

Brief History of a Storyteller

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I am starting to write almost without thinking, with the white glare of the computer screen beating in the manner of a mental space without features, with no trace of a personal mark. I cannot recall the last time that I started a text already knowing its title, or, which is the same thing, setting a limit or starting point for the journey. Thus, with the disturbing and flat light like those of building windows at night, windows which only allow one to get into the inside through imagination, I begin to think of the story of a storyteller who starts with a slight advantage: his stories come together when he has previously been able to “catch butterflies” with his binoculars; that is, once he has achieved the voyeuristic aim, he is converted into one of those writers who simply seek and propose so that the other – the spectator/reader – will find things almost without knowing.

I think and write about Daniel Blaufuks, and at the same time a phrase comes to my mind: “In this film all the events and people are real. Everything that is not real is purely my imagination”. The phrase belongs to Robert Frank and was said in relation to his first feature-length film *Me and My Brother*, which mixes documentary scenes with pure fiction, alternating between black and white and colour. At the beginning of the film these words are superimposed over a bible on the screen. Then I wonder whether all this is not very close to the *Collected Short Stories* (2003) by Daniel Blaufuks, that series of photographs that obey a double logic once they are brought together, in the form of a diptych, that amplifies at the same time as it redefines its individual or original meanings. This would be something like in the novel *Hopscotch* by Cortázar, in which a character is strolling in Paris and after turning a corner finds himself in London. Deep down, what is being mixed is a new narrative, at times illogical, due to the chronological and spatial leaps produced by these multiple points of view. The reader may deal with the novel in different ways, because it does not impose an identity; in a certain manner we are talking about an interactive novel, which is based on the concept of non-linear reading and a type of reader-explorer who delves into a sort of narrative hypertext. And, in that sense, one might understand the photographs in the series *Collected Short Stories* – some of which were taken on different continents yet even so manage to

function in a clear symbiosis – always narrative photographs, although this narrative is one of those that remain in suspension.

Perhaps it is opportune to refer to the theoretician Michel Serres, for whom the history of science is submitted to turbulence and is subjected to random connections of all kinds among different areas. Serres points out how science advances from the unpredictable and the unexpected: “Both the world and the objects, both bodies and my own self are, at the instant of their birth, *drifting*. Drifting off the shore of the descent along the slope. And it means, as is usual, that they are irreversibly destroyed and die (...) the drift is the sum of time: the dawn of the appearing, the life limited by finitude and degradation, a random explosion of the multiple temporalities in the infinite space” [1]. And in effect, in Daniel Blaufuks’s photographs, we come across ups and downs, with moments of greater intensity and other more gentle ones, with different colours, different sounds; in effect, a complex web of perceptions that is like the dizzying rhythm of possibilities that we face in experiencing the hypertext.

Something similar seems to occur to the writer Flannery, a character in the novel by Italo Calvino *If on a winter's night a traveller*: “It has occurred to me to write a novel only made up of beginnings of novels. The protagonist could be a reader who is constantly interrupted.” [2] That syncopated state of the image is produced, if we take as a reference the book published with the already mentioned series of photographs by Blaufuks for his exhibition at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 2003. Here the diptych, as in this book, is presented in two pages and a title. This is therefore a minimum script that represents a cut-off narrative, one capable of interrupting us constantly. In the book, everything is a product of another time and the experience becomes intimate. Like in any hypertext, the reader has in front of his eyes a text that basically is constructed of alternative text **beginnings**” [3]. It all definitively fits in with what Roland Barthes defined as the “ideal text”, thinking of an interwoven text that might form a sort of galaxy of meanings, a reversible text, like a Moebius strip. The one by Blaufuks would be therefore a type of expanded literature, capable of connecting the verbal with the non-verbal; a text that is experiment, a search in which the spectator/reader defines and decides his path of reading, altering the centre, the starting point, going forward without hierarchies. All of this would fit in with the words by

Ana Ruivo in her text *Beyond the Horizon Line*, in which she recommends starting at the end although the end has no end: “More than a homage to the cinema – somewhat in the style of the sequence of censored kisses in *Cinema Paradiso* by Giuseppe Tornatore – all the ‘The End’, ‘Fim’, or ‘Fine’, that appear on the screen refer back to the quotation by Jorge Luis Borges in *Aleph*, about a place that contains all the images in the world from all points of view, and which on the other hand consubstantiates a discourse that the artist has coherently been constructing in the manipulation and questioning of concepts such as life and death, beginning and end, memory and oblivion, encounter and history, horizon and new beginning”.

Thus, without doubt, one needs to understand the story of his journals. Ethiopia, Yemen, London or Saint Petersburg. If we take the last case as an example; published by the Encontros de Fotografia de Coimbra in 1998, under the title of *A Journey to Saint Petersburg*, we note how this travel journal shows Blaufuks’s interest in bringing together the image and the word, above all the handwritten word, inserted like the purest Derridian homage. “We arrived in Saint Petersburg in the afternoon, and everything was just like in the books”, Blaufuks begins his narrative. And this is how he will start a story of cutouts, souvenirs and Polaroid’s capable of expressing colour as if it were from another time.

For Blaufuks, the journey allows the constructing of small worlds like riddles, full of changes in style, which form his political responsibility in the end. It is a process of zapping converted into visual poetry, into a memory of images and dialogues capable of following on from one another at a dazzling speed. After all, Blaufuks translates the moving image as a set of photographs in high-speed. This happens in *Life is not a picnic* (1998), but also in his series *Andorra* (2000), or the significant intermitting alternation of formats in one of his last series, titled *Motel* (2005). They are all just as much diaries as his diaries, lyrical metamorphoses that we could have sensed since the 90’s, when he decided to title a work including the name of two colours: *Earth is Blue as an Orange* (1992), a whole declaration of intent; in other words: “Listen to the pictures”, as Robert Wilson states.

Individual and collective memories are revealed as a collage that mixes fictitious images with real images, with ones stolen from films, photographs, songs, sounds and silences, because for Blaufuks silence is an image; this is why in works like *Life is not a Picnic*,

the rhythm is paralysed and silenced during some moments of explicit self-portrait acted by Blaufuks himself: “ Private discovery, the solitary moment available in the urban confusion, the inner thoughts in an outside world, the exclusion of urban noise in favour of the silence that is music and words”. Everything is a question of perspective, of alternation of the normal order of things, of disturbance, something so visible in the documentary voyeurism of his *Reversed Landscapes* (2002). In Blaufuks everything is a rich puzzle of fragments, of beginnings and ends like the one interwoven in *Endless End*, the melancholy blurredness of *Combo* or the coloured landscapes of *A Perfect Day*.

We may therefore define Daniel Blaufuks as one of those artists capable of contradicting the norm, one of those who expand and deform the landscape in order to allow different levels of reading that will in many cases elude his initial intentions. To a certain extent, almost all of Daniel Blaufuks’s works are in the manner of a polyphonic experiment, from arranged ideas; a montage of sequences in a cinematic style, independently of the fact that in many cases it does not valorise a narrative linearity, but rather a game of language in the sense of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein himself stated that after “several wrong attempts to bring my results together – or thoughts – into a single whole, I realised that I would never be able to do this. All my capacity for writing would be no more than philosophical comments and my thoughts would soon become useless if I tried to force them to go in a single direction against their natural inclinations. And this was supposedly related to the true nature of research. Because this would force us to travel through a wide field of thought that would be crossed in all directions” [4].

In Daniel Blaufuks’s works everything has to do with the evolution of the thought process, like a river capable of shaping its own course and ends at the right place. Everything is the product of an event about which we know nothing and in which it doesn’t matter who the protagonists are. Everything is true, like in the sensations of Robert Frank stated above, and what is not is pure imagination by Blaufuks. Or, in any case, a series of notes that will be of use to him in another story in images, one of those stories capable of building itself.

Blaufuks is interested in that suspended moment, that is his decisive moment, precisely the non-decision, the event resulting from the space between two virtual events, the moment of lack of communication in this universe of continuous communication, of

saturation of apparently decisive instants that do not allow the encountering of meaning, at every second, in a simple gesture. Thus, each photograph points out an option, a choice, a phrase, word or story. As Blaufuks himself pointed out recently: “These are places and non-places that stick to your memory for reasons beyond the lines of your map or the lines in your mind. You stay here because of a face you saw on the street or because of the weather or because your car broke down. Or maybe you just want to finish the book you are reading. And then there you are, lying on a strange bed in a foreign room thinking about what is behind you and wondering what lies ahead. You stare at the enclosing wall.”

If Augusto Monterroso has left us the shortest short story of all stories (‘When he woke up the dinosaur was still there’), Blaufuks does the same with photographs that are stolen in a second: some card-players, a girl taking photocopies... Any tiny gesture may be the motive for a story for Blaufuks, because in that awaiting of the space/time “between things” he will discover the changing frailty of the world: “It is that moment at which something may happen and it only takes a second, which might be the next second, to change everything that exists” [5]. Because for Blaufuks any image gives rise to an invisible movement, a movement that we do not get to see, a before, but above all an afterwards. In many of his works we are immersed in a time that is not complete, and it is with our imagination that we fabricate the magic that will grant life to the image. Because Blaufuks values the pause, the moment of waiting that is as present as it is unexpected in our lives. Therefore many of his characters function in the most absolute solitude, an indisputable mark of an era of communication by satellite along with personal lack of communication. Blaufuks exemplifies all this with images like his Cézanne style card-players, who formalise a non-communicative communication – its title is, in this sense, one of extreme causticity: *A Scientific and Literary Friendship*. But I wonder what would happen if many of his characters discovered Blaufuks’s trick in form of photography, if they realised that they had been captured or frozen by him for an exhibition. Probably the questions would no longer make sense, but rather the answers, and Blaufuks would no longer be interested in them. The characters in his photographs seem to live at an unsolvable crossroad, in search for answers, in a constant anguish of doubt. Here there are no theories of mathematical games, nor logical solutions.

John Berger points out how “the first event leads us to observe others that may be a consequence of the former or may be entirely independent (...) Often the first event, the one that attracts our attention, is more obvious than the following ones” [6]. Everything consists of submerging oneself into that experience, into a narrative time capable of evaluating that expectation. The creation of a psychological state, which is a result of working with unnoticed moments, an unstable state of equilibrium, turns out to be a key point in the course of Daniel Blaufuks, an artist who always seeks until he finds a good image; that is, a universe that does not imply photographic perfection but rather a meaning capable of making us think, or rather, of holding time for a moment; like a word that implies a thousand images and its more frequent vice versa.

Daniel Blaufuks points out that “nowadays, in modern societies, the act of freezing is more and more important”. Therefore many deaths remain intact, like the disputed eternal youth of Walt Disney; and this is also why Daniel Blaufuks deals with freezing time in order to capture memory. This is the reason for the frozen memories he presented at Galeria María Martín in Madrid– which no longer exists – under the title *Flowers for Walt and Other Stories*. Because Blaufuks freezes as a state of homage, as a selfish souvenir in the shape of a flower that we do not want to wither, or like those mutilated statues we wrap up and prepare for a life that is not theirs any longer, because time – an iconoclastic spectator of history – has eroded its parts. Blaufuks takes photographs for all these things, but he also cuts out, keeps and archives papers in his diary, as an awareness of what is lived and as an example of a poetic existentialism that surrounds his deep reflection on the ephemeral and the temporal condition of the human.

We are talking of experience and time, of dilatations of what is seen, as an amplification of experience, as an aggrandizement of the event. All in a current world in which it seems indispensable to recover lost faith in the image. As an example we might call up the strategy of intensification of the real used by the artist Mark Boyle in *Street* (1964). After improvising a theatre, a group of people was placed in front of the curtain. When the curtain was drawn, there was no object or film to see, except a glass screen showing what was happening in the street in real time, a spontaneous reality capable of fixing our attention on what we would never look at otherwise. The identical may be

different, and each image, even when repeated, may be unique (the 'Mozhukin' experiment by Kuleshov is particularly paradigmatic).

Daniel Blaufuks provokes a sort of 'non time' capable of being lived, if we construct another gaze and experience another type of perception, in which what matters is not the place, the what and the now, but the attitude that generates its construction. Thus, questions and doubts leave us in a fade to black. Like those "ends" in the style of horizons that draw an absence, stressing the importance of the literary and cinematographic in Blaufuks's creative universe. The word as a thousand possible images, as the beginning and irremediable end of uncountable stories. Because language understood as experience is capable of transforming visual passivity into an active gesture.

Blaufuks also pays homage to the true experience of reading, in the sense of the intentioned prolongation that induces the reader into a sort of arrested time, of a parenthesis for intense reading. It is this, which Gary Hill describes as zero time, "something like a fixed point. In surfing one could describe it as the moment when the surfer is in the 'green room' (inside a wave). This line of curve/rupture surrounds him so much that it looks like the surfer is not moving. So he is in a perfect position, the "infinite". When you participate in a creative activity, what you want is to find and remain in that sort of fixed point for as long as possible. Yet it is the inevitable ruptures in it that allow the fixed point to be seen *outside* of it. Paradoxically, it needs some type of interruption in order to be what it is: the consummated tuning-fork" [7]. In Blaufuks the word complements the image, and for moments it may even replace it, as in that *Life* or *Horizon* that dominated his project *On the Infinite*.

Everything is the result of an intimate intention, that of the relationship between viewer and image. But, also, we insist, of time, of its prolongations, decelerations and strategies that unite his photographs and his images into movement, which, as Blaufuks himself once described, may present us with a set of photographs at high-speed. That intimacy in Daniel Blaufuks is manifested in solitude, a state that for him describes our lives. This is why *a perfect day* might be the one in which all urban noise is erased in favour of silence, because silence is without doubt an image for a Daniel Blaufuks, who claims private discovery, the inner confinement capable of not succumbing to the agitation of a wrongly communicated multitude. "Those who have the habit of listening

to sounds on a walkman or reading phrases from a book in a public space, know what this is about”, he wrote. In that way, this interiorising of the exteriorised will allow our fictions, to obtain our own perspectives, to cross our gaze.

All of it has a great deal to do with that characteristic ‘suspension’ that predominates in almost all of his snapshots. Blaufuks is interested in the moment after the event, when everything or nothing may happen. That suspension is translated into waiting, into apathy, into disquiet, into freezing, into exile, into *previews*, perfect days or syncopated endings that invade landscapes like that coat hanger in the Chiado square. Everything is the product of a non-decisive instant, of a brief time capable of changing everything that exists. Daniel Blaufuks simply acts as a witness, trying to interfere as little as possible in order to keep his “choices” in boxes with the shape of frames.

Everything starts from a first discovery, like that of the girl who is the protagonist of *Black and White*, who starts to see in black and white and is unable to see in colours, and for that reason she has to imagine these images that she cannot see. Or is it her herself who imagines that she can’t see them? Our reality is in colour, but without doubt the images we see in black and white seem more real due to their historical character, and Daniel Blaufuks plays with this absurd paradox in order to show the apparent and doubtful veracity of the documental.

Deep down, with all this, we shuffle the mentioned loss of confidence in the image in a century we might characterise as the century in which image has managed to discredit itself. Today it is not necessary to stage things, because everything is staged already. Let us think of the blind trust in the image that was shown by the first spectators of *L’arrivée du train de Vicennes* (1897) by the Lumières brothers, who were stricken by panic because they thought the train was going to run them over. The absence of a cinematographic habit filled the action with realism. Today, in the light of so much visual excess, we need the opposite effect or at least to create our own ideological library, our own deconstructive archive of the reality of the image.

Daniel Blaufuks assumes this condition of the history of image. Thus, on occasions, he tries to clarify darker moments of History. As an example we might highlight his documentary film *Under Strange Skies*, which tells the story of the Jews who passed through Lisbon during the war – some of them, like Blaufuks’s own grandparents,

remained in Portugal. In this film, Blaufuks explores the apparent hospitality of Portugal, which, although letting some of the refugees in, granted residence permits only to the few that, like his grandparents, had arrived before the war. With his own photographs, family films and images filmed from a tram in the Rossio square, taken by Eugen Schuftan who once worked with Fritz Lang on *Metropolis*, Blaufuks uses his own text, that is interrupted by letters from his grandfather and excerpts by writers who relate their first impressions of Lisbon. And Daniel Blaufuks knows well that looking is not the same as observing, nor is a postcard the same as a photograph.

In the end, that first impression, that experience of journey as discovery, is present in all of Daniel Blaufuks's works. For him, the path may be more important than the destination. The German philosopher Heidegger must have been thinking something like this when he pointed out that "in waiting, it is important to be able to wait for what you want, without actually waiting for it". Chance may be distilled into serendipity and thus reach something much more interesting than what we were searching at the beginning. Because Daniel Blaufuks is a storyteller capable of freezing his own story.

[1] Serres, M: *El nacimiento de la física en el texto de Lucrecio*, Pre-Textos, Valencia, 1994

[2] Italo Calvino: *If on a winter's night a traveler*, (Spanish language versión, Siruela, Madrid, 1993, p. 21)

[3] Wirth, U.: "Literatura en Internet. O: ¿A quién le importa quién lea?", *Ars Telemática*, L'Angelot, Barcelona, 1998

[4] Wittgenstein, L.: *Philosophical Investigations*.....

[5] Coutinho, I./Rato, V.: "Daniel Blaufuks. Momentos suspensos", en

[6] Berger, J.: *Mirar*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2001

[7] Quasha, G. / Stein, Ch.: "Performance liminar: conversación con Gary Hill", *Arte y parte* nº 41, 2002.

