? There can be no curtain for you, dear reader and spectator, nor for me, since beyond the strange dysfunction of the unique space-time *continuum* with which the series entraps us, as I have just explained, we don't find the *signature* either... this key that opens and closes all propositions. Without certain authorship, before the impossibility of managing this radical *opera aperta*, the cycle of its proposal remains inconclusive, and so does the order of the story along with it. But neither in the distanced crafting of these films, with no hand or footprint, nor in their orbit of influences, which are not at all obvious, nor even in the context of other projects that shape and continue to define the story little by little as a *certain body* do we find the author who insists on deserting his space once the narration's plot is set up, forcing us, finally, to take his place. We see the artist, here, as a lucid escape artist or shady body snatcher... Regardless of whoever may doubt it, this is why his presence among us is an authentic voice-over: keeping the same distance as tradition (*The Others*, the voices of those who have already gone), or the teleology of the technique itself (the legacy of the potter Butades' daughter, according to Pliny).

Death and absence, then, signal an authorship that seeks to empty itself of its traditional functions – style, manner, touch, the personal stamp and so on – that are here replaced by strategies of dissolution and anonymity. Just as Flaubert aspired, the author behaves like God in the universe: present in every nook and cranny, yet visible in none. Because man, just as Father Dinouart assured us in *The Art of Keeping Silent* (1771), is never more master of himself than in silence, "since when he speaks he seems, to put it this way, to become scattered and dispersed by the speech, in such a

way that he belongs less to himself than to others". Thus Zabell is, in his way, another one of the figures that embodies the *Invisible Companion* – like the museum keeper, the catcher in the rye, visual grammar; only on this occasion he has created certain ideal conditions for accompanying us to the film theatre, having chosen the film and the seat himself, and being intimately close to us without our even being able to hear him breathe... In fact, we only see what he wants us to; we see what he has observed with care. This is concentration befitting the *Creator*: in the end we take up his perspective – his point of view and opinions.

[*Post-script*: with respect to this, I recall an interview done with Alain Robbe-Grillet, held in such high esteem by you, Zabell, where he was asked about adapting novels to film and the enormous potential of the "objective distance" of the Flaubertian style, to which the writer and film-*auteur* responded: "Filmmakers discovered that there was a wealth of meaning in the description there, and in fact there were many adaptations; of them I can say that the worst ones were the most faithful. The effect of the image is something very different from the image. Flaubert had understood this very well. When his book came out it was a success because of the scandal it caused. They put him on trial for offending proper custom, everyone hastened to read it, and there was an editor who proposed making an illustrated edition, with prints where you would see the places and her portrait. Flaubert was violently opposed to this, and, outraged, he wrote in a letter: Why would I allow the first imbecile who comes along to display what I had to labour so hard to conceal? This demonstrates to what extent Flaubert was modern. He had understood that literary description doesn't show; often it disguises and conceals; while the image does show – there's a showing effect"].

A fable without an author... We can accept this, but a fable without a moral lesson? This is like a trap that doesn't shut but nevertheless keeps its prey from escaping by captivating it with trickery, using smoke and mirrors to daze and bewilder it. Or maybe it would be better to say that it slows it down, paralyses it... Apart from that, going to the movies is always a bit like this, don't you think? Allowing yourself to be misled by the deception of what is apparently there, and clearly moving no less... jumping from frame to frame, from picture to picture. This is why you, dear reader, having accompanied us today, will be able to say whether you liked the film's ending...