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RADICAL POLITICS AND EXPERIMENTAL
FILM IN FRANCO'S SPAIN: *LOS ENCUENTROS
DE PAMPLONA, 1972*

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ABSTRACT The *Encuentros de Pamplona* of 1972 was the most important exhibit of avant-garde and experimental art that had ever taken place during Franco's dictatorship. Some of the world's most prominent artists, including John Cage, went to Spain to participate in this event. This article offers a reflection on the use of avant-garde and experimental art from the 1950s to the early 1970s in Spain. In the beginning, abstract art was accepted by Franco's regime as a way of exporting a "liberal" and "modern" image of the dictatorship in art exhibitions. Yet the ambivalent nature of abstract experimental art made it possible to take these works as a silent protest against the regime. However, in the early 70s, a younger generation would shift their approach to experimental art forms, yet not reject them altogether: distanced by an attitude of cynicism toward the ability of film to bring about political change, they would appropriate and extend the avant-garde through parody and pastiche, thus marking the "fin de fiesta" of experimental art in Spain.

Experimental film in Spain of the late 1970s can be thought of as the "end-game" of what had been going on in other art forms. By "endgame" I am referring to the paradox that had developed during the previous two decades in which modern art coexisted with an antiquated political regime, namely, the Franco dictatorship. After the 1950s, the regime deliberately used contemporary aesthetic trends, especially painting, at prestigious cultural events (such as international exhibits or the biennial art festivals in Sao Paulo or

Venice) to give the impression that it was actually quite modern. This public relations strategy was meant to obscure the totalitarian regime that had hung on since the 1930s and was still very much alive in the heart of Western Europe.

This situation must be understood in the specific context of the Cold War. The Spanish dictatorship had been modeled on previous fascist regimes, but there was one noteworthy issue here: from the very outset Franco had been stoutly anticommunist. In fact, the only significant military activity he ordered during the Second World War was to send an expeditionary force of Spanish soldiers (the División Azul, composed mainly of Falangists) to fight under German command against the Soviet Union. Later, in the 1950s when the Soviet Union had become the greatest enemy of the Western world, he realized that the survival of his regime would depend on his ability to deal with the sensibilities of the western allies. For this reason, Spain, like many other western countries, supported the Cultural Cold War,¹ and it was imperative to project the idea of a tolerant and modern regime.

Thus it was that abstract artists such as Antoni Tàpies, Joan Miró, Eduardo Chillida and Antonio Saura, who were in direct opposition to the regime, represented Spain in many of these cultural events. Quite often they received awards for their work, which led to a certain confusion in how this was to be understood. On the one hand, it was an implicit act of support to those who opposed the regime. On the other, this offered a venue for the dictatorship to give an impression of democratic-style political tolerance.

The same was true for film as well. It was not unusual to see the presence of Spanish filmmakers who opposed the regime representing Spain at key international film festivals, such as Juan Antonio Bardem or Luis García Berlanga, who in the 1950s showed films produced by UNINCI, a company controlled by members of the Communist Party of Spain (Bardem himself was a well-known communist). Even the most famous of the exiled filmmakers, Luis Buñuel, was allowed to return to Spain in 1961 to direct a highly polemical film that, surprisingly, was able to pass the censorship controls with few modifications. The regime's strategy ended up backfiring in Buñuel's case, as quite a scandal broke out when his film *Viridiana* won the Palme d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1961. The strategy of using the prestigious big

1. Frances Stonor Saunders, among others, uses the term Cultural Cold War to refer to the use of art and literature in the 1950s for propagandistic purposes.

screen to serve the dictatorship gradually diminished, while at the same time the consolidation of the events of '68 brought with it the attitude that the avant-garde was disengaged from society and political relevance (Molins 62).

Therefore, the fact that to a certain extent the regime tolerated the avant-garde made it difficult to interpret the works. The ambivalent nature of abstract experimental art made it possible to take these works as a silent scream against the regime. As Julián Díaz Sánchez points out, exactly how to articulate opposition to the regime through the abstract was one of the main topics of debate at the end of the 60s (16). Valeriano Bozal, in his critique of Umberto Eco's *Opera Aperta*, which had been translated to Spanish, observed, "If you look at just the works themselves, Tàpies or Saura's paintings are open-ended, ambiguous. But within their historic, social and economic context however, they take on, or better possess, a perfectly identifiable sense (that is, if you aim to understand their meaning, not just their aesthetics)" (qtd. in Díaz Sánchez 16). Getting at the (political) meaning of a work of art inevitably led back to the context in which it had been produced. And when we look back at the context of the late 60s, the debate had matured and was directly applied to the question of experimental film. Javier Aguirre (whom we will discuss further), perhaps the most radical producer of abstract, op-art films, said in 1971, "Revolution and progress come through form, not through what you say, but in the way you say it . . . What I mean is that form is the true artistic content, it's form and content together at the same time. A revolutionary act is never separate from a revolutionary change in form, that is, in terms of art, of course" (Lara and Galán 36). In a similar way, Llorenç Soler, who combined experimental work with politically committed films, said in a 2004 interview, "[A]ll the films I made were not just experimentation for the sake of it. I was not just playing with form or narrative structure. My experimental films always involved a critical position against the [political] system."

The notion of revolutionary art, challenging both politics and aesthetics, gradually took hold during the 60s in Spain. There were filmmakers who aimed to create an alternative kind of film that was not part of the standard film industry. These were independent filmmakers who were politically committed to destroying the dictatorship and even the film industry itself. With this new outlook, experimental films became very important during the final years of the Franco regime. They were part of a wider movement that, around the end of the 1960s, came to be known as "marginal films." This term was applauded by the filmmakers since they considered themselves to

be on the margins of the film industry, having carved out alternative channels of distribution for their films, along with faithful audiences who viewed their films in what were basically clandestine film clubs, cultural associations, or exhibition centers. One case that especially stands out is the Central del Curt in Barcelona. It had a catalogue of films available through the alternative channels of distribution, ranging from classical or international political films (such as *Battleship Potemkin* by Sergei M. Eisenstein or *La hora de los hornos* by Fernando Solanas), to highly militant films by Spanish groups such as the Colectivo de Cine de Clase, and even explicitly experimental or underground films such as those by Pere Portabella, Llorenç Soler, and Antoni Padrós (Martí Rom 18). So it was clear that experimental filmmakers were influenced by political struggles and ideological confrontations in this stifling political context. This was also reflected in the way the films were received by the audiences of the film societies and cinema clubs that showed the films. This kind of audience “equated the usual way of watching a film with the bourgeois liturgy of dull entertainment. However, attending militant film screenings was a conscious act of questioning the industrial basis of cinema and confronting the motion pictures with an analytical attitude” (García-Merás 32).

The films crisscrossed and coincided in these viewing contexts, which actually made for a certain fusion, and not uncommonly confusion, of aesthetic and political aspirations. Whereas the more experimental filmmakers were interested in exploring forms of expression in contrast to what was happening in commercial films, formal complexity in fact often masked an underlying political critique, and this was possible especially given that the films circulated in highly limited circles. They were shown mostly in small film clubs or minor film festivals where there was great interest in what was coming out of France, England, and the United States. In fact, having access to what was going on outside of Spain is what truly distinguishes these ten years. As Eugeni Bonet and Manuel Palacio state,

The primary feature of this phase is the clash between the ever-growing knowledge that Spanish filmmakers had of what was being done in Europe (and to a lesser degree in the United States) and the impossibility of following suit because of political repression . . . not to mention the added disadvantage of the severe artistic and cultural limitations that Spanish productions suffered from at that time. (27)

We should also add that internationally, experimental art was at that time closely connected with the political context of the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the overall social unrest that would bring on the 1968 revolution in Paris, Prague, and the US. So at a global level, political debate was being combined with cultural protest, and proved to be an important factor in the case of Spain's transition to democracy (Buckley 15).

There is another important aspect regarding the role film played in the political and cultural scene of those years. At the beginning of the 70s, film journals such as *Screen*, *Cinéthique* or *Cahiers du cinéma* considered the film apparatus as a culmination of Western bourgeois ideology. In this sense, film was considered as, to put it briefly, heir to the strategies of Renaissance painting, which was defined by the position of a central subject who observed the work; it was a world organized around the centrality of the spectator's gaze. Breaking the strategy of controlling the gaze was one of several revolutionary moves that challenged the dominant way of understanding film.

There were discrepancies in precisely how the film apparatus was interpreted, depending on whatever specific sectarian group within the Marxists was doing the interpreting, be it Maoist or revisionist. These debates gained a stronghold in Spain through the cultural magazines at the end of the 70s that presented the arguments that had pitted Parisian intellectuals against each other, and which ultimately influenced Spanish experimental filmmakers.²

For these experimental filmmakers, the main issue was the redefinition of the medium itself in terms of its fundamental means of expression. Meanwhile, those in the camp of militant cinema argued that films needed to be understood by the spectator and should have clear political messages that would be easily comprehended by the masses. However, since they shared production systems, channels of distribution, and screening centers, the two perspectives never really clashed. In fact, the internal debates that one might witness in the Central del Curt, for instance, were not typically apparent in public showings. Actually, both sectors were combined in film programs, dossiers, etc. (García-Merás 18, 27–28), coexisting in their “marginalization,” where everything was assumed to be in opposition to the dictatorship of the

2. The debates on the ideology of the film apparatus found expression in journals such as *Arc Voltaic*, *El viejo topo* and *Cinema 2002*. The majority of these debates continued on during the 80s in the most important film journals in Spain, such as *La Mirada* or *Contracampo*.

day and what would follow after Franco's death. In a sense, this rather vaguely defined political radicalism is what gave rise to the term "marginal"—which became more popular than the term "independent films" that had come out of the '60s. One of the head managers of the Central del Curt said:

back then [1973–1975] we worked in that kind of cinema, not in industrial cinema, and we didn't feel that *independent films* represented what we were about, since we identified them with the 60s. In the 70s we were more politically motivated and so we were more confrontational and the term *marginal films* was used. We thought of it as all of us—from underground filmmakers to counter-information filmmakers to militant filmmakers—as being in the same situation. We were all on the outskirts of the commercial film industry. (Martí Rom 14)

But of course, there were other factors that went into defining these films. One of the most influential was performance art, where body, gesture, and occupying space through actions and interventions would lead to the vindication of art as an ephemeral and literal action (Díaz Cuyás 23). Film and photography (and soon after, video) were used as a way to fix an action that was meant to last only in the memory of those who had witnessed it.

On the other hand, the boundary between the medium and the content was dissolved, such that the bodies of the artists, the music, the paint, the action and the sound mixed together as interchangeable resources in a movement referred to as "intermediality." It was in this sense that Gene Youngblood popularized the term "expanded cinema":

Expanded cinema isn't a movie at all: like life, it's a process of becoming, man's ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes. One can no longer specialize in just one discipline and truly hope to express a clear picture of its relationships in the environment. This is especially true in the case of the intermedia network of cinema and television, which now functions as nothing less than the nervous system of mankind. (41)

Film owed its *raison d'être* not only to its technological nature, but also to its capacity to connect with the public in all aspects of everyday life: it penetrated into life, "expanded" into every space: from living rooms to museums, to clandestine bars, to university film clubs, etc.

One final issue that should not be overlooked was the availability at that time of 16mm cameras, and soon after that, 8 and super-8mm cameras (not far behind were video and electronic formats). They were inexpensive and easy to use, and it was possible to manipulate the film itself, for example, by painting directly onto the reel of film, punching holes in it, or even burning it. So these formats offered many opportunities for artistic exploitation to break the standard industry norms, and brought back a source of exploration that film had not enjoyed since the early days of cinema. In line with these European, and especially French, tendencies, the dichotomy between formal experimentation and political engagement was brought out in initiatives such as the *Acción Super 8* group in Barcelona.

But let us take a closer look at just how far experimental art went in the context of the Franco dictatorship. Probably the most extreme examples of experimental art in Spain were produced by the *Zaj* group, who presented their first performances in 1964. Inspired by John Cage, their fluxus, i.e., their art-actions, which went from clever jokes to agonizing experiences, were provocative, hermetic, and surprising. After one particularly shocking performance in Madrid's *Beatriz Theatre* in 1967, which was widely condemned and ridiculed by the press, there was a governmental order cancelling the following two shows (Sarmiento 16). Prohibitions of this sort were, however, uncommon. The Franco regime tolerated these performances since they had little repercussion outside the minority groups who attended them.

Thus, the culture of experimentation and provocation gradually consolidated during the '60s. The symbolism of rebellion that came out of the various artistic movements, such as computing art, visual and phonetic poetry, or performance art, were typically ambivalent in the sense that they could be understood from a purely aesthetic point of view, yet could inevitably be taken as a political gesture. Manifestos such as "*Palabra y Terror*" (1972) by the poet Ignacio Gómez de Liaño are a good example of this. The manifesto, not differing much from situationist theory, comments on the oppressive nature of language: "No one communicates with anyone—the Great Dictator communicates with himself through each and every person. The Semiosphere is the State Council of the Great Dictator" (Sarmiento 279). Given the social context of 1973, it is highly unlikely that these kinds of expressions were only taken literally.

With all this as a backdrop, something very important happened for experimental art in Spain, which brought all of these forces together. The

Encuentros de Pamplona of 1972 was the most important exhibit of avant-garde and experimental art that had ever taken place during Franco's dictatorship, and probably in all of Spanish history. The exhibit was planned and directed by two artists: the musician Luis de Pablo and the sculptor José Luis Alexanco. They had the financial backing of the Huartes, one of the wealthiest families in Spain at that time. The Huarte family was originally from Pamplona, and they decided to organize the festival as a gift to their hometown. The family had built up its industrial emporium basically under Franco's economic policies of promoting tourism and construction on the Spanish coast. They were also involved with the construction of (among others) the Valle de los Caídos, the most important propagandistic symbol of the dictatorship commemorating Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War.

One member of the family, Juan Huarte, had become an important sponsor of experimental art in the 60s in Spain, supporting sculptors, painters, and musicians (especially from the Basque Country). He financed the Alea group, which set up the most advanced experimental music laboratory in Spain. He also supported a film production company called X-Films, which mainly backed projects by new filmmakers, and produced several experimental films by painters or performing artists related to the patronage of the Huarte family. As we can see, the Huarte family was unique in the Spanish context of that time: they were a well-to-do family that was open-minded, liberal, and interested in supporting the avant-garde.

Their attitude was also reflected in certain facets of their industrial production, such as the meticulous design of the functional, modern furniture they manufactured for the buildings constructed during the years of development in Spain. In the printing business, they founded the Alfaguara publishing company and encouraged literary journals such as *Papeles de Son Armadans*, which was directed by Camilo José Cela and published works by authors living in exile. In architecture, they promoted the cosmopolitan and European-style journal *Nueva Forma*. One of the most important artists sponsored by the Huarte family was the sculptor Jorge Oteiza, who dedicated his award to them at the VI Biennial Exhibition in Sao Paulo in 1957. Nevertheless, the Huarte family would eventually be criticized in the *Encuentros* by those who questioned their patronage as elitist and disconnected from popular, revolutionary culture (Parcerisas 389).

The curators of the *Encuentros* had two main ideas for the exhibit: first, to bring to Pamplona some of the most influential and contemporary works of

experimental art on the international scene; and second, to show them in the streets, in public spaces, or in specially prepared places. Their aim was also to establish Pamplona as a key city on the international circuit of exhibits, following the example of the *V Documenta* in Kassel, or the *XXXVI Biennale* in Venice. If we were to summarize the spirit behind the *Encuentros* in one artistic figure, it would be none other than John Cage. For years, Cage had been in contact with some of the Spanish experimental artists, especially with the Zaj group. His influence, in combination with many other movements such as fluxus, conceptualism, expanded art, serial and electroacoustic music, computing art, *arte povera*, actionism, countercinema, and radical expressions of political art, was decisive in the planning of the *Encuentros*.

In a way, the *Encuentros* were a melting pot of movements and trends, but the basic assumption for the selection of the artwork was guided by three main ideas: first, intermediality—the connection of different media and artistic fields; second, the preeminence of action and performing arts; and third, presence in public space, basically the streets of Pamplona. Many of the most extreme modern artists who practiced the dematerialization of art (presented the following year in the well-known book by Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*) were present in Pamplona to bring Spanish art up to date, and above all, to extend its influence to the street, to the surprise of the provincial townsfolk who were entirely unaccustomed to this kind of event. Just to mention a few, besides Cage and the Spanish artists, who went to Pamplona during that week in June 1972, there were Merce Cunningham, David Tudor, Steve Reich, Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, Laura Dean, Willoughby Sharp, Dennis Oppenheim, Martial Raysse, and Helio Oiticica. Conventional paintings or sculptures were generally not admitted in the exhibit.

The idea of intermediality was particularly important with regard to the video art for the exhibit. The musician Mauricio Kagel, for instance, successfully presented his film *Ludwig Van*, made in collaboration with Joseph Beuys and other German conceptual artists. Specifically for the occasion, Willoughby Sharp prepared his anthology *This is Your Roof*, which included works by video artists such as Vito Acconci, Gordon Matta-Clark, Judith Bernstein, Antoni Muntadas, Alice Aycock, and Dennis Oppenheim. In addition to his piece for Sharp, Oppenheim also presented several of his video performances including versions of *Gingerbread Man* and *Nail Sharpening*.

Now that we have a general overview of how the *Encuentros* was produced

and the main concepts behind it, the question is: What was the role of cinema? Let me quote what the curators themselves said in the original catalogue of 1972:

It is symptomatic that cinema, a new art, is the one most constrained by convention. The reason for that is obvious: cinema has become the fittest weapon for those who try to direct culture. And directing means controlling the imagination, privileging technical efficacy. We can compare, for example, the evolution of the plastic arts and music of the last fifty years with that of cinema and it can be said that, while the plastic arts and music have undergone shifts in the very substance of the works themselves, cinema has not overcome the use of its technical means.

Naturally, this situation has not been accepted all over the world: there is another cinema. Cinema made by artists, musicians, non-professionals, amateurs, etc. And this kind of cinema has its precedents, some of which go back to the end of the last century, to its birth. This is the cinema that will be seen in the *Encuentros*. (de Pablo and Alexanco)

Thus, the *Encuentros* covered a wide historical and stylistic spectrum of cinema. In fact, it spanned from the origins of film up to the time of the exhibit. As for early cinema, the selection included screenings of works by Georges Méliès and Segundo de Chomón. Henri Langlois sent a selection of historical avant-garde films from the Cinemathèque Française, including authors such as Man Ray, Fernand Léger, Dziga Vertov, and Oskar Fischinger; most importantly, he also sent a copy of Dalí and Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929). Recall that, at the time, *Un chien andalou* was only accessible in Spain through semiclandestine circuits of distribution, where it was met by enthusiastic audiences. When it was first shown, the police barged into the locale for unclear reasons ("Comienza el cine"). The audience demanded the film be shown again, shouting out Buñuel's name; however, the *Encuentros* organizers thought it best to repeat the series of Méliès's films instead ("En el último día").

As we know, establishing a connection between early film and historical avant-garde was very common at that time. The curators were highly influenced by Jean Mitry's ideas on experimental film in his *Histoire du cinema experimental*, first published in Italy in 1971. In the selection of films for the *Encuentros*, the curators incorporated two main ideas from Mitry. The first was that almost any film prior to 1920 could be considered experimental,

since the expressive resources of cinema were still being explored. On the other hand, there was, of course, the idea of “pure” cinema, which took film as a genuine form of expression, distinct from narrative or theater (Mitry 26–27). These films dealt with creating visual shapes and temporal rhythms, and were connected with experimentation going on in music and painting.

Along with Mitry’s history of experimental film, there was another book that influenced the *Encuentros*. This was Noël Burch’s *Praxis du cinéma*, translated from French into Spanish in 1970, the year after it came out in France. Burch’s ideas opened a political and aesthetic debate that perfectly keyed into the context of the exhibit. On the one hand, it implicitly legitimized the connection between early cinema and experimental film as alternatives to the dominant Hollywood cinema. On the other, it recognized new strategies for cinematographic language that were being used in experimental music, such as the concept of the aleatory. In fact, the seventh chapter of the book, “Functions of the Aleatory,” circulated widely in the *Encuentros* in the form of a photocopied magazine.

Although a key concept of the exhibit was the use of artistic experimentation to oppose the dictatorship, the situation was actually a bit more complicated than this simple dichotomy. The strongest political organization against the dictatorship at that time in Spain, the Communist Party, was opposed to the *Encuentros* because they branded those artists as elitist. They thought that this was a typical propagandistic tactic of the Franco regime to use sophisticated cultural productions to give the impression abroad that they were permissive and flexible. And as we saw, the *Encuentros* were sponsored by a family that had close connections with the Franco regime.

Filmmakers like Pere Portabella, who was involved with the Communist Party of Catalonia, decided not to take part in the *Encuentros*, and advised other filmmakers and artists to follow suit. At that time, he had been producing a series of manifestos, in the context of the Aixelà School of Barcelona, where he pushed for the construction of a new kind of cinema that would facilitate the emancipation of the lower classes and be useful for the revolution. This mentality was fundamental for the creation of makeshift spaces where films could be produced and exhibited.

And there were also the Basque Nationalists. Several Basque painters who exhibited their rather conventional academic paintings at the same time the *Encuentros* was taking place made it clear that they were opposed to the avant-garde works, which they considered elitist, and which disregarded the cultural context of a city they considered to be Basque (Parcerisas 389).

The Basque terrorist group ETA was against the exhibit as well, and set off a bomb in Pamplona on the day the *Encuentros* began. In spite of these political pressures, a good number of the most important Spanish filmmakers did decide to participate.

During the *Encuentros*, governmental authorities kept a discreet eye on the event, and the organizers themselves squelched any spontaneously formed group events. But in spite of these controls, the *Encuentros* enjoyed an ambience of extraordinary creative liberty. A good example of the permissiveness at the *Encuentros* can be seen in a piece by the Japanese artist Shusaku Arakawa who, incidentally, also presented his film *For Example* in Pamplona. Arakawa produced a leaflet that was freely distributed among those attending the *Encuentros*; it was an experimental game, and at the same time had an encrypted political message. Few readers would fail to recognize the meaning in the leaflet he distributed among the people attending the *Encuentros* or just walking along the streets of Pamplona:

**RAFONC SHOULD BE OPISCAS
ALSO OPISCAS SHOULD BE RAFONC**

The hidden message behind the anagrams: FRANCO SHOULD BE PICASSO / ALSO PICASSO SHOULD BE FRANCO would be immediately deciphered even by the dullest policeman of the regime, and reveals the calculated political ambiguity, and the vague sense of irony, that permeated the *Encuentros*.

Within this multimedia context, focusing on the films of the *Encuentros* can clarify why, at the beginning of the tumultuous 70s, experimental art was inevitably interpreted in a political sense by audiences. As we saw above, going to see certain kinds of films at film clubs and other alternative places was considered an act of rebellion. For these spectators, going to movies just for fun and diversion was to fall victim to what big film industry and capitalist ideology were aiming for. It was necessary to view films from an analytical, critical stance (often backed up by in-depth critiques found in the popular film journals of the time). The hidden codes and obscure references required conscious analysis to decipher the political agenda behind the formalist experimentation.

The most controversial, and in a way the most successful, of the Spanish filmmakers was Javier Aguirre. He was the only experimental filmmaker there who was also working professionally in the film industry. In the 70s

and 80s he directed popular comedies and Disney-style musical films for children. What he usually did was, after making a purely commercial film, he would ask the producers and technicians to give him the extra material that was going to be discarded and dedicate his weekends to making counter-cinema films at his workshop at home, with the assistance of experimental artists, musicians, writers, and occasionally some of the technicians who were working for him on the mainstream productions. Aguirre was highly influenced by serialism in music and acoustic and visual poetry, Op-art, films on perception (such as flicker film), debates on structuralism, or pieces by filmmakers Pierre Hébert and Peter Kubelka (Aguirre, *Anti-cine* 45). He was particularly interested in overcoming the boundaries of sensorial experience. Consequently, he wanted to shock the spectator's perception through what he called "objective aggression." Aguirre writes about the extreme experience of watching his films:

According to some viewers, it is like tripping on LSD. Aggression, which can be seen in aesthetic terms, is objective and can be differentiated from the aggression that is subjectively provoked in Buñuel's films. This line of pure visual violence—*Optic impulses in geometric progression*—formalizes the entropy of the previous film *Entropic Fluctuations*, rationalizing it and offering a quasi-scientific analysis of space and time as measurable material, culminating with subliminal images that are difficult to watch. (Aguirre, "Una experiencia personal" 27)

Aguirre's work contains echoes of writers and thinkers of that time, from the entropic visions of Thomas Pynchon to the synesthetic experiences of Gene Youngblood. But in this case, his aim was also tied to political activism, challenging stagnant Spanish society through this general concept of aggression. Aguirre's project *Anti-cine* consisted of eight films that progressively challenged perception, and the film medium itself, in order to get a rise out of the spectator. Like other filmmakers of the time, he would perforate or distort the film as part of his violent attack against the medium. He was proven successful in the *Encuentros*, as the audience did react violently to his film.

According to Aguirre, the film "situates the idea of revolution as the ultimate goal of the artist, which is not an obstacle—rather the contrary—for the artist to feel completely identified with the political content on which he bases his aesthetic construction" (*Anti-cine* 50). Aguirre considers this film a

“synthesis” of all his experimental projects and, in contrast to the rest of his work, he integrates images of Che Guevara, the Holocaust, and the Vietnam War with phonetic poetry, electroacoustic music, and shocking visual effects. However, the film could not be shown in the *Encuentros*. It was the only film by Aguirre that was censored because of its political content. Aguirre also claimed there was a political orientation to his experimentation with human perception in the line of op-art. In 1971, he stated in *Triunfo*:

I think that real avant-garde . . . is political . . . The thing is, it is very easy to confuse what is derogatorily called formalism with real formalism, which is creation, investigation, revolution . . . That’s the kind of cinema I like to make, films that break away from everything films were thought of before, films that the bourgeoisie doesn’t like and will never like. (Lara and Galán 37)

The other significant Spanish experimental films in the *Encuentros* were the purely formalist productions, some of which were related to X-films. Painter José Antonio Sistiaga focused on the idea of chromatic contrast and progression, combined with a perception of rhythm, in his “abstract” film *Ere erera baleibu icik subua aruaren*. Following the example of Len Lye in the 1930s, and also with the more contemporary influence of Norman McLaren, he painted directly on the surface of the film to add a material dimension to his work. In fact, his work was open to the ambiguity of being thought of not only as a film, but also as a painting that measured 35mm high and over 2000 meters long (Bouhours 19).

Another painter of the group, Rafael Ruiz Balerdi, presented his “Homenaje a Tarzán” (*An Homage to Tarzan, or the Unconscious Hunter*), an animated film that took an old Tarzan movie and added a new and sophisticated soundtrack. He also aimed to explore the dynamics of pure shapes in the filmic medium. Other artists were more in the line of *lettrisme* or performance. Isidoro Valcárcel Medina presented one of the most controversial proposals. He made a film version of the novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet *La Jalousie* (1957); i.e., he made a *literal film version* of the book, filming it page by page, sometimes paragraph by paragraph or line by line, correlating rhythm and editing in relation to the graphic conception of each shot and its duration.

Most of these filmmakers were purely formalist or conceptualist. However, they found themselves submersed in a world of nonstop political debate, with the added tension, on the one hand, of the organizers, who were afraid

the police would intervene, and those who were adamant about understanding all the art as politically charged. The tension between the artists and how their works were being understood is reflected in the observations of a chronicler of the event, commenting on one of the meetings that took place:

An impromptu discussion of art started up spontaneously . . . where some three hundred people sat on the floor in a large circle . . . and with just a cardboard megaphone, they debated the definition of art, the common understanding of expressive forms, manipulation by the dominant ideology, counter-culture . . . , and a series of social-ethical questions that those attending wanted to discuss long and hard. (Lara 8)

Perhaps with the intention of satirizing this tendency towards politicizing everything, the curators of the *Encuentros* had planned to use the provocative works of Catalan underground filmmaker Antoni Padrós. The catalogue dedicated an entire section exclusively to him. Padrós had started out as a pop painter, but got involved in making films that were inspired by the theories of situationist authors, especially by Raoul Vaneigem (Cuesta 197). Padrós would turn everyday situations into surrealist and shocking scenes, with a constant flow of references to camp culture, revolutionary iconography, sexually explicit moments, current events and Brechtian distancing effects. But Padrós's main goal was to mock the mythologies that were so present in the politically oriented experimental filmmakers of the time and, of course, in the audience. There was great anticipation for Padrós's work in Pamplona but, as it turned out, his films were the only ones that were totally censored by the authorities. Surprisingly, the most skeptical films against the revolutionary mantras of the time were also considered too dangerous.

In fact, Padrós is a particularly important figure because he marks the boundary between the spirit of politically radical experimental film and later skepticism of that attitude. The context of challenging and questioning politics would gradually disappear after Franco's death, and almost immediately thereafter a distinct attitude could be noted in the new filmmakers of the independent and marginal circuits. Their films were no longer dominated by complexes of political dogmatism or a forced experimental purism. Many of these new films, mostly done in 8mm, focused on presenting a pleasant rendition of life experiences more than dealing with civic duty or the transcendental nature of art. The meticulous exploration of the film medium itself was no longer an issue. Nor was it imperative to protest against an oppressive

society. In sum, it was no longer believed that film could help change the world. That is why filmmakers were more unconvinced, skeptical, anarchic, and distanced from the grand stories of transformation that had been in vogue until the beginning of the 70s.

The dematerialization of art was not only present in conceptualism, inter-media, or other types of art. It was also related, especially in Spain during the transition to democracy that would start three years hence, to the growing industry of mass culture of the 70s, where social discontent and protests could be more efficiently articulated. The younger generation of the *Movida* (contemporaneous with Pedro Almodóvar) find alternative spaces for articulating their protests against the status quo, for example in comics, popular magazines or punk music, instead of using sophisticated and elitist works of conceptual art. Indeed, the cultural industry was gradually replacing conceptualism as a way to challenge the status quo, and therefore the *Encuentros* can be considered the last act of experimental art in Spain—or as some might say, “the party was over” (Parcerisas 40; Diaz Cuyás 34). In fact, their attitude toward the “dominant modes of representation” was not one of total rejection, but rather parody, excess and pastiche, stretching them until they turned into caricaturesque formulas. These later films unselfconsciously appropriated those cultural and cinematic references that the purists of the preceding decade would have condemned: rock music, comics, fanzines, cult movie fetishism—all these elements easily and naturally permeated their films. Even Bible stories could be brought in, the way Pedro Almodóvar did in *Salomé* (1978), one of his first shorts in super 8: fusing the sacrifice of Isaac with the story of Salomé, the parody culminates in a dance that determines whether Abraham will have to sacrifice his son or not. In spite of Salomé’s ungraceful dance to the rhythm of a two-step, she still arouses Abraham’s desire. In sum, Spanish cinema moved from a reflection on form and medium (the experimentalists) and political militancy toward a new kind of cinema that no longer held such a critical stance. This new tendency had a “free and easy” feeling to it.

The interest in individual experience, with its skepticism of lofty artistic or social transformation and grand utopias, would eventually give way to postmodernism. Antoni Padrós, who had been invited to the *Encuentros* (although for some reason his films were not shown at the event)³ marks this

3. Nor were the reasons clarified after a personal interview that I had with the filmmaker at his home in Terrassa.

turning point. His film *Shirley Temple Story* (1978), which lasts nearly four hours, is the extreme culmination and summary of this tendency. It was made six years after the *Encuentros* and Padrós defined his excessive and exuberant film as a “terrorist musical.” He made caricatures of Hollywood figures to cast a shadow of sarcasm over icons of the dictatorship as well as those who opposed it. The idea of a musical gone mad, starring a perverse Shirley Temple and a cluster of outrageous characters, made it possible to combine caricature with a fetishistic, “camp” vision of the past. In using personal movie icons, Padrós was diametrically opposed to any kind of commentary on history (basically on Franco and the Civil War) or critical stance regarding the difficult transition to democracy that Spain was then undergoing. The *mise-en-scène* in *Shirley Temple Story* creates a distancing effect that is not meant to make the spectator think critically. Rather, the spectator is made complicit in a comic, mocking attitude as taboos are brought to the surface.

All of these contradictions emerge in the years shortly preceding the transition to democracy and find their culmination in experimental films and radical politics, but the *Encuentros* at Pamplona really marked the beginning of the end. The underground filmmakers that followed began what some have called an attitude of disillusionment, but it can also be taken as jaded, frivolous, and hedonistic. The greatest dangers for this new generation were the devastating effects of heroin or AIDS. From this moment on, experimental film lost its prominent place in the debate and was progressively relegated to where we find it today: in museums.

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