

Devo(ra)tional Cinema: Spectacle, Ritual, and the Senses in
Cold War Latin American and Spanish Experimental Film

by

Laura Jaramillo

Graduate Program in Literature
Duke University

Approved:

Negar Mottahedeh, Supervisor

Markos Hadjioannou

Anne Garréta

Richard Rosa

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation revisits a neglected archive of avant-garde Cold War-era Latin American and Spanish films which use baroque, excessive aesthetic strategies inspired by popular religious ritual: the experimental documentaries and expanded cinema inventions of Spanish filmmaker-mystic José Val del Omar; the Mexican psychedelic exploitation epics of Chilean polymath Alejandro Jodorowsky; and the Cuban revolutionary films of Manuel Octavio Gómez. This corpus of filmmakers grappled with the problem of cinema's role within the global system of capitalist media spectacle. Drawing on Guy Debord's 1967 theorization of spectacle as the culmination of the West's privileging of vision above all other senses, I contend that the ultimate end of capitalist spectacle's offer of seemingly limitless pleasure is sensorial numbing. My project tracks a growing recognition during the 1960s that the ubiquity of imported Western media images within the global south doomed subjects to passive consumerism and worse, to the extinction of older epistemologies based in the non-visual senses like touch, hearing, taste, and smell. The films I examine counter ocularcentric rationalism with the sensorial immersion of ecstatic experience. By contrast to the better-known militant anti-colonial films of the period that depict armed struggle, these films experiment with forms of ritual in order to reconstitute the body's senses as a major ground for decolonial epistemic resistance where the rationality of political discourse

fails. In doing so, these filmmakers reconstitute the cinema as a key site for immersive, collective experience.

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Introduction

This dissertation investigates ritual as a key aesthetic mode in Latin American and Spanish experimental cinema of the Cold War, a corpus I term “devorational cinema.” I use the term devorational to describe how this corpus of experimental films devours the symbols of capitalism, religion, and colonialism, spitting them back out as rituals that incite the intense embodiment of liminal experience. The baroque, visually excessive corpus of films I examine by Alejandro Jodorowsky (Mexico), Manuel Octavio Gómez (Cuba), and José Val del Omar (Spain) figure liturgical performance from an array of magico-religious traditions. Eschewing normative codes of structuring narrative on film in favor of an initiatory structure, these films do not merely represent ritual on screen but are themselves rituals. Produced in the years before the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the years immediately following the brutal defeat of the 1968 Mexican student movement, the devorational corpus critique neocolonialism’s entanglement with capitalist media spectacle. As Guy Debord theorized in 1967, spectacle continually displaces lived political struggle with its representation in media images. By attending to an under-theorized aspect of spectacle—namely, its paradoxical intensification of sensory experience on one hand and its hollowing out of critical subjectivity. By contrast to the more famous militant tendency in Latin American cinema of the 60s and 70s, whose practitioners proposed to counter spectacle with authentic national culture,

devorational cinema challenged spectacle by generating more spectacular images that critique ontological nationalism. This project attends to the ways that the devorational corpus theorizes the proper role of spectacle in cinema as an opportunity for sensorial immersion that maintains a space for critique. The filmmakers in my project understood ritual's mediation on film as creating a sensory commons capable of fighting the atomizing drive of an ever-expanding, anesthetizing multi-national media apparatus.

I began this dissertation in 2014 intending to write a history of avant-garde Latin American and Spanish experimental cinema, a category which had not been excavated by film historians. As the project developed, however, I realized that I did not have enough time or experience to navigate all the archives that such a project would require. The important, arduous, and collaborative work of finding and often restoring these films back to a watchable state was only beginning to take shape in curatorial projects like Jesse Lerner's massive 2017 "ISMO ISMO ISMO" program of experimental Latin American Cinema for Los Angeles' Pacific Standard Time.¹ The realization that the archival work of the project I envisioned was not possible ultimately caused a huge reorientation of the project, but my initial only limitedly fruitful research did show me the paucity of deep theorizations of experimental hispanophone cinema, let alone the

¹ Show catalogue: Lerner, Jesse, ed. *Ismo, Ismo, Ismo: Cine Experimental En América Latina*. Oakland, California: Los Angeles Filmforum, 2017.

theorization of hispanophone cinema writ large. I found the study of Latin American film to be predominantly historicist, even when it was Marxist or generally left in outlook and this seemed like a significant elision considering what I understand as the vast conceptual and visual richness of late modernist and early postmodern Latin American cinema.²

I stress the importance of theory as a hermeneutic in the study of Latin American and Spanish cinema not because it is relatively novel compared to existing historicist accounts, but because I believe that the concerns of theory can better illuminate history's affective and aesthetic dimensions. By mapping the circulation of the cinematic image as it transforms throughout the hispanophone world, we can better understand bits of lived social reality that make up history's greater narrative. Another part of this project's initial research involved examining canonical European and American avant-garde film histories. These too presented some clear limitations as these studies often seemed extremely hagiographic in tone, gesturing towards theory while unconsciously affirming the author function and remaining uncritical of the ways that vanguard film subtly

² Paul Shroeder Rodriguez's excellent article on the neobaroque tendency in Latin American cinema and his comparative history of Latin American cinema are a notable exception to the historicist orthodoxy of Latin American film studies. Rodriguez, Paul A. Schroeder. "After New Latin American Cinema." *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012). And Schroeder, Paul A. *Latin American Cinema: A Comparative History*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016.

reproduced race, class, and gender hierarchies within the U.S. and continental Europe.³

With these limitations at the forefront of my project, my most pressing questions became: what would film theory constructed from Latin American and Spanish films look like? And what would a theoretical account of the avant-garde film that was attentive to race, class, and gender in its mapping of aesthetic form look like?

My project then began to take shape as one of gathering together a small group of films that I felt to be both emblematic and important to the genre across a number of national contexts within the hispanophone world, films whose production historically coincided with Latin America's mid-twentieth century literary neovanguards, the earliest stirrings of Spain's transition out of fascism's cultural deep freeze, and the New Latin American cinema.⁴ Avant-garde film practices had existed in Latin America and

³ Sitney's canonical account of the American avant-garde remains the definitive text of this genre, both for its ambition and its relative lack of criticality towards the filmmaking movement. However, a new generation of critics like Ara Osterweil examining the history of American avant-garde film have started to do some deeper historicization of the avant-garde. See Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*. 3rd ed. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. And Osterweil, Ara. *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014.

⁴ Literary critic Oscar Galindo identifies the commonality between different literary Latin American mid-century vanguards in Peru, Mexico, and Colombia as being their senses of social and aesthetic transgression mixed with revolutionary optimism. Oscar V. "Neovanguardias hipervitalistas en la poesía hispanoamericana (1958-1976): nihilistas, revolucionarios, solidarios y

Spain in dribs and drabs since around the late 20s and early 30s—exemplified by works like Brazilian Mário Peixoto's *Limite* (1930) and Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929). But the broader cultural efflorescence of early postmodernity, the 50s through the 70s seemed like the most fruitful place to start because of the ways that aesthetic and radical political energies were entangled during the Cold War. As has been well-documented by scholars of the New Latin American cinema, or Third Cinema, the cinematic production of the period went hand in hand with the decolonization movements and leftist militancy that swept the continent beginning with the Cuban revolution of 1959.⁵

In the first flush of the revolution, the founding of Cuba's Instituto Cubano del Arte y Industrias Cinematográficas's (ICAIC) 1959 established the island nation as a leader in radical film production, inspiring guerilla filmmaking across the region. Third Cinema, strongly characterized by the use of mixed fictional and documentary

amorosos*/Hypervitalist Neo-Vanguards in Hispano-American Poetry (1958-1976): Nihilist, Revolutionary, Solidary and Affectionate." *Taller de Letras; Santiago*, no. 52 (2013): 11–37.

⁵ See Pick, Zuzana M. *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project*. 1st ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993. Martin, Michael T. *New Latin American Cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. Burton, Julianne. *The Social Documentary in Latin America*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990.

techniques, the use of natural actors, and low-budget guerilla style production, came to define canonical accounts of Latin American film in the West. Like many cultural movements that were defined more by the manifestos of their artists than by a nuanced attention to the pieces in their corpus, Third Cinema's programmatic wing has consistently overshadowed some of the movement's complexity. The excess of critical attention paid to documentary has also obscured individual aesthetically innovative films produced during Third Cinema's heyday which fall outside the movement's more explicitly militant tendency.⁶ This dissertation project represents an attempt to both to expand existing critical accounts of an important sub-tendency within the New Latin American cinema and to detail the aesthetic and intellectual tendencies that operated very much alongside the more militant films of the period. Further, this project argues that the avant-garde film production of the period was an important space not only for aesthetic experimentation, but for epistemic experimentation towards answering the

⁶ The most iconic of these manifestos remain Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa's *Towards an Imperfect Cinema* and Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *"Towards a Third Cinema."* The latter document became gave the eponymous name to the cinematic movement, third because its production was neither the first world productions of Hollywood nor second cinema, European art cinema. *"Towards a Third Cinema by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino."* <http://documentaryisneverneutral.com/words/camasgun.html>. And *"For an Imperfect Cinema by Julio García Espinosa, Trans. by Julianne Burton."* <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html>.

questions of what capitalist hegemony does the senses and how the conditions of the senses are related to freedom under this hegemony?

I identify this neglected tendency which existed within and alongside Third Cinema's militancy as "devo(ra)tional" cinema, a cross between the cannibalistic impulse towards "devoration" described in Haroldo de Campos's iconic theorization of a transhistorical Latin American baroque literature and a "devotional" impulse to treat the cinematic image as if it bore a sacred or magical charge.⁷ In "Europe Under the Sign of Devoration," Campos identifies pastiche, syncretism, and the bricolaging of disparate cultural elements as aesthetic strategies that reflect a will to undo a unitary conception of nationhood within avant-garde Latin American literature.⁸ Like Campos' cannibalistic literature, which teems with linguistic signification, the devorational cinema I examine is visually baroque and highly corporeal, presenting the viewer with an excess of visual and symbolic signification within the diegesis that exceeds the films' narrative drive.⁹

⁷ American experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorksy wrote a book titled *Devotional Cinema* which considers details Dreyer's films as allowing the viewer to come into contact with the unfolding "nowness" of the world. Dorksy, Nathaniel. *Devotional Cinema: Revised 3rd Edition*. Revised edition. Tuumba Press, 2014.

⁸ Campos, Haroldo de, and María Tai Wolff. "The Rule of Anthropophagy: Europe under the Sign of Devoration." *Latin American Literary Review* 14, no. 27 (1986): 42-60.

⁹ Kristen Thompson characterizes cinematic excess as the juncture at which the narrative motivations for visual a film's visual devices fails. Thompson, Kristen. "The

The devorational corpus oscillates oscillate between these two aesthetic strategies—
ironic detournment as critique and the staging of syncretic ritualized spectacle.

While devorational cinema tends to be either subtly or highly irreverent, it is also noticeably preoccupied with questions of religion and popular religiosity. Religious spectacle is figured prominently in these films in a number of ways: as liturgical performance on screen; as a way of structuring narrative; even as a way of re-structuring the cinematic apparatus. Though this study focuses on only three filmmakers—Spanish mystic and film technician José Val del Omar, Chilean psychomagician¹⁰ Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Cuban revolutionary filmmaker Manuel Octavio Gómez—I would argue that the devorational tendency encompasses films by diverse filmmakers of the period. This includes filmmakers and artists like including Brazilian Glauber Rocha, Cuban performance artist Ana Mendieta, certain films by Cuban documentarian

Concept of Cinematic Excess.” Rosen, Philip. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 130-142.

¹⁰ Psychomagic is a discipline that Jodorowsky developed in the 1990’s many decades after the production of his Mexican films. Psychomagic describes the merger of different aspects of psychoanalysis, magic, and tarot as a therapeutic practice. I use the term here because it describes well the ways that Jodorowsky conceives of the practice of filmmaking as a medium in which magic, psychology, and therapy meet.

Santiago Álvarez, Chilean art filmmaker Raúl Ruiz, and the absurdist films of Brazilian Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, amongst many others.

Though I contend that devorational cinema can be understood as a strand already existing within Third Cinema, there are key differences between how the two conceptualize a) the role of the cinema within national culture and b) the ideal function of the cinematic image. These difference mark off the most representative strains of Third Cinema from its counter-hegemonic strains in devorational cinema. The decolonial imperative of Third Cinema, heavily linked to militant struggles in Cuba, Brazil, and Argentina, often presented cinema as central to the Fanon-ian project of making revolutionary national culture visible.¹¹ This project is apparent in a range of Third Cinema's most canonical films like Bolivian Jorge Sanjinés' *The Courage of the People* (1971), Cuban Humberto Solas' *Lucía* (1968), and Argentines Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968). While the historical importance of national culture is not to be underestimated, the image of national culture across a number of countries during this period emerges as masculine and heroic, wedded to

¹¹ Third Cinema's various practitioners and theorists saw themselves as responding to Martiniquan philosopher's call for decolonial national cultures, which would be an antidote to the absence of any images of the colonized or by the distorted images of the colonized put forth by colonial cultures. Frantz Fanon ; preface by Jean-Paul Sartre ; translated by Constance Farrington. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1961.

realism. Political struggle is presented as existing exclusively in the realm of the factory worker or the miner. Further, Third Cinema's theoretical wing, concerned with smashing the escapist spectacle of Hollywood cinema, produced an account of the cinematic image as a transparent and neutral document that attests to reality. For example, in one of the most orthodox theoretical account of Third Cinema, Solanas and Getino write, "The capacity for synthesis and the penetration of the film image, the possibilities offered by the living document, and naked reality... make the film far more effective than any other tool of communication."¹² Solanas and Getino ally liberation with visibility, assuming cinema as the ground for a rational public sphere.¹³ While at this historical juncture, documentary served as an essential tool for fostering national and internationalist decolonial movements, this schema too easily loses track of cinematic images as inherently slippery and subject to cooptation.

Devorational cinema also bear witness to colonial exploitation and racial oppression, but is characterized by either an outright refusal or a critique of the ontological nation form. Whether in Jodorowsky's surrealist parables of the neocolonial

¹² Solanas, Fernando and and Getino, Octavio. "Towards a Third Cinema by Fernando." <http://documentaryisneverneutral.com/words/camasgun.html>

condition, or Gómez's mobilization of racialized Cuban popular cultural tropes, or Val del Omar's excavation of media tactility as bounded to racial difference, the officially sanctioned narrative of nationhood is one that necessitates racial exclusion and buttresses the concentration of political power into the hands of the ruling classes. More importantly, at the dawn of globalization, devorational cinema critically reflects on how aided by technology, transnational capital supersedes the nineteenth-century nation state form. From within this recognition, the devorational corpus thinks through capitalist media spectacle's reorganization of sensuous experience in modernity. In concrete terms, spectacle describes the process in which industrial capitalism in its waning phases starts to give way late capitalism, an economy based on consumption and service rather than on production.¹⁴ Late capitalist economies are more dependent on images, or spectacle, because they use images to sell experiences to consumers. In a more philosophical sense, spectacle refers to how the subjects of capitalism come to

¹⁴ On the connection between spectacle and the transition to de-industrialization Debord writes, "As the indispensable packaging for things produced as they are now produced, as a general gloss on the rationality of the system, and as the advanced economic sector directly responsible for the manufacture of an ever-growing mass of image-objects, the spectacle is the chief product of present-day society." Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994, 15.

identify with images over lived social relationships.¹⁵ I use the term spectacle throughout this project in two inter-related ways, first to refer to Debord's philosophical project and the second to describe the ways that the tendency towards exhibition over narrative in film draws the spectator into an aesthetics of wonder, what Tom Gunning terms "the cinema of attractions."¹⁶ The two are related in the sense that the predominance of shiny, attracting images laid over a system of extractive violence under capitalism leads to the condition of being capture to images describe by Debord. All three filmmakers in this project—Jodorowsky, Val del Omar, and Gómez—understood spectacle as a problem not just of subjectivity but of how bodily experience is mobilized towards the project of shaping an increasingly atomized postmodern subjectivity. For the devorational filmmakers, the wonder of cinematic spectacle was central to film's power, but had to be mobilized in critical ways. Devorational cinema, like Third Cinema, saw the hegemony of Hollywood film as the soft power arm of spectacle.

But rather than endeavoring to smash the illusionism of Hollywood cinema as Solanas and Getino proposed, the devorational filmmakers were instead interested in using spectacular images for their own ends. Though postmodern capital would be

¹⁵ Ibid. 5.

¹⁶ Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle*, 8, no. nos. 3 & 4 (Fall 1986).

historically slower to penetrate the national economic contexts discussed in this project, the devotional filmmakers recognized spectacle as a relationship to images first implanted by the imperial Catholic church during the colonization of Latin America. Val del Omar, who drew extensively on the imperial baroque archive, used these images to undermine the historical process of internal colonization of pagan others within the bounds of the Spanish peninsula. Under this spectacular colonial relationship, images of a white Christ serve as the symbolic control, while the racialized violence of empire enforces material control. However, the Catholic tradition of treating religious art and popular religious spectacles as bearing a palpable aura of the sacred also provides a rich ground for the devotional filmmakers' play with spectacle as a form of a critique. Further, through this highly material relationship to religious icons inherited from Catholicism, devotional cinema formulates an alternative concept of the cinematic image away from modernist ocularcentrism, towards a concept of the image that is both more ancient and more postmodern in its synesthetic or tactile drive. In the devotional corpus, images contain a high degree of irrationality and vital energy that acts on the spectator.

Throughout this project a central concern is identifying the vital energies which the cinematic image is imbued and how this stands in contrast to a modernist conception of the image. Third Cinema's political modernism reflects a more less

Bazinian understanding of the cinematic image in which the the medium-specific characteristics of photography embalm the once living objects of history.¹⁷ For Bazin, photography constituted a major technological breakthrough of realism within the history of Western art, which according to the critic had gradually evolved away from symbolic, spiritual representation towards realist, psychological representation.¹⁸

Devorational cinema by contrast has no significant concept of medium specificity. In the devorational corpus, all images, whether drawn, painted, or indexically captured are imbued with palpable, tactile force in the manner of magical fetish objects.

Anthropologist Michael Taussig terms the so called primitive concept of images as maintaining a magical or “mimetic” connection between the thing representation and the representation. Taussig’s theory further suggests that through depiction, images take on a degree of magical control over the things they represent rather than just being sterile depictions.¹⁹ The notion that images have real power over the one who gazes on them operates across my corpus, albeit in different ways. José Val del Omar’s cinematic

¹⁷ Bazin, Andre. “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” in *What Is Cinema?* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹ In his ethnography of Colombia’s Cuba tribe, Michael Taussig uses figurines of white colonialists carved by the tribe as “primitive” examples of representations that bear magical control over their subjects. Taussig, Michael T. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

inventions, for example, sought through interventions into the negative and the projector, to amplify the ghostly tactility of the cinematic image so that this essence could be better felt by spectators. Jodorowsky's films also reflect a conception of the film image as having mimetic and kinesthetic power in their capacity to incite ritual spectatorship within the space of the movie theater. And Gómez and his long time collaborator, cinematographer Jorge Herrera, constructed images as containing a number of syncretic levels that are concealed by the surface of the image.

Throughout this project I contend that devotional cinema responds to the acceleration of appeals to the senses by capitalist media culture. While this acceleration may see superficially like an intensification of media's ability to immersively engage the sensorium, I argue that the visual, tactile, and aural all-at-once-ness of postmodern spectacle leads to an atrophy of the senses as a precondition to experience. Historically, the 1960s marked the intensification of commodity culture all over the world as sensory experience increasingly became an object of market research and a driver of consumption.²⁰ David Howes describes capital's turn away from the industrially produced commodity and towards sensory research and marketing, the "hyperesthetic"

²⁰ Howes, David. "Hyperesthesia, of the Sensory Logic of Late Capitalism." In Howes, edited by David. *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*. Sensory Formations Series. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005.

turn in late capitalism.²¹ Where under Fordist industrial modernity, vision was the main vehicle of appeals to the consumer, under postmodern capital, the rest of the sensorium became a target for the techno-political project of inciting consumption. According to Howes, early postmodernity marked an explosion of market research seeking to investigate how smell, touch, and hearing could become the grounds for sensory commodification.²² Through the immersive experience of ritual, devotional cinema contests two key aspects of the commodification of sensory experience under postmodernity a) the reification of the discrete individual and more broadly b) the atrophy of experience.

As Marshall McLuhan argued, the invention of printing press in the fifteenth century and the rise of alphabetic literacy would cement the “enclosure” of the senses. Under this enclosure, the five senses would be conceived of as separate from each other rather than synesthetically enmeshed.²³ According to McLuhan, this separation of the

²¹ McLuhan points to the development of typography as the first technology that set the enclosure of the sensory commons in motion, writing, “It is not entirely self-evident today that typography should have been the means and occasion of individualism and self-expression in society. That it should have been the means of fostering habits of private property, privacy, and many forms of “enclosure” is perhaps more evident.” McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy; the Making of Typographic Man* University of Toronto Press, 1962, 150.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

senses would in turn strengthen the notion of each monadic individual as sensorially, spiritually, and economically separate from that of their community. For the devotional filmmakers, especially for Val del Omar, the cinema, if wielded as a technology to foster empathy had the potential to reverse the habits of private property fostered by alphabetic literacy. For the Spanish filmmaker, cinema could incite an experience of communal empathy, not through psychological identification with subjects on screen, but through collective sensory experience. For Val del Omar, as well as for the other devotional filmmaker, shared sensory experience is the basis for empathy. The ability to feel sensation and know that others feel it too reminds us of our mutual vulnerability and capacity for delight.

The notion that numbing becomes necessary to surviving the technological and sensorial encroachments of modernity is central to Walter Benjamin's diagnosis of the role of film in modernity. Benjamin observed that industrial modernity, with its explosion of technologies of mechanical reproducibility, reorganized the human sensorium around speed and shock.²⁴ This vast reorganization of the senses, in turn, demanded that mass art forms like film serve as a training ground for helping humans

²⁴ Benjamin, Walter. "On some motifs in Baudelaire." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press, 2006.

to develop perceptive strategies for coping with the increasingly traumatic, fragmented character of modern life.²⁵ If post-industrial capital marks a further intensification of mediated stimuli and the vast commodification of experience, then this period also inaugurates what I call anesthetic culture. This anesthetic turn is apparent in Debord's theorization of spectacle, which he designated as the, "the phenomenon of separation" between reality and images." I interpret Debord's writing on spectacle as tracking a process where by the senses lose their status as a tangible anchor of perceptible reality or truth. In this paradigm, culture is excessively spectacular and ubiquitous to the point of having a numbing effect on the spectator. While the student protest movements of the late-1960s have come to emblemize the alienation at the heart of capitalist societies, a central contention of this project is that devorational cinema recognized alienation in the context of increasingly commodified sensory experience.

Devorational cinema short-circuits spectacle's numbing through the creation of hyper-visual, attracting images of ritual that incite the immersive sensory experience of ritual in the spectator. Ritual performance becomes a central aesthetic strategy to devorational cinema because of its capacity to incite the disorientation of liminal experience in the communal space of the movie theater. I define liminality after Victor

²⁵ Ibid.

Turner as the temporary experience of disorientation which accompanies the exit from structured society that occurs in the ritual process.²⁶ Liminality is traditionally associated with social otherness, as well with the feeling of being unmoored from habitual modes of perceiving and sensing. This project argues that certain forms of film spectator are always already analogous to ritual in their ability to create a framework for liminal experience to take place. Ritual in this project occupies both a negative and positive valence. In its positive valences, I define ritual as an aestheticized performance in which the body's actions are choreographed according to pre-determined or liturgical schemas meant to trigger states of liminal consciousness. As anthropologist Victor Turner famously noted, ritual performance is characterized by "flow states," where action and intention are merged and time consciousness is reduced so that the performer becomes both totally immersed in their environment and focused to the point of going beyond regular attention, into distraction or apperception.²⁷ Turner cites polo and gambling as prime examples of 'autotelic' activities (repetitive and for themselves) which like ritual

²⁶ Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995.

²⁷ Turner, Victor. "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*; Tokyo 6, no. 4 (December 1, 1979): 465-499.

can trigger flow states that merge the experience of movement, time, and space for the performer.²⁸

The between time and space described by Turner in ritual is remarkably analogous to Walter Benjamin's description of cinema spectatorship as sensory entrainment in the *Art Work* essay. One of Benjamin central claims in the essay is that film teaches the masses to cope with the shocks of modernity by allowing viewers to mimetically identify with the rhythms and discontinuities of modern life played out in films' formal characteristics.²⁹ For Benjamin, this mimetic identification schools spectators in the art of apperception or distracted viewing. In both Turner's account of ritual flow and Benjamin's account of cinema spectatorship, apperception is a progressive form of attention because it allows the subject to become unmoored from subjective positions and identify at least temporarily with collective sensory experience. Thus in the positive ritual spectatorship, the experience of being in the movie theater and watching a film relieves the viewer of the highly individuated experience of postmodern life.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility" (2nd version) Benjamin, Walter. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 2: 1931-1934*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005.

But the ritual spectatorship I identify in devotional also has a distinctly negative valence. In its negative dimensions, ritual is the condition of one's actions being inextricably enmeshed in a predetermined symbolic system of control, whether theological or political in nature. Negative ritualization then becomes the condition of losing one's agency to a simulated reality whose sensorial characteristics immediately pleasurable but whose structures and inner workings are unknowable. In the context of spectacle, negative ritualization emblemizes the problem of virtuality, where the world is undergirded by intricate coded systems beyond human perception, but which nonetheless influence human action. As Brian Massumi explains "virtuality as such is inaccessible to the senses. This does not, however, preclude figuring it, in the sense of constructing images of it. On the contrary, it requires a multiplication of images."³⁰ I would argue that devotional cinema's wild multiplication of ritualistic images functions similarly to what Massumi describes as the necessity of multiplying images for understanding the contours of virtuality.

Rather than reading devotional cinema's deployment of religious and magical symbolism as a nostalgia for the so-called-primitive, the corpus' deployment of ritual performance represents an attempt to figure what the new grounds of symbolic power

³⁰ Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Post-Contemporary Interventions. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002, 133.

are in a society that feels increasingly virtual in all its dimensions. If the 1960s marked a historic boundary between the high point of cinephilic spectatorship and the birth of computing, the rise of experimental and expanded cinema during this same period bridges the two technologies with the idea that spectators' bodies are increasingly enmeshed by a technological apparatus. Val del Omar's expanded cinema and Jodorowsky's ritual spectatorship pose the question of what becomes of lived reality under such conditions. Though the national contexts in which this project is staged—Spain, Cuba, and Mexico—would have experienced this hyperesthetic turn to very different degrees, these countries' positions at a remove from the core of the world system actually gives these filmmakers the advantage of seeing the commodification of experience as one of the pressing problems of a globalized world.

Devorational cinema mobilize two key aesthetic strategies—detournment and syncretism—to level critique and to subvert the predominance of spectacle. The first strategy is to detourn or hijack the visual archive and symbols of imperial baroque Catholicism in order to critique Christianity as fomenting the conditions of capitalist spectacle in the Americas and on the periphery of Europe. For example, in Jodorowsky's, *El Topo*, the settler society who steals the indigenous' dwarves land are members of a blood cult whose ubiquitous emblem is a crude representation of the Eye of Providence, which recurs throughout the film's diegesis. Instead of a traditional cross,

Jodorowsky inserts the symbol which appears on American dollar bills. This ironic hijacking of religious icons critiques that way that settler colonialism's injunction to worship an icon of a white Christ set the stage for a spectacular global capitalism powered on images.

The second major aesthetic strategy I identify in this corpus is the use of ritual performance on screen to render visible the syncretic traditions that Catholicism conceals. Devotional cinema mines an archives of magical and popular religious practices like the Afro-Cuban practice of *santería* in Cuba, indigenous Zacateca mushroom rituals in Mexico, or even traces of Sufi thought that inflected the baroque Catholic mystical tradition. Throughout this project I find that the performance of syncretic or magical counter-practices on screen makes visible minoritarian racial, class, and gendered elements that have been suppressed or obscured within national discourses. For example, in Cuban filmmaker's Manuel Octavio Gómez's 1974 epic of revolution and superstition, *Los días del agua*, scenes that figure the protagonists' water healing rituals are presented in psychedelic candy colors that gradually metamorphose into *rumbas santeras*, *santería* ceremonies that like parties include drumming and dancing. Despite the fact that the film was widely understood by Cuba socialist critics as an indictment of popular religiosity as reactionary and retrograde, the chaotic joy of the ritual scenes definitively undercuts this reading. Further, within the window opened up

by ritual, the film's experimental techniques provide the viewer a chance to see differently, to encounter the world through the other-orientation of the ritual process.

Chapter Descriptions

The first chapter of this project looks at works by Spanish filmmaker José Val del Omar in the context of Spanish fascism's program of economic and cultural repression spanning 1940s to the 1960s. This chapter explores the concept of cinematic tactility through the expanded cinema and experimental ethnographic documentaries of Andalusian filmmaker, mystic, and inventor José Val del Omar. For Val del Omar, tactility broadly described how the film image's ghostly materiality inter-mingles with the spectator's body. In the chapter, I weave together Val del Omar's fragmentary writings, texts by media theorists the director read in his lifetime, and close readings of his films and inventions in order to explore the genealogy of the director's idea of tactility. Each constituent part of the chapter explores the diverse web of intellectual traditions from which Val del Omar drew his ideas of media tactility, including Catholic mysticism, children's pedagogy, Islamic philosophy, and the oral tradition of southern Spain. For Val del Omar, tactility is always allied with racial and cultural difference against the abstract technological hegemony of western Europe. I identify Val del Omar's tactility as working at both the level of the image and that of the cinematic

apparatus. Val del Omar's films evidence a fundamentally vitalist concept of the cinematic image where the image retains some essence of its original subject. This essence can be palpably transmitted to the image's viewer. Second, tactility refers to the different ways in which the cinematic apparatus (including the projector, the negative, and visual techniques employed within the mise-en-scene) can incite a disorienting or excessive encounter between viewer and image. If the other chapters in this project deal with films' creation of a ritual frame within which liturgical action occurs, for Val del Omar, cinema technology itself is the device that opens a ritual frame for ecstatic experience to occur.

Through examining Val del Omar's early ethnographic film *Estampas 1932*, the apanoramic overflow system, and two films from experimental documentary epic the *Elemental Triptych of Spain*, I track how Val del Omar's works reflects what Laura Marks calls, "a tactile epistemology." In tactile epistemologies, knowledge is gained through physically touching the surface of the world, rather than through abstracted vision.³¹ For Val del Omar, tactility was always a property immanent to cinema, but the medium's technological evolution towards realism propelled by the U.S. and Western Europe's market dominance had caused film to evolve into pure psychological diversion rather

³¹ Marks, Laura U., and publisher Duke University Press. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

than into a genuinely experiential form. For cinema to evolve into a genuinely experiential form it had to engage the viewer's need for spectacle, as well as establish a hierarchy of ethical values.³² Val del Omar dedicated his life to not only making films, but to making interventions into the cinematic apparatus that could amplify the spectacular qualities of the image and in doing so augment cinema's capacities to incite intense sensorial experience. Throughout his life and works, Val del Omar argued that media's ability to augment tactility could serve as the basis for a cinema that fosters empathic connections between viewers rather than promoting projects of social control.

Born at the beginning of the twentieth-century, Val del Omar was a generation older than Jodorowsky and Gómez. Considering Val del Omar's cultural isolation, his archive and films—some of the first expanded cinema pieces in film history—are astonishingly visionary. These works and the theoretical writings that accompany them provide insights into the future problems and possibilities of an ever-expanding global media apparatus controlled in the global north. Val del Omar's works plants the seed of the project's interest in how ritual presents an alternative epistemology for understanding media within the context of modernism, though the project ultimately

³² Val del Omar, José. "Meca-misticism of cinema" in José Val del Omar, Javier Ortiz-Echagüe, and Santos Zunzunegui. *Escritos de técnica poética y mística*. Madrid: LES PUNXES, 2010, 281-282.

moves towards investigating how media spectacle precipitates a full-blown crisis of experience within postmodernity. This crisis of experience is most strongly embodied in the second chapter of the project, which examines how film ritual emerges as a strategy for coping with political trauma during Mexico's induction into neoliberal economics.

The second chapter of this project reads films by Alejandro Jodorowsky in the context of the Mexican student movement and Mexico City's avant-garde arts scene. The chapter examines the cult reception and ritualistic structure of Alejandro Jodorowsky's Mexican midnight movies *El Topo* (1970) and *The Holy Mountain* (1973).³³ The most well-known of the films this dissertation covers, Jodorowsky's Mexican movies became infamous because of the repetitive, ritualistic way in which American counter-culture audiences attended the films' midnight screenings. This chapter theorizes how the liturgical structure of Jodorowsky's midnight movies' inspired their cultish reception. I contend the films' form and reception constitute the movie theater as a space of communitarian, sensorially immersive encounter in the wake of the trauma and atomization wrought by the student massacres of the late-60s in Mexico and the U.S. I argue that the films, rather than being actually reparative, end up epitomizing the

³³ My job talk brings the threads of this chapter together better than the actual chapter as it is currently written. The description found here reflects what the chapter will look like in the future than how it looks now.

ambivalent status of ritual within postmodern culture. Here, ritual is simultaneously the repetitive enactment of forms vacated of belief and the performance of actions that can trigger an authentic experience of liminality.

The chapter moves through Jodorowsky's involvement with mime and his early Mexico City experimental performance work, tracking the director's fraught relationship to corporality, always associated in these early works with femininity. The middle sections of the chapter sketch the transnational historical production and reception contexts of Jodorowsky's midnight diptych. By examining the counter-cultural milieu of Jodorowsky in Mexico and of his films' reception in the U.S., I explore the ways that the counter-cultural formations of the mid-to-late 1960s served as spaces to think through practices of daily life, adjunct to the period's radical political movements. These counter-cultural spaces open up a demand for epistemic experimentation in which ritual spectatorship becomes thinkable as a reparative practice. My close reading of *El Topo* explores how cinematic images can inspire a mimetic, ritualistic form of spectatorship. In the penultimate section, I read Jodorowsky's allegorization of the student massacre of Tlatelolco in the science fiction epic *The Holy Mountain* as pictorially figuring the condition of spectacle. Jodorowsky's surreal images of the massacre are spectacular images in that they both represent a hyperaesthetic saturation of the visual field, while also transmitting palpable traces of traumatized numbness. Departing from the notion

that the photographic image possesses a ghostly aliveness, I argue that Jodorowsky's works reveal spectacle as a system of images that wields mimetic power over the viewer.

The third chapter examines the work of Manuel Octavio Gómez made a decade after the 1959 Cuban revolution's optimism was beginning to wane and Cuba's first economic crisis was beginning to set in. The chapter examines the role of performance in two of Gómez's films, *Tulipa* (1967) and *Los días del agua* (1971). Gómez, who collaborated throughout his career with cinematographer Jorge Herrera, was one of the revolution's most formally innovative filmmakers. Gómez's work was notable for its engagement with minoritarian themes—the subjective experiences of women, Afro-Cuban folklore, and camp performance. His films often elided the heroic masculinity often seen on screen in the wake of the 1959 revolution. Though Gómez was one of the first wave of directors of the Cuban revolution and was well-liked by the Cuban public during his lifetime, his films have been forgotten for the past few decades. This chapter proposes that through his figuration of various types of spectacular bodily performance at key points in the diegesis, Gómez's films constitute early iterations of Latin American neobaroque cinema.³⁴ Gómez's neobaroque cinema uses bodily performance as a place

³⁴ Paul Schroeder Rodriguez's historical account of the transition between the New Latin American Cinema of the 60s and 70s and the "melorealism" of the 90s was bridged by a neobaroque phase in the 1980s. While Shroeder Rodriguez's periodization useful in its identification of broader shifts, I argue that the

that both syncretically conceals and reveals difference. I contend that Gómez's use of minoritarian performance can help us to re-think Julio García Espinosa's theorization of Third Cinema by centering practices of every day life like magic rituals and dancing as forms of anti-heroic yet revolutionary cultural praxis.³⁵ These kinds of performance, bound to every day life, serve as archives for preserving the revolution as an animating myth under the most precarious material circumstances.

Gómez, whose films often mixed fictional elements with narratives from Cuban history, frequently revisited the history of Cuba neocolonial "pseudorepublic" in order to explore the psychic and economic conditions that gave rise to revolution. Both *Tulipa* and *The Days of Water* are staged at different points during the pseudorepublic. The chapter is divided into two major parts, the first analyzes the fictional film *Tulipa* the story of an aging circus stripper. This sections investigates the conditions of women workers during the pseudorepublic as well as the ways that circus materially and

neobaroque tendency is inherent to the New Latin American Cinema, evidence by filmmakers like Gómez interested in mixing documentary and fiction in extravagant ways Rodriguez, Paul A. Schroeder. "After New Latin American Cinema." *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012).

³⁵ Espinosa, Julio García. "For an Imperfect Cinema" by Trans. by Julianne Burton <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html>.

philosophically sets up an infrastructure for Cuban mass culture in the long nineteenth-century. By close reading an instance of Tula stripping, I show how Tula's refusal to completely show her body to an audience of men through a rhetoric of Arabized dancing mobilizes a code of otherness. The second part of the chapter looks at Gómez's *Los días del agua*, which takes up a news story from the psuedorepublic about a peasant woman whose powers to heal with water are symbolically appropriated by a local politician. Through syncretically mixing various religious traditions on screen with water healing practices, Gómez and his collaborators present an ambiguous allegory of religion. Though on its face, magic is presented as promoting ignorance, magic also serves as a liminal space where the hope of freedom is kept alive. My analysis of both films emphasizes how images of bodily spectacle serve as places where racial, class, and gender difference become visible in the face of a nationalist criollo discourse that historically sought to minimize difference.

A Note on Method

Throughout this project, I have tried to conjugate a historical approach with a theoretical approach in my treatment of the devorational corpus. The historical aspect of the project has presented particular challenges for me as my training has been almost entirely in theory and I started the project having no experience with even the basic

grammars of historical writing. I think this struggle is evident in my prose. But because seed of this project departs from thinking through Walter Benjamin's assertion that the human sensorium is historically-produced, the more purely formalist-philosophical approach that I was prepared to do at the beginning of the project would have fallen short. One of the central preoccupations of this dissertation is trying to understanding how novel aesthetic forms express the oppositional values of a given historical moment before these forms are recuperated by the market or by the state. As such, I felt I needed to needed a way of close reading films that accounted for both semiotics and the phenomenological experience of film. In general, in my readings of films I hue more to the idea that people identify mimetically with the attracting qualities of the image (color, rhythm, of editing, movement on screen) than with the psychological details of plot and character.

Chapter 1. José Val del Omar's Tactile Cinema

1. Introduction

From the late 1920s to the early 1980s, Andalusian filmmaker, inventor, and mystic José Val del Omar produced an enigmatic and formally complex body of experimental cinema, as well as a number of technical inventions for improving the projection and consumption conditions for cinema. Together these projects reveal an idiosyncratic techno-utopianism informed by early media theory, Spanish folk tradition, and Catholic mysticism. This chapter analyzes key works in Val del Omar's oeuvre in order to sketch out the filmmaker's theories of cinematic tactility. For Val del Omar, tactility described not just the faculty of touch, but the whole process whereby the senses extend into the world to apprehend sense data, including spatial proprioception and hearing. Val del Omar sought to make tactility the basis for an alternative cinematic apparatus that could foster ethics and community, using the space of the movie theater as a site for this encounter. Val del Omar's film and inventions are modeled on what Laura Marks terms "a tactile epistemology," where "knowledge is gained not on the model of vision but through physical contact."³⁶ In this chapter, I connect Val del Omar's inventions with his films and archival writings in order to illuminate the often

³⁶ Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, 138.

unexpected conceptual underpinnings of a highly original and idiosyncratic filmmaker's thought, whose *mecamística* (mechanical mysticism) aimed to synthesize faith, technology, and modernity. *Mecamística* proposed that media's inherent ability to connect individuals should serve as its guiding principle, marshalling media's haptic and aural extension of the senses to help overcome modern atomization and individuation.

My work in this chapter is based on archival research I did in Val del Omar's archive. Val del Omar's writings are notoriously difficult to make sense of because of the oblique and fragmentary character of his writing.³⁷ Many of the documents I quote originally appear in multiple iterations on different scraps of paper collected over the course of fifty years, while Val del Omar's patents are laden with poetic language, rather than the scientific, technical language one would expect from such documents. Val del Omar was constantly creating neologisms in order to more accurately express his conjunction of mysticism, the technical, and poetics. *Mecamística cinemista* (mystical filmmaker), *desbordamiento apanoramico* (apanoramic overflow) are a few of the filmmaker's terms that I will use throughout the chapter. Rather than systematic synthesis, I focus on Val del Omar's thought regarding the empathic and tactile

³⁷ Zunzunegui, Santos. *José Val del Omar: Escritos de poetica, tecnica, y mística*. (2010: Madrid: Les punxes 1900), 3.

dimensions of the cinematic image. Though Val del Omar's archive reflects an eclectic range of influences, I highlight the particular affinities that emerge in the filmmaker's archive with early media theorists Walter Benjamin and Marshall McLuhan, amounting to a mutually held conception of mediated modernity as perpetually haunted by the sacred. Benjamin's historicization of the auratic under the conditions of industrial modernity and the critical dimensions of McLuhan's Catholic humanism provide a theoretical underpinning to Val del Omar's account of tactile media. McLuhan provides a particularly strong support for the filmmaker's idea that touch was the sentient faculty most central to oral cultures. Throughout this chapter I refer to touch as the specific sense that Val del Omar understood as underpinning the more primordial, philosophical category of tactility. In its various uses, Val del Omar's tactility sits somewhere between what contemporary film scholarship would call embodied affect, the body's pre-cognitive reactions to stimuli, and a more ghostly, less scientific category in which cinematic images contain a spirit-like essence of the thing photographed, which can touch viewer's bodies. Val del Omar alternates between these two definitions and sometimes means both.

Val del Omar's work as a filmmaker was largely unknown even within Spain until Madrid's Reina Sofia Museum did a major retrospective in 2010 entitled "Desbordamiento," ("Overflow") showcasing his films, inventions, and other works.

Since the 2010 retrospective a small body of critical work has begun to emerge. This chapter intends to develop the conversation on the filmmaker's work further by examining how tactility functions as both a concept, drawing on many philosophical and religious sources, and a guiding technical principal for his inventions. Val del Omar was an intermedial artist par excellence: his oeuvre included films, drawings, sculptures, photographs, collages, and sonic experiments, amongst other things. But most importantly, Val del Omar understood crafting and designing technical utilitarian tools as an aesthetic activity *on par* with filmmaking. His myriad machines, the Bi-Standards, the Chroma-tácto, the PalpíColor, TactílVision, cannot be separated from the tactile aesthetics of his films.

Val del Omar's tendency to break with the standard cinematic screen and to perpetually alter the conditions of viewing in the space of the movie theater has led critics like Thomas Beard to align Val del Omar with expanded cinema practitioners of the 60s and 70s like Peter Kubleka and Michael Snow. Beard notes Val del Omar's shared affinity with McLuhan's cybernetic turn.³⁸ While I believe this connection intends to highlight Val del Omar's unique experimentation with film form by linking his

³⁸ Beard, Thomas in *Desbordamiento de, José Val del Omar*, (España: Centro José Guerrero y Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2010). See also Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*. (New York: Dutton, 1970.)

practice to the well-known Structural vanguard, this claim slightly misleads us as to the ultimate stakes of Val del Omar's filmmaking. I contend, instead, that Val del Omar broke with the traditional screen to constitute the movie theater as an embodied ritual space in which to enact Spanish folklore as materially palpable mythopoesis. In this way, Val del Omar's films actually have a much stronger affinity with what P. Adams Sitney termed the "trance film" of the 1950s and 60s American avant-garde, exemplified by figures like Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger, which tended to foreground film as a window into visionary experience.³⁹ By contrast, Structural film practice relies on a semantic and formal reduction to the material elements of film. In other words, these films tend to be *about* film itself.⁴⁰ Val del Omar's works do not position form as an end, but rather as a radical saturation of possibilities for expanded sentience in film viewership at the level of the image and the technical experience of the image. Like Deren and Anger, Val del Omar's films were structured by ritual practice, not just in the

³⁹ Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*. 3rd ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴⁰ Le Grice, Malcolm. *Abstract Film and beyond*. First. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1997.

way that they literally figured rituals, but in that they treat the film's diegesis as a bounded temporal frame for world-making.⁴¹

2. The Second Republic's Pedagogical Missions and Val del Omar's Kinesthetic Pedagogy

Val del Omar's career in film and photography started during the Second Republic's Pedagogical Missions (1931-1937), in which motorized caravans of artists, each equipped with a mobile museum and a film projector, brought cultural events to the remote towns of northwest Spain, a region under-served by the Spanish state. The Missions represented the republican government's efforts to respond to what had become a national crisis of illiteracy, which had reached 44% and was especially severe in the countryside. The Missions enabled Val del Omar to document Spanish peasants' first contact with cinema. Val del Omar was twenty-seven years old and just beginning to make films when he joined the Pedagogical Missions in October of 1932. The Missions employed many prominent Spanish modernists including Federico García Lorca and Luis Cernuda and lasted into 1937 as the Spanish Civil War ended, despite many attempts at sabotage by nationalist forces. Val del Omar's work with the Pedagogical

⁴¹ Plate, S. Brent. *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*. London; New York: Wallflower, 2008.

Missions planted the seeds of the filmmaker's interest in spectatorship as a form of tactile contact with the image. The photographs and film footage he shot during this time inaugurated his life-long interest in cinema's potential to serve as a pedagogical tool through the amplification of the senses. For the filmmaker, touch represented the sense most familiar to oral cultures. The intellectual genealogy of how Val del Omar developed this primordial connection between orality and touch can be traced first through where his documentation of illiterate peasants coming into contact with cinema and with classical painting for the first time would lead him to broadly define touch as the basic extension of the hand through which all humans first learn.

Val del Omar asserted that cinema was a pedagogical tool not because it could teach—the filmmaker spoke against the notion that anything could be taught—but because it could *sensitize* the viewer, this sensitization being for him the true essence of learning.⁴² For Val del Omar, tactility was the primary sense by which humans learned, over and above language. The accessibility of cinema as a pedagogical tool was not grounded in its visuality, but the manner in the projector and the whole environment of a projection room provided the viewer an opportunity to experience cinema's aural and tactile materiality. In this expanded definition of tactility, the experience of tactility

⁴² Val del Omar, José, "Sentimiento del la pedagogia kinestéica" (1932) in *José Val del Omar: Escritos*, 38.

comes not from extending the hand but from the projection of light through the negative and the tangible presence of other bodies in the room that exerts a very subtle tactile sensation on the skin of the viewer's body. Although Val del Omar could write and read, he often referred to himself as an illiterate peasant, railing against the culture of the lettered and the idea that the printed book represented the definitive form of human knowledge. Unlike many of his avant-garde contemporaries experimenting with film form and materiality, Val del Omar's imagined audience remained throughout his life the unlettered peasants of the Pedagogical Missions and children.

Val del Omar's photographs, much like *Estampas 1932*, often represent villagers observing both paintings and cinema in awe. As Horacio Fernández and Javier Ortiz-Echague point out, although many of these images cannot be verified as being authored by Val del Omar because there were several photographers who participated in the Missions, certain images bear the mark of his central preoccupation: spectatorship.⁴³ Val del Omar's still images capture the transfixed faces of children and adults, as well as many images of the backs of people's heads while watching cinema or looking at paintings. Other photographs of the Missions capture the peasants' faces in rapt

⁴³ Horacio Fernández and Javier Ortiz-Echague, "Val del Omar y documentación gráfica de Misiones Pedagógicas" in *Desbordamiento de, José Val del Omar*, (España: Centro José Guerrero y Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2010), 76.

attention before classical paintings. The expression of ecstatic expressivity evident in these photographs are highly analogous to that of sixteenth and seventeenth century baroque religious painting and sculpture that would serve as a touchstone for the filmmaker throughout his career. These centuries are usually considered the high water mark of the country's religiosity, a time in which church doctrine and subjective emotional experience were deeply enmeshed.⁴⁴ From the outset of his artistic output beginning with the Missions, Val del Omar draws from the intensely corporeal and affective sensibility of the baroque image archive. For Val del Omar, these images, in which ecstasy, piousness, and pain are entangled, depict limit experiences that media can augment and transmit to the viewer.

In one of his writings documenting the Missions, Val del Omar notes the female peasants' fascination with a reproduction of a fifteenth century painting by Pedro Berruguete *Auto de fe presidio por Santo Domingo de Guzmán*, which features the ritual humiliation of two apostates during the Inquisition. The apostates stand on a low parapet at the bottom right of the frame, tied to posts with spikes driven through their genitals. Val del Omar noted that young women would visit the painting at all hours to view it clandestinely, touching the area where the spike was painted, writing "The

⁴⁴ Valis, Noël Maureen. *Sacred Realism: Religion and the Imagination in Modern Spanish Narrative*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), 57.

sexual stimulation that the painting generated attracted all the visitors...but especially the girls who would visit during the most solitary hours to touch the infamous spikes.”⁴⁵

This description of the women touching the spike in the apostate’s groin slyly plays on the analogy between spike and penis. Val del Omar points out that it wasn’t enough for the women to look at the painting during the day time, they returned at night to touch the spike, though the painting was a mere reproduction of a two-dimensional painting. This observation anchors the affective, erotic attraction of the image to the desire to extend the hand out into the world and *touch* even if there is no third dimension to grasp. Thus for Val del Omar, the image, whether painted or photographed, extends beyond the second dimension into the third, oscillating between a mere flat representation and a depiction bearing a palpable trace of the thing represented within it. By contrast to the dominant modernist conception of photography as a medium that breaks with all previous representational arts in its ability to empirically give us the world as it is,⁴⁶ Val del Omar’s fundamentally fetishistic concept of depicted images

⁴⁵ “El estímulo sexual de la imagen atraía la atención de todos los visitantes.... sobre todo las chicas, que buscaban las horas más solitarias para visitarlo y tocar una y otra y otra vez los célebres clavos.” [Translation mine] in Val del Omar, José, “Manuel Bartolomé Cossío y las misiones pedagógicas” (1970s) in *José Val del Omar: Escritos*, 33.

⁴⁶ This modernist notion of photography’s medium ontology is epitomized by André Bazin seminal essay, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in which he

traverses painting and photography with little respect for medium specificity, understanding painting's ability to incite tactile attraction as on par with that of photography. The tactile attraction that painted and photographic images exert has more to do with the trace they contain of the original than with their medium ontology.⁴⁷ In this early iteration of Val del Omar's theorization of tactility, we can already observe how the filmmaker works against notions of photography's medium specificity, privileging the image's effect on the viewer's perception and sensations over the medium's material properties.

identifies the development of photography as a major step towards a teleology of realism in Western art history. Bazin asserts that while painting and classical art create eternity, photography "embalms time," the suggestion being that time and the things represented in photographs are always already dead and thus neutral. Bazin, André. *What Is Cinema?* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, 14. Siegfried Kracauer, another significant theorist of realism, asserted that photography had the tendency to erode personal, subjective memory, replacing the memory of lived experience with hollowed out, empirical depictions. Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1960. Oxford University Press, 1960.

⁴⁷ Val del Omar's fetishistic conception of the image aligns with a minor yet fairly consistent strain of modernist conceptions of the image, which made recourse to anthropological or "primitive" thought, in order to understand images' per-scientific or sometimes even magical underpinnings in Western culture. In her chapter, "The Secret Life of the Object," Rachel O. Moore traces this genealogy from Jean Epstein's notion of photogenie through certain members of the Frankfurt School. Moore, Rachel O., and publisher Duke University Press. *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000.

2.1 The projector and the weight and heat of light in *Estampas 1932*

Val del Omar's second and earliest available film, the ethnographic documentary *Estampas 1932*, was commissioned by the Missions to document contact between the missionaries and the peasants. *Estampas* captures the movement of the missionary caravan through the mountains, singing choral groups composed of village children, and the vast, craggy landscape of northwest Spain. Intended as a publicity piece for the Missions, *Estampas* is fairly straightforward—wide angle shots of open landscapes, villagers partaking in Mission projects, and the Missions making slow progress across the mountains. And yet certain parts of the film foreshadow the themes of Val del Omar's mature cinematic work and inventions: spectatorship as a process of sensorial encounter, and further, of pedagogical-ethical transformation. The following reading of a subsequence from Val del Omar's earliest extant film, *Estampas 1932* begins to illustrate the filmmaker's conception of the tactile dynamic between between screen, viewer, and projector. These shots also demonstrate the filmmaker's early fascination with the workings of the cinematic apparatus:

One scene in *Estampas 1932* dramatizes the villagers' first contact with the cinema. A black inter-title reads, "...and at night, the town en masse attends sessions of educational cinema, talks, performances, and readings." The inter-title cuts to a black screen broken by an orb of light in the top left of the frame. As the image lightens, it

reveals that the light shining in the dark is coming from a projector bulb. As the image fades in, we see a projectionist winding the reel and preparing it for screening, with other missionaries around him in medium shot. The film then cuts to a long shot of a low-ceilinged room packed with people looking on in rapt attention. Two functionaries from the Missions stand at attention in the midst of the audience, one holding a folio of papers under his arm with a bemused expression on his face. The sea of faces is composed of mostly rural women and some men. The women's faces closest to the projector are overexposed by the projector light so that their features become blurred by the illumination. In the second row, near the bottom of the frame, one woman peaks out shy and curious, her gaze meeting that of the camera.

This establishing shot is highly abstract in its graphic character—a shining orb against a black background, a white sun shining in a nocturnal landscape, a point of vivid illumination in the blackest of night. The shot's abstractness performs the defamiliarization of first time cinema spectatorship. But this abstraction is quickly counter-posed by the image of the projectionist and the projector slowly fading in through the darkness of the screen. This fade-in grounds our wonder in the mechanical workings of the machine. In considering Val del Omar's cinema in light of his later inventions, particularly his Bi-Standard B system, it is significant that this early documentary focuses not just on the cinematic experience of the peasants, but on the

technical workings of the projector. For most of the short sequence, the projectionist is performing the simple task of loading a new reel into the machine. Val del Omar highlights an aspect of cinema that most would consider marginal: the maintenance of the projector and the film print that enables the show to continue. From the beginnings of his work, we can see how Val del Omar invests the projector with the capability to incite an experience that, if not yet properly recognizable as mystical, is at least so unfamiliar as to incite a different kind of tactile contact with quotidian elements like light and darkness.

Here we see the peasants' faces bathed in light. Like in certain documentary photographs of the Missions attributed to Val del Omar, light transforms the peasant's faces as it hits the surface of their skin, suggesting that light exerts tangible force on the surface of their bodies. The tangibility of light is central to Val del Omar's assertion of the cinema as a tactile medium. Though the term "tactile" later becomes greatly expanded in Val del Omar's work to mean a broader process of proprioception, in his early theorization, cinema is tactile because the heat and weight of light from the projector bounces off the screen and onto bodies of the audience. When Val del Omar poses the kinesthetic pedagogy of cinema against the abstract culture of the lettered, the cinema's kinesthesia is based on the materiality of light shot through the film negative. Like so many of Val del Omar's theories about cinema, the idea that light is tactile cuts

against many dominant assumptions about the cinema, namely the idea that the film negative is the material of cinema and that light is the medium's immaterial aspect. I contend that Val del Omar's treatment of light as tactile and highly material reveals his engagement with Einstein's theory of relativity.⁴⁸ While orthodox measures of light had long determined that it had no mass because it is composed of photons, the smallest particles, Einstein's 1905 theory of relativity showed that light does indeed possess "relativistic mass" when it is in motion. Though light does not have invariant weight like a ball, light behaves as if it had mass when it is in motion and is subject to gravity. When light touches the edges of the peasants' faces in *Estampas* and shines on the surprised visages of the boys in the photo, it is exerting its tactile force on the spectators.

3. Val del Omar's Cinematic Inventions in Light of Spanish Autarky

In the extended fierce precarity of the 1950s, however, Val del Omar would undergo a period of creative renewal, designing a number of technical inventions for cinema and beginning his practice as an avant-garde filmmaker with the *Elemental Triptych of Spain*. Val del Omar's creative and technical production during this period

⁴⁸ In note 20 of Val del Omar's, "El camino de la deformación" editor Santos Zunzunegui notes that the book *Eisenstein and Relativity* was found in the filmmaker's library. José Val del Omar, Javier Ortiz-Echagüe, and Santos Zunzunegui. *Escritos de técnica poética y mística*. Madrid: LES PUNXES, 2010, 101-102.

was marked by a particular drive to theorize how residually oral cultures, which still relied on the more tactile faculties of hearing and touch, could create technologies that fomented communitarian lifeways counter to the long history of atomization and individuation inaugurated by the Gutenberg printing press. Val del Omar would develop these ideas through the writings of Spanish historian Américo Castro and Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

Val del Omar's notion of Spain as an oral culture whose great philosophical and aesthetic achievements could only be apprehended corporeally are inherently tied to the racial imaginary of fascist philologist-historian Américo Castro. Castro posited that Spanish culture's fundamental difference from the rest of continental Europe, or its "hispanic particularism," was lodged in the country's extensive historical contact with the Moors, who conquered and ruled the south of Spain for nine centuries, from 711 to 1492 AD. The controversial thesis of Castro's 1954 book *The Structure of Spanish History*, which is less an actual history than a psychological study of Spain's national character, is that Spanish co-existence with Moors and Jews was simultaneously marked by a rejection of Moorish and Jewish advanced technologies like alphabetic literacy. Simultaneously, Castro argued that Spain profoundly absorbed "Moorish integralism,"

the Arab philosophical understanding of matter as inseparable from spirit.⁴⁹ Castro's integralism proposes that the ultimate stamp that Islamic thought left on Spain was the concept that the life, body, and soul of individuals are integrated rather than separate, so that matter cannot be conceived as void of spirit.⁵⁰ For example, Castro identifies Moorish integralism as the precondition for the ecstatic corporeal tradition of Christian Spanish mystics Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross. Castro's assertion of Moorish technological developments like literacy as an aggressive form of forced assimilation towards Spaniards betrays the racialized nature of Castro's attitude towards the Moors.⁵¹ However, Castro's orientalism also provides a somewhat progressive basis for Val del Omar's conception of cultural hybridity in the political climate of fascism, which especially in the 1940s and 50s admitted no outside influence, especially not one of Moorish provenance.⁵² For Val del Omar, Moorish integralism made southern Spain a

⁴⁹ Castro, Américo, and Edmund L. King. *The Structure of Spanish History*; Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954: Princeton University Press, 83.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 232.

⁵¹ Abad and Mira discuss how conservative Spanish thought has tended to treat Spanish contact with outside cultures as a form of "forced" assimilation, or a threat. This idea is central to Hispanic particularism. Abad, Alicia Mira, and Mónica Moreno Seco. "Religion and Politics in the Mediterranean: An Historical Perspective." *History and Anthropology* 18, no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 275–90.

⁵² Viestenz, William. *By the Grace of God: Francoist Spain and the Sacred Roots of Political Imagination*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014.

privileged site for the preservation not only of an oral tradition, but a tactile epistemology. It represented a space where Islamic thought influenced Christian theology, making possible within Christianity the ability to understand the divine through physical sensation. Castro's analysis of Spanish metaphysics' shift towards sensation and the material as having been spurred by contact with the Moors provides a rich, if problematic basis for Val del Omar's developing mystical technical epistemology.

Val del Omar's reading of Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* prompted him to expand his Castro-influenced thinking on Spanish orality to a broader theorization of technology and underdevelopment. He ultimately concluded that underdeveloped countries, with their reliance on touch and hearing as major epistemic modes, were particularly suited to shaping technical innovation according to an alternative set of ethical principles than the ones apparent in the centuries-long Gutenberg revolution originating in Germany. For Val del Omar, technological development in the global south had the potential to privilege sensation over reason, community over individuation, immanent experience over linear thought, magic over neutral disenchantment.⁵³ His thinking here echoes what McLuhan famously posited about the

⁵³ McLuhan also read Castro, identifying Spain as the European nation where residual orality was most apparent, writing, "Spaniards had been immunized against typography by their age-old quarrel with the Moors." McLuhan, Marshall. *The*

digital, that the digital era would return humanity to the non-linear, synesthetic sense perception that predated the Gutenberg printing press and its habits of linear thought. McLuhan asserted that less industrialized nations, which retained aspects of oral culture, ultimately harbored a perceptual advantage over fully literate societies because in the incomplete transformation of their epistemic habits, oral cultures retained the value of the more synesthetic senses like hearing and touch.⁵⁴ Val del Omar adopted McLuhan's assertion that these senses better equipped residually oral cultures for the renewed primacy of hearing and touch in the digital age as an injunction to innovate from what most considered at the time as forgotten corner of the world—Spain under fascist dictatorship.

But perhaps the biggest influence McLuhan wielded over Val del Omar's technological thought was the Canadian media theorist's critique of modern technology as profoundly isolating and alienating. For McLuhan, the development of the printing press around 1440 paved the way for modern capitalism by linearizing thought through fostering habits of private property at the epistemic level. McLuhan writes, "It is not

Gutenberg Galaxy; the Making of Typographic Man. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 256.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 27.

entirely self-evident today that typography should have been the means and occasion of individualism and self-expression in society. That it should have been the means of fostering habits of private property, privacy, and many forms of “enclosure” is perhaps more evident.”⁵⁵ Here, McLuhan poses print as the epistemic foundation of private property, which predates the political-economic idea of property. Put another way, typography was the precondition for the enclosure of the commons at the most elementary level: that of perception. First, print individuates the senses. Touch, hearing, smell, taste, and vision are no longer synesthetically enmeshed in the fabric of experience, but discretely separated and ruled primarily by sight. Second, from print’s linearization and its discrete separation of the senses followed the rise of the individual, who through reading was able to imagine for the first time their own perception as distinct from that of the community in which they were embedded. Within McLuhan’s Catholic humanism, vision is an empiricist disciplinary project, which ultimately gives rise to capitalism.⁵⁶ For Val del Omar, McLuhan’s text provided a potent critique of Western technological progress, which evolved to support and perpetuate privacy, private property, and increasingly sophisticated forms of technology emancipated from

⁵⁵ Ibid, 150.

⁵⁶ Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer : On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992.

actual human needs. Val del Omar's advocacy of tactility as an alternative governing principle for technological development reflects a desire to both subordinate technology back to human needs, and further, to radically extend the aesthetic and affective potentials of traditional forms like song and storytelling through media. Media's prosthetic extension of the senses provided a unique opportunity to reconstitute modernity's fractured sense of communal experience. Val del Omar's experimental ethnographic films would begin to test the filmmaker's theories of media tactility through plastic experimentation with the film medium, as well as through the exploration of Spain's traditional arts and architecture.

4. Spain's Residual Orality and Synesthetic Sense Perception

In the long difficult decade of the 1940s after the Spanish Civil war, a time when many Spaniards died of starvation, Val del Omar set aside his cinematic ambitions to work for the regime of General Francisco Franco. The inventor designed a propaganda dissemination system called the "Periphonic System of Valencia," a network of loud speakers strategically installed around the city of Valencia, which would transmit the regime's decrees at scheduled times throughout the day.⁵⁷ In light of a harrowing

⁵⁷ In an undated letter, Val del Omar describes his involvement in the project as a way to make money, noting the pressing hunger that most people faced after the war, but also expressing deep regret at having designed the system, which described as contributing to the "collective cretinization" of the public." José Val del Omar,

recovery from the war and the campaign of extreme repression leveled against leftists by Franco's regime throughout the decade, the 1940s were considered a lost decade for Spain in both economic and cultural terms. The regime's ultra-nationalist program of economic autarky choked the country's economy, causing industrial and agrarian collapse.⁵⁸ In the extended fierce precarity of the 1950s, however, Val del Omar, would undergo a period of creative renewal, designing a number of technical inventions for cinema and beginning his practice as an avant-garde filmmaker with the *Elemental Triptych of Spain*. Val del Omar's creative and technical production during this period was marked by a particular drive to theorize how residually oral cultures, which still relied on the more tactile faculties of hearing and touch, could create technologies that fomented communitarian lifeways counter to the long history of atomization and

Javier Ortiz-Echagüe, and Santos Zunzunegui. *Escritos de técnica poética y mística*. Madrid: LES PUNXES, 2010, 101-102.

⁵⁸ Francoist autarky dictated that the only way that Spain could modernize was through rapid industrialization, which in practical terms meant investment in industrial machinery over coverage of the population's basic food needs. In addition, the economic protectionism of this autarkic economic policy unequivocally favored the industrial and land-owning elite families of Spain, effectively consolidating economic interests with political interests, as is characteristic of fascism. Richards, Michael. *A Time of Silence: Civil War and the Culture of Repression in Franco's Spain, 1936-1945*. Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

individuation inaugurated by the Gutenberg printing press. Val del Omar would develop these ideas through the writings of Spanish historian Américo Castro and Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

Val del Omar's notion of Spain as an oral culture whose great philosophical and aesthetics achievements could only be apprehended corporeally are inherently tied to the racial imaginary of fascist philologist-historian Américo Castro. Castro's controversial 1954 book *The Structure of Spanish History* posited that Spanish culture's fundamental difference from the rest of continental Europe, or its "hispanic particularism" was lodged in the country's extensive historical contact with the Moors, who conquered and ruled the south of Spain for nine centuries, from 711 to 1492 AD. Castro's controversial thesis in *The Structure of Spanish History*, which is less an actual history than a psychological study of Spain's national character, posits that Spanish co-existence with Moors and Jews was simultaneously marked by a rejection of Moorish and Jewish advanced technologies like alphabetic literacy. Simultaneously, Castro argued that Spain profoundly absorbed "Moorish integralism," the Arab philosophical understanding of matter as inseparable from spirit.⁵⁹ Castro's integralism proposes that the ultimate stamp that Islamic thought left on Spain was the concept that the life, body,

⁵⁹ Castro, Américo, and Edmund L. King. *The Structure of Spanish History*; Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954: Princeton University Press, 83.

and soul of individuals are integrated rather than separate so that matter cannot be conceived as void of spirit.⁶⁰ For example, Castro identifies Moorish integralism as the precondition to the ecstatic corporeal tradition of Christian Spanish mystics, Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross. Castro's assertion of Moorish technological development as an aggression or a form of forced assimilation towards Spaniards betrays the racialized nature of Castro's attitude towards the Moors.⁶¹ However, Castro's orientalism also provides a somewhat progressive basis for Val del Omar's conception of cultural hybridity in the political climate of fascism, which especially in the 1940s and 50s admitted no outside influence, especially not one of Moorish provenance.⁶² For Val del Omar, Moorish integralism made southern Spain a privileged site for the preservation of not only an oral tradition, but of a tactile epistemology because it represented a space where Islamic thought influenced Christian theology, making possible within Christianity the ability to understand the divine through physical sensation. Thus

⁶⁰ Ibid, 232.

⁶¹ Abad and Mira discuss how conservative Spanish thought has tended to treat Spanish contact with outside cultures as a form of "forced" assimilation, or a threat. This idea is central to Hispanic particularism. Abad, Alicia Mira, and Mónica Moreno Seco. "Religion and Politics in the Mediterranean: An Historical Perspective." *History and Anthropology* 18, no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 275–90.

⁶² Viestenz, William. *By the Grace of God: Francoist Spain and the Sacred Roots of Political Imagination*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014.

Castro's analysis of Spanish metaphysics' shift towards sensation and the material spurred by contact with the moors provide a rich, if problematic basis for Val del Omar's developing mystical technical epistemology.

Val del Omar's reading of Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* would ultimately take him from exploring Spain's orality through Castro's writings to theorizing that under-developed countries, with their reliance on touch and hearing as major epistemic modes were particularly suited to shaping technical innovation structured by an alternative set of ethical principles than the ones apparent in the centuries-long Gutenberg revolution originating in Germany. For Val del Omar, the technological developments of the global south could privilege sensation over reason, community over individuation, immanent experience over linear thought, magic over neutral disenchantment.⁶³ Val del Omar would derive many aspects of his critiques of the Western lettered tradition and its epistemic modes from McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which posited that the digital era would return humanity to the non-linear, synesthetic sense perception that predated the Gutenberg printing press and its habits of

⁶³ McLuhan also read Castro, identifying Spain as the European nation where residual orality was most apparent, writing, "Spaniards had been immunized against typography by their age-old quarrel with the Moors." McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy; the Making of Typographic Man*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 256.

linear thought. McLuhan asserted that less industrialized nations, which retained aspects of oral culture, ultimately harbored a perceptual advantage over fully literate societies because in the incomplete transformation of their epistemic habits, oral cultures retained the value of the more synesthetic senses like hearing and touch.⁶⁴ Val del Omar adopted McLuhan's assertion that these senses would better equip residually oral cultures for the renewed primacy of hearing and touch in the digital age as an injunction to innovate from what most considered at the time as forgotten corner of the world—Spain under fascist dictatorship.

But perhaps the biggest influence McLuhan wielded over Val del Omar's technological thought was the Canadian media theorist's critique of modern technology as profoundly isolating and alienating. For McLuhan, the development of the printing press around 1440 paved the way for modern capitalism by linearizing thought through fostering habits of private property at the epistemic level. McLuhan writes, "It is not entirely self-evident today that typography should have been the means and occasion of individualism and self-expression in society. That it should have been the means of fostering habits of private property, privacy, and many forms of "enclosure" is perhaps

⁶⁴ Ibid, 27.

more evident.”⁶⁵ Here, McLuhan poses print as the epistemic foundation of private property, which predates the political-economic idea of property. Put another way, typography was the precondition for the enclosure of the commons at the most elementary level: that of perception. First, print individuates the senses. Touch, hearing, smell, taste, and vision are no longer synesthetically enmeshed in the fabric of experience, but discretely separated and ruled primarily by sight. Second, from print’s linearization and its discrete separation of the senses followed the rise of the individual, who through reading was able to imagine for the first time their own perception as distinct from that of the community in which they were embedded. Within McLuhan’s Catholic humanism, vision is an empiricist disciplinary project, which ultimately gives rise to capitalism.⁶⁶ For Val del Omar, McLuhan’s text provided a potent critique of Western technological progress, which evolved to support and perpetuate privacy, private property, and increasingly sophisticated forms of technology emancipated from actual human needs. Val del Omar’s emphasis on tactility as a ruling principle of technological development reflects a desire to both subordinate technology back to human needs and further, to radically extend the aesthetic and affective potentials of

⁶⁵ Ibid, 150.

⁶⁶ Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer : On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992.

traditional forms like song and storytelling through media. Media's prosthetic extension of the senses provided a unique opportunity to reconstitute modernity's fractured sense of communal experience. Val del Omar's experimental ethnographic films would begin to test the filmmaker's theories of media tactility through plastic experimentation with the film medium, as well as through the exploration of Spain's traditional arts and architecture.

4.1 Synesthetic Sense Experience and Islamic Mysticism in *Grenadine Water Mirror*

In 1953, Val del Omar moved from the more traditional ethnographic documentary of *Estampas* to begin his three-film experimental epic, *Elemental Triptych of Spain*, which elucidates the founding mythologies of three of Spain's culturally heterogeneous regions, assigning each territory an element. The first, *Grenadine Water Mirror* (1953) focuses on the southern city of Granada in Andalucía. The first film's imagery is anchored in the Islamic architecture of Granada and the built landscape's extensive use of water in the form of fountains. The second film *Fire in Castille* (1961) takes up the ecstatic and often frightening Catholic architecture and sculpture of the north central region of Castille, associated in the triptych with fire. The final film, *Acariño Galaico* (1961), explores the cold, misty northwestern region of Galicia through a series of elfin sculptures made of mud, making the final unfinished film's element clay.

Grenadine Water Mirror, produced from 1953 to 1955, was shot in the gardens in and around the Alhambra in Granada, Val del Omar's natal city. The film hybridizes a more conventional documentary approach with the director's experimental photographic methods—his use of solarized images, strobe lights, monochromatically tinting of the film's negative, and ultraviolet film stock, amongst a number of other strategies. The film montages a mix of mostly black and white footage: exterior shots of the Alhambra, peasants' craggy faces, children dancing flamenco, luminous shots of water running through fountains and sculptures, wide angle shots of the city of Granada. By contrast to the rest of *Grenadine Water Mirror's* monochromatic black and white, the film's central section is tinted a deep emerald green. The tinting lends the section, which features images of Val del Omar's daughter Maria José dreaming and the Edenic gardens and fountains of the Alhambra, an increased metaphysical weight. With its emphasis on water, *Grenadine Water Mirror* begins to develop a theme which Val del Omar would rework throughout the triptych, namely the status of water as a metaphor for human consciousness.

The following reading of a section of *Grenadine Water Mirror* will allow me to explore how Val del Omar's experimentation with film form enacts key aspects of his mystical technical epistemology:

Here, I analyze six shots from the central section of the film, which begins with an extreme close-up of the face of a young girl, Maria José, wearing traditional southern Spanish garb: a frilly high-necked flamenco dress and hoop earrings. Her head is tilted slightly back and her eyes closed against a background of dense greenery. Val del Omar used ultraviolet black and white film stock to shoot the scene so that the light in the frame is particularly luminous. The emerald tint used to dye the negative makes the lighter values in the image, like the illumination on the girl's face, appear kelly green and yellow, while the darker values like the foliage appear navy in their darkest parts. A voiceover accompanied by the sound of gusting wind across a plane says, "Y con la luna brinca la sangre" ("And the moon makes the blood jump"). The girl tilts her head back further, eyes closed, absorbed in daydreaming or thought. A cut to a distorted close-up of a man smiling shows a face whose shape is distended into an undulating sphere with indefinite proportions. The voiceover says, "y la sabia grita" ("and the wise woman screams"), with cicadas hissing loudly in the background of the voiceover track. A cut back to the girl shows her head tilted even further back so that her chin and jaw occupy the center of the shot. A ripple emerges on the surface of the image and we realize that we are seeing more than the surface of a mechanically reproduced image, but rather the reflection on the surface of a pond. It is unclear as to whether the girl's image is beneath the surface of the water or on the surface of the water. The water continues to

ripple until her image blurs almost to the point of abstraction as the ripples increase in circumference across the surface of the water.

Snippets of violin play on the soundtrack and a cut reveals an image of a tall pine hedge undulating along to the soundtrack. Though the image of the pines is stationary, the surface of the image warps slightly between concavity and convexity with each note played by the violin. The movement on the surface of the image seems to mimic the natural swaying of trees. A cut to a shot of an interior patio within the Alhambra also warps around the edges. On the left side of the image, a stone fountain shoots a single jet of water upwards and the edges of the image undulate around the vertical line that the water creates. The music stops and a big audible breath can be heard on the soundtrack as the camera back to the girl in extreme close-up, now facing the camera. Her mouth is slightly open and the film is sped down so that her eyelids flutter like butterfly wings. Her brow is slightly out of focus as a light from behind the camera shines down the left side of her face. As she breathes in, the camera slightly zooms out in time with her breath and her face comes into sharp focus.

When Maria José tilts her head back, she seems ambiguously poised between waking and dreaming, between receiving the rays of the sun and being overcome by sensation, between deep contemplation and ecstatic escape. The ghostly ripples through the image of Maria José's face, achieved by projecting her face onto the surface of a pool

of water and shooting the surface of the pool, create a confusion between figure and ground. As the surface of her face trembles and ripples, our perception of a stable, immutable photographic image with an identifiable foreground, background, and origin is undermined. Further, the waves possess a ghostly three-dimensionality that seems to extend behind and past the traditional cinematic screen. This extension and destabilization of the image through illusionistic means is key to Val del Omar's developing notion of tactility. In the filmmaker's idiosyncratic theoretical vocabulary, tactility constituted the mediated image's power to extend past the two-dimensional plane, onto the three-dimensional plane, and towards the viewer. In the tactile encounter, the projected image intermingles with the consciousness of the viewer not as an illusion perceived optically but as an image that extends the ghostly material essence of the image so that it may be corporeally apprehended. In *Grenadine Water Mirror*, water functions as a meta-screen within the film, reflecting and multiplying the film's images, distorting and breaking the bounds of what is statically bounded, including the boundary between waking and dreaming, hallucination and reality.

Indeed, in Val del Omar's films, water, in its constantly flowing and reflective states, emerges as the chief metaphor for consciousness. Water is the substance which

mediates between spirit and matter because it contains both.⁶⁷ For the director-mystic, water and its preponderance as an Islamic architectural motif of the Alhambra, was the also the ultimate symbol for how the Moors influenced the ecstatic Spanish mystical sensibility.⁶⁸ If Val del Omar, following Castro, believed that within the Islamic philosophical tradition beauty and sensuous pleasure served as the guarantor of a spirit insolubly tied to matter, then water was the element that most symbolized the spirit's union with matter. In *Grenadine Water Mirror*, the shots of the interior courtyard of the Alhambra, with its anamorphically distorted paradisiacal hedges, features a jet of water prominently shooting up into the frame. As opposed to the water from the previous shots, the water here is arrow-like, shaped by the fountain, almost sculptural. Throughout the six shots discussed here, water is by turns a mirror and a substance that takes the shape of its container. Water poses an occasion for the visitor's ritual contact

⁶⁷ I would argue that one of the reasons that explaining the relationship between matter in spirit in Val del Omar's thought is because these terms are often hybrid, possessing both a more traditional Western valence in which the two are considered separate and a more Islamic valence in which substance cannot be dissociated from spirit.

⁶⁸ The Alhambra was originally constructed as a small fortress on Roman ruins and eventually built up into a palace complex in 1333 by Yusuf I, Sultan of Granada. The complex was gradually built up with various quadrangles added over the centuries, but each added unit retains some central principles: they each integrate water, pools, and fountains into the Alhambra's interior in an effort to make it paradise on earth.

with the built space of the Alhambra, mediating in its sensorial tangibility between the visible materiality of architecture and the invisible materiality of spirit. In fact, I would argue that for Val del Omar, water functions as a form of media in *Grenadine Water Mirror*, extending and multiplying the sensuous properties of the image, and in doing so, showing the porous, inter-connected nature of all consciousnesses. For Val del Omar, cinema's capacity to transmit the sensual materiality of images to a collective audience crystallized a pre-technological, inchoate connection between individual consciousnesses.⁶⁹

Finally, the last shot I analyze here, dramatizes the camera's enmeshment with and extension of the body's sensorial capacities. The shot begins with Maria José in close-up audibly taking a big, deep breath as if she were about to submerge in water. The film is sped down for several frames here so that as she blinks, her eye sockets are filled with the fluttering yellow double exposures of her eye lids opening and closing. The camera zooms out very quickly and the lens focuses sharply in time with the length of her breath. Her presence seems to move slightly away from us without her body

⁶⁹ Val del Omar draws this idea not only from Marshall McLuhan, but from French Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard du Chardin, who believed that human technical and philosophical systems were growing into a "noosphere," driven by Christian love, which would connect all human minds. Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *The Human Phenomenon*. Brighton [UK] ; Portland, Or.: Sussex Academic Press, 1999.

physically moving backwards in the frame. The soundtrack's sudden emphasis on Maria José's diegetic breathing, when the soundtrack has previously been non-diegetic, calls attention to the girl's embodied presence in space and the passage of breath through her body. The theme of breath here is in keeping with Val del Omar's interest in the philosophical imprint of the Moors on southern Spanish life. For example, Ibn' Arabi, the twelfth century Islamic philosopher and Sufi mystic born in the southern city of Murcia, famously wrote that because God breathed life into man, breath was the index of the human spirit's union with God.⁷⁰ In the Sufi tradition, the act of taking a deep breath is a ritual act of welcoming the divine into the body. This second of Maria José taking a breath, which seems to pass so quickly that you would miss it if you blinked, epitomizes the subtle strangeness of Val del Omar's experiments with film form, where rigorous technical experimentation disorients and synesthetically crosses the standard separation of the senses into segregated channels.⁷¹ In this case, for a split second, the

⁷⁰ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study by the Ikhwn Al-Af', Al-Brni, and Ibn Sn.* Thames & Hudson, 1964.

⁷¹ Crary tracks the separation of the senses through the development of Western optics from Newton and Goethe through the nineteenth century. For Crary, the segregation of vision from the other senses serves the broader project of aligning sight with technologies of discipline and measurement. Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992.

camera's ability to focus the eyes is crossed with the embodied sensation of breathing from the soundtrack. Within Val del Omar's mystical technical epistemology, cinema's ability to play with perception is never purely neutral or technical; it is part of the medium's ability to render quotidian experience mystical by rendering it hyper-sensual.⁷²

5. Tactility and Overflow in *Fire in Castille*

Val del Omar worked in relative anonymity for most of his life and gained his first international recognition at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival, when the second film of the *Elemental Triptych of Spain*, *Fire in Castille* (1961) was entered as Spain's official selection alongside Luis Buñuel's (1961) *Viridiana*. Buñuel's film, which was banned in Spain for seventeen years after its festival screening, would take the Palme d'Or. Val del Omar's experimental documentary, *Fire in Castille*, by contrast, won the first-ever technical prize awarded by the jury for the director's inventions, the TactilVision lighting device and the Apanoramic overflow system. The TactilVision light projection system used rotating paper cut-out patterns over a lamp and a strobe light to cast swarming, three-dimensional *horror vacui* patterns on the surface of Juan de Juni and

⁷² Mystical experience is often tied to heightened sense of estranged sense experience. Wainwright, William J. "Mysticism and Sense Perception." *Religious Studies* 9, no. 3 (1973): 257–78.

Alonso Berruguete's sixteenth-century Spanish sculptures of saints and martyrs, animating the sculptures' faces into ecstatic, illusionistic movement within the film's diegesis. The second was Val del Omar's apanoramic overflow system, demonstrated at the film's Cannes exhibition, which extended a projection of lapping flames onto the floor, ceiling and walls of the movie theater. The system worked by creating a concentric double projection composed of two elements: the standard projection in the middle and a larger framing projection around it, spilling the image beyond the bounds of the standard rectangular movie screen. This enlarged the scope and shape of the images while distorting the movie theater's architectural space.

An account written by an attendee of the Cannes screening recalled that people were so afraid of the flames climbing the ceilings and walls of the screening room that they frantically clutched the film program and fanned themselves with it in fear.⁷³ Val del Omar expressed profound disappointment at taking the technical prize rather than the Palme d'Or, as he understood technique to be insolubly linked to content. His disappointment, though it may seem somewhat naïve as narrative has traditionally been prized over attraction, also reveals the visionary stakes of his project, which he

⁷³ Buruaga, Gonzalo Sáenz. "Mi amigo Val del Omar" in *Desbordamiento de Val del Omar*, ed. Maria Luisa Blanco (Madrid and Grandada: Centro José Guerrero & Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía), 34.

understood as making cinema into a machine for amplifying and extending perception. This machine operates not only within the cinema's actual technical components—the film negative, the projector, and the speakers. The architectural space of the theater and the audience's affects too become components in the totalizing assemblage of the cinema.

Fire in Castille, with its mix of ethnographic footage of Holy Week processions and its electric animation of baroque sculpture, eschews narrative in favor of technically-complex, multi-layered spectacle, animating Castillian mythology not as a story, but as a viscerally intense sensory experience structured like a mystical initiation: fallenness, purgation, and illumination.⁷⁴ The film's dominant element, fire, is the most ideologically fraught of the three films because it makes recourse to the ultranationalist myths that became such a cornerstone of Spanish fascism: the supposedly ontological link between Catholicism and Spain, the centrality of Saint Teresa to Spanish identity, and the Castillian desert region as "the backbone" of Spain.⁷⁵ Though the film draws on

⁷⁴ Matt Losada maps the structure of *Fire in Castille* onto Saint John of the Cross's long poem *Dark Night of the Soul*, a text in which Saint John's mystical experience goes through three stages: fallenness, purgation, and illumination. Losada, Matt. "San Juan de La Cruz in Tactilvisión: The Technological Mysticism of José Val Del Omar's Tríptico Elemental de España." *Studies in Hispanic Cinema* 50, no. 1 (2010).

⁷⁵ Francoist mythology enshrined Saint Teresa as central to its mythology, claiming that her lineage could be traced back to a purely Spanish "raza castiza," free of Jewish

these ultranationalist myths, Val del Omar's presentation of *Fire in Castille* as a kind of hyper-kinesthetic horror movie strikes an ambivalent note about this complex mythology, in which the terror and trauma of the Inquisition interpenetrates not only daily life but Catholic ritual and mystical experience itself. *Apanoramic overflow* exemplifies the filmmaker's quest to make the cinema a site for ecstatic experience through formal and technical innovations that overwhelm the viewer's habitual modes of seeing, forcing a different kind of contact with the image.

Fire in Castille combines four types of footage: the Holy Week processions of a town in Castille; montages of dramatically-lit sculptures, paintings, and bas reliefs by Juan de Juni and Alonso Berruguete at the National Sculpture Museum of Valladolid; and short interludes of bustling, modern Spain, shop windows, passengers on a train, cars on a busy road. The film starts with the Corpus Christi procession of Holy Week, in which sculptures are carried through town by processants wearing hooded robes. The

blood. The logic of contagion operated not just at an economic and political level—Francoist thinkers rewrote the deep strata of Spanish history to reflect this supposed purity. See Viestenz, William. *By the Grace of God*, 5-6. Regenerationist philosopher Ortega y Gasset was an exponent of the idea that Spain needed to unite behind its central region, Castille, and leave behind the countries' regionalist insistence on heterogeneity of languages and cultures. Ortega y Gasset, José. *Espanã Invertebrada; Bosquejo de Algunos Pensamientos Históricos*. 2. Ed. Madrid, Calpe, 1921.

film then proceeds to Val del Omar's TactilVision-animated sculptures. The total effect of the film's structure is a movement between mythopoetic past, present, and technoutopian future, in which historical time is simultaneous rather than teleological. The profane modernity of shop windows and highways is counter-posed with the sacralized eternity of the psychedelically-lit Berruguete and Juni sculptures.

The film starts with Val del Omar's ethnographic footage of the Holy Week processions, which depict the centuries-old communal ritual enacted in the present. As anthropologists of popular Spanish Catholicism have often pointed out, celebrations like the feast of Corpus Christi are syncretic displays, configuring many older pagan telluric traditions within a Christological framework.⁷⁶ José Sanchez Herrero differentiates "religion" from "religiosity," the former relating to institutional church doctrine on morality and regulation of ritual and rites, and the latter referring to popular practices of religion having to do with a group or an individual's direct relationship to God.⁷⁷ The semantic difference between religion and religiosity bears weight on how we read the mystical content in the works of Val del Omar, who was much more interested in

⁷⁶ Maldonado, Luis. "La religiosidad popular" Alvarez Santaló, León, Maria Jesús | Buxó Rey, and Salvador | Rodríguez Becerra. *La Religiosidad Popular*. 1a ed. Barcelona: Anthropos ;1989, 31.

⁷⁷ Herrero, José Sanchez, "Religiosidad cristiana popular andaluza durante la edad media" in *La Religiosidad Popular*, 105-107.

individual and collective religiosity than in church doctrine as a mediator of religious experience. For Val del Omar, media itself would help connect individuals and communities to the divine. Though the Franco-era Catholic church would insist that Christianity had triumphed because of the enduring popularity of the Corpus Christi celebrations, the church's own records reveal that, as early as the year 595 AD, their evangelization mission had to accommodate pagan rites to be successful, absorbing key aspects of these pagan rites into official Catholic liturgy.⁷⁸ Thus *Fire in Castille* manifests a semantic doubleness, making it legible as a Spanish fascist text while also operating subtly within the multilayered and ambiguous historical substratum of Christian-pagan syncretism. It is through this syncretic super-imposition, at once historical and religious, that Val del Omar can break with the narrative of the church's unilateral dominance, appropriate its symbols, and propose a third category: a technical mystical epistemology that binds the viewer to their community and to an unmediated experience of the divine, achieved, paradoxically, through mediation.

5.1 The Apanoramic Overflow System: mystical fire, historical terror

The workings of Val del Omar's apanoramic overflow apparatus reveal "overflow" as a process in which the viewer's habitual modes of seeing become so

⁷⁸ Ibid. 32.

overwhelmed that the spectator is forced into developing different epistemic habits of using sight, and by extension the rest of their senses. The apanoramic negative was a composite of two negatives—an inner negative and an outer mask negative. The inner negative projected *Fire in Castille's* main diegesis and addressed the foveal field of vision, where the eye can directly perceive as much visual detail as possible. The outer concentric mask projected flames around the diegesis, expanding and distorting the flames. The movement of the flames was designed to create an opposing movement to the images within the diegesis, intended to create a disorienting tension between the foveal and the outer concentric image. Based on Val del Omar's sketches of apanoramic film prints and accounts from attendees of the 1961 Cannes screening, the apanoramic system overwhelmed the viewer's usual habits of perception in a number of ways: simultaneous projection of two images moving in opposite directions causing a fundamental tension between inner foveal image and outer concentric image; expansion and distortion of the outer-concentric projection by expansion of the image over the walls, floor and ceiling of the theater; and an illusionistic distortion of the architectural space of the theater. For Val del Omar, the overflow achieved by the system begins by breaking with the standard cinematic screen, but that break is only a point of departure for the larger aim of creating a haptic engagement with cinema that had spiritual implications. Val de Omar elaborates apanoramic overflow as a kind of spectatorial limit

experience, modeled on accounts of the mystical experiences of sixteenth-century Spanish martyrs, St. Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross. In Val del Omar's schema, cinematic images are perceived with such tactile intensity that the boundaries of the self become weakened.

As discussed at the outset of this chapter, tactility for Val del Omar was a highly synesthetic category, encompassing not only the five senses' extension into the world, but the process whereby the body assimilates sense data. In a 1959 document entitled "Theory of Tactile Vision," the filmmaker writes that the fundamental impulse at the heart of perception is to "grab it, control it, assimilate it."⁷⁹ The last word "assimilate" highlights the degree to which Val del Omar saw sense information as becoming part of the body, integrated into the spirit, once it was perceived. Val del Omar, like late nineteenth-century vitalist philosopher Henri Bergson, saw no hard and fast distinction between substance and spirit.⁸⁰ Val del Omar's liquid metaphor of "overflow," used to denote the tactile capabilities of the apanoramic system to overwhelm the viewer's senses, further draws out the Bergsonian porosity of body, matter, and spirit set out in Val del Omar's perceptual schema. This schema sets out the experience of film

⁷⁹ "cogerlo, dominarlo, asimilarlo" Val del Omar, José, "Teoría de la Visión Táctil" (1959) In *José Val del Omar: Escritos*, 113.

⁸⁰ Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. New York: Zone Books, 1988.

spectatorship as an encounter in which the viewer assimilates both the cinematic image and the affects of other spectators in the theater into their own body. Paradoxically, the result of this assimilation is not an interiorization of sense data but the production of an exterior “noospheric” sphere of affects and information.⁸¹ For Val del Omar, preoccupied not just with cinema, but with mass communications like radio and television, the drive of media should be to unify individuals into an empathic collectivity through shared sensory-motor experience.

In the triptych and in Val del Omar’s Cannes demonstration of the apanoramic overflow system, fire bears an ambivalent status, at once an ultra-nationalist symbol and a heretical Catholic touchstone. I argue that the elements in the triptych—fire, water, mud —function as forms of media in their ability to mediate the relationship between human consciousness and the world’s materiality. Val del Omar’s cinematic machines, exemplified by devices like the apanoramic overflow system, are meant to further

⁸¹ Val del Omar, highly influenced by Chardin, believed that media could help develop a “noosphere,” a technologically mediated divine realm composed of networked global physical infrastructure, which would produce a spiritual-biological super structure. Together these two structures would create a sphere, which would facilitate idea exchange and the expansion of human consciousness.⁸¹ This Chardinian mystical proto-internet can be observed in Val del Omar’s *mecamística*, which links love, faith, and *communitas* to the inherent workings of the technical apparatus. Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *The Human Phenomenon*. Brighton [UK] ; Portland, Or.: Sussex Academic Press, 1999.

amplify the elements' inherent mediatic capacity to transmit affects and historicity.

Through the spectator's mediated encounter with the immaterial, ghostly images of fire, they experience the overwhelming materiality of history, suffused with ecstasy and terror.

The following scene reading will allow me to show how Val del Omar's play with fire symbolism enacts the spectator's contact with the traumatic history of the Spanish state's founding:

Fire in Castille's second major movement, which depicts spiritual purgatory, contains some of the most charged imagery of Val del Omar's oeuvre. The section opens on the façade of the cathedral of Valladolid with a giant stone cross in front, lapped by flames. I'd like to focus on the shot that establishes the purgation sequence of *Fire*. The shot begins with a low-angle close-up of the base of a stone pillar centered in front of the Iglesia de San Pablo. Flames vigorously lap at the base of the cross and are blown into the right side of the frame by the wind. The church's baroque details take up the whole background of the frame. The film, shot on a misty day, is a deep gray slashed at the center of the shot with brilliant white flames. The camera slowly pans up the base of the pillar as the fires burn, revealing a stone cross. As the cross comes into view, the church's entire façade comes into view, its double bell towers extending into the dense

gray sky. The wide, low-angle of the shot emphasizes the imperial, monumental status of the church, which looms ghost-like in the background of the shot.

The cross with ominous flames at its base bears a complex symbolism here, often associated with the ritual cleansing described by Saint John of the Cross in his poem *Spiritual Canticle*. In reading *Fire in Castille*, scholars like Matt Losada and Elixabete Ansa Goicoechea have tended to interpret the film's central symbolic element as associated with the experience of medieval Christian martyrs, for whom the body's subjection to self-inflicted religious punishment served as ritual purgation.⁸² My own reading emphasizes that Val del Omar's fire cannot be dissociated from the historical terror of the Spanish Inquisition, when in 1478 the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel began a program of consolidating the Spanish state through the church-sanctioned expulsion of suspected Jews and Muslims from the peninsula.⁸³ Amongst the most nightmarishly iconic of the punishments imposed upon suspected Jews during the

⁸² Goicoechea, Elixabete Ansa. "Fuego En Castilla (1957-60): El Cine Espectral de José Val Del Omar." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 50, no. 2 (August 11, 2016): 485–507. And Losada, Matt. "San Juan de La Cruz in Tactilvisión: The Technological Mysticism of José Val Del Omar's Tríptico Elemental de España." *Studies in Hispanic Cinema* 50, no. 1 (2010).

⁸³ Beginning in the fifteenth century, a number of Jewish families, known as "conversos" began converting to Catholicism. The Inquisition inculcated the paranoid persecution of suspected Jewish families, as well as providing a pretext for land and asset requisition for a burgeoning Spanish state.

Inquisition was burning at the stake. In light of this fact, Val del Omar's burning stone cross in front of the church of Valladolid, a structure inaugurated by the inquisition and transcendently associated with the founding and consolidation of the imperial Catholic church, is not only charged with the white-hot pain of the martyrs' self-abnegation, but serves as a reminder of the Spanish state's becoming through fire and blood, through the terror of racial purification.

The camera's upwards movement, from the close-up of the fire at the base of the stone pillar to the wide angle that reveals the cross and the ghostly baroque backdrop of the church, enacts a movement from the subjective, mystical fire of heretical Catholic mysticism to the broader historical context of the Inquisition's terrors. Val del Omar's not only uses fire images as a dominant element of the film, he extends the flames s special effects into the space of the movie theater. Across the *Elemental Tryptich*, fire, water, and mud are treated as the original forms of media. These elements, which compose the world, are treated as living matter. Fire doesn't just make the spectator feel terror, or the mystical presence of God; fire triggers a multivalent historical memory, transmitting ghostly bits of trauma through the centuries. Further, in the context of Francoism's constant recourse to the Inquisition as an archive of racial and national ideologies, the symbolic use of fire as a historical referent seems to double back on itself, referring as much to the present as to the past.

5.1.1 TactilVision, the haptic image, and the optical unconscious

As the name suggests, TactilVision was another means by which Val del Omar explored media tactility in *Fire in Castille*. Though the system was relatively simple, using a set of rotating paper cut-out patterns around a bulb and a strobe light to animate Juan de Juni and Alonso Berruguete's sculptures, the device got top billing in Val del Omar's program for the Cannes screening. *Fire in Castille's* program had the words "in TactilVision" emblazoned prominently on the leaflet's silver and black cover and in the title credits. The centrality of the device's name to Val del Omar's do-it-yourself marketing of the film suggests that the filmmaker saw the simple invention as more than a mere special effect within the film's diegesis, as a device that revealed the outer limits of the cinema's technical assemblage as a whole. In other documents, Val del Omar would call TactilVision an attempt to create a "picto-luminic Cubism," a Cubism utilizing light and the cinematic screen rather than paint and canvas. Val del Omar's luminous Cubism proposed to break the hegemony of linear viewing imposed by Renaissance pictorial techniques, allowing the eye to access an object from multiple and often conflicting perspectives at once. Further, the TactilVision system reveals Val del Omar's engagement with early media theory, namely Walter Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious, the capability of machines like the cinematographic and photographic cameras to apprehend aspects of reality not otherwise available to the

naked human eye. TactilVision, on the other side of the camera, extends the seeing capabilities of the cinematographic lens, thus extending the images' tactile characteristics.

The following seven stills from *Fire in Castille* will allow me to show how TactilVision creates the conditions for the augmented, tactile vision theorized by Benjamin and experimented with by Val del Omar.

In a later part of the purification section, where the film transitions to the illumination phase, Val del Omar frames a bust of Saint Anne by Juan de Juni in extreme close-up. The saint seems to grimace, wearing a heavy habit, face heavily lined and seemingly pained. The TactilVision light shines a cut-out of a star into the center of her face as a woman's high-pitched scream sounds and the bust rotates to the right of the frame. The film cuts to a frontal close-up of the bust crisscrossed by stripes of light. The screams start again as the stripes of light are crossed by opposing stripes, creating a basket weave that undulates in time with the screams as the bust rotates slightly backwards. A cut to an even more extreme close-up of Saint Anne's face, now mottled by splotches of light, gaze cast upwards as the mobile platform underneath the bust tips backwards. A man's military orders followed by a crashing cannonball sounds as a cut reveals the bust in frontal close-up lit with a basket weave. The soundtrack goes quiet, then a static sound can be heard as the bust starts rotating under the basket weave

pattern. Subtle radio wave static starts to sound as a concentric halo pattern fills the background of the shot, creating opposing lines to the basket weave on the bust. The bust rotates to the right until it is in profile, making the halo around the sculpture even clearer as the lines projected on the bust and the lines projected on the wall cast clashing patterns. A low static continues to hum in the background.

Though *Fire in Castille* is a non-narrative film, Val del Omar's TactilVision, in conjunction with Vicente Escudero's soundtrack,, does diegetic work through hyper-sensorial means. The narrative transition from purgation to illumination is achieved through the changing play of light within the mise-en-scene. The screams and cannon shots in the soundtrack further emphasize the transition from purgation to illumination, with Figure 4 serving as the crux of the subsequence, the moment of illumination enacted by the extreme close-up on splotches of light on Saint Anne's eyes. But here, illumination is also enacted as a mystical experience which entirely exceeds vision, even if a vision of heavenly light serves as its initial conduit. Throughout the subsequence, TactilVision lends movement and provides a sense of visual conflict by projecting clashing patterns of light against stone statues, animating the sculptures into haptic, illusionistic movement. The striations and blotches of light cast by paper cut outs pop off the two-dimensional screen.

In Figures 5 and 6 the bust of Saint Anne not only seems to move, but to shimmy and shake along with the hyper-kinetic patterns. The screams in the soundtrack suggest the horrors of purgatory, as well as its physical pains. The soundtrack and the light system enact mystical illumination as a tactile, proprioceptive experience of the divine transmissible through technological means. For Val del Omar, light, the basic material of cinematic images, exerts a physical charge on the spectator's body as a subtle but palpable force. By shaping light and turning it into kinetic conflicting patterns, the TactiVision system emphasizes the medium's physical tangibility. In shots like Figures 6 and 7, the lighting system almost completely decomposes the representationality of the photographed images in the frame. By the final frames of, the transition to illumination, the bust of Saint Anne breaks down into almost total abstraction, save for the shape of the bust against the halo-like patterns which in its bare bones shape references the classical silhouette of saints.

Though I frequently use the term 'illusionistic' to describing Val del Omar's plays of light, the term's suggestion of falseness makes it slightly inaccurate as a way of describing the filmmaker's sculptural deployment of light. Amongst the frequent antinomies in Val del Omar's writings, one that is particularly prevalent is that of optics versus light. The latter term is the one that Val del Omar heavily favored, arguing that light was a much more dynamic and flexible quality than optics. The filmmaker treats

light as a physical property, one that exerts heat and weight onto the spectator, in contrast to the abstracted model of the optical. Val del Omar's use of light over the category of optics exemplifies the filmmaker's critique of the West's over-determination of vision as the most empirical sense. Through the use of his various inventions, the filmmaker was intent on rupturing received habits of vision which had been cemented by centuries of literacy: the tendency to look at the center of an image first according to Renaissance fixed-point perspective, scanning information from left to right as on the printed page, and the Euclidean separation of sight from touch.⁸⁴ Val del Omar, influenced by Ernst Gombrich's writings on the psychology of aesthetic perception, critiques the idea that the two-dimensional plane is flat. Val del Omar, after Gombrich, believed that humans' learned ability to perceive depth on a two-dimensional plane was the essence of three-dimensionality.⁸⁵ Val del Omar argued that optics had long been over-privileged in Western art history to create three-dimensionality over light, citing sculptural reliefs as a form that exemplified this over-reliance on the optical.

⁸⁴ McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 41.

⁸⁵ Gombrich, E. H. (Ernst Hans). *Art and Illusion; a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Princeton University Press, 1969.

Val del Omar's notion that vision could be tactile and apperceptive was deeply informed by Walter Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious.⁸⁶ Benjamin proposed in the 1931 essay "Little History of Photography" that machines have the capacity to reveal what cannot be captured by the eye, not because the machine can produce indexical copies, but because the machine has the capacity to show non-sensuous similarity between objects, thereby exposing the potential strangeness of familiar objects in everyday life.⁸⁷ In 1932, Val del Omar wrote, "Teachers, educators, I believe that, I affirm that, I assure you that, machines which respond to a principle of automatism, to a principle of economy in our psychic apparatus, have worked miracles."⁸⁸ Val del Omar's "miracle" here is Benjamin's non-sensuous similarity in which the machine frees the

⁸⁶ Editor Ortiz-Echague writes in note 40 that Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" appeared in Val del Omar's home library and that the filmmaker often returned in these years to the notion of the optical unconscious that Benjamin proposes in the aforementioned essay. Zunzunegui, Santos. *José Val del Omar: Escritos*, 42.

⁴² Val del Omar, José. "Sentimientos de la pedagogia kinestetica" in Zunzunegui, Santos. *José Val del Omar: Escritos de poetica, tecnica, y mística*. (2010: Madrid: Les punxes 1900).

⁸⁷ Benjamin, Walter. "Little History of Photography," in Benjamin, Walter, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 1: 1927-1930*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005).

⁸⁸ "Meastros, educators, yo creo que sí, yo afirmo que sí, yo os aseguro que las maquinas que responden a un principio de automatismo, a un principio de economía en nuestro aparato psíquico han obrado el milagro." "Sentimientos de la pedagogia kinestetica," 42.

body and the mind from the process of conscious perceiving, opening up the possibility for tactile reception. This sense of tactile reception echoes through Val del Omar frequent play on the verb *palpar*, which takes on multiple meanings: to touch, to make or be palpable, and to palpitate like the heart. For example, the filmmaker compares the way that blind people orient themselves in the world through touch to the way that bats orient themselves in space through the vibration of echoes felt in the bats' body, rather than through the auditory reception of these echoes.⁸⁹

Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious subtends his later theorization of film in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility" (2nd version), composed in 1935.⁹⁰ I pose montage theory as an analogue here to Val del Omar's apanoramic overflow, especially in Benjamin's articulation in the second version of the Art Work essay, where he attributes the revolutionary power of cinema to its status as an art form consumed collectively by the masses in a state of distraction rather than one of attention. Benjamin writes, "*For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means--that is, by way of*

⁸⁹ Val del Omar, José, "Teoría de la visión táctil" in *José Val del Omar: Escritos*, 115.

⁹⁰ Benjamin, Walter. "Little History of Photography," *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2. And Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," (2nd version) in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005).

*contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit.*⁹¹ [Ital Benjamin's] While it would seem counter-intuitive that Benjamin would designate distraction rather than attention as the primary mode of film spectatorship, it is important to remember that film spectatorship changed over the course of the twentieth century to become more formalized and less social.

Though he loved the cinema, Benjamin was not actually interested in the narrative, psychological dramas of the classical Hollywood cinema but with what Tom Gunning designates, "the cinema of attractions, the tendency of early cinema to spectacularize the image, creating fascination and attraction, rather than narrative development."⁹² The cinema of attractions is by nature a more tactile practice than Hollywood classical cinema and its legacies, foregrounding a visceral contact with the image through constituting display as the primary strategy of exposition in the film's diegesis. Benjamin's own preferences for Mickey Mouse, slapstick comedy, and films about animals (over French Poetic Realism and classical Hollywood) illuminate why Benjamin might have posed distraction and apperception as progressive forms of

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 120.

⁹² Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle*, 8, no. nos. 3 & 4 (Fall 1986). And Hansen, Miriam Bratu. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. Edited by Edward Dimendberg. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

attention for a spectator faced with the cognitive surfeit of modernity: advertising, film, radio, railroads, urbanization. Distraction becomes in both Benjamin's and Val del Omar's critical vocabularies a pre-condition to tactility, which in turn, opens the possibility of transformative psychic and bodily experience for the viewer. Val del Omar's own films constituted a cinema of attractions par excellence: "For me, the public is a big baby enamored of the extraordinary."⁹³

Though Val del Omar read comparatively little of Benjamin, the German philosopher's notion of the "optical unconscious" became a hinge point for Val del Omar's own ideas about cognition and the mechanically reproduced image.⁹⁴ I suspect that the resonance has to do with how the mystical and the bodily are related in Benjamin's own thought. Benjamin's media theory drew on the Lurianic Kabbalah, a cosmology in which the created world is constituted by ten sephirot, or vessels, whose interrelations express the connections between body and universe, the material and the divine. In this schema, to know the body is to know the universe. Thus the Kabbalah is at least one genealogical topos for Benjamin's emphasis on the body. Brent Plate writes of

⁹³ "Para mi todo el publico es un gran niño enamorado de lo extraordinario" in "Mecánica del cine," (1961) in *José Val del Omar: Escritos*, 282.

⁹⁴ The text of Benjamin's found in Val del Omar's library was "Little History of Photography." See *José Val del Omar: Escritos de poetica, tecnica, y mística*. (2010: Madrid: Les punxes 1900).

Benjamin's recognition of the body and sensation as *the* site of the political under an advancing regime of technology:

"Benjamin, like other materialists, understood the power of the body stripped of the imago. The body image produced by consumer capitalism creates an anesthetizing veil, a narcissistic narcotic, an opiate for the masses that disallows interconnection in the world. Meanwhile, it is precisely through the thresholds of the body (amended by certain new technologies) that revolutionary processes occur."⁹⁵

Benjamin and Val del Omar are linked not just through their attention to the bodily effects of film, but through their shared critique that modernity represses our ability to sense the world's materiality in all its complexity. The mystical provides a counterpoint to Benjamin's materialism, as an account of what cannot be seen or measured, and yet exists. This counter-position of the invisible against materialism's scientific visible carves out a space for the affective and the communal in the face of modernity's project of rationalization and quantification. However, both figures recognized that there was no reversing the role of technology in modern life.

⁹⁵ Plate, Brent S. *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics : Rethinking Religion through the Arts*. New York: Routledge, 2005, 104.

6. Conclusion

Val del Omar's status as a film technician rather than one of Spain's most important filmmakers is partially responsible for the critical neglect he suffered in the last decades of his life and after his death in 1982. But as Val del Omar asserted in many different ways throughout his life, technics and content could never and should never be dissociated. Technical standardization was for Val del Omar cultural imperialism by another name. The Bi-Standards and apanoramic overflow, with their emphasis on economy and haptics, made a daring intervention into the standard cinematic apparatus, locating ideological and cultural nuance in the minutest workings of the cinematic apparatus' technical assemblage. Val del Omar's mystical technical epistemology proposed ethics and amazement as central functions of media technology. Throughout his career as a filmmaker and inventor, Val del Omar stressed the importance of technology as an extension of the body, rather than technology as abstract tool for mastering nature.

Val del Omar himself was a complicated figure, never explicitly participating in politics, yet working for both the Republic and the Franco regime; neither a leftist nor a fascist, yet ideologically beholden to many Franco-era thinkers who were later discredited. Val del Omar was deeply nationalist yet his works also reflect a long engagement with cultural hybridization and syncretism, not just in his native Andalucía,

but also in Spain writ large. He was influenced by the early modernist avant-gardes and shared their concerns—experimentation with film form, the constitution of cinematic temporality⁹⁶—but spent most of his life in limited contact with the larger international filmmaking community. To a certain extent, it would seem that this isolation was born of his own preference for an ascetic life of quiet experimentation in his PLAT (Picto. Luminic. Audio. Tactile.) laboratory. But Val del Omar did have pressing political concerns, namely, the preservation of communal life. For Val del Omar, popular practices of Catholicism were a major basis for communal life, its festivals and rituals predating mass culture spectacles but remaining intimately related to these later developments. Val del Omar’s insistence on the primacy of communal life echoes aspects of both fascist and anarchist projects in the twentieth century, which produced many failed revolutions that used the restoration of communal life as their rallying cry. Benjamin understood this affinity between fascism and communism, imploring the left to “win the energies of intoxication for the revolution,”⁹⁷ these energies being central to the constitution of communal life. Val del Omar, like Benjamin, understood that under

⁹⁶ Doane, Mary Ann. *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002.

⁹⁷ “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” in Benjamin, Walter, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 1: 1927-1930*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005.

capitalism, even the micro-levels of cognition could be controlled to the end of producing more capital. For this reason, the haptic emerges as such a central category for both, rather than an ancillary or accidental aspect of perception. Val del Omar asserted through his films and inventions that the tactile preserved within it older ways of looking and thinking, making and being.

Chapter 2. Alejandro Jodorowsky's Midnight Movies as Ritualized Spectacle

1. Introduction

This chapter examines Alejandro Jodorowsky's "midnight movies," the Western *El Topo* (1970) and the dystopian science fiction epic *The Holy Mountain* (1974), allegories of societies subjected to the alienating social and economic conditions of spectacle.¹ Jodorowsky's diptych, exhibiting a curious conjunction of exploitation tropes, avant-garde visual technique, and New Age injunctions to self-actualization, are steeped in the problematic of the spectacle. The underlying rhetoric of both *The Holy Mountain* and *El Topo* is that if we can smash our slavish fidelity to the image of Christ, to media, to television, and to advertising images that sell us the illusion of future happiness, then we can finally be free from alienation and live in reality. Dubbed "midnight movies" because of the audience ritual that sprung up around them at New York City's Elgin Theatre, the films came to be touchstones of hippie mass culture in the post-1968 period. By examining the genealogy of bodily performance practices in the director's early performance works and the spectatorial ritual of midnight movies, I track how the director poses ritual, and the forms of cognitive and sensory alterity that ritual fosters, as

¹ Guy Debord designated spectacle as the process whereby social relations become increasingly mediated by commodities, and their images, under capitalism. Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

a counter-epistemology to the reified consumer subjectivity of spectacle. Jodorowsky's midnight allegories expose the paradox of this exploding consumer culture—its offer of seemingly limitless sensory pleasure circumscribed by the logic of property relations and subtended by military violence. The preponderance of corporeal images in Jodorowsky's films reflect the body's status as a site of increasingly violent and traumatic discipline during the transition to economic postmodernization. I argue that Jodorowsky's midnight movies, especially when understood within their reception contexts, pose the senses as a site of epistemic resistance to an encroaching regime of spectacle.

El Topo tells the story of a gunfighter's quest through the desert for enlightenment, his acquisition of a family and his tutelage under different religions, which help him to become a master gunfighter and defeat a colonial settlement. The psychedelic exploitation epic *The Holy Mountain* presents a more far-reaching parable of the transformation of human relations through commodity fetishism under late capitalism. A thief is recruited to travel to the summit of a mountain with a group of individuals who represent the different industries and institutions that comprise the film's surrealist dystopia. The two films allegorize capitalist modernity in the Americas, first as a process of colonization through subjugation of indigenous peoples in *El Topo*, and later as hegemonic control of North America over South America in *The Holy*

Mountain. In Jodorowsky's midnight films, this hemispheric dominance of north over south is fundamentally spectacular, enforced both materially through violent racialized repression and ideologically through idolatry of the graven image of a white Christ, and later in the idolatry of imported film and television images.

Jodorowsky's midnight movies were transnational co-productions, financed and initially released stateside, but made in Mexico, shot in Spanish and then dubbed in English. This chapter attempts to account for the films' American reception, as well as for the Mexican historical events which shaped *El Topo* and *The Holy Mountain's* narratives. Jodorowsky's idiosyncratic midnight movies, mixing mysticism, psychoanalysis, avant-garde aesthetics, and neindigeneity, arose from the specific ferment of Mexico City.² Thus their reception was shaped as much by the local political climate of the post-1968 period in Mexico as it was by the aesthetic interests of the Elgin's young cosmopolitan audience. As critic Josexto Cerdán and Miguel Labayen point out, Jodorowsky's success was premised on the degree to which he positioned his

² Cuauhtemoc Medina documents how these genealogies had been in conversation since the 1930's in Mexico when Erich Fromm established a psychoanalysis school in a former monastery in Cuernavaca. Medina, Cuauhtemoc. "*La montaña sagrada: un rituo de anti-iniciacion*," in Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas) (28th : 2004 : Campeche, Mexico), and Peter Krieger. *La Imagen Sagrada Y Sacralizada*. 1. ed. México, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2011.

films between genres and national distribution contexts.³ I argue that this between-ness is part of what helped cement the foundations of the midnight movie for North American youth culture audiences. The Elgin public, thirsty for representations of the exotic, was also looking for movies that could diagnose the ills of Western civilization. In Jodorowsky's movies, they found both qualities in spades.

Jodorowsky's injunctions against media images echoes many of the prevailing critiques which emerged during the 1968 period, namely Guy Debord's identification of the image as capital's most dangerous weapon. In 1967, Debord termed the image's interpenetration into every corner of quotidian existence, "the society of the spectacle." For Debord, industrial capitalist society had come to be governed by the most immaterial commodity of all: the image. Thus commodity fetishism indicates more than the subject's mere love of or identification with objects, and comes to constitute a far more transformative process whereby a whole society identifies with images. Fredric Jameson describes the problem of commodity fetishism set up by Marx and vastly expanded by Debord as "a vast process of abstraction that seethes through the social

³ Cerdán, Josetxo and Labayan, Miguel Fernandez. "Arty Exploitation, Cool Cult, and the Cinema of Alejandro Jodorowsky," in *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America*. Ed Ruétalo, Victoria, and Dolores Tierney New York: Routledge, 2009, 102-114.

order.”⁴ The image here denotes a broad category which moves from the semi-concrete to the abstract. On the more literal side, the image stands for the predominance of the mass media image in postmodernity. In its most abstract and insidious form, the image is an expanded and immaterial commodity. In this latter schema, mechanically-reproduced media images catalyze the process by which representation takes precedence over material political gains and lived social relations.⁵ For Debord the spectacle forecloses real political struggle by infiltrating the psychic and sensuous life of the subject, replacing political struggles with the image of politics.⁶ My analysis in this chapter tracks a growing recognition during the post-1968 period, reflected in Jodorowsky’s films, that the predominance of the image was an agent of profound alienation and an agent of cultural imperialism.

A distrust of the image runs strongly through Jodorowsky’s work, ultimately coming to full fruition in *The Holy Mountain*, which paints a devastating picture of a transnational networked social totality in thrall to images. Usually deemed to be little more than cult oddities, I read Jodorowsky’s midnight films as highly political and

⁴ Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999, 235-6.

⁵ Debord. *The Society of the Spectacle*, 5-8.

⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

explicitly anti-colonial, though admittedly wrought with the director's own paradoxical relationship to power. Jodorowsky's midnight movies visually and narratively articulate the genesis of a rapidly globalized world accelerated by the trauma of 1968. There is a dialectical tension in the representation of this burgeoning transnationalism. On one hand, the global is the ground for a vibrant and endless production of cultural hybridity, evident, for example, in Jodorowsky's mad bricolage of religious sensibilities. On the other hand, Jodorowsky's films, through allegorically figuring totality, present the *systemic* nature of the global as a means by which fascism allies with neo-colonial capitalism to exert greater authoritarian control over its networked subjects. In Jodorowsky's midnight movies, all shot in Mexico, the spectacle is the soft power aspect of authoritarian control, serving as a disciplinary mechanism by which subjects measure themselves against multi-national, usually American, media, advertising, and television images, and are doomed to find themselves perpetually wanting. Jodorowsky's films lay bare how the production of incessant consumer desire actually becomes a problem of gendered, racial, and national subjectification.

Jodorowsky's films stage spectacle as a process in which the body is always in danger of becoming a sterile, anesthetized image. Throughout this chapter, I track the different meanings of body and image apparent in Jodorowsky's work. First, I argue that the genealogy of Jodorowsky's performance practices reveals a deep mistrust of the

flesh, such that it becomes impossible to imagine an unproblematic relationship to corporeality in these works. The flesh here is always associated with femininity and with death. Throughout this chapter, I examine ritual as a fundamentally ambivalent form that sometimes epitomizes a masculinist need for bodily transcendence and sometimes a positive drive towards embodied collective experience. Often ritual vacillates between these two poles. Second, the photographic image for Jodorowsky is always a semi-magical category that with mimetic control over the thing reproduced. A person who is photographed is trapped inside of a photographic image forever; their essence remains inside that image, ready to be manipulated. Thus mechanical reproducibility and the flood of images it introduces into the world represent a form of magic, which can only be fought with more magic. In this schema, ritual emerges as an important aesthetic form because of its capacity to elicit psychic and sensory alterity, counter to the commodified and atomistic sensory experience offered by an expanding consumer culture.

2. Performance, Flesh, and Gender in Jodorowsky's Early Life and Works

Alejandro Jodorowsky has been an unbelievably prolific transmedial artist since the late 1940s, producing a number of works in theater, performance art, film, and comics. In this section, I map Jodorowsky's bodily performance practices from his early work in mime to his later work in theater and happenings. I argue that these practices

root Jodorowsky's films in a theatrical tradition that blurs the line between performance and ritual. I trace the origins of Jodorowsky's hyper-formalist filmmaking style, characterized by a static camera and performances which alternate between slapstick physical comedy and controlled ritualistic movement, to the director's diverse performance practices from the late-1940s to the mid-1960s. Despite the predominance of corporeal actions in Jodorowsky's works, close attention to his performance practices reveals a curiously abstracted notion of corporeality for an artist so obsessed with figuring the body and its viscera in such explicit terms. The first phase of Jodorowsky's performances as a clown and as a mime enacts his cultural and racial liminality within both Latin American and French society. The second phase, exemplified by his theater of the absurd and conceptual art happenings, inaugurates the director's experiments with structuring his aesthetic practices like rituals. It is within these ritualized theatrical and conceptual experiments that Jodorowsky's ambivalent relationship to the flesh and its association with femininity are revealed.

Jodorowsky was born in 1929 in the coastal mining town of Tocopilla, Chile to exiled Ukranian Jews fleeing from the pogroms of the Russian empire. As a child in Tocopilla, Jodorowsky was treated as an immigrant outsider by his Chilean peers and as a third-world townie by the American families who worked as mine administrators in the area. During Jodorowsky's young adulthood, Chilean president Gabriel González

Videla, ascending to power as a moderate, gradually became a caudillo. Videla formed a Cold War alliance with the U.S. that made Chile a strategic partner in the region and allowed the Chilean government to suppress demands for agrarian reforms and placate the ruling class. From 1946 to 1948, a series of laws were set in place that outlawed the Communist party and leveled violent repression against peasants and miners.

Jodorowsky attended college in Santiago, where he was enrolled at the university for two years before dropping out to work as a clown in a circus. In 1947, Jodorowsky founded a theater troupe called Teatro Mimico, but by 1953, decided to move to Paris, where he studied at Etienne Decroux's mime school. Jodorowsky's autobiographical writings and interviews about his time in France highlight the fact that his social circles in Paris were heavily made up of Latin American expatriates, including figures like the radical Chilean folk singer, Violeta Parra. Jodorowsky recalls that in his experience of Paris in the early 50s, Parisians were distinctly disinterested in socializing with immigrants, even famous ones.⁷ As a result, the director often describes the experience

⁷ Weiss, Jason. An Interview with Alejandro Jodorowsky, Winter 1999.
<http://www.raintaxi.com/an-interview-with-alejandro-jodorowsky/>.

of his early life as feeling like a Jew in Latin America and like a Latin American in Europe.⁸

Jodorowsky is seldom read as an anticolonial figure, and is more often interpreted as an avatar of certain kind of Frenchified Latin American cosmopolitanism.⁹ This is consistent with Jodorowsky's own statements, which continually assert his refusal of identity, rooted in a troubled relationship to his family—particularly to his mother and his older sister, the surrealist poet Raquel Jodorowsky—and finally to his country of birth.¹⁰ And yet, I argue that despite his para-national self-presentation, Jodorowsky's narratives intervene into a distinctly Latin American colonial problematic of how *criollo*, Spanish-descended men born in the New World, are empowered to wield almost absolute patriarchal authority, subjugating aberrant forms of masculinity and racialized others, particularly indigenous people, through violence. In Jodorowsky's writings and films, the figure of the *caudillo* or, authoritarian dictator, is often collapsed

⁸ Jodorowsky, Alejandro. *El maestro y las magas*. México, D.F.: Random House Mondadori, 2013.

⁹ Cerdán and Labayan. "Arty Exploitation, Cool Cult, and the Cinema of Alejandro Jodorowsky," in Ruétalo, Victoria, and Dolores Tierney. *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America*. New York: Routledge, n.d.

¹⁰ Jodorowsky, *El maestro y las magas*.

with that of the priest. Both the caudillo and the priest spew arbitrary edicts and rule the most intimate aspects of morality with an iron fist.

Jodorowsky worked as a mime from 1953 to 1959. The young performer first joined Etienne Decroux's mime school in 1953. A year later, he joined Marcel Marceau's mime troupe, where he performed for five years until 1959. Decroux is widely considered to be the grammarian of modern mime. Jodorowsky's teacher sought to create a language of bodily expression freed from referential meaning, a language of "pure" bodily movement. Decroux's mime was based on the performer being able to execute perfectly controlled and isolated muscle movements, a *mime statuaire*, or statuary mime, that, like sculpture, could articulate physical properties: resistance, breakability, weight, volume.¹¹ This required almost total bodily control and attention from the performer. Decroux's non-referential mime also stressed the effacement of the performer's face and identity behind a veil to repress all expressivity that would draw the viewer's attention away from the performer's body. Decroux's highly intellectual and critically unpopular approach to mime was ultimately quite different than Jodorowsky's own borderline Vaudevillian mime and film performances, influenced by

¹¹ Decroux, Etienne. *Paroles sur le mime* Paris: Gallimard, 1963 in Felner, Mira. *Apostles of Silence: The Modern French Mimes*. Rutherford N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press ; Associated University Presses, 1985

the more commercially palatable Marceau. However, I propose that Decroux's insistence on modern mime as a fundamentally anti-expressive, sculptural enterprise, and his emphasis on the performer's absolute presence when performing, had a more profound effect on Jodorowsky's conception of the performing body than his work with Marceau. Decroux's model of the performer's flesh as inert, sculptural material is reflected in Jodorowsky's later performance-based ritual practices, in which bodily performance presents a way to access the spiritual through mimetic movement. Jodorowsky's own statements bear this out: "Pantomime was for me an internal searching. The assumption of my corpse. A desire to jump towards the flesh to find the immaterial."¹² [trans. mine] Jodorowsky's description of the embodied materiality of performance allowing him access to immaterial spiritual experience denotes the degree to which his works understand corporeality as a limit to be transcended.

Jodorowsky came to Mexico City in 1959 with Marcel Marceau's mime troupe and decided to stay in the country after signing a contract to teach mime. Jodorowsky promptly became involved with the Mexican avant-garde theater, staging Beckett,

¹² Maria de Lourdes Sánchez Puig and Ignacio Maldonado Llobet, *La osadía de Jodorowsky: los primeros happenings latinoamericanos* (Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico, D.F. 1996. "La pantomina fue para mí un intent de búsqueda interior. Un asumir mi cadaver. Un deseo de saltar hacia la carne para encontrar lo inmaterial," 31.

Ionesco, and Strindberg plays. Almost immediately, Jodorowsky's theater fomented scandal, as well as a period of renewed theatrical experimentation in the city. Mexican theater in late 1950s was fairly staid: realist, psychological, and invested in the maintenance of high culture.¹³ Jodorowsky's plays, by contrast, were psychologically opaque, with surrealist dialogue. Under the influence of the Artaudian Theatre of Cruelty, Jodorowsky's plays attempted to dissolve the traditional division between performers and spectators.¹⁴ Jodorowsky borrows from Artaud the notion of a confrontational, spectacular, symbolically freighted theater in which props and costumes are as important as performance itself.¹⁵ For Jodorowsky, as for Artaud, props and actors merge in an abstract symbolic world in which performance and ritual blur. This quality in Jodorowsky's films would later be referred to by multiple critics as possessing a "liturgical" quality.¹⁶ Liturgy means public religious service, but also

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Medina, *Age of discrepancies*. Artaud, whose writings on living amongst the Tarahumara peoples of northwest Mexico, had just been translated into Spanish for the first time in 1972, exerted a great deal of influence on Mexican intellectuals in the late-50s. 91.

¹⁵ Artaud, Antonin. "The Theater of Cruelty (First and Second Manifestos) and Artaud, Antonin, and Mary Caroline Richards. *The Theater and Its Double*. New York, Grove Press 1958: Grove Press, 1958, 89-100, 122-132.

¹⁶ Ibid. 122.

connotes a specific order in which ritualistic actions are performed. I believe this latter definition at least partially characterizes the role of bodily performance for Jodorowsky in that it points to the way that bodily performance is imagined as a highly structured and coded system of movement.

Jodorowsky's arrival in Mexico in 1959 arguably catalyzed a paradigm shift in Mexican aesthetic practices.¹⁷ Jodorowsky's work in the Mexican avant-garde theater dovetailed with the beginning of Mexican youth's broader social, political, and aesthetic rupture from the conservative values of PRI's reigning nationalist orthodoxy and its Mexican nationalist aesthetics. The late 1950s saw the exhaustion of Mexican nationalist art paradigms, like muralism, and the domestic adaptation of the international avant-garde's experiments with geometric abstraction. Jodorowsky arrived in Mexico at a moment when young Mexican artists were eager to form a vanguard from "autochthonous" elements that reflected the actual conditions of daily life in the country.¹⁸ A number of key figures, like Felipe Ehrenberg, Pablo Leder and LMO, credit

¹⁷ Interview with Mexican artist Pablo Leder in Puig and Llobet, *La osadía de Jodorowsky*, 32.

¹⁸ Interview with Mexican performance artist Felipe Ehrenberg in Puig and Llobet, *La osadía de Jodorowsky*, 34.

Jodorowsky's scandalous performances with granting a sense of permission to break with the reigning institutions and their traditional values.¹⁹

The early 1960s inaugurated the formation of a number of Mexican neo avant-garde groups, a period often termed "la era de los grupos" (the group era) by Mexican critics.²⁰ These groups would ultimately reject the imported geometric abstractions coming from Paris and New York in favor of aggressive political critique, aesthetic excess, an embrace of low culture, and figuration, against the internationalist, cosmopolitan claims of abstraction. In Mexico, the student movement made demands far beyond reforms to the university sector, challenging the ruling oligarchical hegemony of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), and demanding a more equitable distribution of economic opportunities throughout Mexican society. The student movement was accompanied by an efflorescence of aesthetic practices, like graphic design and documentary, aimed at expressing the problems of daily life in Mexico, using a new vocabulary that was borrowed neither from the international style nor the old nationalist vernacular.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid, 32.

²⁰ Richard, Nelly. *The Insubordination of Signs: Political Change, Cultural Transformation, and Poetics of the Crisis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

²¹ Mantecón, Alvaro Vazquez, "Visualizing 1968," in *The Age of Discrepancies*, Ed. Debroise, Olivier. Mexico City: UNAM, 2006, 37.

For the Mexican student movement, everyday life was the ground for not only political, but also broader epistemic change. Jodorowsky aligned himself with these young Mexican artists. Jodorowsky's theater works appealed to Mexican youth formally, embracing visual excess in the form of baroque sets, costumes, and staging, and the denaturalized acting he inherited from Decroux's mime and clowning. Thematically, Jodorowsky's performances broke the exact taboos that a generation of Mexican youth thirsted to see broken: mainly the various prohibitions on nudity and open displays of sexuality imposed by the Catholic Church. While miniskirts, long hair on men, and sex outside of marital relations seem by now like totally antiquated markers of freedom, it is difficult to overstate the degree to which these simple symbolic acts were felt by young Mexicans as part of the larger paradigm shift already under way in the early 60s.

In his Mexican theater work, Jodorowsky starts to formulate a complex relationship between the performer's body and theatrical space, between figure and ground that becomes central to his filmic work a few years later. In Jodorowsky's Artaudian plays, highly ornate sets and props are as prominent as the stylized performances of the actors, who move in a graphic mythological image space which collapses the natural depth of the theatrical stage. Jodorowsky's 1957 collaboration with surrealist British-Mexican painter Leonora Carrington *Penelope* exemplifies the odd

relationship between figure and ground in Jodorowsky's staging and performances. I contend that Carrington had a deep effect on the director's filmic visual style, particularly her highly elaborate but slightly primitivist graphic style and her spatial play between three- dimensionality and flatness (Figure 1).²² This flattening of spatial depth ultimately becomes an important visual strategy for representing a mythologized postmodernity in Jodorowsky's films.

By 1961, as Jodorowsky's Mexican theater work came under increased censorship by the state, the director moved away from plays and began staging "panic parties, which would eventually develop into the happenings known as "pánicos efímeros." In the phase when the happenings were just parties, the director would invite

²² A documentary photograph of a scene from *Penelope* shows five human figures on the stage. Two of the figures wear props that make their human figures almost merge with the graphic space of the stage. At the center back of the stage stands Penelope dancing with a Horus figure. The Horus mask is painted crudely with flourishes of illusionistic depth in certain areas that make the mask look three-dimensional. The total effect is that of a three dimensional person merging with a two-dimensional cartoon. Another figure stands behind a painted minotaur-lion cut-out with his torso emerging from the prop. This merger of performers' bodies with props lends a cartoonish quality to the actors and to the theatrical space of the stage. Carrington's painted backdrop further augment the artificialized space within the diegesis. In every detail of the sets, costumes, and props, as well as in the tableau vivant-like poses of the actors, our attention is continually called to the constructed-ness of the illusion and the stiff liturgical poses of the actors. The dominant feature of the scene is the lack of distinction between the bodies and prop on stage, rendering the human figure as an object on par with props, and the hollowing out of spatial depth.

politicians, prostitutes, actors, intellectuals, and various other types to these parties with the aim of creating an immersive, participatory, and volatile experience for the party's attendees. Under the support of the Panic Group (named after Pan, the Greek god of laughter and terror), founded in Paris in 1962 with Spanish filmmaker Fernando Arrabal and French illustrator Roland Topor, these parties would evolve into happenings, staged mostly in Paris and Mexico City.²³ Once the parties officially became, "pánicos efímeros," ephemeral panics, Jodorowsky would further extend his tendency towards constructing liturgical space evident in his earlier theater works and drew its participant base from the Mexican vanguard theater. Jodorowsky's pánicos share affinities with both the American hippie happenings of the late 1950s, associated with conceptual artist Allan Kaprow, and with a broader global rise of action art over the course of the 1960s. Conceptual art's migration towards "actions" reflected the predominant sense during the period that the body's actions were a vehicle for social praxis, and thus art that used the body could be not only an aesthetic site, but also a metaphor for social praxis.²⁴

²³ The Panic Group came together in reaction against what they felt had become the bureaucratization of official surrealism and its defense of official culture Puig and Maldonado Llobet, *La osadía de Jodorowsky*, 51.

²⁴ Within these waves of Body Art are diverse tendencies which can be almost infinitely parsed out, but it is useful to identify here two larger tendencies within conceptual art's broader impulse towards corporeality. The first is to understand art actions as more or less sculptural objects like Duchamp's readymade.²⁴ The

Jodorowsky's work is more precisely related to performance art's will to reanimate ritual as a site of cultural practice. This desire emerges in other artists working during the 1960s, for example, U.S. Latinx Raphael Montañez Ortiz,²⁵ and the Vienna Actionists, who took up ritual through the 1960s as a site of violent transgression. Jodorowsky shares a particular affinity with the Actionists' tendency towards psychoanalysis, symbolically transgressive action, and an interest in achieving the modernist "total art work," or a work that integrates all the arts.²⁶ For Jodorowsky, as well as for the Actionists, working during the transition to postmodernity, this total work of art could no longer occur with modernism's by-now exhausted secular testing of the the limits of form. Jodorowsky and a number of other artists' response was to

second tendency is more wedded to a more theatrical tradition in which the art action is achieved through bodily performance, a tendency which came to be formally known later in the 1970s as performance art. Stiles, Kristine. "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," in Schimmel, Paul, Russell Ferguson, Kristine Stiles, *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, Los Angeles, and Museum of Contemporary Art, 1949 – 1979*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1998.

²⁵ Montañez is most famous for a piano demolition performance he did in 1967. Coincidentally, Jodorowsky himself did a similar performance in 1962, but Jodorowsky's authorship of the idea has also been debated. Many attribute the first performance piano demolition to Fluxus Group founder George Maciunas, a few months before Jodorowsky in 1962.

²⁶ Interview with Pablo Leder, Puig and Maldonado Llobet, *La osadía de Jodorowsky*. 25.

sacralize the artwork's whole context by placing its material and performative dimensions within a ritual frame, while paradoxically vacating ritual of substantive religious or doctrinal substance.

Jodorowsky's pánicos shared two basic structural affinities with ritual—the creation of a bounded temporal frame and the use of props to construct symbolic-mythological equivalences, which, taken together, build a sense of a total world, a construction which scholar of religion and film Brent Plate terms “world-making.”²⁷ The director would instruct his performers meet at a pre-determined but somewhat random place, bringing various props consisting of quotidian, mostly organic objects (eggs, flour, rats, paper, etc.). Once everyone arrived, he had them improvise with the materials to create a semi-ritualized theatrical spectacle with no predetermined objective. The performances were never to be repeated or reprised, as their unique occurrence in time was central to their constitution. Yet despite taboos on reprising the events, some clear repetitions occur within extant verbal and photographic documentations of efímeros, namely Jodorowsky and the actors' demolition and destruction of objects. A characteristic of much performance of the period, it bears distinctly gendered valences in Jodorowsky's work, as these demolitions tended to use

²⁷ Douglas in Plate, S. Brent. *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*. London; New York: Wallflower, 2008, vii.

objects symbolizing the feminine.²⁸ The performers' demolition of living or once-living props like eggs and small mammals points to the pánicos' intermediary position between sculpture and ritual, between a conception of objects as matter and objects as Artaudian ritual symbols. The uncertain status of objects in the pánicos allow us to see the degree to which the films ultimately stage the total effacement of thingly materiality as an initiatory process that allows the viewer access to an image world liberated from the problems of corporeality. The ritualized effacement of organic matter in the pánicos also enacts extensive (real and symbolic) violence on a corporeality transcendently allied with women and femininity.

2.1 *Melodrama Sacramental* and Feminine Sacrifice

There is scarce documentation of Jodorowsky's happenings, but seventeen minutes of excerpts from a four-hour 1965 efímero titled *Sacramental Melodrama* remains extant.²⁹ *Melodrama* reveals Jodorowsky's happenings to be more theatrical in nature and less totally participatory than the Panic Group's assertion of desire for the total abolition between spectator and performer would suggest. Jodorowsky perpetually serves as high priest, master of ceremonies, and star of the show. *Melodrama Sacramental*, staged in a

²⁸ Hadler, Mona. *Destruction Rite: Ephemerality and Demolition in Postwar Visual Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017.

²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aM3RtHxOCKs>

theater, contains several loosely visually related vignettes. In the first vignette, a hooded monk-like man fondles a dancing woman and she dances with various men until the end of the vignette when they find a large plaster breast on the floor and kick it until it starts to disintegrate and the crowd cheers. The second vignette features a man in a samurai suit chipping at a stone block which eventually starts to bleed. The third vignette features a rock n'roll drummer manically pounding a kit while a man in a latex suit and helmet strangles chickens and rubs them all over the dancing bodies of naked women. Later in the third vignette, a monkey is crucified and the female performers dance with large crucifixes between their legs. Then, Jodorowsky rips through an inflatable swimming pool resembling a labium, miming a re-birth. The fourth vignette involves the destruction of a pig's head and a cow heart with a hammer and, finally, the wrapping together of Jodorowsky and a woman whose skin is painted black into a crucifix shape. There is a gendered code to the performers' movements in *Melodrama*. While Jodorowsky performs in sweeping, deliberate gestures, several women on stage do a seizure-like dance, shaking their limbs and heads uncontrollably.

Here I call the reader's attention to how bodily movement and performance follow distinctly gendered codes in *Sacramental Melodrama*. The male performers, particularly Jodorowsky (always the star of his own show), wield tools, play instruments, and demolish objects, while the women do palsy-like dances with their

skins painted black, a costuming choice which additionally racializes the women performers. Despite the fact that the *éfileros* were relatively open forms, functional movement is clearly linked to men's bodily autonomy, while women's performance is associated with stricken flesh. The female performers' shaky, percussive dances are analogous to what Hal Foster calls Dada's "traumatic mime," in which performances mimed epileptic fits to display the conditions of the nervous system innervated by industrial modernity's regimes of trench warfare and assembly lines.³⁰ In Foster's analysis, trauma is embedded in movement itself and shaking flesh bears the stamp of this trauma. In Jodorowsky's performance, only female flesh is riven with the anxious currents of modernity. The contrast between the smooth ritualistic movements of the magician Jodorowsky and the schizophrenized dances of the female performers on stage implicitly suggest that women's bodies bear traumatized flesh, while men's performance, allied with mastery, allows them to escape the ravages of embodiment.

In *Melodrama*, women's association with flesh and animality is rooted in the condition of being embodied, a condition which men are able to transcend through through the liminal space of ritual and mime. Here, Jodorowsky's statements about his original reason for wanting to become a mime as "an assumption" of his "corpse"

³⁰ Foster, Hal. "Dada Mime." *October* 105 (2003): 167–76.

illuminates his definition of flesh: simply put, flesh is associated with powerlessness and death. Here, Hortense Spiller's distinction between flesh and body helps us to understand the politics of agency and embodiment that operates within Jodorowsky's notion of performance. Spillers contends that political subjects are endowed with 'bodies,' while subjects traditionally left outside of political subjectivity, like African-American women, are simply cast as 'flesh.'³¹ For Jodorowsky, mimetic bodily performance, exemplified by the clown, emerges not only as a parodic strategy but one inherently wedded to political agency, posed against the dumb fleshiness of women, animals, and the masses, exemplified by the spectator described above. This opposition between the male, agential moving body and afflicted, feminized flesh has far-reaching consequences for Jodorowsky's notion of ritual performance.

In *Sacramental Melodrama*, the cross-pollination of performance with ritual ultimately serves to symbolically expel the contamination that feminine and animal flesh represent from the realm of the masculine. For all Jodorowsky's rejection of Catholicism, *Melodrama's* thematic content obsessively reanimates Catholicism's hatred of feminine flesh as a carrier of original sin. The props in *Melodrama*, whether live animals or quotidian objects, function as magical fetishes for femininity, such that their demolition

³¹ Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, Ithaca, N.Y. 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65-83.

represents the purging of the feminine from the ritual frame of the performance. When Jodorowsky cuts through a labia-shaped kiddie pool with a hammer, climbs through it with his back to the audience, and starts throwing live turtles through the opening these acts constitute a reverse birth, the labium constituting a boundary within a boundary through which femininity is continually purged. If in traditional societies magic and its rituals were tied to the telluric cycles of the earth, what is novel about Jodorowsky's postmodern notion of ritual performance is that by symbolically destroying the feminine, ritual becomes an epistemology capable of severing the body's connection to nature and bringing it, through magic, under the total domination of culture.

As we will see in the next section of this chapter, Jodorowsky's notion of ritual as gendered transgressive performance, developed throughout his early mime and conceptual happenings, would shape his two midnight movies and their reception in surprising ways. I argue that cult spectatorship constituted a hyper-mimetic, affective, and kinesthetic mode of spectatorship which remained in constant interplay with the ritualized mise-en-scène of Jodorowsky's films. I read Jodorowsky's early ritualistic performances as epitomizing the drive towards masculinist transcendence of corporality. Strains of this desire for transcendence also become apparent in the north American counterculture's taking up of *El Topo* as a ritual against alienation in the wake of the political trauma wrought by the bloody end of the 1960s in the U.S.

3. Cult Spectatorship and Sensory Entrainment

El Topo became a cult hit in 1970 when it began showing at Manhattan's Elgin Theater at 1 am screenings, a slot usually reserved for exploitation and B movies catering to an artsy downtown crowd. The owner of the Elgin, Ben Barenholz, saw the film at a private screening at the Museum of Modern Art and had a canny instinct that *El Topo*, with its injunctions to self-discovery and surreal visuals, would appeal to the young bohemian audiences of his theater.³² The film's run at the Elgin was a sensation, screening daily from December 18th, 1970 through the end of June 1971.³³ Based on the wild success of the late night *El Topo* screenings, the midnight movie, a programming logic which had already been coalescing around a group of repertory and first-run movies since the early 1960s, became a formalized and profitable business. But what made the midnight movie (and the category of "cult" film that these screenings ultimately inspired) such an object of fascination and attempts to cash in was its audiences' behavior. The ritualistic aspects of midnight movie spectatorship seem to have sprung up spontaneously amongst the film's New York City youth culture

³² Hoberman, J., and Jonathan Rosenbaum. *Midnight Movies*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1983, 93.

³³ The film would have continued to run at the Elgin indefinitely, but the Beatles' manager Allen Klein stopped the screenings short by purchasing the rights to the film in order to screen it at its own venue in hopes of making more money off the film. Hoberman and Rosenbaum. *Midnight Movies*, 95.

audience. Audiences would attend the screenings repeatedly, twenty and thirty times, consume drugs in the top balcony of screening room, and even come to the film dressed up as el Topo.

A number of film reviews from the period highlight the ritualistic behaviors of midnight movie-goers. One 1970 review by *Village Voice* film critic Glenn O'Brien called screenings of *El Topo* at New York City's Elgin Theatre "a midnight mass," writing, "They've come to see the light....and the ritual begins again... The audience is here for communion."³⁴ O'Brien's review is astute in highlighting the cyclical, liturgical nature of the Elgin public's viewing patterns, as well as the degree to which the counterculture was seeking ritual practice. In other reviews, critics like Vincent Canby and Pauline Kael both noted the audience's intensely serious attitudes in the screening room. Kael casts this behavior in a particularly macabre light, "The mostly young audience sat there quietly—occasionally laughing at a particularly garish murder or mutilation..."³⁵ Kael and a number of other critics' descriptions of the Elgin attendees' behaviors highlight what a number of commentators on the social and embodied aspects of film

³⁴ O'Brien, Glenn, "El Topo" (review), 1970, in Voice, Village. *The Village Voice Film Guide: 50 Years of Movies from Classics to Cult Hits*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2006.

³⁵ Pauline Kael in Hoberman, *Midnight Movies*, 97.

viewing have suggested, but never quite developed—that film spectatorship is a form of ritual and that certain kinds of movies inspire cults, with attendant rites.³⁶

The midnight movie emerged from a circuit of downtown Manhattan theaters including the Waverly, the Charles, and the Elgin, which started putting together late-night programs of exploitation, trash, and art cinema for niche audiences as early as 1959. The screenings drew the first representatives of the counterculture: beatniks and artists. From the early-to-late 60s, the New York underground burgeoned into a queer, hybrid, pop culture-obsessed scene organized by Jonas Mekas and represented by figures like Jack Smith, Barbara Rubin, and Kenneth Anger. At the Charles, for example, screenings were characterized by their anarchic programming, mixing silents, repertory films and new experimental works submitted by novice filmmakers. Contemporary accounts describe the Charles screenings as talkative and rowdy, more like parties than

³⁶ J. Hoberman's *Midnight Movies*, which I rely on heavily in this chapter, comes closest to developing the idea of cult film as religious rite, but because the book was written as a trade publication for a popular audience, the book does not explore this assertion in very much depth. Hoberman himself draws on Harry Alan Potamkin's writings from the 1930's, which depict Hollywood as the perfect mix of capitalism and religion. See Potamkin, Harry Alan, and Lewis Jacobs. *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin*. New York: Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2008.

what we would now consider absorptive movie screenings.³⁷ In *Midnight Movies*, Jay Hoberman cogently observes a shift that occurred in New York film culture from 1966 to 1971, from this earlier bawdy underground to the more austere explorations of film form associated with minimalist aesthetics, represented by experimental filmmakers like Paul Sharits and Tony Conrad.³⁸

Jodorowsky's midnight movies and their ritualistic valences represent a third stage in the transformation of New York's underground film scene that followed the turn to minimalism. I argue the emergence of the midnight movie tracks along a broader cultural pessimism that began to settle in by the early 1970s. Jodorowsky's films, and the strange mix of offerings that came to be screened as official midnight movies after the success of *El Topo* in 1970, can be seen to constitute a kind of reaction against the austerity of minimalism, a desire to bring back some of the wildness of the early New York underground. However, Jodorowsky's films did not revive the old underground in any substantive way. Rather, these screenings created ritualistic patterns of spectatorship around films that defied easy generic categorization and which, overall, reflected the mood of failed revolution and the deep economic and cultural slump that

³⁷ Ibid, 39-45. For the canonical account of the New York avant-garde, see Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*. 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

³⁸ Hoberman, *Midnight Movies*, 79.

followed. In the U.S. between 1968 and 1970, a number of assassinations of major political figures occurred that turned a broad-based national student movement, allied with the Civil Rights struggle, from cultural and political optimism aimed at large-scale social change towards a pessimistic sense of defeat. The predominant feeling was that the world historical crisis of 1968 had actually succeeded in consolidating power into the hands of the right, more explicitly bolstered by a corporate war machine than ever. These events included the 1969 election of conservative Richard Nixon, the murder of Civil Rights Leader Martin Luther King, the assassination of progressive presidential hopeful Bobby Kennedy, and the 1970 Kent State massacre of students protesting the Vietnam War by the National Guard.

The counterculture audiences of Jodorowsky films in both Mexico and the United States came from a mix of vanguard art communities, antiauthoritarian political formations, and disaffected youth. There is general agreement amongst observers of this period that the counterculture of the late 60s bore a complicated and not always clear relationship to the political anti-systemic movements, which were often composed of university students who rejected the old left politics represented by trade unions and the right authoritarianism represented by formal government.³⁹ While the official anti-

³⁹ Wallerstein, Immanuel, and Zukin, Sharon. "1968, Revolution in the World-System: Theses and Queries." *Theory and Society* 18, no. 4 (1989), 434.

systemic movements fought explicitly for the reorganization of industrial society based on class demands and the push for minoritarian civil rights, the counterculture served as a space to work through issues of cultural alienation and practices of everyday life capable of reflecting the values of a new society. Critics have been quick to dismiss this countercultural milieu and its Dionysian elements as depoliticized, at best adjacent to the radical activity of the period.⁴⁰

Despite widespread cynicism about the connection between the anti-systemic movements and the counterculture, I would argue that the counterculture can be seen as an outgrowth of the anti-systemic movements, one that served as an experimental space to work through issues of cultural and political alienation. The counterculture recognized a profound alienation in Western capitalist society, treating it as a broader epistemic problem related to ways of seeing and being, doing and thinking which cannot be fully separated from the properly political. The counterculture and anti-systemic movements operated as parallel formations to each other until the crushing, violent defeat of the student movements in 1968. After this point, the counterculture

⁴⁰ Immanuel Wallerstein, commenting on the counterculture's relation to the anti-systemic movements of the 1960s writes, "it is very easy to turn counter-cultural trends into very profitable consumption-oriented lifestyles (the transition from yippies to yuppies)." Wallerstein dissociates political activity from what he calls the "lifestyle" practices of the counterculture. Wallerstein and Zukin, 434.

became a market to sell commodities superficially inflected with the ideals of the student movements to young people. Midnight movies emerged at the juncture when this commodification was incomplete, and the possibility of the counterculture as a space for social experiments was still in the air.

Cult film as a category has been difficult to define because the qualities that make a film “cult” often elude simple categorization and do not occur in exclusive genres. I depart from J. Hoberman’s key insight into cult film, that audiences choose cult films—not critics, studios, or filmmakers.⁴¹ I argue that if it is audiences who constitute the cult film, then cult spectatorship as a category is more deeply enmeshed with the viewer’s embodied experience of film and their behavior in the space of the movie theater than has previously been examined. Of course cinema spectatorship always represents a process of interplay between the viewer’s body and visual, aural, and tactile stimuli experienced collectively amongst other bodies.⁴² But what brackets cult off from the more general category of spectatorship is the audience’s performative response to

⁴¹ Barton-Fumo, Margaret. “An Interview with Alejandro Jodorowsky.” *Film Comment*. Accessed March 15, 2017. <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/an-interview-with-alejandro-jodorowsky/>.

⁴² Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 2: 1931-1934*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005, 118. And Vivian Sobchack, Vivian Carol. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992.

the film. These responses encompass a range of behaviors, from laughter at specific scenes, to audiences performing along with the diegesis à la *Rocky Horror Pictures Show* (1975), to repetitive patterns of viewing a specific film. Pauline Kael's slightly alarmist description of the audience's selective laughter at the gorier scenes of *El Topo*, which I cite earlier in this section, constitutes one such performative response. Even today as spectatorial cultures have been transformed by home theaters, at public screenings of cult horror favorite *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), audience members still perform this kind of awkward laughter at the scariest parts of the film, a response which adds creepiness to the diegesis and signals to other audience members who is truly initiated into the cult.

Perhaps the defining aspect of *El Topo's* reception by the Elgin crowd, and in turn, the founding act of cult spectatorship, is the repetitive nature of the public's viewing habits, which Hoberman describes as "total diegetic immersion."⁴³ I argue that this repetition is what constitutes the movie theater as a habitual space, and therefore as a ritualistic space. If classical Hollywood spectatorship was characterized by the standardization of film's narrative structure and absorptive modes of viewing, then cult spectatorship is characterized by weak narrative structures viewed in a distracted,

⁴³ Hoberman, *Midnight Movies*, 96.

repetitive manner.⁴⁴ *El Topo's* picaresque quest narrative, with its ritual interludes, its structural discontinuities and lack of clear narrative causality, exemplifies the weak narrative structure of cult film, which lends itself to repetitive, iterative viewing. I posit that *El Topo*, in contrast to a classical absorptive model, functions within an experiential and initiatory logic in which watching the film repeatedly is a means of undergoing the ritual process presented in the film's diegesis. Because ritual is iterative and sensorially immersive, rather than stable, unitary, or merely representational-symbolic,⁴⁵ the total diegetic immersion of cult spectatorship allows audiences to experience the film as an embodied practice of sensing and performing, rather than as a text with a defined meaning apart from the world of the audience.

I argue that a model of distracted viewing shares structural affinities with the states of mind induced by ritual: reduced time consciousness, a feeling of proprioceptive sensing (rather than optical vision), and depersonalization. In comparing the two, I am intentionally collapsing the distinction between viewing and performing, because I

⁴⁴ Miriam Hansen contends that classical Hollywood spectatorship coalesced around absorptive model of viewing and the consolidation of narration from a male perspective. Hansen, Miriam. *Babel and Babylon : Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.

⁴⁵ See Geertz, Clifford. "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example." *American Anthropologist* 59, no. 1 (1957): 32–54. And Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures : Selected Essays*. 2000 ed. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

believe that in cult spectatorship, the boundary between the two becomes blurred. For example, Walter Benjamin famously wrote of distraction as a mode of viewing cinema, *“Reception in distraction—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception—finds in film its true training ground.”*⁴⁶ Here, Benjamin’s claim for distraction identifies apperception, the act of coming to knowledge through physical experience and sensory memory rather than through rational thought, as the dominant mode of attention demanded by modernity. Through watching films, the audience becomes accustomed to the excessive noise, light, and speed of the modern world, while also being trained to bodily *make sense* of a world rendered opaque by a surfeit of sense data. In the realm of the anthropology of religion, Victor Turner’s canonical work on the ritual process makes an analogous claim to Benjamin’s for the power of apperception, characterizing the quality of attention elicited by ritual performance as “flow,” a state in which action and intention are fused, time consciousness is reduced, and disbelief is suspended.⁴⁷ Turner uses the example of games with rules as activities that can trigger flow because the rules create a bounded

⁴⁶ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility,” 120.

⁴⁷ Turner, Victor. “Frame, Flow Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies; Tokyo* 6, no. 4 (December 1, 1979): 465–499, 487.

frame within which the action can be “auto-telic,” or for itself.”⁴⁸ Likewise, in cult spectatorship, the screening room and the movie screen function as ritual frames, cordoning off infinity from the quotidian world. Repetitive viewing becomes like ritual, an autotelic activity capable of fostering apperception.

More broadly, Benjamin’s and Turner’s accounts of apperception in cinema and ritual highlight the ways that cult spectatorship can open up spaces for the loosening of the egoic self, or alterity, and the experience of the collective effervescence of the social, or *communitas*.⁴⁹ Here, I return to my earlier claim that the cult ritual around *El Topo* provided a visually, sonically, and affectively immersive form of reparative sensory engagement against a backdrop of vast cultural alienation. I emphasize that the alienation American youth culture audiences of the early 1970s would have faced was two-fold, at once rooted in the historical trauma of the Vietnam War and in a major shift in the conception of the capitalist subject from worker to consumer. With consumption as the driver of the new post-industrial economy, capital shifted towards “hyperesthesia,” the drive towards inciting consumer desire through smell, touch, and taste, in contrast to the previous industrial paradigm which had appealed primarily to

⁴⁸ Ibid, 488.

⁴⁹ Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995, 96.

vision.⁵⁰ I link this new hyperesthetic market for sensory experience to the propagation of a diffuse, but persistent alienation related to the radical retraction of communal life under late capitalism. Instead of communal experience, sense experience like touch was now mobilized to expand consumption, individualism,, and ultimately, solitude.⁵¹

Midnight movies offered a reparative to this alienation, serving as venues for a performative kind of spectatorship capable of triggering cognitive and sensory modes of immersion analogous to ritual in a collective context. If neoliberal capital's advance meant an increasingly atomized consumer base, then the experience of *communitas* was a significant counter to this alienation.

⁵⁰ David Howes links the growth of marketing in the mid- to late-twentieth century to the expansion of capital's ability to sell not only products, but sensory experiences. If industrial capitalism was characterized by department store-style techniques of display to incite desire through saturating the visual field of the buyer, consumer capitalism moved to a model of engaging consumers' sense of smell, touch, and taste to create a totally enveloping sensory experience. Howes, David. "Hypereasthesia, or the Sensual Logic of Capitalism," in Howes, David. *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005, 286-7.

⁵¹ In his early writings, Marx links the alienation of the senses to private property, writing that the transcendence of private property would enable 'the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities.' For Marx, capitalism represented a sensory deprivation for the poor from luxury and for the bourgeoisie, a deprivation of communal life through a fixation with accumulating more and more capital. Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. [1st American ed.]. New York, International Publishers, 1964, 118-19.

3.1 *El Topo* as Nietzschean Ritual

Perhaps one of the reasons *El Topo* unexpectedly launched the midnight movie as a mass culture ritual is that the film inserts ritual into the generic conventions of the Italian spaghetti western.⁵² The spaghetti western-style format provided Jodorowsky with an easily recognizable allegorical framework to stage the battle for dominance between good and evil on the contested desert terrain between hemispheric north and hemispheric south.⁵³ *El Topo's* central drama revolves a tribe of indigenous dwarf people exiled from their land by a white settler society. The settlers are part of a blood cult whose ubiquitous emblem is a crude representation of the Eye of Providence, which recurs throughout the film's diegesis. This eye symbol denotes how the conjunction of Christianity and capitalism uplifts vision as the central technology of spectacle. In fact,

⁵² Spaghetti Westerns were characterized by extravagant violence, romantic wide angle shots of the Mexican desert, a penchant for transgressive Catholic iconography, and a tendency towards political allegory. In Mexico, a series of politicized Italian westerns set during the Mexican revolution and dubbed the "Zapata westerns," enjoyed wide popularity between 1966 and 1968. Thus it is not difficult to see why in Jodorowsky's Mexico City context, the genre would be ripe for the director's appropriation, which gives the western a theater of the absurd twist.

⁵³ As Austin Fisher notes, the "border" is complex in the Italian spaghetti western. In the most politically committed western between 1966 and 1968, the American border is an allegory for Southern Italy, while also ideologically reworking Hollywood's imperialist western to question U.S. hegemony. Fisher, Austin. *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema*. London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

El Topo's narrative ultimately poses spiritual and sensory entrainment as uniquely capable of combatting the spectacle that sustains settler culture. The gunslinger, el Topo (played by Jodorowsky) must travel through the desert to duel four gun masters, in the process undergoing the sensory, spiritual, and kinesthetic training which will prepare him to eventually defeat the settlers.

The following analysis of the third gunfighter vignette will allow me to explain how *El Topo*'s ritualized diegesis incites performative reception: In this segment beginning at 59:12, el Topo duels an indigenous Angora rabbit keeper. Black-clad el Topo finds a corral in the middle of the desert filled with rabbits, where the keeper, dressed in white, sits inside a lean-to playing a violin-like instrument. He is forced to duel el Topo because the latter's presence has caused the mass death of his rabbits. In order to correct this injustice, Jodorowsky and the keeper must duel twice, first by shooting at crows, and second by dueling each other to the death. At the end of their first duel the keeper asks el Topo, "Can you tell me which one of these you killed?" Lifting the crow up with his left hand, the keeper says, "This one is yours. It was shot through the head," then lifts his right hand up with another crow in it and says, "This was mine. It was shot through the heart." At 1:02:54, there is a cut to a medium shot of the two figures. The keeper lifts his right hand to el Topo's chest and says, "The heart"

and then lifts his left hand up to Jodorowsky's head and says, "the head," forming an x across the middle of the screen.

The keeper's movements are deliberate and simple, neither expressive nor functional. Rather, as ritualistic action, they serve to reinforce the head-heart diagonal axis in the middle of the screen along which the symbolic battle is being waged. The shot establishes the antinomies upon which the duel is based: good versus evil, left versus right, head versus heart, black versus white, Christ versus the devil, rabbits versus crows. The rabbit keeper represents a hybrid between indigeneity and the aspects of Christian doctrine which dictate pacifism in the face of violence, a trusting, Christological goodness counter-posed against el Topo's cynical will to power. Brent Plate's insight that film cosmologies, like ritual, are constructed along certain axes, helps us understand how Jodorowsky sets up the duel's symbolic stakes.⁵⁴ In this sequence, the cosmology is established according to a horizontal and diagonal axis along which the binaries alternate. When the keeper, in a deliberate, ritualistic manner, lifts one crow to Jodorowsky's heart and the other to Jodorowsky's head, as if anointing his opponent with the dead crows, he forms an x with his arms in the middle of the screen. This creates a path for the binaries to cross, undermining the two figures' good-evil polarity.

⁵⁴ Plate, S. Brent. *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*. London; New York: Wallflower, 2008, 41.

By constructing these spatial binaries only to have his characters alternate between the two axes, Jodorowsky subverts the moral binaries they represent. The design of the *mise-en-scène* implicitly argues, in a Nietzschean vein, that absolute morality does not exist.⁵⁵

The second gun fight begins at 1:03:08. With the two figures facing each other in profile medium shot, the rabbit keeper asks el Topo, “Are you ready?” and turns his back to the camera, starting to walk away. Non-diegetic music consisting of a regular drum beat and pan flute starts to sound. The score ratchets up the tension of the coming duel, while providing a rhythmic structure to its ritualistic action. At 1:03:14, the camera cuts to the keeper, framed in low angle against a stick fence, which sweeps across the frame diagonally. The keeper extends his arms to the rhythm of the music, his gun now raised. At 1:03:15 is an identically framed reverse shot on Jodorowsky as he mirrors the keeper’s movements, the line of the fence running diagonally across the last third of the frame in the opposite direction of the previous shot. As with the keeper, the drum beat punctuates Jodorowsky’s extension of his arms, emphasizing his movement in space by

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Beyond Good and Evil*. New York : Modern Library publishers, 1917.

fixing his stylized performance to a regular beat. The quality of the performers' movements here is slow and symbolic, rather than expressive or functional.

I would like to pause on for a moment to consider how the performers' movements construct liturgical space. If *El Topo's* public enacted a parallel liturgy to the images on screen, these two shots and their concatenation indicate how the film might have inspired such mimetic, kinesthetic responses.⁵⁶ The two sequential shots of the gunfighters are mirror images of each other, posing dynamic oppositions (like the fence lines going in opposite directions) yet suggesting that this is a battle whose success is premised on Jodorowsky's effective mimicry of the rabbit keeper. According to the film's own tenuous narrative logic, by mimicking the keeper's movements, Jodorowsky is subjecting himself to the kinesthetic training that is necessary to fight the settlers. I argue that this ritual process incites kinesthetic empathy in the viewer.⁵⁷ Soviet

⁵⁶ Medina, Cuahtemoc. "Un rito de anti-iniciación: La montaña sagrada." Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas) (28th : 2004 : Campeche, Mexico), and Peter Krieger. *La Imagen Sagrada y Sacralizada*. 1. ed. México, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2011.

⁵⁷ Widely and variously theorized by psychologists, early film theorists, and in the contemporary period, cognitive neuroscientists,, kinesthetic empathy has been theorized across several fields but there is a general agreement that the term describes the viewer's empathic response to another person's movement. Reason, Matthew, and Dee Reynolds. *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*. Bristol, UK; Chicago: Intellect, 2012.

psychologist Vsevolod Meyerhold described kinesthetic empathy as the spectator's fascination with actors' onscreen movements, which elicit an internal (if not literal) mimicry in the spectator.⁵⁸

Meyerhold's model provides a suggestive means of understanding the Elgin public's parallel liturgy. By viewing the ritualistic movements on screen and miming them internally, the Elgin audience enacted ritual in the space of the movie theater. If a growing consensus within film theory dictates that spectatorship can never be understood solely through the model of the disembodied eye, but rather through the body's entire sensing capacities,⁵⁹ then a mimetic theory of cult film can expand our

⁵⁸ Soviet psychologist Vsevolod Meyerhold, presents a more emotionally-based empathic theory of kinesthetic empathy, differentiating between functional movements and expressive movements, asserting that expressive movement is particularly capable of producing emotional response in viewers because of the way that the viewer internally mimes the actions on screen. In Meyerhold's schema, the viewer is able to process emotion *through* a subtle internal mimicry. Other theorists of kinesthetic empathy in the cinema like Balazs and Epstein focus more on bodily movement more generally as a quality that enacts an attracting, intensifying effect on the viewer's sensory experience. d'Aloia, Adriano. "Cinematic Empathy: Spectator Involvement in the Film Experience," in eds Reynold and Reason, *Kinesthetic Empathy*, 79.

⁵⁹ In her reconstruction of Walter Benjamin's theoretical writings on film, Miriam Hansen, emphasizes how the theorist foregrounds the whole sensing body's capacities in his account of film spectatorship. Hansen describes Benjamin's schema of the body as a "porous interface between organism and world that allows for the circulation of psychic energies," Also see Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, Marks, *The Skin of the Film*.

understanding of embodied spectatorship. I argue that that when a viewer observes a figure on screen performing ritual, not only is the viewer internally mimicking the image, but they are absorbing cultural information encoded in kinesthetic movement.⁶⁰ When Jodorowsky mimics the keeper's movements, it indicates to the viewer that they in turn should move along with the screen, even if internally.

The final shot of the scene I will analyze begins at 1:03:19 when the camera cuts to a crane shot of the keeper on the left and Jodorowsky on the right towards a pool in the center of the shot. The height and angle of the shot flattens the scene into a pictographic graphic tableau. Rabbits litter the length of the enclosure but Jodorowsky's side is differentiated by the presence of black crows interspersed amongst the white carcasses, which builds on the contrast between rabbit and crow, vegetarians and carrion-eaters, avatars, respectively, of innocence and cunning. The drum beat grows louder, its pounding punctuating the figures' movement towards each other as they approach the pool. The sense of spatial depth is compressed by the crane shot and the figures' bodies appear in profile in a balanced symmetrical frame, bounded within the fence lines. The shot, which spans five seconds, is a pastiche of the convention in ancient

⁶⁰ Mauss, Marcel. "Techniques of the Body." *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (February 1, 1973): 70–88.

near eastern pictographic art of figuring the entire human body in profile, bounded by a geometric frame at the top of the head and below the feet. The height and distance of the camera makes the two figures look like two-dimensional stick figures dueling on the surface of a beige papyrus scroll, rather than living men dueling in an actual desert.

This shot creates a flattened mythological image space within the film's diegesis that seems to reject the three-dimensional depth of Renaissance illusionism in favor of two-dimensional representation. I argue that this flattening is more than a visual or spatial trick, but actually a way of representing historical time as cyclical and mythological rather than forward-moving. With this shot, the film switches registers from the liturgical space of to the flattened, mythological space of. The shot denaturalizes the illusionism of the realist photographic image, converting the indexical image into a symbolic representation emptied of spatial depth and volume. By referencing ancient pictographic art, Jodorowsky seems to locate the scene not in the historical past of the western genre's nineteenth-century setting, but in the cyclical time of myth. I would argue, however, that Jodorowsky is less interested in a telluric, mythical temporality than he is in a postmodern, spatialized one.⁶¹ Within Jodorowsky's

⁶¹ Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Amerikastudien/American Studies; Heidelberg* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 1984): 55.

postmodernized sense of myth, ritual performance, and the apperceptive modes it elicits, becomes a way of simulating immanent experience.

The duel scene appears to end with the keeper shooting el Topo in the heart. But the amoral gunslinger reveals that he has placed a copper bowl over his heart to protect himself from the shot. El Topo then proceeds to shoot the keeper in the heart. The overly trusting indigenous man falls backwards into the pool in the middle of the corral and the water runs red with his blood. Jodorowsky says, "Too much perfection is a mistake." With the implicit argument that no one can survive in the world without knowing how to use power, Jodorowsky presents a profoundly disenchanting cosmology, but one in which magic is nonetheless necessary. For Jodorowsky, magic, including deception and charlatanism, is way of manipulating images in a world in which images are the currency of consumer culture, a world in which reality has been increasingly transformed into images.⁶² If we understand so-called "primitive" magic as mimicry that instantiates a kind of control over the thing mimicked, then we can identify a commonality between magic and the mechanically reproduced image.⁶³

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ In his study of Colombia's Cuna tribe's use of mimesis, Michael Taussig asserts that the Cunas carved likenesses of white colonialists used in healing rituals, function to give the user a form of magical control over the thing imitated. Taussig, Michael

For Jodorowsky in 1971, there is already no escape from the spectacle; there is only power within it. Magic is a way of gaining control over images, rather than being dominated by them. Indeed, one of the central conceits of *El Topo's* narrative is that Christianity sets up the conditions for a spectacular, mythologized capitalism.⁶⁴ Jodorowsky's insertion of ritual into *El Topo's* western generic framing lays bare the degree to which the western film itself, with its cowboys and Indians and contested land, has already been enshrined as a founding myth of settler colonial society. If ritual is dependent on mythology to function, then the mythology on which Jodorowsky hinges his cinematic ritual is one vacated of divinity, yet crowded with symbols associated with various divinities, behind which the logic of capitalism operates.

4. *The Flesh as Allegory*

The Holy Mountain was widely dismissed as a hippie oddity by popular critics at the time of its 1973 release. I argue, however, that the psychedelic exploitation epic is

T. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge, 1993, 13.

⁶⁴ Roland Barthes locates popular culture as the modern storehouse of myths, through which the deepest cultural stories and biases are transferred from the traditional sphere of religion to contemporary sphere of advertising and film. Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2012.

one of the paradigmatic texts of postmodernity in its prescient imagination of a late capitalist social totality dominated by a mythologized spectacle. *The Holy Mountain* represents Jodorowsky's most coherent, systematic, and lucid attempt at allegorical social critique. I would argue that of the reasons for critics' widely dismissive attitude towards Jodorowsky at the time, and towards *The Holy Mountain* more specifically, is the fetishistic quality of his surrealist images. Every violent act is figured in all its fake, gory body horror,⁶⁵ nothing is left implied through off screen space, and each frame of the film piles layer upon layer of baroque visual excess. It is not just that Jodorowsky's films violate good taste, which they certainly do, but they also present the viewer (and indeed the critic) with images that emphasize the uncomfortable and disgusting dimensions of corporeality: feces, animal carcasses, vomit, maimed bodies, and fake gore all punctuate *The Holy Mountain's* diegesis.

I would like to suggest that that the disgusting, literal, and even exhausting quality of Jodorowsky's cinematic images represents something more significant than the director's adolescent, masculinist penchant for cruelty. Jodorowsky's fetishistic, corporeal image reflects an important, paradigmatic shift, away from the body on film as

⁶⁵ Williams, Linda. *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. And "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* (ARCHIVE); Berkeley 44, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 2.

a bearer of social signification and psychological depth, and towards a model in which the corporeal is increasingly one object amongst many in the film's diegesis. The structuring paradox of *The Holy Mountain* is that though Jodorowsky poses shattering the illusion of spectacle as a spiritual imperative, at the level of the film's visual representation of flesh and gore, the corporeal image is itself already fully ensnared within the crisis of meaning heralded by spectacularized social and economic relations. The sense that the body is inescapably enmeshed in spectacle, I argue, stems from an awareness of the growing regime of military and police violence that underwrites spectacle.

In *The Holy Mountain*, a group of the seven most powerful people on earth accompanied by a common thief, attempt to reach the top of a sacred mountain which allegedly holds the key to immortality. The spiritual quest to the top of the mountain is set against a dystopian world in which capitalist control over bodies is exerted through the dual manufacture of violence and commodified pleasures. *The Holy Mountain* episodically details the machinations of a corrupt state allied with a corporate defense apparatus to present a diffuse yet ever-present allegory of the defining event of late 60s Mexico, the Massacre of Tlatlelolco. On October 2nd 1968, government snipers perched on the rooftop of an apartment complex opened fire on thousands of students gathered in Mexico City's Plaza de las Trés Culturas to demand the de-militarization of the

Mexican police force. For many decades, the Mexican government refused to release accurate figures about how many students were killed. The mass killing was the most visible event of the PRI's long "dirty war" on leftist student activists from the 1960s through the 1980s. Though the figures have been hotly contested, during this period, around 1, 200 leftist activists were captured and disappeared by Mexican government forces, funded and backed by the U.S.⁶⁶ The senselessness and extreme violence of these killings haunt Jodorowsky's 1973 film in both textual and sub-textual ways.

The Holy Mountain is, in fact, not just an allegory for Massacre of Tlatlelolco, but a reflection of the director's own experience of those events. In a 1980 interview with Yuri Hertz, Jodorowsky explained that on October 2nd, 1968, he went to the Plaza de las Trés Culturas to meet his wife, who had just performed in a play. He arrived just after the massacre had occurred, not knowing what happened that day. Jodorowsky narrates the psychic mood of the plaza after the event: "There was a big silence and the dogs were barking. It was one of the weird psychological experiences I've had. Death was in the air.... When a large quantity of human beings are killed, all the town is scared and they

⁶⁶ Calderón, Fernando (Fernando Herrera), and Adela Cedillo. *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-1982*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

don't know why."⁶⁷ Jodorowsky's account, which details no blood or bodies, highlights the contrast between the semi-orderly appearance of the public space and the palpable sense of fear in the air. The monument erected in the Plaza to commemorate the students notes, *la plaza amanecio barrida* ("the next morning, the plaza had been cleared"). The PRI has only ever officially acknowledged the killing of forty students, an admission made as late as 1993, while accounts from the student left put the number as high as 700.⁶⁸ The indeterminacy of the number of students killed, the bodies' disappearances, and PRI's generalized silence around the event left deep historical wounds in Mexican historical consciousness. The inability to put a number on the deaths, or for the families to even find the bodies of the students, can be seen as a structuring absence, a disappearance which defined the deep political depression of the Mexican left through the 70s. The brutality of the massacre marked a paradigm shift away from the sense of revolutionary optimism that had swept Latin America through the 50s and 60s, spurred by the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

⁶⁷ Hertz, Yuri in Cobb, Ben. *Anarchy and Alchemy: The Films of Alejandro Jodorowsky*. London: Creation, 2008.

⁶⁸ The number of students who were died or disappeared remains controversial to this day because these kinds of extrajudicial disappearances of student activists have continued to happen in Mexico, the most notable recent case being the 2014 disappearance of twenty-five indigenous student teachers from a rural teaching college in Ayotzinapa.

As Bruno Bosteels suggests, 1968 in Mexico constituted not so much the loss of an actually existing horizon of liberation, but the annihilation of the very hope of liberation.⁶⁹ Bosteels writes that the massacre haunted the Mexican left as a specific kind of melancholic ghost that represented, “if not the end of all politics, at least the end of modern politics, understood...as the sovereignty of the social bond.”⁷⁰ No longer could politics be idealized as a process by which citizens demand rights from a government constituted by the people. Rather, politics came to represent the naiveté of even expecting justice in dealings between the state and its constituents. Instead, militarized violence nakedly came to mediate between state and people. The period after the massacre also set the stage for unequivocal forms of neocolonial collaboration between the PRI and the United States over the ensuing decades.

4.1 *The Holy Mountain* and Cold Allegories of the Flesh

In the *The Holy Mountain*, a thief traverses the three major parts of the film in hopes of finding enlightenment at the summit of the eponymous holy mountain. The film’s first part finds the thief in a nightmarish, carnivalesque landscape littered with various exploitative spectacles—the Conquest restaged as a bloody re-enactment with

⁶⁹ Bosteels, Bruno. *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Religion in Times of Terror*. London; New York: Verso, 2012, 161.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 161.

toads dressed as friars and chameleons dressed as Mayas, complete with north American tourists competing for a front row seat; a storeroom full of infinite reproductions of full-body casts of a crucified Christ; soldiers in gas masks dancing romantically together. In the second part of the film, the thief climbs a tower to find an alchemist (played by Jodorowsky). The alchemist entreats the thief to come on a journey with seven of the most powerful people on earth, each the head of a corporatized cult contributing to planetary immiseration. The seven episodes allegorize postmodern capital's tremendous power to discipline subjects through ever more targeted methods of delivering discipline and pleasure. The third part of the film details the sensory and spiritual training that the group must undergo in order to reach the top of the mountain.

The Holy Mountain's middle episodes detail the late capitalist regime inaugurated by the Massacre, with each episode representing the different ways that this new politics is brutally inscribed onto bodies in the manner of the Kafka story *In the Penal Colony*, where a machine slowly kills prisoners by carving the penal code into their flesh.⁷¹ The Kafkaesque social inscription of ideology onto bodies in these episodes of the film ranges from the soft inscription of beauty represented by a prosthetics and baby factory, to the hard inscription of military indoctrination represented by a factory that produces

⁷¹ Kafka, Franz. "In the Penal Colony," in *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Richmond, Surrey, United Kingdom: Alma Classics, 2014.

racist games for children. In the Axon episode of the film, the killing and torture of hundreds of students at the Massacre of Tlatlelolco is presented as one such mode of inscription.

The following scene analysis will allow me to detail the ways that trauma inflects Jodorowsky's allegorical corporeal images. In middle section of the *The Holy Mountain*, Axon is introduced as one of the characters who will journey up to the mountain. As the chief of police, he represents martial law and fascist violence. The Axon episode shows him ruling over a violent cult whose central rite is the castration of young boys and their subsequent indoctrination into a fascist militia. Within this episode, there is a montage of gross out violence, which allegorically figures the killing and torture of students during the Massacre of Tlatlelolco.

The following scene analysis will allow me to detail the ways that trauma inflects Jodorowsky's allegorical corporeal images. I will analyze seven shots from the end of a nineteen shot montage. At 1:09:54, cut to a high angle close-up of a cadet kneeling between two fallen female students. The student on the right has yellow paint spilling from her swollen belly. The cadet tears a live white dove from the abdomen of the girl on the right. At 1:09:59, cut to a high angle extreme close-up of a girl's midsection covered in strawberries. The camera zooms out to reveal a cadet removing whole cabbages from her skirt and stomping them under foot. At 1:10:03, cut to an extreme

close-up of a prone student with his head against the edge of a curb, vomiting a pile of shiny red maraschino cherries. The camera pans up slightly towards his mouth to reveal his mouth spitting out more cherries in clear liquid. At 1:10:07, cut to an extreme close-up of a fallen girl's head propped up against a corner. Metal tubes wrap around each side of her head and squirt blood onto the concrete in front of her gaze. The tubes squirt precise jets of blood each time she shakes. Her convulsive cries can be heard through the violin track. At 1:10:12, cut to a medium shot of Axon removing a head that he has presumably decapitated from a torso. As fake blood sprays from the neck and splashes onto Axon's face, a skull pops out of the torso. At 1:10:12, cut to an extreme close-up of a female student with metal tubes protruding from both ears, squirting blue blood. The camera zooms back and reveals her fallen body draped over the curb. The montage ends at 1:10:22, with Axon framed in long shot, kneeling with a bible before a landscape of dead bodies filling the alley behind him. In front of him lies a pile of severed limbs. Acrid smoke rolls down the alley towards the camera until it fills the frame and obscures the image.

Jodorowsky's representation of the Tlatlelolco in this montage is strikingly distanced, using surrealist visual devices to represent the torture of the students by the police. The montage creates an extreme contrast between viscerality and objectivity in its narration of one the most fraught episodes in modern Mexican history. Rafael Corkidi's

serene cinematography, characterized by slow gentle zooms and omniscient medium and high-angle shots, accompanied by the film's elegant violin score, is counter-posed against the mock gore of the student's torture. Under the non-diegetic violin music, we hear the diegetic sound of cadet's grunts and growls. Also notable in the montage is how the director seems to return to a strategy central to his earlier experimental theater work, of using food and live animals as the sculptural raw material for the spectacular gore of the student massacre. The objectivity of the camera, and the use of highly artificialized violence, stand in stark contrast to the cadets' frenzied attack on the students and the riotous movement within the picture plane. The overall tone produced by the film's music and cinematography is one of traumatized distanciation.

The quotidian props used to make the gore—flour, cherries, strawberries, ribbon—inhabit a liminal sphere between visual metaphor and what Steven Shaviro calls “cold allegory,” body horror imagery which bypasses visual metaphor, and instead, presents the flesh in all its gore as a literal site of traumatic social inscription.⁷² By contrast to an older regime of visual metaphor, in which an image can still analogically stand in for another idea or an event, cold allegory is produced when the distance between the image and its meaning has collapsed under the draconian economic and

⁷² Shaviro, Steven. “Body Horror and Post-Socialist Cinema: Györgi Pálfi’s *Taxidermia*.” *Film-Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (October 2011), 90-91. Jodorowsky, working with the legacies of French, Latin American, and Eastern European surrealism could even be understood as a genealogical precursor to a filmmaker like Pálfi’s.

psychic conditions of late-stage capitalism.⁷³ I propose that Jodorowsky's images of the Massacre, their vacillation between visual metaphor and cold allegory, begin to exhibit this process of collapse between signifier and signified in the post-1968 period. There is an ironic distance in Jodorowsky's use of non-realistic props and slapstick flourishes, like the skull springing from an already decapitated torso, which betrays a deep sense of trauma. The real trauma of Tlatlelolco forecloses any possibility of an emotionally coherent tone in the film's visual narration of the massacre. Instead of an expression of sadness or mourning, Jodorowsky stages the massacre as testing of the limits of the performers' bodies. I locate the melancholy of the massacre's representation, not in any obvious expression of mourning or loss, but in the notion, enacted through the Jodorowsky's utilization of his early career performance strategies, that the body is now both exceedingly fragile and infinitely flexible. The body can now be molded, like a dead material, according to the limitless demands of a new economic and military regime.

The vignette with the maraschino cherries exemplifies how Jodorowsky incites disgust through staging the limits of the body. The shot begins with an extreme close up of a triangular pile of red, slightly translucent maraschino cherries pooled at the bottom of a curb. The camera then pans upwards to reveal a male student's mouth vomiting

⁷³ Ibid.

cherries, pink translucent liquid dribbling from his lips. The cherries, though not “realistic,” are incredibly disgusting—their amount, the way they seem mass-produced rather than like natural fruit, the liquid that surrounds them. Though there is a metaphorical slippage between the cherries and human viscera, ultimately, the disgust we feel in watching the scene is at the idea of the actor holding that amount of sickly-sweet cherries in his mouth or stomach. This scene eschews verisimilitude in order to stage the limits of the flesh as an infinitely flexible, thing-like material. As fake viscera, the cherries are never endowed with a connection to spirit or being. Their materiality is not eclipsed by their metaphorical linkage to viscera, but rather suggests that living flesh is as object-like as industrially-produced fruit. In an inversion of metaphorical referentiality, the cherries render the flesh as a sterile object.

In *The Holy Mountain*, the murdered flesh of students is presented as no different from the strawberries, flour, or sausages that pour from the holes in it. The film represents the students’ bodies as always-already objects under a post-Tlatlelolco political regime. Jodorowsky’s cold, corporeal images register the student massacre in the film’s Axon episode not as visual metaphors, or even mere representations of Tlatlelolco, but as images that contain traumatic traces of the event. *The Holy Mountain’s* historical allegory is startlingly precise in diagnosing the ways that Tlatlelolco inaugurated a new Mexican, and perhaps global, disposable political subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

Despite Jodorowsky's alignment with left critiques of the spectacle, in most ways, he remains resolutely anti-political, locating the solution to the problems of spectacularization in the actions and practices of the individual. In keeping with many strains of New Age thought that blossomed during the late 60s and early 70s, the ultimate message of *The Holy Mountain* is that the solution to living in the lucid dream of capitalism's image world is simply to wake up and gain a different kind of consciousness through bodily and spiritual practice. Rather than dismiss this idea out of hand, however, I would argue that Jodorowsky's appeals to awake from spectacle reveal the ways that New Age religion and its popularization throughout the U.S. and Latin America stepped in for traditional political critique amongst certain segments of the middle class after 1968. I link this investment in depoliticized critiques of modernity to the disillusionment and defeat of the student movements. When politics seem insurmountable, the self can seem like a manageable terrain for transformation.

An analysis of the following sequence will allow me to show how *The Holy Mountain* represents modernity as an assemblage of spectacles. At 1:50:28, a medium shot of the figures around the table shows Jodorowsky in the center of the frame. The initiates all have shaved heads and blue anoraks that denote their liminal condition, having been stripped of identity to undergo the ritual journey to the mountain. The

wind diegetically whistles through the undulating tall grasses in the background. The alchemist removes his white robes to reveal an identical blue anorak beneath and places his hands back onto the table, saying, "Is this the end of our adventure? Nothing has an end. We came in search of the secret of immortality, to be like gods." He makes an expansive gesture to the group and says, "And here we are: mortals. More human than ever." He places one hand on top of the other and says, "If we have not obtained immortality, at least we have obtained reality. We began in a fairy tale and we came to life, but IS THIS LIFE REALITY? No. It is a film." The alchemist raises his right palm, fingers extended. Projecting his palm toward the camera, he says, "zoom back camera!" as it zooms out, revealing first the initiates around the table and then the crew and the lights. The camera keeps zooming out until the whole cast and crew and all of the set's rigging are visible. At 1:51:26, a cut to a high angle shot shows the initiates and the crew looking back at the camera as Jodorowsky points at it. The alchemist then says, "We are images, dreams, photographs." He pounds on the table with his fists and continues, "We must not stay here, prisoners. We shall break the illusion. This is *magia!*" Jodorowsky and the initiates then rise from the table and flip it up towards the camera, revealing a red enneagram⁷⁴ symbol emblazoned across its surface. At 1:51:49, a cut to an extreme

⁷⁴ The enneagram is a diagram which maps nine interrelated human personality types developed by Bolivian spiritual guru Oscar Ichazo.

long shot shows the cast, crew and the whole rigging apparatus around them at the base of a mountainous landscape, as the table falls on its face to the ground. Once the table falls, the alchemist says “goodbye to the holy mountain. Real life awaits us.” The cast starts walking towards the mountains into the distance as the screen fades out to white and the credits roll.

The zoom here enacts a kind of reality effect, revealing that there was in fact never a holy mountain to begin with and the perception that the initiates were at the mountain’s summit was based merely on the camera’s bracketing off a smaller portion of a much larger landscape. Further, when the camera zooms back enough to reveal the cast, crew, the rigging and the boom mics that surround the initiates, we see that the illusion is dependent on a whole technical-industrial apparatus to sustain its smooth running. While Jodorowsky’s revelation of the camera’s technical and spatial illusionism falls in line with many classic critiques of the mechanically reproduced imaged leveled by film and media theory, I argue that Jodorowsky’s monologue in this scene of the film suggests the deep imbrication of the photographic image with magic. When Jodorowsky says, “We are images, dreams, hallucination,” he does not mean that the photographic image has distorted the initiates’ perceptions, but rather that the initiates, in being captured on film, have literally become someone else’s hallucination, and are dreams themselves. The photographic image for Jodorowsky is always a semi-magical category

that has mimetic control over the thing reproduced. Thus mechanical reproducibility, and the flood of images it introduces into the world, represents a form of magic, which can only be fought with more magic. Through their investment in status and power, the initiates have projected themselves as powerful images into the world, and in projecting themselves, something of their essence, and therefore their egos, have gotten trapped in the infinite relay of mediation.

Additionally, there are some structural analogies between New Age thought and left critique that enable the slippage described above. Marxist systemic thinking understands capitalist modernity, its industrial and social relations, as a product of uneven distribution of resources and power, New Age thought understands the world's fractured unity as a product of modern rationalization. As scholar of New Age religion Wouter J. Hanegraff asserts, in all their variety and multifarious syncretism, these religions tend to share an underlying "holism," the idea that everything in the universe is intricately connected and can be understood through a systemic relationship between its parts.⁷⁵ The difference between leftist politics and New Age religion, however, is that the former depends on concrete work and social antagonism, while the latter's focus is

⁷⁵ Hanegraff, Wouter J. "Prospects for the Globalization of New Age: Spiritual Imperialism Versus Cultural Diversity" in Rothstein, Mikael. *New Age Religion and Globalization*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2001.

on changing individually-held epistemic perspectives in order to restore the world to its former unity. I highlight these two strains of thought because I believe that for midnight movie audiences, there may have been code switching between them. Further, while Jodorowsky's own perspective is politically neutralizing, because of the weight it places on individuality, I would argue that his films legitimately attempt to reflect a notion of social totality that exceeds economic determinations, a social totality with a spiritual and collective character.⁷⁶

Further, the cultivation of bodily practices as a way of getting back in touch with an atomized sensorium bears interesting parallels with Debord's notion of spectacle. While the society of the spectacle has been discussed extensively in its ideological dimensions, I believe Debord powerfully sets up the problem of the spectacle in relationship to the senses and Western philosophy's long project of uplifting vision above all other senses. An oft-neglected aspect of Debord's theorization of the spectacle is that alienation is not merely emotional, but is indeed a problem of the senses, of the Enlightenment project's elevation of sight over touch. Debord posits the spectacle as the

⁷⁶ Emile Durkheim's analysis of social totality, versus that of Marx, is closest to what I mean by collective consciousness. I believe this account, which emphasizes spiritual and affective relations within social totality best accounts for that which cannot quite be encompassed by a description of economic relationships. Durkheim, Émile, and W. D. Halls. *The Division of Labour in Society*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984.

culmination of modernity's empiricist privileging of sight, writing, "it is inevitable that it [the spectacle] should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived."⁷⁷

Here, Debord links the pleasure of looking, scopophilia, with the idea that abstraction is a fundamentally deceptive reduction of the world's thingly materiality into symbols, or representation. Debord's formulation of sight as the sense which sustains spectacle also suggests the tactile power of touch (and in turn, hearing, and taste) to affirm that very materiality. The alienated subject of the spectacle is not just a politically disaffected subject, but one alienated from their senses, and thus from the world.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 7.

3. Manuel Octavio Gómez's Syncretic Baroque Images of Cuban Popular Culture

1. Introduction

This chapter examines two films by Cuban filmmaker Manuel Octavio Gómez, *Tulipa* (1967) and *Los días del agua* (1971). These films figure the performance of cultural forms disfavored by the revolution—circus, cabaret, and popular religious practices like *santería* ritual—as spectacles which suddenly intrude into the film's diegesis. Though Gómez was one of the founding members of the revolutionary film organization Industria Cubana de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) and very prolific through the 1980s, the director's films have been largely forgotten in the last few decades, and have been curiously absent from Third Cinema's critical corpus. Some of the critical neglect of Gómez's work is at least partially due to the fact that the filmmaker's works largely elide the heroic masculinity that came to characterize the revolution, presenting national identity as unstable and always under contestation by minoritarian elements within Cuban culture. These minoritarian elements often erupt into Gómez's narratives through images of bodily performance. Drawing on the concept of the New World baroque poetic image, I show how the neobaroque cinematic image synthesized radically different cultures, bringing together diametrically opposed extremes to crystallize the often internally contradictory historical reality of the

Americas in aesthetically excessive terms.¹ Throughout this chapter, I explore how Gómez's baroque filmic images of bodily performance crystallize on one hand the problem of gendered and racial economic exploitation and on the other, the desire for a mysticized cultural strata. Through these corporeal images, the sphere of popular spectacle emerges as both reactionary and as a space of contestation for elements that fall outside the revolution's representational bent towards casting the nation in the image of a heroic, self-sacrificing *criollo* male worker.

From 1959, the year of the Cuban revolution, Cuba's cinema industry became the most prolific and aesthetically innovative film industry in Latin America, producing a number of advances in the documentary form, and eventually, in the fictional feature film. *Tulipa* (1967) and *Los Dias de Agua* (1971) were two of Gómez's most critically and popularly successful fiction films, made during this rich and highly experimental period of ICAIC's history. The movies produced by ICAIC from the late 1960s to the early 1970s are heterogeneous and difficult to categorize because of their thematic and stylistic variety, but two overarching thematic and stylistic preoccupation emerge in this corpus: first, a concern with how to cast a new revolutionary subjectivity through film and

¹ José Lezama-Lima was the original theorist of the neobaroque, arguing that New World architecture and poetry represented an art of counter-conquest by which the colonized appropriated and re-animated European cultural forms. Lezama Lima, José. *La Expresión Americana*. 1. ed. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993.

second, the conviction that a high degree of aesthetic experimentality was necessary to represent a new revolutionized society.² Gómez's films are unique within this corpus in that they consistently interpret social reality from a minoritarian perspective—women, Afro-Cubans, peasants. Gómez frequently cast his wife Idalia Anreus as his films' protagonist. Gómez and Anreus' work on *Tulipa*, *Los días del agua*, and a number of other films, reflects their mutual interest in representing the complex subjective experiences of women.

Though during the first two decades of the revolution Cuban film was concerned with representing women, it primarily endeavored to do so through casting them as productive working subjects and was less interested in representing women's subjectivity. The aim during this period was to represent women as able to equally shoulder the burden of industrializing the Cuban economy with men.³ Che Guevara's famous essay on the "new man" was highly influential in shaping the image of the

² Chanan, Michael. *Cuban Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, 247-272 and 5.

³ Despite the drive to represent and express the new affective and social modes of a collectivized society, women were unequally represented in this project. As Glenda Mejía points out, early post-revolutionary cinema endeavored to introduce women as workers capable of taking up the industrial productivity burdens demanded by the revolutionary project, but the new revolutionary cinema less apt to explore women's emotional and subjective experience during this period of societal transformation. Mejia, Glenda "MUJERES EN DOS ÉPOCAS DEL CINE CUBANO - Razón y Palabra."

nation in that of the self-sacrificing, male, criollo factory worker.⁴ Though Guevara's notion of the new man implicitly includes women and racial minorities, it elides any difference between subjects and renders heroic masculinity as a teleological endpoint of revolution. This chapter traces the ways that Gómez's cinematic images reveal racial, class, and gendered fissures within the new man project. I argue that this occurs at the level of representation, by casting unheroic subjects as protagonists, but more importantly, at the level of the image itself. I argue that Gómez's baroque imagistic strategy, which syncretically layers different and sometimes antagonistic cultural elements together, allows for moments of radical subjective alterity to emerge.

Both *Tulipa* and *Los dias del agua* are set during different times in what Cuban historians call the "pseudorepublic," the period from 1902 to 1952 when Cuba, with military and financial backing from the United States, was officially established as a republic independent from Spain. While *Tulipa's* setting is historically non-specific, the costumes, and the problems of the Cuban woman it takes up, are characteristic of the 1940s and 50s, the period immediately before the revolution. The Platt Amendment, passed by Congress in 1901, bound Cuba to exclusive trade and political alliances with the United States. The republican period was characterized by explosive economic growth for a small segment of the Cuban ruling class and American business interests,

⁴ "Guevara (1965): El Socialismo y El Hombre En Cuba." Accessed April 12, 2018. <https://www.marxists.org/espanol/guevara/65-socyh.htm>.

as well as extensive political corruption and elections whose legitimacy was persistently tainted by violence at the polls. The republic recurs in Gómez's films as a point of historical reference because it epitomizes the neocolonial condition of the country before the revolution in which wealth flowed to American businesses. By contrast, a large portion of the Cuban population, especially in rural areas, did agricultural work in *latifundios*, large swaths of land financed by American investors.

My discussion of *Tulipa* comprises Parts 2 and 3 of this chapter. I reference a number of genealogically interrelated Cuban popular culture forms, most of which originated and spread throughout the island in the nineteenth-century—namely, the circus and the *bufo habanero*, both of which often relied on racist Cuban stereotypes. In Part III of this chapter, I turn to *santería*, and to a lesser degree, cabaret, forms which were alternately stigmatized and folkorized according to political expediency. I argue that what draw together these disparate cultural forms are their basis in bodily performance and their origins in black, lumpen popular culture. Though for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Africana religion of *santería* was stigmatized, its dominant mode of constructing belief—syncretism—made its way into mainstream Cuban popular culture. *Santería*, a syncretic popular religious practice that allowed black Cubans to continue worshipping Yoruba gods through the official practice of Catholicism, left a profound mark on Cuban cultural production in a number of ways. First, many Cuban arts, like the famous rumba, and by extension cabaret, have their

origin in African rituals. Second, the diffusion of black arts through all sectors of Cuban society in popular culture made syncretism a dominant method for representing lived historical reality as a composite of different cultures teeming with the racial, class, and gender antagonisms wrought by colonization. I argue that Gómez and his various collaborators, including Jorge Herrera, Julio Garcia Espinosa, and Bernabé Hernandez, inherited the syncretic tradition from a pre-cinematic popular culture. They then used the cinematic image as a spectacular site for the depiction of difference and its interrelated social antagonisms.

2. *Bodily Performance, Cuban Popular Culture, and Minoritarian Transgression*

Manuel Octavio Gómez's 1967 fiction feature *Tulipa* narrates the hardscrabble life of Tula, a woman on the brink of losing her job as a circus stripper due to her advancing age. The film represents an early example of Gómez's experimentation with dialectically using popular culture tropes like the circus to show bodily spectacle's vacillation between economic-spiritual degradation and the transgressive play of difference. Throughout the film's narrative, the circus and the sainete, or vernacular theater, serve as cultural forms where racial, sexual, and gender difference are brought to bear on Cuba's patriarchal and criollo national imaginary. In *Tulipa*, the circus serves as a heterotopia for popular culture, where the exhibition of freakish physical traits and open nudity would seem to invert the moral norms of bourgeois society, but in fact perfectly

mirrors the exploitation, sexism, and racism of the society that hosts it.⁵ Within the circus' heterotopic setting, the stakes of stripping as a bodily spectacle become achingly clear—the flesh is commodified and its value linked almost absolutely to youth. Though the film's narrative ultimately toes the moralistic line that stripping is a form of debasement, it also keeps a space open for Tula's performances as an orientalist dancer to bear a different valence. Tula's spectacular performances within the film's diegesis stage her refusal of patriarchal and class norms as a refusal to completely show her body, a refusal to yield to complete visibility. Gómez's treatment of Tula's bodily performance makes her dance a contested site for a transgressive play that visibilizes her precarity and sexual difference. Though *Tulipa* is framed as a historical film, one which officially critiques the economic and social conditions of the period immediately preceding the revolution, I argue that the film also subtly critiques the enduringly narrow strictures of a criollo national imaginary still dominant within the revolutionary paradigm at the time of the film's production.

⁵ Here, I follow Olga Rodríguez-Falcón's assertion that key works by Guillermo Cabrera-Infante and Julio García Espinosa's search for heterotopic space in Havana's cabaret culture. For Cabrera-Infante and García Espinosa, the heterotopic space of cabaret offered a context in which racial and class antagonisms could be at least momentarily reconciled in a context that brought several strata of society together. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as formalized spaces of social abnormality, which invert the utopian idea. See Rodríguez-Falcón, Olga. "The Lumpen and the Popular: Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Julio García Espinosa." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 28, no. 4 (September 1, 2009): 465–79. And Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. [1st American ed.]. New York, Pantheon Books, 1971.

Like many of the revolution's first wave of films, a certain humanism is evident in *Tulipa*, whose narrative poses friendship and social solidarity against the dehumanizing conditions of poverty. This humanism, drawn as much from Italian neorealism as from a concern with establishing the moral parameters of a new society in Cuba, confronts the hostile emotional conditions forced upon people by poverty, as well as the importance of social solidarity in surviving these conditions. But *Tulipa* differs from the first wave of revolutionary-era fiction films in a major way. The film casts the revolutionary subject in the mold of an older female stripper and explores her emotional life at a time when women's subjectivity was largely occluded from Cuban revolutionary film.⁶ Gómez said of the film's protagonist, "Through the story of a nude dancer in a circus, the film shows a vision of our country before the triumph of the

⁶ Despite the drive to represent and express the new affective and social modes of a collectivized society, women were unequally represented in this project. As Glenda Mejía points out, early post-revolutionary cinema endeavored to introduce women as workers capable of taking up the industrial productivity burdens demanded by the revolutionary project, but the new revolutionary cinema less apt to explore women's emotional and subjective experience during this period of societal transformation. Mejía, Glenda "MUJERES EN DOS ÉPOCAS DEL CINE CUBANO - Razón y Palabra." <http://oldversion.razonypalabra.org.mx/N/n66/varia/gmejia.html> For example, For example, one of the most iconic films of this period, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968), lays bare the ideological and emotional paradoxes which beset bourgeois gentleman Sergio, on the eve of the revolution. By contrast, Sergio's lover Elena, a mulata woman from the popular classes (played by Daysi Granados), is endowed with no equivalent psychological richness.

revolution, highlighting the underuse of man's capabilities and the effects of his frustrations, escapisms, and meanness" [translation mine].⁷ Though Gómez assumes "man" as the universal subject in this statement, his use of a middle-aged stripper, a tertiarized service worker,⁸ as the film's protagonist inverts the image of the revolutionary subject as a masculine heroic industrial worker. Gómez not only inverts the paradigmatic national imaginary of the revolution, but poses friendship between female circus employees as a subversive strategies against the circus' patriarchal culture, represented by Cheo the manager. As Michael Channan points out, the friendship that springs up between Tulipa, Beba, and Tomasa, the circus' bearded lady, is presented not

⁷ "A través de la historia de la bailarina desnudista de un circo, el film muestra una visión de nuestro país antes de triunfo de la Revolución , destacando la subutilización de las posibilidades del hombre y su secuela de frustraciones, escapismos, y mezquinidades." Gómez, Manuel Octavio, interviewed by Mario Rodríguez Aleman in *Cine Cubano*, No. 40, 1967.

⁸ Tertiarization refers to the growth of the service sector when it begins to displace industrial production. Because tertiarization before the revolution was associated with nightlife, cabaret, and prostitution, these kinds of service economy jobs were considered less dignified than industrial production, which the revolution ultimately sought to expand. Ironically, as Cuba's industrialization project failed, the country's economy came to be increasingly tertiarized, dominated by the tourism and health industries. Gabriele, Alberto. "[Cuba's Socialist Economy from Distorted Tertiarization to Market-Compatible Reforms](#)" in Font, Mauricio A. (Mauricio Augusto), and Carlos Riobó. *Handbook of Contemporary Cuba [Electronic Resource]: Economy, Politics, Civil Society, and Globalization*. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2013.

only as the precondition to survival but as the “most positive human value” for these women on the fringes of society.⁹

Set during an unspecified time during Cuba’s republic, *Tulipa* implicitly takes up the problem of rural women’s near-destitution during what Cuban historians call the pseudorepublic. The pseudorepublic, which spanned 1902 to 1952, marked Cuba’s first post-colonial government. However, because this independence was gained with financial and military backing from the United States, it was considered by most historians another iteration of the colonial condition, albeit under the power to the north rather than the old Spanish model. The republic was characterized by explosive economic growth for a small segment of the Cuban ruling class and American business interests and a high degree of modernization enjoyed exclusively by these sectors. The republic recurs in Gómez’s films as a point of historical reference because this epoch epitomized the neocolonial condition of the country before the revolution, when half the nation’s agricultural land was concentrated in the hands of 1.5% of the population. During the republic, most rural Cubans worked as *jornaleros* (landless day laborers) or as tenant farmers on tracts of land owned by North American corporations. This situation was even worse for female laborers, who were not only paid less than their male

⁹ Chanan, *Cuban Cinema*, 257.

counterparts, but were also responsible for rearing children, cooking, and other necessary household tasks.

The facts of rural womens' near-total lack of economic options during the republic highlights why the female circus performers of *Tulipa* are made disposable economic subjects twice over, first as women, and then as tertiarized service workers. In *Tulipa*, Tula, Beba, and their friends are trapped in the lowest form of employment—circus performance survival hinges on the whims of the public, and the bosses steal performers' money anyway. These womens' jobs are considered so low not only because they are forced to perform with their bodies, but because their work does not produce economic value in a traditional sense. By contrast to the revolution's glorification of the industrial worker who will make Cuba a productive economic power, the tertiarized female circus workers of *Tulipa* do not produce anything. They simply use their bodies to entertain other proletarians using well-worn popular culture tropes like the *sainete* and are paid small amounts of money from other peasants' meager sharecropping wages. By playing up the irresolvable economic trap of this situation, Gómez highlights the fact that for precarious women, their bodies are all they have left to sell when there is no work. In *Tulipa*, the female body becomes a site for both limitless exploitation and refusal, even in the midst of the most extreme commodification.

The history of the circus and the *sainete*, Cuban popular cultural forms which figure heavily in *Tulipa's* narrative, reveals that the development of a nationalist Cuban

popular culture relied on fixing racial, gender, and class difference in order to make it an object of laughter, thereby consolidating white criollo identity and patriarchal dominance. In *Tulipa*, the circus is a heterotopia within popular culture, in which all of popular culture's contradictions and injustices come to the fore. Historically, the circus was the place in Cuban popular culture where all the arts, particularly music, dance, graphic design, and various types of corporeal performance were integrated into one art before the advent of cinema. Further, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the circus was one of the main venues for vaudeville performance, which would eventually develop into the more properly theatrical *bufo habanero* in the mid-nineteenth century.

Later, when cinema was introduced to Cuba at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a concurrent boom in circuses throughout the country as the circus whetted the public's appetite for mass culture spectacles. A few observations about the circus' emergence and its popularization elucidate why it became such a rich space for heterotopic allegory in Gómez's film. The first Cuban circus, The Campo de Marte, was established in Havana around 1800. The success of the Campo led to a veritable explosion of circuses by the beginning of the twentieth-century—from more formalized enterprises performing for middle and upper-class Habaneros to very cut-rate operations traveling through remote parts of the country performing for the poorest jornalero audiences. Though various historical accounts attribute the circus' origins to European companies which passed through the island, once the Campo de Marte was

established and the form was more broadly adopted throughout the country, audiences overwhelmingly favored national companies and performers over foreign ones.¹⁰

Though different circuses served different socio-economic rungs, the economic character of the circus was decidedly mass, generally by and for a criollo lumpenproletariat. The casual observer can infer that the lower the socioeconomic level of these travelling circus acts, the more likely that a given circus would have a mixed-race lumpenproletariat public. Cuban historian of the circus Hilda Venero de la Paz points out that for nineteenth century criollo men without family inheritances, comedic performance at itinerant circuses was one of the only avenues for paid employment, as work was extremely scarce.¹¹ Venero's account also highlights how the circus and official popular culture activities were the sanctioned ground of criollo men.

The growth and popularization of the circus is deeply intertwined with the development of the vernacular theater or *bufo habanero*, the two forms evolving symbiotically together over the course of the nineteenth century. In its inception, the circus was one of the places in which vaudevillian itinerant showmen would begin to develop vernacular Cuban comedy, later known as the *bufo*. The *bufo habanero*, which Gómez makes frequent reference to in *Tulipa* and in an earlier documentary, *Cuentos de*

¹⁰ Venero de la Paz, Hilda. *El Círculo Mágico: Orígenes Del Circo En Cuba, 1492-1850*. Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2016, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

la Alhambra (1965), was the first properly national theatre practice in Cuba, repurposing the Spanish comedic *sainete*¹² to develop archetypal racialized performance figures like “el negrito,” “la mulata,” and “el gallego,” whose laughs resided in fixing racial and sexual difference into archetypes.¹³ These racially stereotypical figures reinforced a shared sense of identity and a common daily cultural existence amongst its white criollo audience.¹⁴ Both the circus and the bufo spoke to an increasing desire by Cuban criollo society to see itself reflected in Cuban culture as distinctly national and markedly different from Spanish colonial culture.

The *sainete* is performed throughout *Tulipa* as the circus’ main attraction. In one scene, Beba, who is being groomed as the mulata star of the *sainete*, is harangued into

¹² Following the convention of Cuban writers, I alternately between using the term *bufo* and *sainete* throughout this chapter. In Spain, the *sainete* was a type of theatrical comedy that drew its comedic force from mocking lower-class speech, dress, and behavior.

¹³ The names translate roughly into: “the little black,” the diminutive connoting racial condescension and white anxiety towards black Cubans; “mulata,” the eroticized figure of the mixed race woman; and “gallego,” the Galician, usually constructed as lacking the common sense to survive on the island, a stereotype inflected with anti-colonial feeling against the Spanish. Lane, Jill. *Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, 24.

¹⁴ Jill Lane’s study of the bufo habanero argues that blackface performance in the criollo theater of the mid-nineteenth century tracks along a rising anti-colonial sentiment in Cuba. Lane argues that blackface constitutes a multivalent practice, an attempt to a craft national unity out of a violent colonial past and an affirmation of white criollo superiority over black Cubans. Lane, *Blackface Cuba*, 24.

dancing with Cheo, costumed as the negrito in blackface, and Ruperto, playing the perverted, oafish Galician. Beba is cast into the ring but refuses to strip or dance throughout the show. I argue that Gómez's repeated use of the sainete and Beba's reluctance to perform in it is a subtle critique of the racial, gendered, and economic exploitation at the heart of Cuba's burgeoning popular culture, which would eventually become mass culture through the spread of film as a transnational imported product. Understanding the circus and the sainete's vaudevillian tendency to fix difference as an exploitative stereotype provides insight into the ways that mass culture does the same on an even larger scale.

2.1 *Tulipa's* Ambivalent Dance

Tulipa's narrative transpires over the course of the circus' tenure in six different towns. The film begins when Cheo, nephew of the circus owner Ruperto, takes the young, beautiful recruit Beba to see Tula do the dance of the seven veils in a small tent set off from the larger main attractions. Beba is mesmerized by Tula's dancing. In the first town, the film tracks Cheo's attempts to get Beba to become his full-time mistress and serve as the circus' female lead performer, while his wife, who usually plays the sexualized *mulata* in the show, recovers from a broken leg. Cheo believes that Beba, in addition to being his on-call lover, will make a good replacement for the circus' sideshow nude tent, currently occupied by Tula. Cheo assumes Beba is green and desperate enough to be seamlessly integrated into the circus without a thought for

Tula's displacement. But instead, Beba refuses her role, performing awkwardly at the sainete, fighting with Cheo's wife, and befriending Tula. The older dancer decides to take Beba under her wing as an apprentice. Throughout their burgeoning friendship, Tula stresses to Beba that the older dancer's ability to not fully expose her body, to always leave something to the imagination, is the quality that has made her such a singular performer. Tula muses of her time as the star of the circus, "I always left something to the imagination, a feather, a flower, something artistic." There is an irony inherent in Tula's repeated assertions, however, that plays contrapuntally against her own reflections on her artistry, in that the men who flock to these shows are only there to see her naked. Further, the circus' new management under Cheo has determined that Tula is now too old for her body to entice anyone. In the next section I will read a scene from *Tulipa* which will allow me to illustrate the ways that Gómez's images of Tula's performance enact a dialectical movement between the dancer's exploitation and her subversive resistance to allowing her body to become fully visible:

Once the circus reaches the second town and Beba now understands the fuller implications of Tula's work, she sneaks into the side tent to see the older dancer perform again. This sequence cuts steadily between Tula dancing, an audience of jeering, horny men, and Beba's distressed expression in the dark. The sequence is established with Tula in extreme long shot, her back to the camera dancing for the audience against the tent's backdrop, which is decorated with large painted flowers. On the right side of the frame

is a small orchestra in silhouette playing diegetic orientalist music with a strong Afro-Cuban backbeat. The audience's silhouetted heads line the bottom of the frame. Tula is well lit with a fill light and dressed in a belly dancing costume with gauzy veils attached to her fingers and a veiled headdress. Beba watches, melancholy, from the audience as Tula dances. The film cuts to an extreme close-up of two men's faces only slightly visible through the darkness of the tent. A low-key light illuminates the left sides of their faces, revealing their sweat-slicked foreheads. The mulatto man who occupies the center of the frame has gold-capped teeth which glint slightly in the light. On the right side of the frame, a white man's skin appears clammy and waxy in contrast with the cavernous black holes of his eye sockets, which are cast into shadow. The two jeer at Tula. A cut back to Beba in medium shot surrounded by men reveals her outraged expression.

The film then cuts back to Tula dancing across the stage, revealing that she has removed some of the veils, her arms extended wide around her, displaying her exposed midriff. A cut back to the crowd of men in the dark shows a man fanning himself in the top right of the shot. Low-key lights isolate the men's guayaberas, allowing most of their faces to blur into the dark background so that they appear almost headless. A cut back to Tula on stage in medium shot with her back to the camera shows her arms extended outwards with her veils falling around her like a wide, gauzy cape. A cut back to the audience shows one backlit man in a fedora silhouetted against a crowd of laughing men. The film cuts back to Tulipa in long shot, twirling with her veils flying around her.

This is followed by a cut to a black man in the audience in extreme close-up. He is backlit so that only the edges of his face are illuminated, his features indistinct except for the light that glints off his teeth and the points of light reflected in each of his eyes. A cut back to Tulipa in close-up shows her veiled face with her arms lifted around her, whirling in front of the camera. The film then cuts back to an extreme close-up of men in the audience whose forms are indistinct, except when one man blows smoke from a cigarette into the camera lens. The scene ends with Tula refusing to fully undress as the men's taunts escalate. Beba, embarrassed to see her friend humiliated, runs crying from the tent.

In this scene, Jorge Herrera's cinematography and Rafael González's lighting, with whom Gómez would also collaborate with in *Los días del agua*, set up a tonal contrast between the black of the audience and bright grays of Tula's performance. The scene, which cuts back and forth between Beba's offended, sensitive gaze, the lecherous audience, and Tula's dancing, encodes each party's moral position within a distinct tonal range in the mise-en-scène. The audience of mostly men, which Gómez's crew captured in semi-documentary fashion by recording an actual small town circus audience, is shot through the murky darkness of the circus tent. The men are illuminated with points of low key light that make them look like a faceless, sinister mass. Soft, blurry gray patches of light illuminate only certain details of the audience's features against the inky background—sweating foreheads, leering smiles, clothing that seems to

float in space without bodies. These details serve to expressionistically highlight the mass' monstrosity. The audience's amorality and will to consume is photographically coded as a dark unknowability. The lighting on Beba, whose wounded expression peeks out from the dark, eyes highlighted in a creamy gray and the rest of her face shrouded in black, emphasizes her still-intact morality and naïve innocence. Tula, by contrast, is shot with extensive fill lights so that the details of her face and costume are distinct on stage. Her dancing form is captured in white and light gray tonal variations, and the glittering sequins on her costume brightly punctuate her movement. By contrast to the audience and Beba in the dark, Tula's near-total visibility (save for her mouth and the veiled parts of her body) is coded as both the most amoral and ambivalent figure in the film.

While *Tulipa's* official narrative is organized somewhat melodramatically around the question of Tula's respectability in the face of her supposed dehumanization as a stripper, I argue that the film's actual position towards sex work, laid bare in the visual exposition, is actually quite ambiguous. This ambiguity turns not on whether Tula is respectable, but on how the act of stripping oscillates between a negative spectacle that commodifies the flesh and stripping as a progressive spectacle through which forms of alterity repressed by the dominant culture can appear. The former perspective, embodied by the audience, constitutes the most obvious layer of the film. Based on the representation of the audience as a dark mass of licentious desires, spectacle is the process of pure, uncritical consumption by which the flesh, and thus the soul, are

debased through the monetization of the body's exposure. The audience's insistence that Tula finish disrobing is in fact an appeal to finish the task of making her flesh a totally consumable object. The audience, shrouded in darkness, possesses power in their ability to passively consume Tula's body without being visible.

By contrast, the figure of Tula in all her ambiguity, casts spectacle as a transgressive play of alterity. Tula's cabaret-like performance, a quasi-orientalist dance to a variation on the "Dance of the Midway,"¹⁵ is fundamentally rooted in a lumpen popular culture which appropriates and hybridizes different elements with little respect for their provenance. Throughout the film's narrative it is made clear that the circus' main attraction is the *sainete*, the grand performance and expression of racial, sexual, and nationalistic tropes. Tula, having been exiled from the *sainete*, dances in the side show. Her act, based on an imagined Arabized otherness, performs her alterity as a

¹⁵ "Dance of the Midway" or "The Streets of Cairo," was popularized through its publication in the "ethnic" section of Arban's *Method for the Cornet*. The tune has no actual known Arabic origin, but some have linked it to *Kradoutja*, an Algerian melody popular in France in the 1600s. Arabian song became popularized as a marker of the "Orient" through its use in the 1950 Looney Tunes animated short "Rabbit of Seville," in which Bugs Bunny charms an electrical plug as if it was a snake. The song is also quoted in Louis Armstrong's song "Hoochie Coochie Man." Benzon, William. *Beethoven's Anvil: Music in Mind and Culture*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. My notions of orientalism and "otherness" follow Edward Said's understanding of orientalism as Europe's long colonial imagination of the East, and its tendency to overwrite the actual histories, traditions, and cultures of the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 2003.

lumpen, tertiarized older woman in a context where those categories have been excluded from revolutionary subjectivity. Though in the context of Cuba, this Arabized otherness would have been a highly imaginary construction filtered through a vague historical idea of the Moors, the fact that Tula's escape itself relies on a racialized performance, even an imagined one, is indicative of the central role of race in popular culture performance. Tula's refusal to completely unveil herself enacts a self-conscious play between the danger of becoming an object and the assertion that she is, in fact, despite everyone's denial of her value, a subject. Further, though she is lit for total visibility and the audience nearly invisible, in the end her dance denies the audience's desire to see her totally exposed.

The ideological oscillations inherent to Gómez's images of popular performance constitute a baroque code in which his cinematic images speak doubly—a minoritarian perspective couched in a set of official national images and discourses. Paul Schroeder Rodríguez, historicizing the neobaroque tendency that immediately succeeded New Latin American cinema's militant phase in the 1960s, identifies the neobaroque's strategies of inversion, parody, and distortion further radicalize militant cinema's revolutionary praxis.¹⁶ The neobaroque film, with its variety of aesthetically experimental visual strategies, subverts nationalistic monologism, the idea that the

¹⁶ Rodríguez, Paul A. Schroeder. "After New Latin American Cinema." *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012): 87–112.

nation and historical reality are a unified and coherent whole.¹⁷ Though Schroeder-Rodriguez locates neobaroque Latin American cinemas as products of the 70s and 80s, I would argue that films like Gómez's start to reveal the fissures and contestations within the New Latin American cinema as early as the mid-60s. Filmmakers like Gómez, who never quite fit in with the more heroic aspects of the New Latin American cinema, reveal an alternative understanding of the revolutionary project as perpetually under construction and polyvocal in nature.

Further, Gómez's mobilization of popular culture tropes in *Tulipa* constitutes an early iteration of, the eventual dominance of the Latin American neobaroque image. Though much less aesthetically complex than the images in his later film *Los días del agua*, *Tulipa's* expressionistic use of lighting and the figuration of the performing body as an aestheticized site for making social and political conflict visible point to a breach in Cuban film's militancy, a need for that militancy to critique itself through imagining daily life as the ground of struggle. Haroldo de Campos and Maria Tai Wolff's paradigmatic description of the New World baroque, invoking Walter Benjamin, describe its anti-hegemonic strategy in the following way:

"To speak the baroque code, in the literature of Colonial Brazil, was to try to extract difference from the morphosis of the same. As the allegorical style of the baroque was an alternative speech—a style in which in extreme cases anything could

¹⁷ Ibid.

symbolize anything else (as Walter Benjamin explained in his study on the German Tragic Drama—"the alternating current" of the Baroque brasilica was a double speech of the other as difference: to speak a code of otherness and speak it in a state of otherness...."¹⁸

Benjamin's identification of the ambiguity within the baroque poetic image as that which simultaneously signifies its opposite provides a useful framework for understanding the workings of the filmic image in Latin American cinema's neobaroque phase.¹⁹ If a cinematic correlate to the New World Baroque poetic image exists, it would be characterized by an aesthetic slippage within the image that gives way to an ideological one. In *Tulipa*, Gómez's dialectical cinematic images perform what Campos and Wolff call the baroque's will to "extract difference from the morphosis of the same." In *Tulipa*, this occurs through Tula's will to make visible her difference as a woman whose economic viability has been exhausted, against the heteropatriarchal neocolonial culture of the republic. The historical framing of the film then subtly folds over into a critique of its contemporary context, where that same heteropatriarchal structure has deeply inflected the workerist imaginary of the revolution. Though at the imagistic level Tula's performance is shot and edited in a mostly naturalistic manner, these scenes

¹⁸ Campos, Haroldo de, and María Tai Wolff. "The Rule of Anthropophagy: Europe under the Sign of Devoration." *Latin American Literary Review* 14, no. 27 (1986): 48.

¹⁹ Rodríguez, Paul A. Schroeder. "After New Latin American Cinema." *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012): 87–112.

betray a certain burgeoning baroque strategy. Their expressionistic use of black and white calls attention to itself as a heavily coded representation, opening a breach in naturalism, which gives way to the suggestive ambiguities generated by Tula's performance.

Though faithful to the revolutionary project since its inception, Gómez nonetheless early on starts to find critical social fissures within this project. On one hand, Gómez speaks the official discourse of the revolution, which through its main cultural wing in the film industry, was concerned with producing films that could rewrite the bourgeois historiography of the republic and expose the true stakes of the commodification of the human under neocolonial conditions.²⁰ On the other hand, *Tulipa's* mobilization of the popular exemplifies the way Gómez understood the revolution as a process always under revision, a process in which challenging ontological nationalism was necessary to prevent the revolution from becoming univocal and authoritarian. Gómez's images speak these perspectives *simultaneously*, never settling for a binary either/or.

²⁰ Gómez states in an interview, "[*Los días del agua*] constitutes a search for our own cultural values, of a national, decolonizing, and revolutionary expression of our reality." Gómez, Manuel Octavio interview. *Cine Cubano*, No. 71-72, Habana, Cuba: 1972.

3. *Los días del agua, Ritual Performance, and Imperfect Cinema*

In *Los días del agua* (1971), Gómez and cinematographer Jorge Herrera's neobaroque image strategy would become more explicitly syncretic. The film uses ritual performance and the popular myths they enact as a nexus around which questions of revolution and superstition crystallize. Gómez and his collaborators notably elide some of the revolution's most orthodox attitudes towards popular religiosity, namely the revolution's official position, that witchcraft and popular religiosity could be tolerated but would fade out when the revolutionary process had reached its full fruition. Instead, *Los días del agua* casts ritual performance, along with the mythical sphere it invokes, as a wellspring for enduring revolutionary sentiment that long predates the 1959 revolution. In Gómez and his collaborators' schema, popular religiosity, deeply influenced by black Cuban culture, is designated as a space where the possibility of freedom is preserved in the face of extreme precarity. I argue that *Los días del agua*, co-written by Julio García Espinosa during the heyday of "imperfect cinema," can help us expand the category of imperfect cinema beyond the orthodox militant cinema. This expansion is important because it illuminates the ways that armed insurrection is fed on the practices of daily life that preserve freedom, including religious ritual.

By 1971, the year that Manuel Octavio Gómez made *Los Dias de Agua*, Cuban film was still making formal and thematic strides, but the optimism and vanguardism which had characterized the first ten years of the revolution were beginning to wane. In 1970,

after a smaller than projected sugar harvest and increasing signs that Cuba would have to stay economically dependent on the Soviet Union, pessimism set in. As a result of scarcity and the general feeling that dissent could be more dangerous than ever now that the promise of national economic independence was fading, a certain cultural orthodoxy started to take hold. The major symbol of this narrowing of ideological diversity and growing intolerance to critique was the Padilla Affair, in which dissident poet Heberto Padilla was imprisoned for writing a book critical of the militarization and bureaucratization of Cuba's Communist Party. But in the field of film, the early 70s would also mark a peak in ICAIC directors' creative freedom under Alfredo Guevara's leadership of the institute. *Los días del agua* was one of only five fictional features produced by ICAIC that year, due to the reduced financial liquidity caused by the sugar shortfall. In fact, as we will see, *Los días del agua's* production was itself profoundly enmeshed with the historically failed sugar harvest of 1971.

Based on true events drawn from sensationalized newspaper stories from Pinar del Rio province, *Los días del agua* tells the story of historical figure Antoñica Izquierdo, a peasant woman who becomes a religious leader and later a quasi-political figure based in her miraculous ability to heal people with water. An ambitious local lawyer, Navarro, appropriates Izquierdo to win the support of her followers for his populist gubernatorial campaign. When Navarro wins the governorship and drops his populist agenda, the healer realizes that the politician's only true desires are the accumulation of money

through the consolidation of power. When Izquierdo turns on Navarro, he imprisons her, and her followers riot. Izquierdo and her followers are then massacred by Navarro's republican forces.

As in *Tulipa*, Gómez speaks a double discourse in *Los días del agua*, painting economic underdevelopment, emblemized by superstition, as the enemy of social progress, while using the film's images to generate a tension and ambiguity that cuts against the film's official anti-religious ideology. At the film's most overt ideological level, the narrative reflects the revolution's ongoing concern for narrating pre-revolutionary Cuban history as dialectical progress towards revolutionary rupture, a process of overcoming the shackles of colonialism and neocolonialism through coming to radical consciousness. But by the early 70s, Cuban films' broader thematics had shifted away from the optimistic search for the image of the revolutionary subject, and towards a gloomier preoccupation with the consequences of continued underdevelopment. This latter current is very much apparent in *Los días del agua*, an allegory for how poverty leads people into blind faith, superstition, and ultimately fascism. Considered Gómez's best-known and critically lauded film (along with his 1968 *La primera carga al machete*), *Los días del agua* represents the director's deepest exploration of the dialectical relationship between Cuban popular cultural spectacle and its intertwinement with neocolonial exploitation. I contend that Gómez and Herrera's neobaroque imagistic strategy, developed through the experimental use of color film

and riotously crowded picture planes, subtly critiques the revolution's increasingly orthodox program. A special target was its attitude towards popular religiosity, which at the time was, at best, tolerated as a belief system that would be eventually eliminated by socialism and at worst, stigmatized as linked to criminality. *Los días del agua's* baroque, anarchic picture planes and figuration of Antoñica Izquierdo's water healing rituals as generative spaces for power and social meaning, undermine the revolution's epistemic certainty that magic would eventually be wiped out by scientific rationality.

Los días del agua's critical reception within Cuba echoed the film's surface anti-religious message, reflecting the dominant attitude of the state towards both institutional religion and popular religiosity. This attitude was based in Leninist doctrine separating church and state. Following this doctrine, religious activity would be tolerated, yet would also be considered an atavistic vestige of an under-developed society.²¹ As Hector Amaya asserts, during the Cold War, Cuban film criticism became a space for the ideological performance of an imagined future state.²² Nowhere is this ideological performance more clear than in *Los días'* critical reception, which most critics

²¹ Lenin writes, "Our Programme is based entirely on the scientific, and moreover the materialist, world-outlook. An explanation of our Programme, therefore, necessarily includes an explanation of the true historical and economic roots of the religious fog." "Lenin: Socialism and Religion." Accessed June 14, 2018. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/dec/03.htm>.

²² Amaya, Hector. *Screening Cuba: Film Criticism as Political Performance during the Cold War*. 1st edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

understood as an argument for imminent secularization and a clear allegory of the dangerous power of the state's union with religious authority. In 1971, Cuban critics understood Antoñica's story and the desperation, superstition, and ignorance it symbolized as a clear sign of the inevitable teleological breaking point that was expected to precede revolution. Further, for many Cuban revolutionary intellectuals, the 1930s represented the zenith of the neocolonial republic's crimes of corruption, exploitation and fascist governance, buttressed by the United States' neocolonial strong arm.

For example, in a 1971 review of *Los días* in *Granma*, Mario Rodríguez Aleman writes that the central goals of the film are to denounce, through the story of Antoñica Izquierdo, "the high degree of irrationality, magical and pre-scientific thinking that dominated the epoch" [the 1930s].²³ Statements like Aleman's strongly reflect the fact that the revolution still bore traces of Western enlightenment values, which understood science as fundamentally opposed to magic, and secular rationality as the enemy of religious irrationality. Another reviewer, Roberto Branley, in *Juventud Rebelde*, goes so far as to describe the popular religiosity manifested in *Los días*' script as a "dialectical" and "class-conscious" treatment of "frustration and under-development, as much mental as economic during the 56 years of pseudorepublic."²⁴ Branley understands the peasants who put their faith in Izquierdo as manifesting mental or psychological

²³ Aleman, Rodríguez Mario. "Los días del agua." *Granma*, Habana, Cuba: July 16, 1971.

²⁴ Branley, Roberto. "Hidroterapia," *Juventud rebelde*, July 22, 1971.

symptoms of economic under-development, which presumably would not have afflicted them if they had the rationality of economic development on their side.

The relationship of the socialist Cuban state to Africana religions in Cuba is a complex one, because while these popular religious practices were never outright prohibited, they were by turns both stigmatized and appropriated by government institutions according to political expediency. Further, from the early phases of the revolution, the state had an uneasy relationship to institutional religion that made rapprochement with any kind of faith, whether popular or institutional, problematic. By 1959, when Cuba became a socialist, secular state, the Catholic Church, the largest institutional religion in the country, had already seen record lows in mass attendance by rural peasants.²⁵ The segment of Cuban society that most attended church during the 1950s and the in the immediate aftermath of the revolution were affluent urban whites, which further cemented the narrative that the church was by and for the Batista-supporting ruling class. In 1961, when Castro expelled one hundred and fifty Catholic priests Cuba and put them on a boat to Spain in the middle of the night, the gesture was more about articulating a rupture with the Church's traditional hegemony in Latin America than about any real threat that the Catholic church posed to Cuban socialism.

²⁵ Crahan notes that in the lead up to the revolution, the Church lacked both the resources and a vision for stepping in as a social service agency for the country's ills Crahan, Margaret. "Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 17, no. 2 (1985).

In light of this apparent lack of a hegemonic national religion, the majority of the country's religious practices at the time of the revolution were a piecemeal and largely private affair, determined by family tradition, class, and race. Santería, a syncretic religious tradition which allowed African slaves to continue worshipping Yoruba gods (orishas) under the cover of Catholic saints, was widely practiced by the black and mulatto lumpenproletariat on the island. Santería mixed African ceremonies with certain Spiritualist practices like mediumship and spirit possession.²⁶ Before the revolution, santería was understood in popular discourse as a practice of and for the black, uneducated lower classes. After the revolution, however, the socialist government developed a complex relationship to santería as a source of "authentic" Cuban culture, and the religion's official recognition by cultural institutions served as a route towards a superficial racial reconciliation between white Cuban intellectuals and the island's black

²⁶ Spiritualism is a form of form of religiosity, which became popular amongst Cuba's white middle class in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Following the teachings of the French author, translator, and scholar Allan Kardec, spiritists believe that the living can communicate with the dead through séances and mediums. In Cuba, many practice spiritualism alongside Africana religions like santería. The spiritualist belief that each living person has a protective spirit guardian mirrors the santero belief that each person has an orisha who guides them, as well as the Roman Catholic belief in personal guardian angels. It is therefore easy to see how these three practices would easily become syncretized in Cuba.

population.²⁷ During the early years of socialism, black Cuban intellectuals, calling for the increased visibility of Cuba's African heritage within the revolution's cultural program and for real measures to end the country's history of racial discrimination against black Cubans, saw the recognition of santería as key to a broader acknowledgment of the contributions of black Cubans to Cuban national culture as a whole. But this recognition went awry, as various government cultural agencies, in a bid to integrate African culture into the core of Cuban identity, took up the social scientific study of santería as a storehouse of the myths, rituals, music, and dances of African-descended Cubans, and in the process de-sacralized them.²⁸

Though santería was enthusiastically taken up by revolutionary-era Cuban ethnologists as an important aspect of Cuba's African heritage, these initiatives understood the religious tradition primarily as a source of folklore, rather than as a set

²⁷ Brown, David H. *The Light inside: Abakuá Society Arts and Cuban Cultural History*. Washington [D.C.]: Smithsonian Books, 2003, 199-236.

²⁸ The groundwork for the integration of African culture into Cuban national identity was laid three decades before during what would later condescendingly be called the "black craze," a period in the 1930s in which Cuban ethnographers like Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera for the first time took interest in the idea that Cuba was not exclusively a white criollo nation, but one in fact, deeply shaped by the culture of the African slaves who were brought to the island by slavers from the seventeenth-century until the nineteenth century . See Fuente, Alejandro de la. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

of genuine spiritual practices.²⁹ The dances and drumming that were so central to santero rituals were now performed in theaters as ethnological examples of black performance traditions, tacitly secularizing them. The ultimate hurdle that the project of reclaiming santería for national identity faced was ultimately the socialist government's conviction that the religious content of santería rituals would disappear over time along with racial discrimination.³⁰ By the early 60s, simultaneous with the expulsion of the Catholic priests, the government's relative tolerance and curiosity towards santería shifted towards quiet prohibition as many lodges were pressured to close. During this period, santería rituals were stigmatized as markers of racialized social dangerousness. Though the revolution never went so far as to officially prohibit any specific set of institutional or popular religious practices, the broader sentiment expressed by Cuban government policy was that religiosity was an obstacle to a society founded on racial and economic equity. This obstacle would ideally be overcome in the revolutionary process.

Gómez and his collaborators on the script, Bernabé Hernandez and Julio Garcia Espinosa, took ample liberties with the basic kernel of *los acuáticos'* story, layering and superimposing a number of events, outside religious imagery, and themes over the basic

²⁹ Ibid. Also see Berry, Maya J. "From 'Ritual' to 'Repertory': Dancing to the Time of the Nation." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 29, no. 1 (2010): 55–76.

³⁰ Ibid, 291.

historical facts of Izquierdo's life. Despite *Los días del agua's* representation of superstition as an easily manipulable and potentially reactionary trait within the lumpenproletariat, the film also figures popular religious iconography, rituals, and performance as powerful spectacles whose powers of attraction often undermine the film's overtly anti-religious messages. The hallucinations which punctuate the diegesis—superimposing santero, Catholic, and cabaret iconography onto los acuáticos' water healing practices—present magico-religious symbols and rituals as occasions for the performance of alterity. Gómez contrapuntally works against the film's connotative meaning at both narrative and visual levels. At the level of narrative, the film uses only the smallest kernel of los acuáticos' historical chronicle, superimposing several layers of fictional elements onto the bare-bones documentary facts of the narrative to construct a political allegory far more dramatic and sweeping than the original sources.³¹ At an aesthetic level, Gómez and his life-long cinematographer and collaborator, Jorge Herrera, craft an eclectic visual system through the film's expressive use of color in the diegesis.

³¹ This method of mixing documentary with fiction has been a key strategy of Cuban narrative filmmaking since the revolution. See Burton, Julianne. *The Social Documentary in Latin America*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990. And Haddu, Miriam, and Joanna Page. *Visual Synergies in Fiction and Documentary Film from Latin America*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

I will begin by address Gómez and his co-screenwriters' narrative technique. What is a matter of historical record is that Antoñica Izquierdo was a peasant woman who allegedly healed the sick with water from a mountain spring above her cabin in Viñales. Izquierdo and her family were popularly called "los acuáticos" (the aquatic people), and according to Nilo Blanes, the Havana journalist who reported on the case in 1930s, were visited by around 250,000 people.³² Izquierdo ultimately died in Mazorra, a state insane asylum, where doctors administered copious amounts of electroshock therapy to cure her of what they thought was schizophrenia. Besides these few facts, there are many aspects of the story which Gómez and his collaborators improvised. For example, contrary to the film's narrative, Antoñica never led armed revolts against the ruling government, nor did she incite her followers to violence.

The most notable improvisations on the story, however, rest in Gómez, Hernandez, and Espinosa's depiction of Izquierdo as having practiced forms of spiritualism and santería. The few remaining relatives of Izquierdo who are still alive and still practice water healing perceive this as the most offensive invention in Gómez's film, insisting that los acuáticos' beliefs are not related to Catholicism, spiritualism, or

³² Nilo Blanes interviewed in G.B. "Otro Film Cubano: Los días del agua" *Romances*, Habana, Cuba: September 1971.

santería in any way.³³ They argue that, in fact, los acuáticos have no religious basis for their beliefs and that their healing is based on the elemental powers of water, rather than faith in god or a pantheon of deities. The remaining members of los acuáticos understand water healing as a medicinal rather than a ritual practice.³⁴ I call attention to the divergence between the historical facts of los acuáticos' beliefs and the film's version of them because it is through the film's fictionalizing, syncretic method that los acuáticos' story is assigned tremendous magico-religious force and allegorical weight within the sweep of Cuban history. Gómez's fictional rendering of los acuáticos' practices as a hodgepodge of sometimes contradictory religious beliefs constructs Izquierdo as a stand-in for the various popular religious practices that the Cuban state could not fully reconcile with Marxist doctrine under the revolution. By contrast to the perspective of Cuban critics detailed above, Gómez ultimately frames his negative assessment of popular religiosity around its potential to become mediatized spectacle. The semi-historical chronicle at the center of the film is narrated not as a set of objective historical facts, but as a story whose wild visions are mediated and sensationalized through the lens of the republic's yellow journalism and the opportunism of local con man Toni Guaracha.

³³ Author interview with distant relative of Izquierdo, Antonio Tomas Perez Infante, Viñales, Cuba August 2017

³⁴ Ibid.

While Cuban critics of *Los días del agua* understood the film as a clear allegory against religion and superstition, Gómez and his collaborators on the film's script had a more complex understanding of the popular religiosity figured on screen. All three filmmakers, white criollo Cubans, had a notable interest in *cubanía*, the almost ontological set of characteristics at the root of Cuban-ness. Cubanía has been consistently associated with poor mestizo and black Cubans' contribution to the culture as these were the groups in Cuban society, who, unlike white middle or upper-class criollos, had no fantasy of return to the colonial metropole.³⁵ Gómez made several films that drew on *cubanía* in the form of the *sainete* and cabaret (*Tulipa*, 1967 and *Cuentos del Alhambra*, 1963), popular religiosity and ritual (*Los días de agua*, 1971), and Yoruba myth (*Patakín*, 1983),³⁶ which indicates that he understood there being a certain genealogical fluidity between popular religiosity and popular culture forms like the bufo, cabaret, and son. The director, who was born to a bourgeois immigrant Galician family, owners of a

³⁵ Fernando Ortíz theorized Cubanidad as the multiple and hybrid essences that make up the foundation of Cuban identity. Ortíz Fernando, "The Human Factors of Cubanidad," 1939. Ortiz, Fernando. "The Human Factors of Cubanidad." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. <https://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau4.3.031a>.

³⁶ In terms of ICAIC's production history, another notable elision from revolutionary cinema is the absence of the musicals. This is odd, considering that music and dance have consistently been defining elements within Cuban culture. Since its founding in 1959 to the 1980s, ICAIC produced only three musicals. Besides Espinosa's film, Gómez's *Patakín* (1985) is one of these three ICIAIC musicals, a comedy based in Yoruba myth which skewers machismo in Cuban society. The latter film became a camp hit in certain U.S. film circles in the 1980s.

bakery in a poor black neighborhood of Havana, recalled as a child being allowed to attend Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies at cabildos that other whites were barred from.³⁷ When asked by Julianne Burton about the popular and folkloric themes of his work, Gómez noted, “I have always felt the need to delve into popular life, to bring myself closer to forms of popular expression, to identify the problems of the common people and try to express them.”³⁸ Gómez’s statement reflects an idea of the cultural register of *lo popular* as a sphere which produces different forms of cultural knowledge than official culture, and which persisted even under and through the revolution’s official policy of cultural renovation. Gómez’s lesser-known collaborator Bernabé Hernández had also done extensive research on Afro-Cuban religions, making three documentaries for ICAIC on the subject in the 1960s: *Abakuá*, *Cultura aborigen*, and *Superstición*. The latter title seems to reflect the demands of state ideology more than the ethnological curiosity of the director’s research into native and African magico-religious practices.³⁹

³⁷ Calderón. *Los Días de Manuel Octavio*. Ediciones La Memoria. Habana, Cuba: Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torriente Brau, 2016, 25.

³⁸ “Manuel Octavio Gómez Interviewed by Julianne Burton.” Accessed February 27, 2018. <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ManOctGómezInt.html>.

³⁹ Robbins, Dylon. “On the Margins of Reality: Fiction, Documentary, and Marginal Subjectivity in Three Early Cuban Revolutionary Films” in Haddu, Miriam, and Joanna Page. *Visual Synergies in Fiction and Documentary Film from Latin America*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Julio García Espinosa is by now considered the most famous of *Los días de agua's* scriptwriters, emerging as a central theorist of Cuban cinema and third world cinema more broadly in his 1969 essay "An Imperfect Cinema." This seminal text has often been interpreted too flatly, as a call for an overtly political counter-cinema that smashes Hollywood's naturalistic illusions, or worse, as a call for a kind of poor cinema, bearing an aura of authenticity because of its low production values. One of the things I would like to suggest in this chapter is that films like Gómez's *Tulipa* and *Los días del agua* can bring out deeper resonances in Espinosa's notion of a politicized aesthetics, as one which does not just advocate for politically didactic guerilla styles of filmmaking, but uses pre-existing popular cultural traditions already participated in by broad swaths of the population as the basis for an anti-heroic yet revolutionary cultural praxis. Espinosa's famous essay takes up the problem of the representational codes of a post-revolutionary cinema, which, no longer made by specialist producers and passively consumed by audiences, is free to articulate the problems of everyday life in aesthetically diverse ways.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Espinosa writes, "What happens then is not only an act of social justice — the possibility for everyone to make films — but also a fact of extreme importance for artistic culture: the possibility of recovering, without any kinds of complexes or guilt feelings, the true meaning of artistic activity." Julio García Espinosa, and trans. by Julianne Burton. "For an Imperfect Cinema." <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html>.

One of the most ignored aspects of Espinosa's text is the degree to which he emphasizes marginalized cultural modes like folk art, camp, and the broader category of "popular art" (which he opposes to American "mass art") as examples of aesthetic practices in which everyday life and artistic practice are continuous, and thus radically democratic.⁴¹ The author privileges these marginalized popular cultural strains (which include various forms of performance, like dance, music, and ritual) because these practices and traditions understand the body and its functioning within everyday life as the basis of all aesthetic activity. Embedded in Espinosa's argument against specialization is his assertion that the division between producers and consumers of film follows the original segregation of body from spirit enshrined in classical aesthetics. He writes:

"Perhaps it is based on the enormous prestige which the spirit has always enjoyed at the expense of the body. Hasn't artistic culture

⁴¹ Ibid. On camp, Espinosa writes, "Camp" and its attitude toward everything outdated is an attempt to rescue these leftovers and to lessen the distance between high culture and the people. But the difference lies in the fact that camp rescues it as an aesthetic value, while for the people the values involved continue to be ethical ones." On popular art: "Art has always been a universal necessity; what it has not been is an option for all under equal conditions. Parallel to refined art, popular art has had a simultaneous but independent existence." On folk art: The future lies with folk art. But let us no longer display folk art with demagogic pride, with a celebrative air. Let us exhibit it instead as a cruel denunciation, as a painful testimony to the level at which the peoples of the world have been forced to limit their artistic creativity. The future, without doubt, will be with folk art, but then there will be no need to call it that, because nobody and nothing will any longer be able to again paralyze the creative spirit of the people."

always been seen as the spiritual part of society while scientific culture is seen as its body? The traditional rejection of the body, of material life, is due in part to the concept that things of the spirit are more elevated, more elegant, serious and profound. Can't we, here and now, begin doing something to put an end to this artificial distinction? We should understand from here on in that the body and the things of the body are also elegant, and that material life is beautiful as well. We should understand that, in fact, the soul is contained in the body just as the spirit is contained in material life, just as — to speak in strictly artistic terms — the essence is contained in the surface and the content in the form."⁴²

We know that the oppositions Espinosa refers to here—between body and spirit, matter and spirit, surface and essence, content and form—are false, because embodied experience mediates between these dichotomies. I propose, then, that imperfect cinema can be re-read as a category not only rooted in democratic, participatory aesthetic practices, but in making art from what is most directly at hand: the body's capacity for sentient experience *through* action. If for a certain strain of Cuban revolutionary-era intellectuals, *cubanía* and its associations with lumpenproletarian blackness represented an "authentic" cultural sphere (*lo popular*), I argue that that sense of authenticity is more than a simple racial fetishism (though this fetishism is not entirely absent). Rather, the lasting influence of Africana ritual, dance, and music on Cuban culture is the sense that the body's ability to move and perform constitutes the basic kernel of all aesthetic activity. This stands in contrast to a more European idea of aesthetic contemplation and

⁴² Ibid.

perception as the precondition to action. If we keep folk art, camp, and popular art at the forefront of our conceptualization of imperfect cinema, it becomes both more politically volatile and less politically correct as an aesthetic category than it would initially appear to be.

But Espinosa's identification of popular art as a locus of authenticity was not so easily reconcilable within the revolutionary program. All the marginal cultural strains that Espinosa rescues as fruitful but ultimately limited models for imperfect cinema—folk art, camp, and popular art—are inherently spectacular forms, both in their aesthetic surfaces and in their economics. Havana's nocturnal cabaret scene, which Espinosa admired greatly based on his 1977 essay documentary *Son o no son*, is an example of a cultural form that came to embody this problem of spectacle. Featuring Cuban orchestras accompanying costumed dancing by beautiful semi-nude women, the cabaret displayed both "authentic" Afro-Cuban and sleazy, exploitative elements, drawing rich European and American tourists along with the city's lumpenproletariat. Cabaret was outlawed by the socialist government in 1968 in a bid to eliminate prostitution and gay cruising. Less officially, its intent was to limit spaces where concentrations of lower class Afro-Cubans congregated, as well as to finally quash the symbolic memory of a mobbed-up, pre-revolutionary Havana.⁴³

⁴³ Rogriguez-Falcón, Olga. "The Lumpen and the Popular: Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Julio García Espinosa." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 28, no. 4

As Olga Rodríguez-Falcón points out, there is an irresolvable contradiction between Espinosa's support of the government's closure of spaces in which people displayed "lumpen" and "anti-social behavior" and his continued use of these forms as productive models for revolutionary aesthetics.⁴⁴ The contradiction resides in the fact that popular culture spectacle like cabaret, regardless of its authentic Afro-Cuban dance and musical content, draws its attracting qualities at least partially from the exploitation of women and racial stereotypes (we can see how the legacy of the bufo is with Cuban popular culture at all times). But in the context of a profoundly patriarchal society, the cabaret's existence as a heterotopic space where social and moral norms are inverted also creates a cover for minoritarian identities and behaviors like gay cruising to become visible/practicable. In the absence of utopian social equity, spectacle, particularly corporeal spectacle, becomes a privileged site for the transgressive play of difference, where minoritarian negativity is united with aesthetic play. I argue that this tension at the heart of Gómez's baroque images are what gives them not only their iconic power, but their ability to represent a fundamentally syncretic experience of historical reality without erasing the racial, gendered, and class tensions inherent to that reality. Gómez,

(September 1, 2009): 465–79.

⁴⁴ Espinosa, Julio García, and Víctor Fowler Calzada. *Conversaciones con un cineasta incómodo: Julio García-Espinosa*. Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello, 2004.

unlike Espinosa, saw no easy reconciliation within popular culture. From the perspective that Gómez articulates in his films, especially *Tulipa* and *Los días del agua*, the revolution does not do away with the problem of spectacle that subtends popular art, and in turn, the cinematic and mass media image, because difference persists as social antagonism.

3.1 Ritual and Liminality in *Los días del agua*

Los días del agua stars Idalia Anreus as Antoñica Izquierdo, a peasant who heals her sick infant with water. Once word spreads of Antoñica powers, her hut in the mountains of Viñales becomes flooded with local tenant farmers begging Izquierdo to work her magic on their infirm bodies. When Lino Baez, a local journalist, catches wind of the alleged miracles transpiring in the mountains, he begins reporting on the healer's activities. As the media spectacle propagates throughout the country, aided by local huckster Toni Guaracha's avid word of mouth, more people flock to the shack for free miraculous healing. When asked why she doesn't charge people for healing, she says, "All of God's things are free," a line of dialogue that hints at the seed of revolutionary desire within Antoñica's healing practice. Toni first spreads the rumor of Antoñica's miracles at a local bar in a crowded Pinar del Rio shopping district. He agitates the local women by loudly whispering, "The Virgin! She appeared in los Cayos! In San Felipe!"⁴⁵

⁴⁵ "La virgen! Se le apareció en los Cayos. En San Felipe!"

A cut to an inter-title reading “The Gospel According to Toni Guaracha” fills the screen, and Antoñica appears sitting inside her hut, her surroundings transformed into a psychedelic wonderland. Over images of her praying and rocking a plastic baby doll, Toni Guaracha’s non-diegetic narration tells the story of how the Virgin came to visit her. In Toni’s account, when Antoñica sees the Virgin and her royal procession disappear into a forest, she follows them into heaven. Once in heaven, she finds the Virgin and gives her the baby doll, and the Virgin heals it. The rest of the sequence cuts between Toni’s rapt, credulous audience and Antoñica’s travels through a place that looks both like heaven and hell.

The following two excerpts from a longer six-minute sequence will allow me to read the ways that Gómez and Herrera construct a syncretic spectacle in their fictionalization of Izquierdo’s water ritual. **[Because the sequence is quite long and somewhat repetitive, I have excerpted three sub-sections of the sequence, which together give a better overall sense of the entire sequence than a long, continuous analysis of one part of it.]:**

1. The camera steadily zooms out to a long shot of the Virgin seated on a throne, the members of her court arrayed around her—an angel behind the throne, a black dwarf with hearts painted on his face at the left foot of the throne, a cabaret dancer at the Virgin’s right with one hand on the throne,

and an oafish man at the right foot of the throne. The oaf looks directly into the camera, breaking the film's fourth wall. A tinsel and net awning sits above the Virgin's crown and the waterfall, now tinted pink, rushes behind the throne. The Virgin lifts the chalice to her face as she is fanned by the cabaret dancer.

The sequence begins with a medium shot of a crowd in a bar flanked around Toni. The camera pans from left to right, showing the townspeople dressed in jaunty hats, fashionable hairdos, and pearls, denoting their modernity. A non-diegetic, suspenseful trumpet track plays as the townspeople's expressions grow more shocked, and then fades and cut to Toni in long shot in the middle of the crowd. The base color palette of the bar scene is yellow but the camera lens is tinted with magenta gels. The walls of the bar are festooned in Coca-Cola signs and other advertisements. Toni says to his spectators, "One moment, that wasn't all! Things didn't just stop there." The film then cuts to a long shot of Antoñica in a forest, passing through a curtain of shredded cloth suspended between the trees as she descends a stone staircase. As Antoñica begins her path through the underworld in search of the Virgin and her heavenly court, Toni's non-diegetic voice narrates, "After that, the very Virgin herself showed Antoñica eeeeeevrything bad—sickness, sin, and all the trash that's in the world. And it was there she [the Virgin] said to Antoñica that she wanted her to be her messenger and help her to cure people so that happiness would definitively come to earth." The shot is

overexposed almost to the point of being blown out, the lens still gelled to lend it a purplish tint. Antoñica wears a deep blue dress and a white veil, the clothing associated with Yemayá, the orisha of rivers and motherhood.

In these first three shots Toni narrates the hallucinatory parable of Antoñica's acquisition of her miraculous powers. His speech is directed at an audience aspiring to be modern, one whose modernity supposedly separates them from the ignorance of a peasant like Izquierdo, yet who cannot get enough of the miracle in the mountains. The bar walls, full of ads most noticeably a Coca-Cola ad, suggest that the audience's attention has momentarily been drawn away from the iconic force of commercial culture towards religious lore, but that the distinction between the two is fundamentally thin. The base color palette of the bar scene's set and props is yellow, but Herrera placed a magenta gel over the lens, which gives the images a warm purple tint. The yellowed purple of the film in these two shots depicting the modern town gives the scenes an air of petrified modernity, a historical epoch preserved in yellowed newsprint with its prejudices and its injustices. The middle-class audience in its gawking, respectable, and immobile state, contrasts sharply with Antoñica's swarming followers, captured in documentary style elsewhere in the film. The townspeople's immobility signals a certain complicity in the crimes of the second republic because of their addiction to consuming spectacle in the form of newspapers. This first section, coded yellow, contrasts with the

predominantly violet, magenta, and blue tones of the Virgin apparition sequences, which occur in a distinctly mythical temporality.

[Antoñica walks through a forest path beset with zombies] As Antoñica makes her way through the forest, she comes upon the Virgin and her court. The Virgin appears in close up sitting on a high square-backed throne wearing a large cabaret-style crown tipped with peacock feathers. A giant veil is draped around her shoulders and extends past the corners of the frame. She is illuminated by a key light that casts an orange glow. Behind her is a waterfall lit with a royal blue key light. She throws her head back and releases a full-throated laugh, but only the sound of the waterfall rushing loudly behind her can be heard in the diegesis. A cut to an extreme close-up of the Virgin shows her holding a large red chalice in her hands. There is now a blue tint to the scene that clashes with some of the warmer-toned colors, so that the images in the frame look almost like early hand-colored film. The editing cuts back and forth between Antoñica approaching the court and detail close ups of the court's mythological composition, until in a reverse shot back to the court shows the Virgin in medium shot sitting on her throne with her bare legs crossed. She wears ornate cabaret costume platform heels and holds the chalice, still flanked by members of her court in fantastical costumes.

In Antoñica's encounter with the Virgin, the deity laughs. The Virgin's framing, slightly to right of center, her veil extending past the corners of the frame, suggests that her image has an iconic force which exceeds its representation in the film. Lit in blue and orange-gold, the Virgin is coded with the colors associated with Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba who has traditionally been syncretically worshipped as Oshun in the Yoruba pantheon. The absence of the Virgin's laugh in the diegesis, replaced with the sound of the rushing waterfall, suggests that her apparition's only material correlate is the elemental power of water. She exists in the realm of appearance, of disembodied corporality, a symbol that nonetheless exerts vast phenomenological powers over those who behold her. In a sense, we can understand Antoñica as having been granted material powers to heal the sick by an image. Antoñica, who wears blue and white, is coded with the colors of the Yoruba goddess syncretically worshipped in the Yoruba pantheon as Yemaya. As Antoñica approaches the Virgin's court, the hallucinatory scene framed by Toni's narration, transforms into a ritualized myth in which the Virgin, as Oshun, gives Antoñica, as Yemayá, her powers by handing the peasant her chalice. Through the coded use of color, lighting, and sound, the scene syncretically folds Antoñica and the Virgin into the mythical sisters Oshun and Yemaya, keepers of oceans and rivers.

Here we see the Virgin's full court. The shot begins in a medium framing of the Virgin, backed by a pink-tinted waterfall and flanked by the other cabaret dancer and

the dwarf. Angels, satyrs and saints occupy the foreground of the shot. The focal point is the Virgin's bare, crossed legs. She wears elaborate cabaret-style heels, emphasizing her linkage with the widely desired and equally devalued mixed race cabaret queens. The simultaneity within the frame of the Virgin's sexualization, the ecclesiastical framing of the shot, and mythological visual tropes like the satyrs in the foreground, constitute a kind of symbolic play characteristic of Gómez's syncretic method. I argue that though Gómez and his collaborators make few explicit references to santería, they employ santería's syncretic strategy to construct the key spectacular images of the film. This syncretic method of image construction ultimately absorbs santería's non-dualistic concept of good and evil, such that the holy is contained in the heretical, purity in the erotic, and power in powerlessness, and vice versa. The shot's placement of the Virgin's shapely legs at the center of the frame plays with her status as the most powerful figure in the film, yet who is also linked with lowness and liminality. The manifold details of the court landscape construct it as an infinitely complex inversion of commercial modernity's various idols and fetishes, represented by Toni and the crowd.

[Antoñica walks up to the Virgin's court and is handed the chalice filled with water which allows her to heal the sick. After Antoñica departs from the court, she walks through a forest filled with zombies accompanied by the court's dwarf, sprinkling the zombies with water and bringing them back to life.] As Antoñica processes through the forest sprinkling the zombies with water, they begin to dance. The

mise-en-scene of the forest scenes is heavily overexposed and chaotic, filled with kinetic movement that blurs the figures in the frame. Often the clashing colors of the previous scene are completely washed out from the brightness of the Cuban sun. For example, Antoñica walks behind the dwarf, sprinkling water over the dead with a hand pump while dancing. The brightness of the sun almost completely blots out the image behind the two figures. In another canted high-angle shot, a young zombie is shown climbing out of his grave between two rocks as water splashes on him. As the music builds in frenzied intensity, more zombies start dancing. The camera cuts to a medium shot of a blurry forest landscape in which one zombie dances while another drums. Water flies diagonally across the frame and a smoke bomb goes off in the background. The water enhances the kinetic movement of the bodies dancing. The scene ends with several more shots of the Virgin's court and all the zombies in the forest dancing with greater and greater intensity as the soundtrack's drumming builds. The movement of all the bodies in the frame creates an abstract, kinetic pattern in the mise-en-scene.

When Antoñica takes the chalice and goes out into the forest to heal the zombies by splashing water on them, the forest setting becomes extremely overexposed with light. Throughout this sequence, Herrera used an 800 ASA/ISO film speed, which allows the surface of the film to saturate very rapidly with light when exposed, also causing the

image to have higher contrast and grain.⁴⁶ As a result, the extreme, penetrating vibrancy of the Cuban sun is visible through the trees, shooting celestial, ray-like projections through the forest canopy behind Antoñica. The zombies who were half-immobilized in previous shots now rise, dancing to the drums of Leo Brouwer's non-diegetic atonal Latin jazz score under the light-flooded canopy.⁴⁷ The film's use of the zombie reflects the traditional anxieties of this now-familiar trope: a racialized subject who suffers the tortures of their hyper-exploited corporality even in death.⁴⁸ Most of the extras on *Los días del agua's* 1970 shoot were cane farming peasants from the region, who were expected to harvest what was projected to be the largest sugar crop in the country's history during the same months that they were working on the film's set.⁴⁹ There is a slippage created by the use of actual peasants as zombies, since most of the extras would

⁴⁶ Jorge Herrera interviewed in G.B. "Otro Film Cubano: Los días del agua" *Romances*, Habana, Cuba: September 1971, 41.

⁴⁷ The presence of zombies in *Los días del agua* is interesting because though common in the francophone Caribbean, namely Haiti, the zombie historically did not appear as a common trope in Cuba, either in film or in literature, until the last decade. The zombie has no European antecedent, originating in the francophone Antillian- American plantation, and historically reflecting anxieties about slavery, race, and capitalist exploitation. McAlister, Elizabeth. "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 461.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 461.

⁴⁹ Calderón. *Los Días de Manuel Octavio*. Ediciones La Memoria. Habana, Cuba: Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torriente Brau, 2016, 74-75.

have had recent memories of being republican-era tenant farmers. Despite their nominal freedom, jornaleros on sugar plantations epitomized the liminal condition of zombie labor enslaved by an economic system in which they could not make enough money to live off their own labor.

It is significant that when Antoñica revives the zombies, they do not just come back to life, but actually dance to the point of inciting a full zombie party. Instead of clear, sharp images, these shots emphasize the swarming, kinetic movement of light reflected on splashing water and a landscape full of dancing bodies. In these shots, much visual detail is lost to overexposure, which is characteristic of Herrera's photographic style at its most experimental. In, for example, water splashes in front of the lens and one zombie, whose body is painted white, drums on a tree stump in the center of an overexposed shot. The purple tint of the shot is dappled with bright white sprays of water which splash in front of his shimmying torso. The cinematography's formal emphasis on kinetic, blurry frames highlights movement as the property common to both the body and water, symbolizing the restoration of life's flow.

Gómez and Herrera's myriad visual excesses in *Los días del agua* can be read, then, as neo-baroque syncretic image strategies. These excessive baroque images have a political content, even if it is perhaps less obvious than in Gómez's more explicitly revolutionary, heroic films like *The First Charge of the Machete* (1968). They express the

swarming, ecstatic, liminal, messy and often reactionary force of the social as it escapes the desires and discourses of the state. In a 1971 interview on *Los días del agua*, Gómez says of this sequence, “All of these devices we utilized [in constructing the Virgin’s apparition as a cabaret performance] as a way of showing that the people in that epoch [the second republic] used criollo disorder [in the original Spanish *relajo criollo*] to evade reality.”⁵⁰ I suggest that Gómez’s description, though meant as negative critique, encompasses both the threat and the promise of the criollo ‘mess’ as a way of inverting the reality of racial, gender, and economic injustice, in the form of a joke, a performance, or a game that undermines power.

On the whole, this sequence in which Antoñica is granted the power to heal the zombies by the Virgin is one of the most baroque in the entire film, exemplifying what Kristen Thompson calls “cinematic excess,” aesthetic details within the mise-en-scene which do not explicitly advance the film’s diegesis.⁵¹ The most notable formal elements here—Herrera’s muddied candy colors, the way the editing emphasizes tableaux-constructions naturalistic diegetic unfolding—layer visual excess over an already densely referential diegesis. By layering a number of symbolic and sensory cues over an already freighted allegory of religion and the state, the film’s exploration of spectacle

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Thompson, Kristen. “The Concept of Cinematic Excess” in Rosen, Philip. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

becomes semiotically promiscuous. In doing so, the film is able to dialectically cast the myth of the Virgin's apparition as a spectacle from which the masses (zombies) derive both revolutionary and reactionary force. On one hand, the ludic space of popular culture spectacle allows a certain revolutionary negativity in the form of transgressive play to come to the fore. On the other, the sheer sensorially and psychological force of the religious illusion, enacted here by attracting images, condemns people to eternally passive spectatorship in the form of superstition.

In *Los días del agua*, water, the material substance that sustains all life, serves as a metaphor for revolutionary collective consciousness.⁵² By receiving the water, the zombies are freed from the half-death of slavery and erupt into dance. The zombie-peasant masses' revolutionary potential lies precisely in their power to search for life-sustaining joy under the most precarious material circumstances. If for Gómez, and for Cuban popular culture more broadly, dance is the most basic evidence of human creativity and survival, then dance is not so far from the potential to make revolution. Gómez says of the characters in the film, "...our intention with this film ...was an

⁵² Water has a complex cross-cultural metaphysics. In Yoruba thought, for example, water is the substance that binds all heterogenous forms of life together. For more on Yoruba beliefs about water, see Owoseni, Adewale O. "Water in Yoruba Belief and Imperative for Environmental Sustainability." *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 28, no. 0 (2017): 12–20. In the Western hermetic tradition, water is associated with emotions, consciousness, and knowledge. In Catholicism, water represents purification, a substance capable of cleansing sins through the ritual of baptism.

allegory of armed insurrection in the different epochs of the mediatized Republic.”⁵³

Gómez’s statement is complicated by the fact that the insurrections figured later in the film are carried out by Antoñica’s followers themselves, whom Gómez describes elsewhere in the same interview as hopelessly trapped by superstition. The dancing masses and the revolting masses are the same. By contrast to the local bourgeoisie, immobilized by consumerist spectatorship, the masses possess the creativity and capacity for action that is necessary for radical rupture with the ruling order.

Contrary to the film’s reception and to some of Gómez’s own statements about the ideological work of the film, the director and his collaborators present a sacralized allegory of revolutionary rupture, while subtly undermining the state’s institutionalization of the revolution. As Michael Taussig’s work on Venezuela and the cult around the figure of Simón Bolívar reminds us, popular magical practices perpetually draw on and rewrite narratives of the state’s power.⁵⁴ The hallucinatory religious spectacle that drives the film’s narrative functions as a place where often opposite ideological and aesthetic ideas exist in an uneasy syncretic tension. Further, for Gómez, persistently invested in a subversively minoritarian perspective, revolutionary

⁵³ Manuel Octavio Gómez interviewed in G.B. “Otro Film Cubano: Los días del agua” *Romances*, Habana, Cuba: September 1971, 38.

⁵⁴ Taussig, Michael T. *The Magic of the State*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

rupture is not inherently masculine or heroic, but rather, comes always from below. The allegorical dispensation of revolutionary consciousness by a pair of female deities inverts the heroic masculine narratives that became so central to the revolution's hagiography in the first decade after 1959.

Conclusion

Though Cuban revolutionary film and the New Latin American cinema have been written about extensively by a number of scholars and have come to occupy a central place in global film history, persistent elisions in this history contain alternative visions of revolutionary politics that arose during the period. Aside from Afro-Cuban filmmaker Sara Gómez, few women were able to make films in the first years of the revolution. In light of these absences, someone like Gómez, who was deeply invested in alternative perspectives to that of the heroic, masculine criollo, deepens our understanding of Cuban culture's history of political resistance and revolt. Significantly, ritual traditions like santería offer us a view into how these tendencies are transmitted through myth. Further, Gómez's syncretic mixing and code-switching between popular religious and popular culture images and practices does not cover over antagonism, but rather crackles with social antagonism at every turn.⁵⁵ Gómez's mobilization of popular

⁵⁵ Mexican critic Heriberto Yopez critiques the spread of the term "hybridity" throughout the 1990s to describe latino culture, pointing to the ways that indigenous and black subjects are erased or covered by these "hybridity"

religious and cultural tropes is so significant because it illustrates how these tropes vacillate between commodified spectacle and a radical alterity that constitutes the ground for revolutionary rupture. Further, Gómez and Herrera's collaborations constitute substantial developments in Cuban film aesthetics.

discourses. Yepez, Heriberto. *The Empire of Neomemory*. Chainlinks. Oakland, California: 2013.

Conclusion

In conclusion, devorational cinema, through its treatment of the image as possessing an irrational, and even magical charge, can help us understand something about contemporary life that is not accounted for by more neutral understandings of media images. The devorational corpus not only illuminates a critical juncture in Latin American cultural and film history, it shows us how filmmakers understood the cinematic image, and by extension, the media image, as a site of both pleasure and control. These filmmakers each recognized in different ways that the transformation of reality into images represented by spectacle demanded new forms of critical spectatorship. Almost fifty years later, in an age when we are more bombarded by images than ever and the entire human sensorium is capital's target, the urgency of becoming critical spectators has grown more insistent than ever.

As the manuscript develops into a book project, I see the two main avenues for potential development as: the inclusion of women filmmakers in the devorational corpus and the further expansion of my claim that ritual aesthetics in the 1968-era pre-figure virtual reality/cyberspace. I think the glaring omission in the manuscript as it stands is the absence of films by women. In the beginning of the project's conceptualization, I couldn't find films by women that employed the ritual framework that I pose as central to devorational cinema. As the project developed, however, Galerie Lelong made Ana Mendieta's performance documentations available. In a future draft of

the manuscript, I would like to write about these films which document her ritualistic performances in the wilds of Iowa. This chapter could also potentially extend one of the project's threads—namely, devorational cinema's relationship to performance art. The second aspect I'd like to develop is the ways in which devorational cinema bridges the transition from film to immersive forms of media arts. The project has been moving towards this idea for a long time, but because so much of my existing writing was based in archival work, the broader work of contextualizing these objects within the film and media landscape of the 1960s fell by the wayside.

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