

Pere Portabella. Pondering Complexity Through Cinema

In conversation with Marcelo Expósito

Catalogue of the exhibition *Experiments with Truth*, curated/edited by Mark Nash for The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, 2005.

Filmmaker Pere Portabella's work as a director, producer, and agitator has been influencing Spanish cinema since the late 1950s. Portabella produced Carlos Saura's first feature-length film, Los golfos (1959), Marco Ferreri's El cochecito (1960), Luis Buñuel's Viridiana (1961), and the young José Luis Guerín's Tren de sombras (1997); the latter is considered to be one of the most significant films of recent Spanish cinema. A solo exhibition at MACBA (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona) in 2001, a retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2003, and his participation in Documenta11 have contributed to a recent renewal of interest in Portabella's work. He spoke with artist and independent curator Marcelo Expósito in Barcelona.

Expósito: I would like to ask you to evaluate the revival of your films under the perspective of two different shifts that I feel have taken place. On the one hand there is the present degree of visibility of certain films that were done on the margins of the cinematographic institution and, to some extent, under illegal or clandestine conditions; on the other hand, there is the inclusion within the system of contemporary art of artifacts that were originally conceived as political interventions in the cinema institution.

Portabella: Before I say anything else, I would like to state that I consider myself primarily to be a filmmaker. I say this not to sublimate my profession, but rather in the sense that I believe that political responsibility is part of the total process of the production of a film, up to the moment that it is screened in a movie theater. This, however, does not invalidate the use of or diffusion through other types of media or institutions. Since I have never identified with underground or art cinema, I think that the historical shifts that you are pointing out, on the one hand, and the artistic framework on the other, are the result of a process I will try to explain.

Two situations have conditioned the visibility of my films. The first was the censorship imposed during the Franco era, which was a tactical decision made around 1970—the year I made *Vampir-Cuadecuc*—during a moment when social and cultural forces were becoming radicalized in the democratic fight against the dictatorship. When these historical conditions came to an end, first *Informe general* (1976) and above all *Puente de Varsovia* (1989)—which I made many years later, using different methods—were both films that looked for a maximum of “visibility.” However, what happened is that under democratic conditions, the ideological and administrative censorship was replaced by a filter that was increasingly controlled by corporations that consider films the central

product of a totalizing marketing system. As Godard would say, films are produced to the detriment of cinema.

I have always thought that the main political dimension of my films lies in attacking linguistic codes. Ideology impregnates society through the dominant languages. I have never seen myself as working on a film that is “transparent” or supposedly more “comprehensible” codes. I understand their tactical function in certain political situations. But what I think has maintained the interest in my films, beyond their juncture, is the way in which they are all related to their context, through the complexity—rather than the complication—of language, and through the subversion of the dominant codes.

While the cinema institution is increasingly dominated by corporations, in the last few years some artistic institutions have demonstrated a progressive interest in modern cinema through a historical focus on the complex and critical dimension of artistic languages. There are those who are revising the conservative character, the mausoleum-like kidnapping and elitism of culture that has historically dominated museums, by constructing new participative, open spaces. I think this has permitted the displacement of my films into the realm of contemporary art without changing their strictly cinematographic character and taking in consideration the various historical conditions under which my films were produced.

The shifts that you suggest, therefore, are not haphazard or capricious. They respond to the need to relocate one’s exercise or practice where it is best suited in order to openly debate the need to create codes for breaking away, for meeting with new circumstances. One does this not in order to merely survive as a filmmaker, but to continue *incising* reality, through a specific cinematographic practice.

Expósito: That reminds me of the way Alexander Kluge worked during the 60s and 70s in the field of cinema, simultaneously developing his political considerations on the concept of the public sphere. Cinema was a place to criticize and reach beyond the bourgeois public sphere which, behind its legitimizing facade of transparency and equality for all, hid very precise mechanisms for marginalization and exclusion. For Kluge, an alternative, critical public sphere was possible in films by exploring the communicative and socializing capacities of the cinematographic language, and at the same time recovering the democratic control of the production, distribution and exhibition sectors. As the struggles around '68 came to an end, and the cultural counter-revolution of the 80s attempted to present linguistic and political ruptures as obsolete, Kluge turned to commercial television. He understood that the strict cinematographic institution was no longer a field for influencing ideas on cinema and the public sphere.

I recall Kluge's case here, in spite of numerous differences between the two of you, because I think it is revealing in regard to the circumstances that a series of proposals have continued from '68 to the present and that, contrary to what is commonly stated, tell us of their current use as a reference model for artistic oppositional practices today. Validity in the sense that, for instance, as you said, the first political dimension of certain aesthetic practices has to be found in its intervention on language, with an eye on the historical, political, and economic conditions under which they operate.

Portabella: *Vampir-Cuadecuc*, *Informe general*, and *Puente de Varsovia*, which I have already mentioned, are three different examples. The first is a materialist film that exploits, to the utmost, the capacity to break away from the conventional cinematographic language by a precise analysis in order to overcome it and go on to the evocative powers of the images. *Informe general* was meant to occupy a new democratic space in the course of the Spanish political transition, leaving clandestine activity behind and demonstrating the political scene after the death of Franco in a documentary directed in the form of narrative cinema. *Puente de Varsovia* was made when dominant narratives were being restored, years after the international New Cinema had finished. That is why, compared to *Vampir*, its images are extremely meticulous; they allude to narrative conventionalisms to construct apparently conventional scenes that, however, are narrated under extreme tension. In each case, using different methods, my films try to break with the Aristotelian rule of narrative (Brecht) so as to suggest an alternative use of the potentialities of the cinema.

Expósito: Could you specify where the materialistic dimension of your films is located? I always like to recall Joan-Enric Lahosa's insight when he spoke about the "revelatory fascination" in *Nocturno 29* (1968), *Vampir*, and *Umbracle* (1972). This idea tells us of a type of materialism that captivates the spectator, who is allowed to explore the full range of the image's expressive possibilities, and at the same time to understand the illusory mechanisms and the material character of film stock. This practice is very close to a type of naïve materialism, a sterilized and mechanistic reductionism in the analysis of the production of feeling through images.

Portabella: I have never been keen on making materialist films of the type you call "sanitized." I have always wanted to exploit cinematic language starting with an implied radical subjectivity, with a gaze that does not avoid the notions of individual reformation / recreation. And it is from this point that one is able to construct a "territory of encounter" with the spectator's gaze. Think about this scene from *Puente de Varsovia*: the long traveling shot towards an autopsy. At the beginning it is seductive and refuses to be laborious and tense, yet by the end it offers us a detailed topography of a cadaver. It is only in this "territory of encounter," where the gaze is recreated and at the same

time interpolated with tension, that things are able to be evidenced, unveiled, and revealed through images without the use of a merely mediating and utilitarian language.

Expósito: I remember a conversation with Godard recalled by Serge Daney in regard to the television broadcast of the first Gulf War. Godard stated that the persistent fixed shot of the camera, which showed no more than a greenish image of bursting lights from the bombardment over Baghdad, escaped two classic narrative elements of the cinema: the *hors-champ* and the reverse shot. For Godard, this impoverished audiovisual narrative was not sheer chance. Eliminating the *hors-champ* hid the context in which the conflict was taking place and so impeded its comprehension. Avoiding a reverse shot denied the possibility of thinking against the image shown. Godard is the bodyguard of the history of cinema understood as the historical process that has given us new complex tools for looking at and representing reality, tools that can help us to construct a critical and complex way of thinking. As you suggested before, cinema has gone beyond films. As far as I am concerned, this is the meaning behind the revival of your films and the films of others within the framework of new artistic spaces with a critical vocation: this helps us to cut short the banality of the image which can be found not only in television or publicity, but even in the institutional fields of cinema and art, by affirming that the complexity of language is the sine qua non condition that is necessary in order to think critically about a world that is increasingly complex.

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