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Javier Téllez
by Pedro Reyes
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Lea la conversación original entre Javier Téllez y Pedro Reyes, [aquí](#).



Oedipus Marshal, 2006, still from single-channel video. Total running time: 30 minutes. Comissioned by Aspen Art Museum, Aspen. All images courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.

Erasmus of Rotterdam claimed there were three types of people: those who lived in a dream world, those who lived in reality, and those who were able to turn one world into the other. The Venezuelan artist Javier Téllez belongs in this third category of people for whom the boundary between reality and unreality, reason and madness, is not only shadowy but also worth delving into. For the Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing such constructs do nothing but create artificial divisions whose function is to ensure the preservation of the status quo. If, in a similar vein, Téllez's projects build a bridge between these two worlds, opening the possibility of creative collaborations with the so-called mentally ill, he avoids the pieties associated with art therapy by warning us that he seeks "not a therapeutic practice to cure the insane but rather one to cure the sane of their lucidity."

Téllez and I once played telephone with tin cans perched on trees at the Utopia Station site for the 50th Venice Biennale, but, for the following interview, we discussed his increasingly deperated film projects—*Oedipus Marshal* (2006), *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See* (2007), and *Caligari and the Sleepwalker* (2008)—over the less cumbersome and more contemporary mediums of the telephone, email, and Skype.

PEDRO REYES Where should we begin? At the beginning or at the end?

JAVIER TÉLLEZ In the middle.

PR Which part is the middle?

JT The middle would be the present.

PR Javier, in the development of your work over the past 15 or 20 years, you'd always used video, but lately your work has consisted of films.

JT I've always wanted to make films. My grandfather founded one of the first movie theaters in Venezuela in 1911: the Capitol Theater in Turmero, the small town where my mother was born. We'd visit often, so I spent part of my childhood in the projection booth. Since I was a kid, I would film what I saw around me with the old Bell and Howell camera my dad gave me. Later I studied film and acquired a Super-8 camera so that I could make movies using my friends as actors. In the '90s, I used video because it was a more accessible medium. It's only in the past five years that I've managed to create films. The brilliant Cain-Abel image Godard used in *Sauve qui peut* explains the relationship between film and video beautifully. The truth is that these days, it's impossible to conceive of the one without the other. Though video is immediate and readily lends itself to the urgency that imbues many of my projects, film, on the other hand, possesses an unquestionable element of "reality." That is, film as a medium is constituted as "reality" by being both *exposed*, or developed, and *exposed*, or shown, before an audience. I prefer to make movies on film although, in the end, for practical reasons, I might transfer them to video. For me, film "incarnates." As a medium it registers precisely the idea with which we began this conversation—being in the middle, in the here and now.

PR In Godard's *Le petit soldat*, while the protagonist is taking pictures of a character named Veronica, he utters the now famous quote: "Photography is truth. And cinema is truth 24 frames a second." The etymology of the name *Veronica* is "the true image," and it refers to the cloak with which Saint Veronica wiped the face of Christ during the Passion. His image remained on the cloak—we could say it's the first Polaroid in history. Might it be that the chemical stigmata that light leaves on the negative is what makes cinema true?

JT Cinema is the wound and the stain, no doubt, but the stain in motion! "If something is to stay in memory, it must be burned in," Nietzsche wrote in his *Genealogy of Morals*. Film burns this truth 24 times a second. The Council of Nicea recounts that a certain Harrasin of Gabala drove a nail into the eye of an icon, and instantly lost one of his own. This was perhaps the first antecedent of Vertov and his Kino-Eye, or the celebrated image of Luis Buñuel. Yet another story of cinema before cinema, protocinema.

Also, the time and effort that completing a cinematographic production requires is a sort of Passion. In order to produce the icon, we need to bear the cross that precedes the epiphany. And the successive appearance of the body on the screen is, without a doubt, a form of resurrection. Some great 20th-century filmmakers have been interested in depicting the epiphany of reality on celluloid: Buñuel, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and, especially, Roberto Rossellini. All of them have been under the theoretical influence of André Bazin, and had a relationship to Catholicism and the permissiveness of the image that opened up with the Counter-Reformation. I've always seen a continuation of the chapter in art history that Caravaggio and the Spanish Golden Age painters opened in the films by these directors.

PR So going to the cinema, then, would be a sort of sacramental act.

JT It could even be seen as a form of Eucharist. The absorption of static images on the spectator's retina, read by the nervous system as images in movement, is a sort of transubstantiation of the bodies represented on the screen.



Caligari and the Sleepwalker, 2008, still from high-definition video. Total running time: 27 minutes, 7 seconds. Commissioned by Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

PR In your last film, *Caligari and the Sleepwalker*, you include a scene of the actors attending a screening of the same film they'll reenact: the 1920 *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* by Robert Wiene. Talk about the phenomenon of somnambulism in the film. Are there analogous relationships between wakefulness and sleep, reason and common sense, life and film?

JT Any film lover is fascinated by the double mechanism that registers images and projects them to create the illusion of movement. The cinematographic mechanism's hypnotizing quality is one of the fundamental themes of *Caligari and the Sonambulist*. Curator Valerie Smith invited me to make a film in Berlin that would be shown in the exhibition *Rational/Irrational* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. As is my usual practice, I decided to make a film in collaboration with the patients of a local psychiatric institution. The two elements I used as springboards for my collaboration with the patients were the Wiene film and Mendelsohn's observatory Einsteinturm (the Einstein Tower). Both icons of German Expressionism were produced simultaneously in Potsdam at the beginning of the '20s and constitute the swan song of the avant-garde movement. So, I watched the film with the patients and invited them to make a new version of it primarily inside Mendelsohn's building.

Hypnosis is one of the themes in Wiene's *Caligari*, as is madness—it contains one of the first cinematographic representations of a psychiatric hospital. This is what led me to present it to the patients in the first place. The way cinema relates to hypnosis and spiritism has been present from the very first texts that describe the perception of images in motion. The history of modern psychiatry, too, is linked to hypnosis via Charcot and La Salpêtrière. It's only natural that these themes reappear in a project that directly engages a film like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. We were particularly interested in exploring visual and auditory hallucination.

PR Mendelsohn's building, a solar observatory that is surprisingly smaller than the idealized image we see in architecture books, operates in your film as a magician's tower or an extraterrestrial space station.

JT When I initially proposed the idea of Mendelsohn's tower as an image to the patients, they developed a narrative that strayed from the original story of Dr. Caligari's cabinet. From the horror genre of the original film, we moved toward science fiction. The telescope that inhabits Mendelsohn's building—we could say that the whole building is the apparatus—becomes a machine that produces the narrative of delirium. It's a bit like in Adolfo Bioy Casares's story "The Invention of Morel," where a quasi-cinematic machine produces simulacra of characters and situations inside an abandoned building.

In his classic study of hallucinations, *On the Origin of the "Influencing Machine" in Schizophrenia*, the psychoanalyst Viktor Tausk, who was a colleague of Freud's, describes a psychic device that he calls "the schizophrenic influencing machine." It's as if a machine caused patients to experience flat visual hallucinations. A sort of magic lantern, the machine creates or removes thoughts via mystical rays or forces that also produce involuntary movements in the patient's body, discharges of semen, and erections. The schizophrenic patient describes these sensations as manifestations of electrical or magnetic energies. Tausk's writings on his patient's delusions could easily fit in a reader of what's been called the "cinematographic apparatus." Also fundamental are the detailed descriptions by James Tilly Matthews, a patient at an English insane asylum at the turn of the 18th century, of the imaginary "air loom machine" used by villains to control people, and *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* by Daniel Paul Schreber, a patient of Freud's. I see these as a sort of counter-technology, constructed from within mental illness, that challenge Bentham's Panopticon and the other control apparatuses abounding in the history of psychiatry.

Mendelsohn's fantastic solar observatory became central to our narrative because it functioned as a schizophrenic machine allowing hallucinations to be transmitted through contagion or projection. All of this, in short, as a metaphor for film.



Caligari and the Sleepwalker, 2008, still from high-definition video.

PR Is film a phenomenon similar to lucid dreaming, where one takes control of one's dream?

JT : For sure film and dreams are siblings. With *Caligari and the Somnambulist*, I'd like for something akin to Chuang Tsu's dream of the butterfly to occur.

PR In your film the patients are simultaneously actors and spectators of their own action. Given that you filmed them watching the movie you made with them and then included this footage in a subsequent version of the film, is this split within the ego an analogy for schizophrenia?

JT As the patients watch the film, they make comments that later the spectators of my film experience non-diegetically as voice-overs—the power of the disembodied voice is characteristic of auditory hallucination. And the exchange of roles between spectators and participants in my film continues with the carnivalesque spirit of all the work I develop in collaboration with people who are mentally ill.

PR What about the chalkboards on which the patients write their own dialogue? They are a resource you've taken from silent films, but in what almost amounts to a Brechtian break, in your films they're held by the actors themselves.

JT Chalkboards are a constant in my films. They reaffirm the way that cinema, as a medium, is inscription—a type of mystic writing pad, a palimpsest reaffirming the pedagogical nature of the work of destigmatization. They can be

read literally as an image that gives the patients *voice* by introducing the canceled or excluded language of those who live with mental illness within Logos. Also, the introduction of written language within the context of visual representation represents a distancing from the passive consumption of the image in motion.

PR In your *Caligari*, and also in your film *Oedipus Marshal*, the Western you made in a ghost town near Aspen, Colorado in collaboration with patients of a nearby psychiatric hospital, you work with the suppression of a particular resource. In *Caligari*, it was the voice; in *Oedipus Marshal*, facial expressions were substituted with masks.

JT Voice-overs, or disembodied voices, are a recurring element in my films; yet the idea of hearing voices is something that patients bring to the narratives on their own, without my having instigated it. The case of *Oedipus Marshal* was particularly interesting to me, since the voices in the auditory hallucinations had been inspired by the role of the chorus in classical tragedy. And in my film *Letter on The Blind For Those Of Us Who See*, the voice, per force, was the principal medium of collaboration with the blind people.



Caligari and the Sleepwalker, 2008, still from high-definition video.

PR You've told me that prior to beginning a project you hold workshops where you sit with patients to discuss their ideas, develop the plot of the films, and make casting decisions with them. Aside from technique, what makes your *Caligari* unique to me is the collective playwriting process.

JT Each project is specific, since it is the result of collaborating with particular people. Of course, I accumulate experience and learn from each project. Normally, before beginning a new project, I show my earlier films to the patients I'm going to work with: this also might generate a certain sense of continuity.

PR The Brazilian director Augusto Boal said that Aristotle promoted the use of the chorus in classical tragedy because it relieved the audience from their need to express themselves in the face of a tragedy's unfolding: "You don't need to express your opinion; the chorus will do it for you." When you open the door to the patient's participation, in terms of playwriting, are you allowing for an array of different outcomes? Are you interested in the possibility of reinventing drama?

JT I still have my doubts about Boal. I think that, in the end, his reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* is limited, as is his formulation of a "theater of the oppressed," which doesn't successfully depart from a didactic model. Boal's experiments seem to seek to demonstrate the therapist's mastery, and this might be a continuation of Jacob Levi Moreno's psychodrama. It's necessary to place Antonin Artaud up against Brecht; and up against Boal, to posit more relevant experiences such as Grotowski and *The Living Theater*, or the invisible theater of happenings. What we find in these is the unscripted creation of uncontrolled performative situations where the limits of reality and theater are dissolved through catharsis, collective

rituals, the spectator's active involvement, and the carnivalesque. Perhaps Boal isn't aware of the *true* Dionysian spirit of Greek tragedy when he distances himself from the most interesting theatrical experiment of the first half of the 20th century: Artaud's Theater of Cruelty.



Oedipus Marshal, 2006, still from single-channel video.

PR Regarding psychodrama, Jacob Levi Moreno was focused on the idea of "training spontaneity": the therapeutic role of creativity in the impromptu creation of a play. In film production, the threshold of spontaneity is reduced, since ensuring the image's quality requires a certain control. Can you give me an example of an element that arose in the sessions with the patients that you later incorporated into *Oedipus Marshal* as you were making the film?

JT The script is always written with the patients, but in their performances of it there are always variations and surprises, especially since we're talking about people who have never had professional experience as actors. It's inevitable that they'll produce unexpected results. I'm interested in working right on that line where patients will continue to be themselves but at the same time will be *possessed* by the characters they've created. My projects—like all cinema, perhaps—exist halfway between documentary and fiction. Spontaneity might be read in a variety of ways. I agree with Robert Bresson when he argues that theater in its classical form destroys the spontaneity of actors given that their acting must be repeated and rehearsed innumerable times. The cinematographic record, on the other hand, is unique—it's the record of an instant that only repeats when it is projected.



Oedipus Marshal, 2006, still from single-channel video. Total running time: 30 minutes. Comissioned by Aspen Art Museum, Aspen.

PR One question I genuinely ask myself in relation to your work has to do with the notion of agency. Placards and blackboards provide the patients with agency.

JT They're props in the sense that Artaud uses them in *Theater of Cruelty*—props that become meaningful in their own right, beyond their functional value within the plot. It's a kind of bricolage, where patients can interpret all kinds of diverse elements when talking about their lived experiences.

In the workshops the patients become a collective. We read a film, a building, a fable, or a Greek tragedy as texts—this was the case for *Caligari and the Somnambulist*, as I explained, and also for my version of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, and *Oedipus Marshal*. This text I bring to the patients functions as the connector that might allow for collective agency—I often work with patients who don't know each other very well, so starting off reading a text is very helpful. For *Oedipus Marshal*, we selected Sophocles' tragedy alongside the genre of the Western (the movie was filmed in Colorado) as points of departure. I'm deeply interested in how the patients translate the original narrative into their own reality. The Greek tragedy underwent a process of metamorphosis when it was adapted to the specific circumstances of the American West and to the realm of mental illness. Patients read the figure of Oedipus as a schizophrenic instead of as a Freudian neurotic. The voices of the Greek chorus, in our narrative, became the main character's auditory hallucinations.

We used a range of genres—Westerns, Japanese Noh theater, and Greek tragedy—not to create parodies but rather as containers for new meanings that might be produced via the strategies of the *bricoleur*.

PR It's fascinating that you'd distance yourself from parody. Parody makes fun of a genre at the same time it uses its resources. It seems to me that your work is closer to a theory of metatheater—or, in your case, metacinema. In your films, our reading of the actors' work cannot be disassociated from our knowledge of their mental condition. Are you interested in Peter Brook's *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*?

JT A person living with mental illness lives Rimbaud's "I am an Other." It's not difficult for him or her to reach a state of possession. *Marat/Sade*, or more precisely, what we imagine Sade's theatrical representations might have been based on Peter Weiss's play are an interesting phenomenon, since they operate within an exchange of roles between spectator and actor. This also relates to the carnivalesque spectacle in which the world was turned upside down: the medieval theatrical representation of the celebration of madmen using entire towns as their stage.

The presence of carnival within my work comes from the visits I made during my

childhood to the carnivals of the psychiatric hospital of Barbula, where my father worked as a psychiatrist. Patients there would trade their uniforms for the hygienic white coats of the doctors. This image, "burned in memory," has stayed with me for the rest of my life, and has become one of the guiding images of my work.



Caligari and the Sleepwalker, 2008, installation with single-channel projection. Installation shot of *Mind the Gap*, Kunsthaus Baselland, MuttENZ, 2009. Photo by Viktor Kolibal.

PR I've asked you before if you consider your work to be therapeutic. You responded that more than curing crazy people, you are interested in curing sane people of their sanity.

JT The cure for the sane and the cure for the sick: negation and affirmation at the same time. Madness is situated beyond language, it shares a liminal condition with art.

The problem with therapeutic psychodrama, like the one proposed by Jacob Levi Moreno, is that it continues to enact the privileged position of the therapist, of the one who administers the cure. I prefer a truly dialogic method, an inter-subjective model in which the encounter with the other might be possible without the eradication of difference. I'm thinking concretely about the films of Jean Rouch, who's been a huge influence on my work. In other words, I'd prefer my practice be seen as a bridge, and not as a path to a goal.

PR *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See* is undoubtedly a film about inter-subjectivity.

JT It presented a particular problem—

PR Epistemologically?

JT And phenomenologically, too: how to make a film in *collaboration* with blind people, some of whom had never seen in their lives. The solution came from the voice and from touch. The camera recorded the tactile experiences of the blind as they touched the body of an elephant, but the images were later edited with recorded descriptions from the blind people. The film's viewer, then, was located within the point of view of the person who cannot see (a blind spot for sure). For a while I'd been wanting to make a film about blindness as homage to my mother, who gradually lost her vision during the last years of her life.



Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See, 2007, still from high-definition video. Total running time: 27 minutes, 36 seconds. Commissioned by Creative Time, New York.

PR The premise of the film originates in the Hindu fable “The Blind Men and the Elephant.”

JT The project for the film started off with the Indian fable of the elephant and the six blind men—the Eastern counterpart to our Platonic cave, and another history of protocinema. Six blind men attempt to recognize a pachyderm. Each one touches a different part of the animal, so therefore they cannot reach an agreement about the elephant’s characteristics. The premise of the parable is erroneous given that the blind men were not allowed to touch the animal’s entire body—one of my sightless collaborators highlighted this during the making of the film. For me, the film itself becomes the elephant that the spectators, those who see, have to recognize despite their limitations. Their main limitation is that since they can’t stop seeing, they cannot access blindness.

PR There’s a phrase from Diderot saying: “If you want me to believe in God, you must make me touch him.” Are you interested in Diderot’s rationalism?

JT No, we only took the title of our film from Diderot’s text. We might touch the veil, but not the body of God. This reminds me of that classic story about trompe l’oeil retold by Pliny the Elder: the rivalry between the painters Parrhasius and Zeuxis was resolved through a competition. Zeuxis asks Parrhasius to unveil his painting, soon realizing that there is no veil to lift; what he’s seeing is represented within the painting itself. Parrhasius’s indisputable mastery is demonstrated. This is a very beautiful story about the illusory nature of all representation. As illusionists, which we are by nature, it’s our task to signal the limits of language itself: negation and affirmation at the same time.



Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See, 2007, still from high-definition video.

PR On the topic of tricks, let's talk about ha-ha walls.

JT It's fascinating that you mention them. In Sydney, in the Rozelle hospital where I shot *The Passion of Jeanne d'Arc*, I found some original remains of ha-ha walls built around the asylum. The ha-ha wall is an important architectural element in the renovation of psychiatric institutions, as it permits the inmates of the institution an illusory contemplation of the landscape, and yet at the same time isolates them from the rest of society. The ha-ha is thus as much a sophisticated mechanism of control as Bentham's Panopticon.

As for tricks, have you heard the joke about the hole in the hospital wall? A flaneur is walking around the outer wall of a psychiatric institution, sees a hole in the wall, and hears that on the other side someone is repeating "One hundred, one hundred, one hundred..." The flaneur peeks through the hole and sees a patient behind the wall who sticks an awl through the hole, and pulls out the prier's eye, and begins repeating "One hundred and one, one hundred and one, one hundred and one..."

PR Ha!

JT Seems like today we're paying homage to Don Luis, don't you think?

PR Buñuel? Oh yes. In *My Last Sigh* he says that his lack of interest in science is due to its limited ability to explain those matters of deepest concern to him—dreams and laughter, for instance. If you explain a joke, it ceases to be funny. There's a type of knowledge that we can only access through art, or artifice.

JT In that sense, the best translation of the term *trompe l'oeil* would be *eye trap*.

PR So speaking of walls, let's return to architecture.

JT One of the recurring thematic concerns in my work with people living with mental illness is architecture. The architecture of confinement is obviously an everyday concern for those who experience it or have been institutionalized. The image of the house keeps reappearing in their visual representations. A person who is mentally ill is basically a homeless person forced into an interior exile by the rest of society—no wonder Oedipus functioned so perfectly as the alter ego of my collaborators. The psychiatric institution is a home forced upon the patient, an architectural straitjacket that the patient must survive in or transgress. This is why I've been interested in making architectural works in the past: the gigantic birdhouse *Bedlam* from 1999; *Liftoff*, from 2001, which is another birdhouse designed by a patient as a hybrid between a trap and a gigantic loudspeaker; *Choreutics*, from 2001, a gigantic spider web in the form of a fish trap; and finally, in the installation version of *Caligari and the Somnambulist*, a pavilion made of chalkboards serving as a projection room. The image of the trap inverts the institutional trap in these works. Somehow it responds to the image of the burrow in Kafka, in which as Deleuze and Guattari claim, "Only the principle of multiple entrances prevents the introduction of the enemy."

PR We started out talking about Godard, who once said: "A story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end ... but not necessarily in that order." We've already talked about the present and the past. Can you tell me what you plan to do in the future?

JT ...

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