

Experimental Conversations | Issue 4 | Cwwo p422:

Issue 2: Autumn 2008: Spanish Avant-Garde Film

EXPERIMENTAL FEATURES IN ARREBATO

Alberte Pagán / Esperanza Collado

Images possessed me, devoured me... and I was happy in my surrender. Cinema and I were planning something special, based on reciprocal trust... although it was necessary to reach the edge of the abyss to understand what was happening... it was a matter of letting oneself go with the cinematic flow. -Pedro P. in *Arrebato*.

During the late '70s and early '80s, a time of socio-political transition in Spain, a number of filmmakers who had been producing independent and experimental cinema managed to show their films in commercial venues. Among those works, Iván Zulueta's 1979 film *Arrebato* is notable for its unclassifiable nature. Considered a 'cult film', *Arrebato* is unequivocally a product of its time: while not exactly marginal, its singularity resides in the mode in which the avant-garde discourse that dominates a considerable part of its length is integrated within a broader genre, fantastic cinema.

Perhaps the experimental features in *Arrebato* have been exaggerated, and even though Zulueta's previous films were highly avant-gardist -*Leo es Pardo* (1976), *Babia* (1975), *A Mal Gam A* (1976)- the author affirmed he "had no intention of making avant-garde cinema whatsoever"; he wanted to make a commercial film to reach a broad audience. Nonetheless, the director's previous experimentation with the medium and his distinctive style are reflected in *Arrebato*'s central preoccupation with formal cinematic concerns such as the interval between frames, its implications in the pauses and rhythms generated within the visual discourse, and a type of vision through the other that ultimately falls through the interstices of cinema.

The avant-garde elements featured in *Arrebato* are integrated within a non-linear, complex and elaborated narrative structure that ignores traditional canons, contrasting radically with the Spanish cinema scene in the late '70s (1). Those avant-garde elements are embodied in one of the film's main characters, Pedro P. (Will More, a non-professional actor who also appears in Pedro Almodóvar's *Dark Habits* [*Entre Tinieblas* 1983]), whose name is a direct reference to Peter Pan. Pedro P. acts as a conducting thread in the narration of the film and represents the alter ego of José Sirgado (Eusebio Poncela) and, ultimately, Iván Zulueta himself. José Sirgado and Pedro P. function as two sides of the same entity, as they are both filmmakers who fulfill Zulueta's own interests in cinema: Sirgado makes B-series vampire movies, Pedro P. is an experimental filmmaker whose main aspiration is to find 'the precise rhythm'. In this sense, *Arrebato* realizes one of Zulueta's most ambitious aims: the combining of his love for horror movies and his practice in experimental filmmaking.

It would be plausible, therefore, to speak of an 'applied' or 'put into practice' experimentalism in *Arrebato*, which, in non-commercial or non-promotional circuits, would make of this film an avant-garde work. For this reason, the intention of this essay is to examine some of the sediments of avant-garde cinema history detectable in Zulueta's practice, especially in *Arrebato*. However,

we have first included a brief synopsis of the film, followed by a series of sections in which we note a diversity of relational channels or concepts that should be understood in terms of interactions and influences between avant-garde cinema history, Zulueta's oeuvre in general, and *Arrebato* in particular.

Synopsis

José Sirgado has spent a whole day with his editor, finishing his second film, a B-series vampire movie, and is visibly displeased, perhaps because "his relationship with cinema has nothing to do with what he had imagined it would be" (Zulueta, synopsis of the film, 1979). When the editor reproaches Sirgado's attitude, he answers "in fact, I don't like cinema; cinema likes me". Later in the evening, he drives home. The action takes place in Madrid, in the summer. The porter at Sirgado's apartment building tells him his unwelcome ex-girlfriend Ana (Cecilia Roth) is in his apartment. Next, he gives Sirgado a parcel mailed from a mysterious sender, P.P., containing a key, a roll of Super 8mm film, and an audiocassette. Tormented by the personal and creative crisis that adds to his inability to finally break with Ana, he decides to take heroin after a vain suicide attempt. Next, he plays the audiocassette he has received. It's of Pedro's voice, which will recur throughout the rest of the film, bringing back memories of the first time both filmmakers met. From this point on, past and present interweave. Manifestly, Pedro's obsession with the *pause* has grown noticeably since the last time they met, especially after Sirgado sent him an interval-timer, a mechanism with which he can control time lapse or rate of recording while filming. Pedro's concept of the *pause*, which he presents as an Achilles heel, is ambiguous, but there are at least two possible explanations of it: the vanishing point and key to reach the correct rhythm in cinema; or the metalinguistic distance between the absent and present captured material in film, which transforms into cadence within the core of montage. Pedro has become addicted to filmmaking, eventually filming nothing other than himself. The voice on the cassette recording indicates that the key belongs to Pedro's apartment and that Sirgado must collect Pedro's last processed roll of film from the chemist in order to discover the ultimate outcome of his cinematic experiments. When Sirgado arrives, he finds a strange ritual in which a projected image intervenes in surprising ways, ultimately bringing him over into 'the other side of the mirror'.

From Expressionism to Psychodrama

Expressionist German cinema, especially *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), and the Surrealist film *Un Chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929), influenced much of Zulueta's work. Whilst *Nosferatu* died under the sunlight, disappearing through a juxtaposition of frames, in *A Mal Gam A* the inverse process occurs: the protagonist materializes from nothing and stabs himself -his twisted shadow, resembling *Nosferatu's*, appears before a window. Turning death into suicide, Zulueta goes back three decades to create a combination of expressionism and psychodrama in the same fashion as Maya Deren's films, which Stan Brakhage and Kenneth Anger continued. In *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), Brakhage shows the protagonist's final suicide through his shadow. Camera and human vision had become one entity during the film: the protagonist can only perceive himself through his projected shadow, a procedure Zulueta imitates in *A Mal Gam A*.

If psychodrama implies a mystic process of self-awareness in which the boundaries between dreams and wakefulness dissolve, we can find a diversity of psychodramatic features in Zulueta's work in general, in which narcissism, identity, and self-filming play a significant role. An example is the sequence of *Arrebato* in which José, seated somnolently in his armchair, is seen waking up directly following a concatenation of images summarizing Pedro's global journeys to the accompaniment of a hypnotic musical drone from a turntable. The oneiric images of Pedro's travels, shot in the style of his other 8mm films, are outside the narration of the film: José doesn't set up the projector to watch them, as he does with the rest of Pedro's films. They simply appear without any narrative justification, forcing us to symbolically interpret them. Pedro's narration

seems to telepathically enter José's hypnotized mind without any mechanical intervention, foretelling the final fusion of both characters.

Although there are many significant direct references to *Nosferatu* in previous films by Zulueta, none of them reflects the interactions between vampiric catharsis and the sublimation of cinema with the thoroughness and complexity of *Arrebato*. The film's densely self-reflective nature when dealing with ideas intrinsic to the medium and its practice leads to an interzone in which cinema overcomes death and life. '*Arrebato*' means exultation, ecstasy, rapture -exactly what Pedro P. experiences while watching his own films; the verb related to the noun '*arrebato*', '*arrebatar*', implies the action of snatching -which also acquires significance in the peculiar relationship between Pedro/Sirgado and cinema, and their final fusion. The supernaturally acquired anthropomorphism of Pedro's Super8 camera -a camera capable of filming by itself- does not simply refer to a demoniac entity: the vampiric performance of the camera, which metaphorically sucks Pedro's blood (a phenomenon reflected in the increasing number of red frames mysteriously appearing in his late films), turns death into the reference proper of representation in *Arrebato*. Nevertheless, death should not be understood as opposite to life in this context. The characters do not die; they are transferred into a cinematic dimension, the other side of the mirror that brings them closer to cinema.

Addiction to drugs, specifically to heroin, plays a parallel role in the film: it takes the characters' lives into a different arena. Pedro, in contrast to Ana and José, only takes the 'right amount' of cocaine in order to have access to 'the right rhythm' in which the so-called pause plays a decisive part since it negates the passing of time. The unconscious -or nearly unconscious- states of dreaming, sleeping, the evocation of memories, and being high on heroin are reiterative and of a special significance in *Arrebato*. When Pedro and José experience such states the narrative discourse breaks and formal experimentalism emerges. In the same way, Pedro's camera performs its vampiric activities when Pedro sleeps. The relationships between cinema, imagination, dreams, and the unconscious have been widely explored in avant-garde cinema, which brings us back to *Un Chien andalou*. There is a direct reference to Buñuel's film when Pedro and his friend Gloria - whose androgynous voice is dubbed by Almodóvar- fight in his apartment. Pedro throws an object at her and the next shot -a man lying on the sidewalk who has been robbed- refers to *Un Chien andalou*.

The Manipulation of Time

Filming with a timer device is a distinguishing feature of Zulueta's cinema as a whole. In *Arrebato*, it becomes the main technique used in Pedro's cinematographic work, and a direct emanation of his continuous search for the correct pulse between images. Filming with a timer during long periods allows a precise comprehension of procedural phenomena (the movement of clouds, a plant growth, rising or falling tide, etc.), of great use for science and lyrical cinema.

Shots of clouds, intercut with images of an empty sky or surrounded by buildings and fleeting shadows, abound in Zulueta's *Aquarium* (1975), *Leo es Pardo*, and *Arrebato*. In fact, when Pedro receives the time-interval device he immediately sets his camera on a tripod pointing directly to the sky. Avant-garde filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov (*The Man with the Movie Camera*, 1929) and José Val del Omar (*Aguaespejo Granadino*, 1955), who undoubtedly influenced Zulueta, had already made use of such techniques.

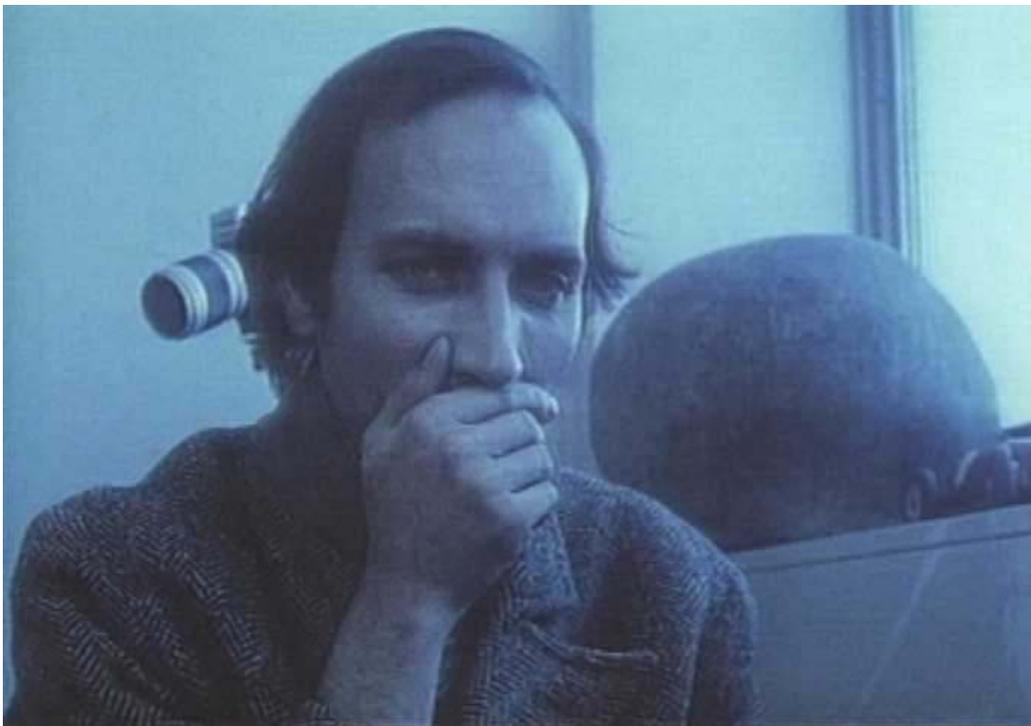
Arrebato contains two sequences in which rapid montage appears as a pronounced avant-garde cut -in, seemingly occurring completely outside the narrative context of the film. An example of this is the acceleration of images in a programme on a TV in Pedro's house. A similar acceleration of images is achieved with the technique of assembling different rapidly edited shots with almost identical frames. Robert Breer's *REcreation* (1957) made a deep exploration of this method, although, owing to an unbalanced concatenation of images, the result is much more abstract in Pedro's films.

Pedro, like Zulueta, utilizes the 'flicker' technique in most of his films, as well as its counterpoint, slow motion, which lends his works a very poetical nature. The final section of Marie Menken's *Notebook* (1963), *Etcetcetcet*, includes a vertiginous circular shot of vehicles which Pedro P. imitates in order to depict his travel from Segovia to Madrid. Owing to its long duration, this sequence constitutes another attempt to break the film's narrative by displaying a certain independence from it, although as soon as Pedro's voice is back, the experimental discourse is halted.

Lyrical film

What once was called the 'film poem', 'pure film' or 'impressionist cinema', a cinema engaged in capturing non-narrative lyrical impressions of reality, and which reemerged decades later as 'lyrical film', is also present in the aesthetics of *Arrebato*, specifically in the 8mm rolls filmed by Pedro. The continuous movement of clouds and the surface of water are opened to aesthetic contemplation, as they were in films such as *Regen* (Joris Ivens, 1929) or the more abstract *H2O* (Ralph Steiner, 1929).

A reference to pointillism, which originated in 1920s impressionist cinema and was continued by Len Lye in his hand-scratched films (*Free Radicals*, 1958), could be highlighted too when we look at Zulueta's sublimation of tingling TV monitors, always present in his films. In *Arrebato*, that television presence only lasts about four seconds: TV static is on one occasion inserted without any apparent justification between a shot of José and a movie poster; in another, it functions as a background against which the ghostly presence of Ana is superimposed. Television pointillism has been explored by Aldo Tambellini's *Black TV* (1968) and, in a similar fashion, although exploiting the materialist nature of celluloid grain, by Ken Jacobs in *Tom Tom the Pipers Son* (1971). In both works, a referential pre-existing image is transformed by means of extreme close-ups of the screen, which ultimately becomes abstract. Zulueta followed such a procedure in *Te Veo* (1973).



Abstraction through detail

In *Complementos* (1976) Zulueta illustrates the entire process of a heroin shot, which reappears in *Arrebato* with a significant difference: focusing in on a sole detail, the needle absorbing the substance from a spoon, the filmmaker seems more reticent about experimenting formally,

although the sequence shows an excellent rhythmic construction of the ritual. In the feature film, the camera remains steady in a close-up while the syringe goes in.

A Mal Gam A abounds in detail shots of turntables and light reflected on their surfaces, which provides the film with a formal and kinetic nature. In *Arrebato*, in the context of the experimental work of Will More's character, Zulueta again shows the grooves of a vinyl record in an interesting formalist play in which the flow of images from Pedro P.'s journeys around the world and its accompanying music cease and restart intermittently. The interruption of such hypnotic fluidity, depicted by shots of a stylus going up and down the vinyl groove alternated with black frames, performs a double ellipsis: the passing of time during Pedro's journeys while José seems to be immersed in a trance and the spatial displacement in which, gradually, we are brought back into the narrative present. This entire sequence exemplifies the continuous alternation of past -the remembered moments evoked by Pedro's voice from the cassette player- and the present in which José, despite the interruptions of Ana, remains attentive to Pedro's recordings.

Returning to the sequence early in the film focused on José and Ana's relationship, there is an interesting transition between the shot of her face appearing superimposed over TV static and the couple making love. The transition consists of a few shots of Ana's mouth and face during the sexual act. The image here is grainy, undefined and poorly illuminated. It is accelerated, slowed down, thrown out of focus and contrasted with the following sequence, in which the couple appears lying in bed in sharp 35mm clarity. Such a poetical flourish, which could be understood as José's memory, makes use of lyrical cinema techniques similar to those in such films as Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967), and Stephen Dwoskin's *Dirty* (1971). The lower part of a blurred male face appears among the footage Pedro sent to José, as well as images of an erection in close-up taken directly from *Fuses*. Appropriation is, in fact, a technique Zulueta frequently makes use of in his work in general, most notably in *Kinkón* (1971), *Masaje* (1972) and *Frank Stein* (1972), in which -following the methodology employed by Bruce Conner in *A Movie* (1958)- the Spanish director combines accelerated footage taken directly from television programmes with pre-existing images or found-footage.

Materialism

Materialist film advocates the inclusion of the cinema apparatus in the film: form and structural elements intrinsic to filmmaking become the content of the work, eliminating the construction of fiction found outside the very material properties of the work. Perhaps Zulueta's ambitions are very different from those of structural/materialist film, although a work like *Arrebato*, which focuses on filmmaking itself and persistently emphasizes the presence of cameras, splicers, celluloid, and projectors, makes possible a coherent interpretation in terms of the material or physical presence of film. Nonetheless, this presence will never appear completely independent of the narrative line that dominates *Arrebato*, although Zulueta's tendency to emphasise the elements mentioned with numerous close ups provides a significantly materialist approach to the medium that goes beyond the purely diegetic context of the film. In comparing the activity of the camera in *The Man with the Movie Camera* -purely formal and alien to human movement- with that of Pedro's Super8 camera in *Arrebato*, we find that the narrative justification, the camera's personification as a vampire, is an impediment to the experimental progress of the film. In fact, the persistent presence of the material of film contrasts greatly with the negation of its physical reference, as Zulueta proffers cinematic properties that transcend the limitations of materiality.

Conversely, it would be plausible to track the influence of a materialist film classic such as *Line Describing a Cone* (Anthony McCall, 1973) to the sequence in which Ana mimics Betty Boop in front of the light cone coming from the projector. The mechanical apparatus (form) places itself as the content; the beam of light acquires presence, shaping solid shadows as with McCall's film-sculpture or Malcolm LeGrice's film-performance *Horror Film* (1971). In those cases, in which the screen is illuminated only with light coming from the projector, there are references to *Blanco*

sobre Blanco (Antonio Artero, 1970), *Zen for Film* (Nam June Paik, 1964), and *White Field Duration* (Le Grice, 1973) -the first of these using no celluloid whatsoever.

We have already mentioned the use of red frames in *Arrebato*. Their appearance at first seems subliminal, but increases progressively every time there is new footage shot. At first, Pedro P. discovers there is a red frame superimposed on his footage and, therefore, on his recorded experiences, every ten seconds. After shooting several rolls Pedro thinks carefully: there are twenty frames left; ten frames appear in red coloration each shooting session, consequently, "I have two times, two dreams, two doses, two raptures, two whatever they are, but I have two left". An interpretation of such a phenomenon outside the narrative context of the film (i.e. cinema acquiring vampiric qualities), refers directly to flicker film and its metrical and mathematical approach of cinema: "velocities added up, subtracted, multiplied..." says Pedro P. The red frame in *Arrebato* could be loosely related to the appearance of red frames in Paul Sharits' *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*, (1968), and the progressive imposition of red coloration in Peter Kubelka's *Schwechater* (1958). Its counterpoint would be Pedro's face captured still on the screen: the last roll of film is entirely covered in red frames, with the exception of one frame in which Pedro's portrait appears. Moreover, when Sirgado projects that very frame, the image miraculously moves: Pedro gestures Sirgado to his (Pedro's) bed in order to let himself be filmed by the camera. The triangular exchange of reciprocal looks between Pedro (from the screen), the camera, and José - who, seeing the emerging image of his own face confounded with Pedro's on the screen, decides to bandage up his eyes as if he could not stand the sight of his surrender to cinema-, ends up in a beautiful, dramatic, and, above all, cinematic conjunction of the 'three' characters preceded by the sound of a machine gun replacing that of the camera's clicking shutter.

Te Veo (1973) ends with the signature '*By Zulueta*', the letters scratched into the celluloid frame by frame by the filmmaker as a materialist manifesto, as Len Lye and Stan Brakhage had done before in their films. Brakhage made his *Chinese Series* (2003) by scratching celluloid moistened by his own saliva with his fingernails, while lying in bed a few days before dying of cancer. Like the process by which the characters become mummified within the frame in *Arrebato*, this method perhaps symbolizes a passion for cinema so personal and extreme that it can only result in the intention of a filmmaker to imprint his signature on a work that transcends the boundaries between life and cinema, cinema and death.

In short, the experimental features in *Arrebato* emerge within its narrative content. On the one hand, a consideration of the film as "fantastic" or fictional reveals a series of narrative means that resemble the practice of avant-garde filmmaking. Although pushing it to its limits, these features do not break the narrative continuity and remain subordinated to the storyline. On the other hand, the protagonists' prime occupation, filmmaking, allows an inclusion of cameras, celluloid, projectors and splicers that does not fall outside the referential quality of the image-text. Rather than an approach to structural-materialist film, such elements function as a reinforcement of modernist realism, which in *Arrebato* falls into the practice of "cinema within cinema".

The visual excesses of *Arrebato* are a product of Zulueta's own cinematographic background, first, as an underground cinema spectator during his time living in New York in the early 60s and, subsequently, as the creator of a series of experimental films influenced by this experience. The dramatic content of the film embraces the inclusion of avant-garde features, since its fantastic or vampire movie quality adopts formal experimentation naturally. Such is the case when people appear and disappear without apparent narrative justification, a still frame projected on the wall inexplicably acquires motion, a light bulb switches off when Pedro sneezes, and a recorded voice comments on events happening in the present. Rather than appealing to the so-called 'suspension of disbelief', such phenomena are organically adopted into the narrative discourse in an indeterminateness that provides a great creative richness to the film. On a few occasions, such images may fall outside the limitations of the storyline, acquiring an autonomous presence, most

notably in the sequence in which Pedro P. shows José and Ana his journeys on a Super8 projector before announcing:

"Tomorrow I'll leave this place, new spaces wait for me, other people, famous places which nobody knows, thousands of hidden rhythms that I will discover. The mirror will open its doors and we will see the... the... (sneeze).. the... the other! Uh.... so... stay still! Stay still, everybody! Stay still, world, because I'm coming!".



Alberte Pagán / Esperanza Collado

Alberte Pagán writes and makes films. His publications on cinema include Introdução aos Clássicos do Cinema Experimental; Imaxes do sonho en Liberdade: o Cinema de Eugenio Grandell, and La Mirada Impasíbel. As Películas de Andy Warhol. Primeira Parte. *His films have been presented at various festivals including the Gijón International Film Festival and Punto de Vista in Pamplona (Spain). He has also written* A Voz de Trevón. Unha Aproximación a Finnagan's Wake, *an essay on James Joyce's novel.*

Esperanza Collado is an artist, curator, and writer based in Dublin. She has recently finished a PhD on dematerialized processes of exhibition cinema. She lectures on Visual Culture and Politics of Representation in Dublin Business School college. Previous curation includes Márgenes: Experimento y Praxis (*The National Gallery of Ireland, thisisnotashop gallery, 2008*), Structural/Materialist Film (*Irish Film Institute and Filmbase for the Darklight Symposium, 2007*), and Zero Degree: The New Image of Thought (*thisisnotashop, 2007*). *She is a co-founder of and frequent programmer with the Experimental Film Club in Dublin. Her works have been shown at* Anthology Film Archives (*New York, 2006*), Micromuseum (*New York, 2006*), *thisisnotashop* (*Dublin, 2008*), *Annecy Film Festival (France, 2008)*, *Loop Video-Art (Barcelona, 2007)*, and *Directors Lounge (Berlin, 2007)*.

issue date: 08/Oct/08

(1) The unstable economic conditions following Franco's death threw radical filmmakers (such as those involved in the 'Official Cinema School', where José Luis Borau lectured Zulueta) into a crisis which resulted in profitability being put before quality.