



↑ *Telenouvelle Basque* workshop, Arteleku. [Aitor Bengoetxea]



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WE HAVE MIR
RORS IN ST
EAD OF EYES

We're at a workshop at the Goethe Institut in Mexico City, centring on the idea of creating a short film with a mobile phone, and I'm one of the students. The date could be today or last week or even 10 years ago, but as it happens it's taking place over these days. We don't specifically examine the actual technology of making films using mobile phones or stuff like that. Instead, we focus on the old question of storytelling, and in the first week, we spend a routine eight hours a day developing ideas, writing, and discussing scripts, points of view and the different things that motivate us to tell a story. Slowly and painfully we come to understand and accept that the *thing* we so obsessively wanted to talk about and to which we still cling is simply not a story. It is little more than a feeling, an outline, a character and a situation; a starting point, but seldom a story. That process often ends up working like psychological therapy for the students. I remember, for example, the Colombian photographer who says that each head is a world in itself (*as if*); that the people in old people's homes have lots of stories to tell; and I remember how Till Passow—the German film-maker directing the workshop—asks her where exactly the story is because he doesn't see it. And I remember how she wants to summon her French ex-boyfriend who she misses so badly so she can question him on camera and make him tell the truth about a series of things that neither interest us nor appeal to us as an audience: Does he think about her now that they are no longer together? Is he happy? What does he think of death? Why could they get so close physically and not emotionally or mentally? Why did he leave? Then there's the guy who wants to depict a rose seller who's just arrived in Mexico City from a far-off town and doesn't now how to process the city; what should she do with it? In some way, this guy (a student, actor, film-maker in the making) is himself a reflection of the girl with the roses: he doesn't know where to go with his own script. And again, Till says, «But where's the

story here? I can't see it!» And I'm thinking about those incestuous cheese-selling Mennonites who renounced European modernity 300 years ago to go and live without technology on distant ranches in a new world called America: the ones who stand at the traffic lights, utterly unfazed by the city, looking down on it's advanced chaos, scorning it just like the Zapatistas who travelled round Mexico at the time of the 1996 poll, saying, «It just can't be true that this is the country that says it is so advanced compared to us, the Indians. Is this what they want to turn us into?»

Bit by bit, as the workshop develops, we find ourselves trapped in the dialogue, time and time again getting lost in a game of mirrors that reflect us in one another as the hours go by. Sometimes I even start to think that reality is complex and has many different layers, and that each head is a world. Despite it all, though, I manage to avoid falling into that cliché.

It seems obvious that wars can be won with mirrors and with words, and that without the linguistic help Malintzin gave Cortes, the invaders might perhaps have remained entirely *lost in translation*. Straight away, the conquistadors made sure that the vanquished peoples learned their language, that they spoke it and understood it and thought in it, and, moreover, that they expressed themselves in it, so that they would be familiar with the dominant zeitgeist, and through silence and sounds would learn it and apprehend it. In other words, they made sure they would be confined to the predictable structures of the language that they themselves had built and mastered previously. That is what is used, the classic thing. The main pillar of globalisation. The required protocol. This is the only way to take control of another person's mind, through seduction and repetition. The colonised will express *your* concepts through *their* words (without realising that they are actually *your* words),

and their ideas and language (which will work like an operating system, making them function as the system requires: *your* system). Then come the beliefs, the religion, the desires, and with them, everything else. They're lost forever in a game of mirrors: seeing (on television) and desiring and working for that which they'll never be able to be and never even be able to possess.

According to an old Basque saying, everything that can be named must exist, but there are people who believe that for something to exist it must first be named, stated, brought down to earth as an idea, and that only in that way—and only then —is it able to exist: otherwise it is confined to the world of the invisible, the incomprehensible, the non-existent, the world that only schizophrenics and lunatics can see.

Or as Subcomandante Marcos said about the Indians: «To reveal ourselves, we hide behind a ski mask; to conceal ourselves, we take it off».

They were always there and nobody wanted to see them; only when they covered their faces did they take on a face: the face of single, small, silent rebellion. «In order for them to see us, we had to cover our faces, for as long as we showed our faces, they treated us like animals and never listened to our demands». «It means we're all the same; if one of us falls, there will always be someone else behind the ski-mask to keep going, and in this way the enemy will never be able to recognise us or punish our families».

Not that they can recognise them, not that they are capable of understanding: of all the Zapatista commanders, it is only the *mestizos* and the whites who have warrants out against them from the mis-government: the others continue to be invisible, inexplicable, incomprehensible, senseless, tasteless, in other words,

Indians. Indians who undoubtedly do nothing but obey the orders of a white conspirator who manipulates them so that they can realise their dream of blood, purification and revolution. Indians with no other explanation, Indians who speak languages where some western words-concepts do not exist, and who speak «Christian» in an unpolished way that proves they understand nothing.

Till Passow, with his foreign eyes, sees the stories we do not see. And yet I prefer to tell stories of office clerks than of Aztec prostitutes or half-breed transsexuals or zombies trapped in the Metro. Yet their eyes complement what I can see here, and I end up choosing to do a teaser on the future Indian rebellion of 2010, which coincides with the bicentenary of Mexican independence, the centenary of the revolution and the Mayan prophecies of the end of time.

A few weeks before the workshop in Mexico City, I went to Donostia to give a workshop at Arteleku. I call the city Donostia because I don't like calling it San Sebastián. I always wonder whether one name might be a translation of the other. Whether Don means San (Saint) in Basque, and Ostia means Sebastián. People always tell me that's not the case. And I'm reminded of Cindy Flores (the Mexican cyber-feminist) who couldn't stop laughing when we were playing Civilization 3 and I founded a city called Donostia (whenever I play Civilization I always choose the Spanskí civilization), since she presumed I was making fun of Spanish slang... A city called Don Hostia; what could be funnier¹? But one day we spoke seriously about the subject and I had to prove to her that this wasn't just one of my jokes. Eventually, she believed me, but she didn't understand.

She asked the same question: Does San Sebastian mean Donostia in Basque? I don't think so, I said, yet in some way it's nearly the same city. In other words: it is the same, yet at the same time it's utterly different, depending on what language you're thinking in. Or at least that's what I think, and I hope I'm not getting badly *lost in translation*. Who can I ask about that? A Spaniard, a Basque, a Donostiarra (a native of San Sebastian)? Perhaps we need some objective, external judge, who is not trapped in this game of mirrors and who has no sort of involvement with the Spanish state (the Spanish empire)?

Anyway, our mission in Arteleku was to discuss the genre of the soap opera and in particular the *telenouvelle vague* by producing an original series on Basque culture: translating the Mexican soap opera into a popular political melodrama which would narrate plots and devices that are specific to Basque society. What actually followed was no less explosive than the original proposal: a couple of Donostiarras² aged between twenty-something and sixty-something proposed plots for the series involving all sorts of things: what affirmative action is, what works, what has to be done, what it means for a character to get out of prison after 30 years for having demonstrated politically or for a mayor to go to prison for not condemning the murder of a councillor. And finally, after completing the collective writing of the symphony and stringing it together, Maider Zilbeti appears with a new twist for the translation: what

if this soap opera were set with Mexican actors instead of Basque ones? For me it made sense, even if it was just to see whether the drama could be explained from the subjectivity of another skin colour: a *mise-en-scène* with stills of Basque landscapes and swarthy actors depicting episodes of Basque separatist tragedy on stages built against the bricks of fiction which Judge Garzón³ uses to create reality. That reality. His reality. That war they keep fighting through entertainment, the media, religion and also arms, just like the military-entertainment complex: smiling and injuring... And yet as the Mayas said in their game of mirrors: I am you and you are me.

If another world really is possible, we can try writing and planning it with fountain pens, *caméras-stylo* and html. And by inverting factors, building new structural shapes for telling stories and weaving new relations with the same actors and the same stories as ever (there is nothing new under the sun, says the literature), we can hack and modify the reality of our societies: through the narrative invocation, the network of collective and personal stories, the remix and the randomness and all the possible strategies: something along the lines of «Invoke first, formulate later»: gradually this will become reality in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Another narr@tive is possible. ♦

1 Translator's note: Donostia is the Basque name for the city of San Sebastián. «Hostia» (pronounced «Ostia»), literally meaning «the Sacred Host», is a common expletive in Spanish as spoken in Spain.

2 Translator's note: Donostiarra, in both Basque and Spanish, means a native of San Sebastián/Donostia.

3 Baltasar Garzón, the controversial judge on Spain's «Audiencia Nacional» (criminal court).