

POETICS OF EDITING IN AGUAESPEJO GRANADINO: AESTHETIC, TECHNICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH INTO THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SPECTATOR IN THE WORK OF JOSÉ VAL DEL OMAR

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I. INTRODUCTION

"We want to make cinema that looks towards God by framing and pursuing magic." (Apud. Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 227). This statement, with which the Andalusian filmmaker José Val del Omar began the presentation of *Aguaespejo granadino* (Water-Mirror of Granada, 1953-55), the first film in his *Elementary Triptych of Spain*, also constitutes the program that guided all his work. From *Estampas* (1932), produced in the context of the Pedagogical Missions of the Second Spanish Republic, to *Acariño Galaico* (1961-95), the posthumous conclusion to his filmography, mysticism, understood according to Heidegger's definition as an elementary countermovement,¹ would become the driving force behind an ongoing exercise in the tactile condition of the image. There are no symbols or metaphors in Val del Omar; rather, there is a focus on people and things in the place—*stimmung*—where they open out to the world.² With his si-

multaneous work as a filmmaker—or *cinemist*, as he preferred to call himself—and inventor, he always sought to transform the experience of the spectator, to transcend the distance imposed by visual contemplation; the "apanoramic overflow of the image", diaphonic sound, and what he called "tactile vision" would become the pillars of his visual research.

In the summer of 1961, the screening at the Cannes Festival of both Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana* (1961) and Val del Omar's *Fuego en Castilla* (1960) presented the same iconographic background to spectators in two completely different ways, while at the same time introducing a filmmaker whose work constituted a key link between the avant-garde cinema of the 1920s and the "expanded cinema" and underground cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. Over five decades, Val del Omar tirelessly articulated a treatise on the quest for the light, creating experimental forms drawing from a legacy related to the Spanish and Andalusian

poetic tradition. “By instinct. I wanted to escape from the darkness of books. I wanted to go to the luminous image. Just as butterflies are attracted to the light,” he explains in his *Manifesto* (1935), in a poetic turn that also seems to evoke the so-called *philosophy of the light* restored by the Sufi mystic Suhrawardī in the Islamicised Iran of the twelfth century, and a tradition which, via Ibn’Arabi, can be found in the poetry of Saint John of the Cross.

However, there is nothing in Val del Omar’s work that does not originate in its concrete presentation of shapes, its editing, and its haptic approach to the image, in a “return to things” akin to the mysticism of Teresa of Avila, the position “of one who comes down from the rapture to build glory with the heart and hands. In a vehement realism that shuts itself away after having known the experience of living in the One.” (Apud. Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 222-223). This article offers an exploration of the conditions under which Val del Omar’s films move towards an all-embracing and transformative idea of the cinematic experience based on the notion of tactile participation. Through an analysis of the editing and the poetic mechanisms of rhyme, adjacency and juxtaposition that shape the creation of time, space and meaning in *Aguaespejo granadino*, we examine Val del Omar’s meticulous attention to the mechanics of potential-action, stasis-dynamism, and staticity-mobility.

Taking a different but in many ways parallel path to the American avant-garde film tradition, from Stan Brakhage to Marie Menken, in whose poetics we can hear the pantheist echo of the American transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, the ultimate object of Val del Omar’s work is the role of the imagination in the human being as a form of mediation with the transcendent experience. The images of water, fountains, inlaid designs, lattices, thistles in bloom, Christs veiled in cellophane, flaming crosses, and amphibians and squids in copper cauldrons that fill the *Elementa-*

ry Triptych of Spain represent no more than the threshold into his ultimate interest: the human physiognomy, the face as a space that one arrives at and never leaves. For Val del Omar, it is never merely a matter of seeing, but of coming to see the mechanism that underpins a poetics based on the idea of revelation. Things are revealed because the starting point is always a mystery, an obscurity that is the foundation of song, because above all with the films of Val del Omar we are dealing with poetic forms.

It is precisely for this reason that it is necessary to define a theoretical space that is essentially phenomenological, where the approach to forms in themselves coexists with the mobility that Val del Omar gives to imaginary forms. Along with Aby Warburg’s project to outline a gestural history of the afterlife of antiquity in the West, which offers the opportunity to analyse the logic of the editing according to expressive pathos formulae (*pathosformeln*³), we need to set out parameters that take into account the imaginary material. Thus, in a liminal sense, Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenology of the poetic image and, in a certain way, the comparative method of Albert Béguin (1993), must necessarily coexist with a methodological toolkit that can define the space of the mediating nature of the imagination. The structural foundation proposed by Gilbert Durand in *Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire* (1960) and legitimated through the behaviourist reactions of authors like Bekhterev thus connects perfectly with the research of the Islamicist Henry Corbin, a disciple of the Arabist Miguel Asín Palacios, into the heuristic and axiological nature of the Creative Imagination—*‘ālam al-mitālī*⁴ in the Sufi tradition and in Shiite gnosis—as an organ of perception.

While the vindication of the imagination as agent came to be associated with the unreal and the falsehoods of fantasy in the West (with the exception of a golden chain of artists and philosophers like Plotinus, William Blake, Heraclitus, Pico della Mirandola, Swedenborg, Shakespeare,

Coleridge, the German Romantics and Jung), the categories that Sufism proposes in its various orders (*turuq*) accept, first of all, that the creative imagination (*‘ālam al-mitālī*) is exercised as a cognitive faculty, mediating between sensory perception and the understanding and giving rise to a world as ontologically real as that of the senses and the intellect (Corbin, 1964, 1996, 2000). In this world, the spiritual meaning of texts and beings is perceived. This *mundus imaginalis*, as Corbin transliterated it into Latin, constitutes an inter-world, a genuinely “imaginal” geography and not a mere allegory, as it assumes a noetic or cognitive function of its own: it permits access to a region of being which without it would be inaccessible (Corbin, 1971-1973).

As argued in the analysis of *Aguaespejo granadino*, the place where Val del Omar’s films lead us is also home to a region that is ontologically real and accessible through the poetic approach to things in themselves. Val del Omar’s PLAT (*Picto Lumínica Audio Táctil*) laboratory, where he would create his many innovations in technique and editing, also constitutes a place to sustain this “visionary geography” discussed throughout Corbin’s exploration of Shiite gnosis, accompanying each image with a single verb: to touch, simply to feel, to be consumed in the tactile experience to subdue the darkness, the death which, as we are warned in *Fuego en Castilla*, “is only a word that is left behind when one loves. The one who loves burns, and the one who burns flies at the speed of light. Because to love is to be that which is loved.” The pursuit of magic to which Val del Omar alludes in the statement that opens this article is also, above all, an incantation against disappearance, against death, which he maintained in all his films with the famous caption that concluded all his films: “*Sin Fin*” (“Without End”).

2. TOWARDS A TACTILE VISION

Following his experiences in the Pedagogical Missions of the Republic in the 1930s, Val del Omar’s

ideas about film viewing took on a humanistic and pedagogical dimension. From that period we have the emotive testimony of the pictures he took of spectators who, in the towns where they took the films for screening, watched the images projected with their faces in a trance, their eyes and mouths wide open: “On those rapturous faces there occurred an emptying out, a cycle of transfiguration going in through the eyes (the excitement of the images seen for the first time) and out through the mouth, like a gentle breath,” as Carlos Muguero writes (apud. Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 114).

That pedagogical experience marked his film work. In 1932, Val del Omar would write: “The teacher can collaborate in the formation of the child without imprisoning his impulses in symbols and rules, without killing his creative awareness [...]. The cinema replaces the book because the only thing that is useful to keep is the scientific truth expressed by the poetic language of imaginative thinking with its basic contrasts and its geometric sincerity. It replaces the series of teachers because of its better continuity, its better method, as I would prefer this to be limited to showing the world without explanations and then ensuring the real, affective interaction of the child with his schoolmates” (Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 43). And in 1961, he would note: “Our instruments of physical communication have advanced, but our minds continue to be closed and remote.” And: “For me the whole audience is a big child in love with the extraordinary” (Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 282).

The similarity between these reflections and the ideas developed by Stan Brakhage in one of his most famous writings, *Metaphors on Vision*, illustrate the idea of “coming to see” that runs through all of Val del Omar’s work, based on a mechanism of countermovement or movement back to the beginning: “Imagine an eye unruléd by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adven-

ture of perception. How many colours are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be?" (Brakhage, 1963: 1).

In this sense, Val del Omar's work as a filmmaker is inseparable from his work as an inventor and his theoretical thought on cinema and pedagogy, as Nicole Brenez concludes: "he had to fabricate his own tools (technical and logistical dimension of his work), develop his own conception of phenomena (theophanic dimension of his aesthetics), and systematise the organisational logic that structures his films (methodical dimension)" (Mncars, 2010: 48). In this way, Val del Omar's work in his PLAT laboratory reveals a confluence between scientific and artistic research, inventing devices and poetic forms to explore what acts of perception the audiovisual can generate.

Among his inventions, the theories on light and colour outlined in his conception of tactile vision hold a very important place, as Rafael Tranche points out: "Val del Omar previously analysed the perceptive mechanisms that intervene in the act of vision. In this sensory process, he discovered the instinctive intervention of touch to obtain a more precise and intense impression of the object perceived. Thus, when somebody looks at an object [...] he feels it with two sensory surfaces (his retinas) so that between the two, and through the difference between them, they give him information on the form and the distance of that object. But furthermore, the need to touch, to physically "feel" the object is implicit in the action of looking" (Buruaga, 1995: 172).

Val del Omar's starting point is the elementary notion of vision: eye and light, an optical process and a light process. His technical procedure is based on using lights of low but concentrated intensity, which fall upon certain areas of the object in brief (fractions of a second), alternating time cycles. Moreover, with these directed lights, it is possible to project onto the motif, by means of

auxiliary lighting, points, lines, areas of light with weaves and colours.

In this sense, an analysis of his Super 8 footage can reveal much about his work process in the PLAT. As if it were a notebook, Val del Omar used the camera to make essays, sketches, studies or outlines on the motifs that appear throughout his work: thus, the water in the fountains of the Alhambra, flowers or clouds, motifs he used in the composition of *Aguaespejo granadino*, reappear in other shots in with variations or from different perspectives. In his laboratory, in the 1970s, with quite modest resources, Val del Omar developed his essays on tactile vision through the powers of photosensitive film: picto-luminous experiences, laser rays, the adiscope (a quadruple slide projector), or the Cyclotactile Energetic Bionic Optic ("an anamorphic lens rotating at variable speeds, coupled on the same shaft with a normal lens"⁵), in the quest for a figurative representation that aspired to verticality: "Spain did not have a cinema because the frenzied horizontal workings of the machine were not mastered by the Mediterranean peoples, especially in that markedly vertical tradition, mysticism" (Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 52).

The camera is an instrument of perception that can be used to see something we would not see with the naked eye (hence Vertov's comparison of the camera to a microscope), as Didi-Huberman (2010: 13-14): writes: "all the images of the world are the result of a manipulation, of a voluntary effort in which the hand of man intervenes [...]. The question is rather, how to determine, each time, in each image, what it is that the hand has done exactly, how it has done it and why, what was the purpose of the manipulation that took place. For better or for worse, we use our hands, we deliver blows or caresses, we build or destroy, we give or take. For each image, what we should ask ourselves is how it looks (at us), how it thinks (of us), and how it touches (us) all at once."

In this way, Val del Omar tinkers with, manipulates, and transforms sound and image devices,

but his techniques have a pedagogical, humanist end to offer knowledge to the spectator, through games with language, conceptual associations and emotional states which he combines in atonal structures that match his editing logic up with the music of Schönberg. This form of research, which gave rise to the mechanism of coming to see through a rigorous exploration of emotion, can be studied in detail if we focus on the structure and poetic rhymes that underpin one of his greatest films, *Aguaespejo granadino*.

3. AN ESSAY OF LYRICAL PLASTIC ART

In the first of the intertitles in *Aguaespejo granadino*, Val del Omar indicates that the film is “a brief audiovisual essay of lyrical plastic art,” relating the vocation of the essayist (conceptual thought) with visual poetry (lyrical associations). Based on this dual but inseparable nature the different meanings of the film would be connected, as will be explored below. We are thus dealing with a work that moves away from narrative to express the filmmaker’s thoughts and feelings with the aim of arousing analogous feelings in the spectator. While narrative is organised principally around relations of continuity between the actions described (and in this respect in cinema a horizontal logic tends to predominate in the reading, characteristic of the written sentence and the verbal narrative), in poetry a conceptual logical tends to predominate, whereby images are interrelated through ideas, and themes are created through visual motifs, as explored by Eisenstein through montage and juxtaposition.

After identifying a technical property of the film—diaphonic sound—two different intertitles, which will then appear in the film, invite us to develop an initial conceptualisation: “Mathematics of God” and “The one who gives the most... has the most.” From the beginning, Val del Omar appears to posit a pantheist vision that could be related to the sense of unity described by Salvador

Pániker: “Val del Omar has a sense of the unity of all things: Man and nature, consciousness and matter, the inner world and the outer, the subject and the object. As Gonzalo Saénz de Buruaga has written, he has suffered the opposites first-hand (tradition versus modernity, art versus technique, radical individualism versus the global village, etc.) and attempts to synthesise them agonisingly” (1995: 11-12).

After S1—the sky, with a tower in the lower left area of the frame—we see a series of four shots (S2-S5) that establish an initial visual and conceptual relationship: fish in a pond (fig.1); flowers floating on the water (fig.2); a child opening some curtains (fig.3); and two faces carved in the rock of a fountain (fig.4).

Taking into account that, in principle, the film could be understood in its broadest, literal sense as a lyrical documentary on Granada and the Alhambra, this beginning invites us from the outset to see the game of associations that characterises the film: movement vs. staticity/permanence vs. impermanence/the natural world vs. the artificial. These shots present a series of motifs associated with nature (sky-fish-flowers-child-rock), but in fig.1 and fig.2 the fish and the flowers are trapped or enclosed in an artificial construction: the pond that constrains their freedom and marks the limits of the space. In fig.4, sculpted into the rock are two figures that give shape to a fountain (architectural space). In fig.3, the child opens the curtains in a house as if he were opening a curtain in a theatre. The relationship between nature (the sky, the flowers, the fish) and architecture (the pond, the fountain, the house) represents this opposition: the realm of nature and the realm of culture, which, as will be analysed below, appears associated with stagnation.

The motifs are clearly demarcated—sky, fish, flowers, child, fountain—as Val del Omar offers shots that are stripped down and nearly always centred on their objects. This stripping down will be further developed in the second and third

parts, which are progressively more ornate and in which the elements will be grouped to create much denser poetic maps. But returning to the simplicity of the beginning, it would seem logical to view this editing technique as well as an introduction to the more documentary theme: images of Granada or of the Alhambra, previously explored in *Vibración de Granada* (1935). The film will move constantly between these two levels: on one hand, the recognition of actual spaces; on the other, the filmic work involving a stylisation of these motifs through inventive optical and auditory alterations. In the first case, the intention is to set the film in Granada, the underlying theme in a literal, immediate reading; in the second, the relevant rhetorical associations are presented to develop the film's lyrical conceptualisation. It is also important to note the introduction of the voice-over in the shot of the child, with the words "How blind!" foreshadowing the idea of blindness that is developed from S6: a man emerges from a cave; the shot shows two caves, almost symmetrical, like the empty sockets of a pair of eyes (fig.5), while the voice recites: "But how blind are the creatures that lean on this earth!" (Gubern, 2004).

The next shot (S7) once again supports a reading in line with the dialectic between movement and repression. A child dances while a crouching gypsy woman claps in time. "They dance without knowing why" says the voice. S8 shows an old man leaning on a wall (fig.6); S9 shows a man, also static, whose body at the same time is being turned around in a circle; S10 is a close-up of an immobile woman whose body is also being turned around; finally, S11 is a close-up of an old woman (fig.7), again immobile, while her body moves in a circular motion.

Top to bottom.

Figure 1. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

Figure 2. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

Figure 3. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

Figure 4. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).





Figure 5. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).



Figure 6. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

4. THE FOUNTAINHEAD OF THE RAPTURE

Val del Omar seems to present the rigidity or immobility—stagnation— of bodies in a figurative idea of the concept of repression, using men who look like sculpted figures, like the bourgeois figures in Jean Vigo's *À propos de Nice* (1930). Just as the flowers floated and the fish swam trapped within the limits of the pond, the human bodies are subject to an external movement beyond their control. As expressive *pathos* of suffering, they are bodies that do not even show their pain, which would transform their potential into action and through their distress bring out the connection to a primordial element, what Nietzsche called the *Urquell* (the fountainhead or primary source).⁶ Artifice, imposition and construction are signified by the circular turns external to the movement of the body itself; the bodies appear to be standing on some kind of spinning platform that is moving at a speed of its own.

Although up to this moment the editing could be understood as a documentary approach to the “Granada” motif, it becomes clear that operations of another kind are being employed, evoking a

theme of repression and artifice versus movement and freedom. S12 presents the continuous temporal displacements, with the rapid waning of daylight: night falls over Granada (figs 8-9). This shot introduces a visual typology characteristic of the film, the expression of the “perpetual instant”: “Life is merely an explosion in slow motion, and I intend to compress it until it turns into rapture: into an eternal instant” (Buruaga, 1995: 24). There is an attitude in Val del Omar that can also be found running through different religious traditions: “Suffering itself is a deception (*upādhi*), because its core is rapture, which is the attribute (*upādhi*) of illumination” suggests Joseph Camp-



Figure 7. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).



Top. Figure 8. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).
Bottom. Figure 9. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

bell in his study of comparative mythology, *The Masks of God* (1960: 56).

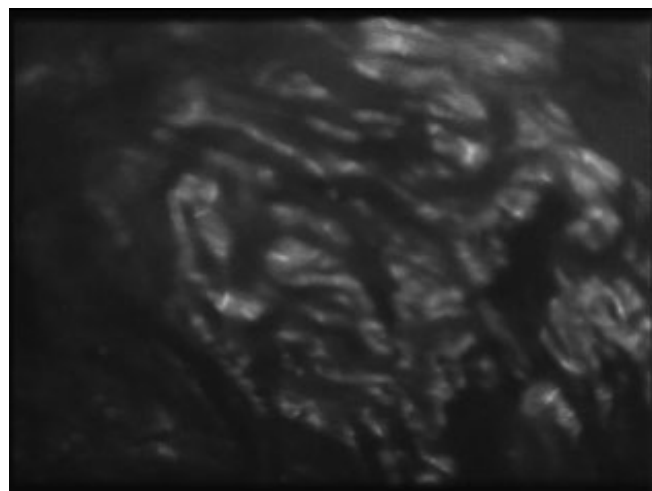
In response to this rapture, the voice-over returns to the notion of blindness: “My God! But how blind are the creatures if their understanding cannot even reach the shadows of their bodies.” Shadows appear too, crossing and covering the hillsides like flashes or vibrations: the film will focus on the shadows that loom over the city, with night falling, so that S13 shows, over the aquatic detail of a pond, various changes of light (fig.10). Water is the prevailing element of the film, just in his subsequent films it would be mud (in *Acarinho galaico*) and fire (in *Fuego en Castilla*).

After the manner of the lines of Lamartine cited by Bachelard in *Water and Dreams*, “it takes

us, the water rocks us, the water puts us to sleep, the water gives us back to our mother” (1983: 131),⁷ The shots of water shimmer, flow and change. They celebrate movement, punctuated by the sound editing, when they are not otherwise depicting its imprisonment in stagnation. Thus, the aquatic detail here adds to the first shots of fish (fig.1) and flowers (fig.2), but with one clear peculiarity: here, the changes of light are constant so that the shot, in showing movements of light and water, seems to be a reaction to the staticity of the human faces shown in P9, 10 and 11. At the same time, we observe the introduction of certain technical manipulations: the use of time-lapse photography and the mobile staticity of the bodies.

The next four shots (S14-17) return to the theme of water, showing different fountains (figs. 11-12), in a motif foreshadowed in S5 of the film (fig.4). Just as it is in the mysticism of the Spanish Golden Age and in the Persian Islamic tradition, the fountain is an essential motif of the film, since it brings together the idea of power (“The current that is born of this fountain / I know to be wide and mighty / Though it is night!”, wrote Saint John of the Cross in “Song of the Soul that Delights in Knowing God by Faith”) with the idea of boundaries. Although it springs forth with an appearance of freedom, the water flowing from

Figure 10. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).



the pipe embodies for Val del Omar an image of the boundaries, the imprisonment or the enclosure that culture imposes on nature, with the added aspect that faces are figurative fountains ("Oh crystalline fountain / If in those your silvery faces / You would form of a sudden / The desired eyes / I have pictured in my inner places!", cries the Bride in John of the Cross' "Spiritual Canticle"). From the third fountain (S16) the camera pans down to a turtle in a pond: this animal, slow, nearly immobile, is perhaps related to the human figures seen previously, according to the continuous playing between movement and staticity in which the film engages. In any case, Val del Omar suggests a conceptual relationship of editing that cuts across the poetic meaning of the film: a static setting (the fountains/the faces) and a movement (fluid, in the case of the water; automatic, in the case of the human beings).

5. THE VISION

Following a shot of some trees, we see the first physiognomic distortion of a face through an optically provoked anamorphosis (S19). In the film's quest for figurative verticality, analogous distortions are frequent, contaminating the representation of the faces with an aquatic, specular quality, as if the water reflecting the images had been stirred (fig. 13), as in the Christ figure sinking in the marsh in *Fuego en Castilla*. The idea of *water as mirror of life* thus finds a correlate in the plastic arts. From this point on, the film weaves a web of motifs that reappear with variations: for example, S27 is a girl coming out of a cave, which ties in with the boy opening the curtains (S4) and the man emerging from the cave (S5). These symmetrical games are constant: every figure in *Aguaespejo granadino* appears at least twice, in accordance with the structure of associations and rhymes. Certain motifs, like musical backing and counterpoint, deepen the meaning of the previous ones: for example, the field of flowers, suggesting the way



Figures 11 and 12. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

in which nature or bodies feed on water through an energy that comes out of the earth, contrasted with the blockage of human beings, trapped in their culture, in an image that Romantic and Symbolist poetry has often explored and that authors like Rilke have taken to its ultimate expression: in the eighth of the *Duino Elegies* (1997), he evokes the idea of "the Open" (*Das Offene*), on which only the animal can gaze, because the human is always stagnant in the world, cut off from that *Nowhere without Not* (*Nirgends ohne Nicht*).

In the final part of the first block is one of the film's most extraordinary moments: the dance or rapture of water, in a slow-motion shot that appears almost as if it were being turned by a crank. First it appears stagnant (fig.14), a "prisoner in the sanctum of its culture" as the voice-over later describes it, and then we immediately begin to see sculptural forms (S33), in a homage to the poetic power of cinema, which changes our vision of things, from their material literalness to their



Figure 13. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

contemplation as sculptures carved, it might be said, in glass (figs. 15-16). The ordinary or ornamental reveals, through the meta-mysticism of Val del Omar, another extraordinary beauty,⁸ a poetic metamorphosis, inspired by the dance, as if the water could transmute its fragile and fluid matter into something more solid, just as the still-frame tries to sculpt, capture, or otherwise materialise life in motion, according to its irreversible process. *Aguaespejo granadino* thus fulfils the expectations that Val del Omar would suggest for *believers in cinema*: “Do not court repression. Walk in the single, centripetal direction that magnifies, connects and harmonises the instinct. This cinema has come into our hands.”

The film represents the Alhambra, just as Marie Menken would do in *Arabesques for Kenneth Anger* (1958-61), as a space emotionally and rhythmically outlined by the images manipulated by the filmmaker. In a space which, as his Super 8 films show, has been photographed countless times by multitudes of tourists, how can one compose an inner image, a vision, a poetic metamorphosis? If water is a *prisoner in the sanctum of its culture*, what needs to be done is to release its expressive potential—in rapture, in canticle—through the



Figures 14 and 15. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

powers of cinema, optics, and editing, transforming it into forms resembling sculptures of glass or fire, in opposition to the tourist cliché, the predetermined image, the monumental object that cannot be touched. In a presentation of the film, Val del Omar would assert: “Man is in a cage made from his falls. Most only see water fall. A few see it flow, run, turn stagnant, cry... [...] But they don’t see the ascension” (Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 222).

The experience of a vision as opposed to a viewing, in Val del Omar, is characterised here by this pedagogical conception whereby the image is liberated from verbal learning, in a form similar to the idea expressed by Brakhage, as Jacques Aumont summed up: “His utopia, or his ghost, is the pure vision, completely freed from the burden of language; a vision without prejudices, without



Figures 16–19. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

knowledge, perfectly innocent, and that would operate solely through its immense power. [...] The cinema has not dedicated itself enough to the vision, but too much to the viewing, confirming an old tendency of all visual arts in the West, clinging to the visible exterior. The result: it has become difficult to engender filmic visions, to return through cinema to that ‘natural’ vision that perhaps is the child’s vision before language imposes its restrictions, and that makes it possible to ‘recognise’ everything before knowing it” (1999: 71).

This conception of the film, as proposed by Carlos Muguiro, in the form of a *garden of the vision*, configures its structure in three temporal sections: day (S1–S36), night (S37–S95), and day (S96–S190), in accordance with a structure like that outlined by Gilbert Durand in his atlas of the human imagination, *Les structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*: the diurnal order, the nocturnal order, and the synthetic-disseminating order or order of synthesis. If we consider the number of shots—day (36 shots), night (59 shots), day (95 shots)—the first and second parts together have the same number as the third part. Each part can be differentiated by visual signs—the green filter that separates the central shots of the night—as

well as sonic signs—opening sentences like: “From the fountains of Granada, reason flees with the day” (S36), “And with the moon” (S37); and closing sentences like: “The green madness of the moon passed. Now, with the dawn comes the reason of the stones and the true miracle of the waters” (P95). In each of these sections, a series of temporal manipulations occur: time-lapse photography, slow motion, flashes of light, in a subjective time that breaks with the appearance of linear time—with horizontality—to capture the almost palpable sensation of time.

Nightfall, with the appearance of the moon, the “first dramatic epiphany of time” as Durand describes it (1982: 95), appears to be tinged with a green filter. The first shots return to some of the motifs seen in the first part: a girl’s face (S43), physiognomic distortions, movements of water that stir the reflections, trees, the gardens of the Alhambra, lights... The fountains are depicted in the water spouting from them, vertical figures that form the heart of the nocturnal block, and the shadows turn into protagonists in a few shots, such as the shadow of a hand that slides over a face lying horizontally (S48). In the pond, water lilies and leaves are clustered together; Val del Omar moves in on the detail of a flower: “Love” (S53). Then, when he returns to the image of that flower, some drops of water fall on the petals (S56). The idea further reinforces the relationship between water, which constitutes a recurring motif in the first section, and the flowers, a motif that appears for the first time in S28 of the film. By night, the images appear to rise out of a dream, with an ethereal quality as if they were floating or reflected in one of the ponds (figs. 16–19).

6. PRISONS OF THE SOUL

An important motif in the second part of the film is the windows, a symbol of contemplation, reflected as well in their frames and the idea of tactile vision. Thus, the girl in S43/S45 reappears

in S68 looking at the camera and, in S67, a man is reaching his left hand towards the lens. In the words of Pániker: “Val del Omar recovers the ontogenesis of being an adult by going back to the creativity of the child. This child who coordinates her visual universe with the tactile, but also vice versa” (Buruaga, 1995: 13).

In a certain way, S69 functions as a synthesis of the different elements we have seen: a pond with water lilies stylised by flashes of light. Thus, we have the pond, the water, the flowers, the light, elements that have been appearing in isolation or in relation with one another and that now are all brought together in a single image. *Aguaespejo granadino* thus proposes a set of conceptual associations and visual motifs which at first appear isolated to be progressively combined and made more complex. First, they are introduced separately (the water, the fountain, the girl) and then combined in images of greater density (the girl drinking water in the fountain).

The third part of the film begins with the voice saying: “The green madness of the moon passed. Now, with the dawn comes the reason of the stones and the true miracle of the waters.” The “miracle” and the “mystery” will be central in this last section. Buruaga compares Val del Omar’s cinematic quests with modern physics: “The labyrinths of modern physics have also thus become productive mysteries which, like black holes, keep expanding our vision of the cosmos. Hence, as Pániker says, all is mystery: “Today scientists present us with a universe—macro- and micro-physical—that is hugely mysterious, turbulent, uncertain, ambivalent, tearing up the old Newtonian order. And he adds: “This is the new evidence, digestible only from a mystic perspective” (Buruaga, 1995: 157). Later, he takes up the idea of mysticism once again: “As Valente wrote, the first paradox of the mystic is to signal to us, through language and with language, an experience that language cannot convey: the mystic demolishes language to take it to an extreme of

maximum tension, to the point where silence and the word are viewed on either side of a void that is at once unsilenceable and unspeakable. This profound introspection, applicable to the poetic language of John of the Cross or Miguel de Molinos, should also be applied to Val del Omar; like the two mystics, Val del Omar tries to communicate the unspeakable, to make us see what cannot be seen and hear what cannot be heard” (1995: 158). The unspeakable, in Val del Omar, are the stones, the gazes, the flowers, the clouds, all the elements that surpass our understanding or create a logic of deceptions, shadows and spectres, as he wrote: “I feel immersed in a being that throbs. Chains of logic bind us and imprison us.” (Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 269).

It is no accident that the final section opens with a view from a mountaintop (P92), which in all traditions, from Mount Carmel to Ramon Llull’s Puig de Randa, is the summit of the mystical experience, crowned, furthermore, by the sun. Light in this section acquires a mysterious quality to suggest both a “divine miracle” and a “coming to see”, like a Platonic or Plotinian awakening to the vision once the obstacle that obscured it has been overcome. The shots of light appearing over the city (S100), or the mountains (S101), are mixed with images of houses in Granada, seen from above (S104). And it is at this point that Val del Omar’s ideas about tactile vision, through the experiences with light, attain their greatest depth. In his library, the filmmaker had underlined the following words (in italics) in Alan Watts’ *The Book*: “All your five senses are differing forms of one basic sense, something like touch. Seeing is highly sensitive touching. The eyes touch, or feel, light waves” (Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 270).

Finally, on a general level, it is worth concluding that the whole last part of the film is sustained by details of rising water, bubbling up from the spouts of the fountains, combined with wide shots of Granada and other motifs already used in the first and second blocks. In this part, a

direct parallel is created between the motionless city and the pond with its stagnant waters, and the aforementioned imprisonment of the water is verbalised over a courtyard of the Alhambra (figs. 20-22): *"Prisoner in the sanctum of its culture."*

Over these images of the water in the pond—as it appeared at the beginning of the film—the poetic power of water ends up emerging once again in contrast to the constructions of arches, windows and bars that oppress: the water dances and transforms again into a sculptural form (S176), nearly solid for a moment, its substance then transfigured into flames, fire, a burning image (fig.23), in a pact between water and fire characteristic of the logic of alchemical transmutation.⁹

In his vision of the Alhambra, Val del Omar has stylised some of his recurring images: the fountains, the water, the flowers and the light are some of the elements filmed by the filmmaker to set up a dialectic between movement and imprisonment, freedom and repression. The idea is profoundly Rousseauian: Man is blocked, lacking vitality and energy, and must try to leave his chrysalis state to develop his true potential, a theme that runs through many of Val del Omar's theoretical writings.

In the same way, based on the idea of the "eternal instant" or "explosion in slow motion", there is a sense of the contrast between the permanence and impermanence of things, as Pániker writes: "There are clearly Eastern resonances in these words, even Buddhist ones; the explosion in slow motion that is at once instant and total. The paradox is that this same impermanence liberates us. If everything were permanent we would be in a prison, like the modern plastics that cannot be destroyed [...]. Val del Omar felt the need to reconcile the two dimensions: the mystic and the rational, the primeval and the technical. He knew that a complete human being is defined by being at once fully secularised and fully sanctified [...]. Val del Omar does not dissociate the spirit from matter, and he must no doubt have had an essentially in-



Figures 20-22. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

tegral, corporeal and sacred conception of eroticism. And to speak of eroticism is to speak of art. It is not about ascending to spirituality, in any case, but reconciling the ascent to the spirit with the



Figure 23. *Aguaespejo granadino* (José Val del Omar, 1960).

descent to matter, because it is high time that we brought an end to certain vestiges of Platonism” (Buruaga, 1995: 4, 11-12). It may be relevant to add here that the book of poems written by the filmmaker was titled *Tientos de erótica celeste* (“Touches of Celestial Erotica”, 1992). In *Aguaespejo granadino*, the flowers, the water and the men are immersed in the vastness of the fields of Granada through constant wide shots of the sky and the city. In this way, the human figure becomes immersed in a bigger landscape. Thus, while the cultures of diurnal influence give predominance to the human figure and have a tendency to exaggerate heroes and their feats, as suggested by Durand (1960) the poetics formed around a mysticism and a sense of cosmic alignment tend to favour the iconography of nature as a refuge, as exemplified in all the mysticism of Saint John of the Cross.

This quest for the unspeakable is found at the heart of Val del Omar’s themes on God and the Mystery (as the voice-over says: “Mystery. Mystery. We shall go into full mystery” (S129-S130); “Mystery it is that the milk could flow in abundance” (S131-S132); “Mystery it is that the sun could raise the grass” (S133); “Mystery it is that the water could rise.” (S134)). Like a rapturous psalmody based on the model of the *dhikr* or recitation of

the names of God in Sufism, or like the *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries* of Ibn’Arabi (1994), Val del Omar composes his attempts at a vertical figurative representation: “A cinema that looks to God by framing and pursuing *energy*” (Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 53).

According to Buruaga, the mystery is therefore associated with the labyrinth: “Val del Omar insistently repeats in his film on Granada that ‘we live in full mystery’, and repeats it, I would say, with delight, with that serene attraction to the mystery that Jorge Luis Borges also glimpsed when he said that one simply tries to fulfil the orders of Something or Someone without greater precision. But the great Argentine writer also gave us the keys to the labyrinth, one of his most recurring themes: the labyrinth is the most obvious symbol of bewilderment and wonder as it is a strange architectural structure designed for people to get lost in” (1995: 158).

7. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, from the names of God to the inversion of the mystery in the labyrinth, the landscapes of *Aguaespejo granadino* are made up of ponds and canals, of all the enclosed constructions that configure the film’s cartography. On this point, it would be worth underscoring Val del Omar’s use of so few motifs—water, flowers, clouds—and remember that, as Durand (1960: 264) argues, apropos of Van Gogh and his predilection for small themes, a few tiny elements serve the mystic to suggest a whole cosmology. Indeed, following Durand’s idea of synthesis, the whole film could be read in terms of a quest for a space of intimacy, for a mystic refuge from time. The Alhambra thus becomes a projection of the outer world. The frames of the doors and windows are the image that Teresa of Avila, in her poem “I Live without Living in Myself”, calls “this prison, these chains / which my soul has entered”, a motif foreshadowed in the first images of the ponds.

In this way, the film's figurative interweaving or editing gives shape to the deeper meaning that Val del Omar sought to give to the spectator's experience, an experience of the mystery: "man is subjected to a threefold tension: from above, from below, and from his fellow man," Val del Omar would say (Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 230). This experience entails a location in a *between*, in a transformative interval or passage. Through the movement and handling of the camera, and of the projection of light as a tactile vision, the relationship between the images opens an "imaginal" space (Corbin, 1996) in the spectator's perception, an increased awareness and understanding of perceptive, participatory and contemplative possibilities in reality; excitement in which the spectator touches the light with his eyes and outlines landscapes of vision: "I can tell you that in pure cinematic projections the curtain disappears, the spectator's retina disappears; all that remains is our psychic screen, absorbing the rays of light as if it were the surface of a deep lake, on which a dream is projected and in which instinct is recognized. And to connect. And to merge" (Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 44). ■

NOTES

- 1 In German: "elementare Gegenbewegung". Heidegger, Martin. *Die Idee der Philosophie und das Weltanschauungsproblem* en *Gesamtausgabe. II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1919-1944. Band 56/57. Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1987, pp. 313-314.
- 2 The term *stimmung* is used here in the specific sense given to this concept by Giorgio Agamben in his works *Il linguaggio e la morte* (1982) and *Vocazione e voce* (1980), drawing on Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927), and on his readings of the poetry of Hölderlin. Agamben not only underscores the condition of "emotive tonality", which is the most common translation of *stimmung*, but also explores its relationship with language based on the proximity of the root of this term to "*stimmen*", or voice. But above all, he stresses its liminal nature: *stimmung*

does not relate either to the inner being, the *Dasein*, or to the world, but to the boundary between the two. *Stimmung* is thus defined as the openness of the *Dasein* to the world.

- 3 See, especially, Warburg, A. *El renacimiento del paganismo. Aportaciones a la historia cultural del Renacimiento europeo* (2005) and Didi-Huberman, G., *L'Image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (2002).
- 4 Literally, "mirror world", corresponding to the "imaginal world" of Islamic-Persian theology.
- 5 For more on the techniques on the Super 8 footage, see the article by Elena Duque (2017, January 13), *Val del Omar y el cinematógrafo que cabe en un bolsillo. A propósito de la sesión 'Arder amando'*.
- 6 "Das Leid, die Sehnsucht, der Mangel als Urquell der Dinge" (Suffering, longing, lack as a primary source of things). In Nietzsche, 1968: 210.
- 7 Lamartine, Alphonse de, *Les confidences* (1849). Apud. Bachelard, G. (1983: 131).
- 8 Val del Omar defined meta-mysticism as an attitude that is Teresian, realist and mystical all at once. And indeed, the Spanish realism of the Golden Age had posed this problem of "representing the unrepresentable", of uniting an extreme realism with the experience of the extraordinary. Cinema was a medium capable of automatically recording the most ordinary actions, and it is precisely in the inner depths of the ordinary (as Val del Omar would say in "Palpicolor") that the extraordinary is found. In this sense, the *mecha-mystic* was heir to that "aesthetic of small things" which, in the twentieth century, would be taken up again by authors like Lorca (Ortiz-Echagüe, 2010: 270).
- 9 "Fire that does not burn" or "water that does not wet the hands" are some of the names given to the ultimate secret of alchemy, the transmutation of matter, as described by Patrick Harpur (2006).

APPENDIX

- S1. Sky, clouds and a tower.
- S2. Fish in a pond.
- S3. Flowers in a pond.

- S4. Child opening some curtains.
- S5. Two faces carved in the rock of a fountain.
- S6. Two cave entrances. A man emerges from the right cave.
- S7. Small child dancing; woman clapping in time.
- S8. Old man sleeping, leaning against a cracked wall.
- S9. Man turning around in circles.
- S10. First shot of a woman turning in circles.
- S11. First shot of an old woman turning in circles.
- S12. Time-lapse shot of the day over the mountains of Granada (clouds, light, nightfall).
- S13. Details of the water in a pond. Changes of light.
- S14. Water falling from a fountain with the figure of a face.
- S15. Fountain depicting a young man.
- S16. Detail of a fountain tap; stream of water falling on a turtle.
- S17. Fountain depicting a bust.
- S18. Low-angle shot of a tree.
- S19. Distorted face.
- S20. Man and woman together with a child.
- S21. Turtle on some rocks.
- S22. Canal under a rocky wall. Changes of light.
- S23. A man, together with some mules, on a winding road.
- S24. Turtle moving horizontally to the right.
- S25. Flashes of light over a landscape crowned by a church.
- S26. Turtle turning to the left.
- S27. Girl coming out of a cave.
- S28. Field of flowers.
- S29. Shadow of the water of a fountain on the stone pavement.
- S30. Distorted face.
- S31. Reflection of a building of the Alhambra in a puddle. Small canal. Soft focus.
- S32. Canal of the Alhambra.
- S33. Stream of water in close-up, with the fountain behind. Focus/soft focus.
- S34. Time-lapse shot of the clouds over the Alhambra landscape.
- S35. Falling water of a waterfall.
- S36. Time-lapse wide shot of the day over Granada.
- S37. Night falls; time-lapse shot of the moon over a hill.
- S38. (From here on the shots, representing the night, appear in green tones). Reflection of a girl's face.
- S39. Distorted face.
- S40. Image of the girl again; movement of water distorting the reflection.
- S41. Row of trees.
- S42. Garden of the Alhambra.
- S43. Face of a girl moving slightly backwards, with her mouth open.
- S44. Light and reflections on the water.
- S45. Face of the same girl from shot 43.
- S46. Water spout.
- S47. Downward pan over spouting water.
- S48. Shadow of a hand sliding over a face positioned horizontally. Vertical pan down.
- S49. Water spout. Downward pan.
- S50. Slow-motion version of shot 48. Female voice.
- S51. Reflections on the pond.
- S52. Wider shot of the pond, filled with leaves. Flashes of light.
- S53. Detail of a flower.
- S54. Woman's face.
- S55. Window of the Alhambra.
- S56. Detail of the flower (shot 53). Drops of water falling on the flower.
- S57. Fountain depicting a wolf's face. Water tossed over the fountain.
- S58-59-60. Fountains depicting faces of animals and people; reflected lights (in S60, lighting up the eyes).
- S61. Fountain.
- S62. Fountain (S60). A reflection appears over the eyes.
- S63. Wide shot of the gardens; semi-circular image.
- S64. Detail of a gate of the Alhambra.
- S65. Water running down a sewer.
- S66. Two flowers; change of light.
- S67. Distorted face through reflections on the water. The man is reaching his left hand out towards the lens.
- S68. Girl looking (same girl from shots 43 and 45).
- S69. Shot of the pond filled with leaves. Flashes of light.
- S70. Wider shot of the pond. Flashes of light.
- S71. Wide shot of the Alhambra. Time-lapse shot; passing clouds.
- S72. Reflections on the water.
- S73. Fish.
- S74. Zoom over a tower.
- S75. Girl lowering her eyes (shots 43, 45 and 68).
- S76. Distorted face.
- S77. Fish. Wider shot than 73.

- S78. A girl's face. The distortion decreases.
 S79-80-81-82. Shots of the Alhambra.
 S83. Windows of the Alhambra.
 S84. Detail of a window.
 S85. Detail of a distorted mouth.
 S86. Reflection of trees on the water. Variation of light-darkness-light.
 S87. Waterfall.
 S88. The sky, some rooftops, trees.
 S89. Trees.
 S90. Sky.
 S91. Fountain. Fade to black.
 S92. Top of some mountains. Fade to black.
 S93. Stars.
 S94. Wide shot of Granada. Fade to black.
 S95. Black screen.
 S96. Top of the mountains. Sparkle of the sun.
 S97. Mountainsides.
 S98. Statue. Eyes of the figure of an old man.
 S99. Image from an arch; flashes of light.
 S100. The light over the city. Shadows receding.
 S101. The light over the mountains. Shadows receding.
 S102. View of the city through an arch. Changes of light.
 S103. Detail of the houses of the city. Changes of light.
 S104. Wide shot of the Alhambra.
 S105. Bell tower.
 S106. Shadows on the walls.
 S107. Girl drinking at a fountain.
 S108. Mountains.
 S109. Waterfall.
 S110. Camera moves up to close-up of a gypsy girl.
 S111. Two spinning tops.
 S112. Waves on the water.
 S113. Spinning top and turtle.
 S114. Face of the gypsy girl. Moving her face from right to left.
 S115. Close-up of a man. Moving his face upwards.
 S116. Writing on a wall.
 S117. Falling water.
 S118. Face of a gypsy woman.
 S119. Detail of a cactus. Camera moves upwards.
 S120. Tree. Camera moves upwards.
 S121. Top of the mountains. Flickering light.
 S122. Stream of water rising up to a sphere.
 S123. Wide shot of Granada. Flickering light.
 S124. Stream of water rising up to a sphere in which a landscape can be glimpsed.
 S125. Hillsides of the city. Flickering light.
 S126. Image of the sphere (shots 122-124).
 S127. Fields. Trunk of a tree in the right corner. Flickering light.
 S128. Wide shot of the city. Flickering light.
 S129-130. Tree branches and smoke.
 S131. Image of a crucifixion between some barren tree trunks.
 S132. Woman breastfeeding a child.
 S133. Pan upwards over a field of flowers.
 S134. Wide shot of the city.
 S135. Hillsides. Changes of light.
 S136. Clouds. Time-lapse shot.
 S137. Eyes of a woman (looking upwards).
 S138. Canal of water.
 S139. Shot through several arches. Intense light.
 S140. Running water.
 S141. Fountain. Overhead shot. Sudden change of light.
 S142. Trees. Running water.
 S143. Water spout through two windows.
 S144. Water spout in lower part of frame.
 S145. Detail of a stream of water.
 S146. Detail of a fountain. Camera moves downwards.
 S147. Water spouts aligned.
 S148. Canal with water spouts.
 S149. Various fountains and water spouts in a long shot.
 S150. Detail of a stream of water.
 S151-152-153-154. Streams of water.
 S155. Statue of an angel.
 S156. Old man and child looking to the right of the camera.
 S157. Face of the angel.
 S158. Sky.
 S159. Wide shot of Granada.
 S160. Wide shot of Granada.
 S161. Pond.
 S162. Building in front of a pond.
 S163. Mouth of a canal.
 S164. Decorated walls.
 S165. Courtyard of the Alhambra.

- S165. Longer shot, from inside some arcades, of the same courtyard.
- S166. Water spout. Camera begins moving upwards.
- S167. Water spout. Camera moves upwards.
- S168. Top of the Alhambra in the darkness.
- S169. Tower.
- S170. Zoom towards a window.
- S171. Face of a man looking upwards.
- S172. Running water.
- S173. Face of a man (shot 171) staring. Camera moves upwards.
- S174. Wet rock.
- S175. Two statues of animals. Water spouts in their mouths.
- S176. Detail of a stream of water. Time variations.
- S177. Distorted face of a man.
- S178. Appearance of the moon. Time-lapse shot. Darkness.
- S179. Face of a man with his mouth open. Camera moves downwards.
- S180-81-82-83-84-85. Still images of streams of water edited together in a series of dissolves.
- S186. A girl's face.
- S187. Close-up of a man.
- S188. Mountain. Time-lapse shot of clouds.
- S189. Face of the girl (shot 186).
- S190. Mountain. Time-lapse shot of clouds.
- Final credits: Sin fin ("Without End", caption spins around).

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POETICS OF EDITING IN AGUAESPEJO GRANADINO: AESTHETIC, TECHNICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH INTO THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SPECTATOR IN THE WORK OF JOSÉ VAL DEL OMAR

Abstract

Through the analysis of the editing and the poetic mechanisms of rhyme, adjacency and juxtaposition in *Aguaespejo Granadino* (1960), this article examines José Val del Omar's ability to create a poetic form capable of redefining the participatory experience of the spectator. His triple status as a filmmaker, theorist, and inventor enabled him to develop the idea of a tactile vision, with which he sought to follow in the tradition of mystical poetry. At the same time, he became a key link between the avant-garde cinema of the 1920s and the "expanded cinema" and underground cinema of the 1960s and 1970s.

Key words

Experimental film; Spanish Cinema; Haptic Visuality; Editing; Mystical Poetry; Val del Omar; *Aguaespejo granadino*.

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POÉTICA DEL MONTAJE EN AGUAESPEJO GRANADINO: INVESTIGACIÓN ESTÉTICA, TÉCNICA Y PEDAGÓGICA SOBRE LA EXPERIENCIA DEL ESPECTADOR EN LA OBRA DE VAL DEL OMAR

Resumen

A través del análisis del montaje y de los mecanismos poéticos de rima, adyacencia y yuxtaposición en *Aguaespejo granadino* (1960), se estudia la capacidad del cineasta Val del Omar para gestar una forma poética capaz de redefinir la experiencia participativa del espectador. Su triple condición de cineasta, teórico e inventor le permitió desarrollar la idea de una visión táctil, en la que perseguía una inscripción en la tradición de la poesía mística, al mismo tiempo que se convirtió en un eslabón clave entre el cine de vanguardia de los años veinte y el cine expandido y *underground* de los sesenta y setenta.

Palabras clave

Cine experimental; cine español; visualidad háptica; montaje; poesía mística; Val del Omar; *Aguaespejo granadino*.

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