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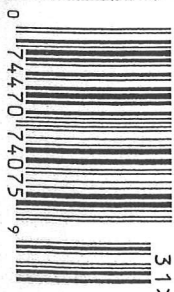
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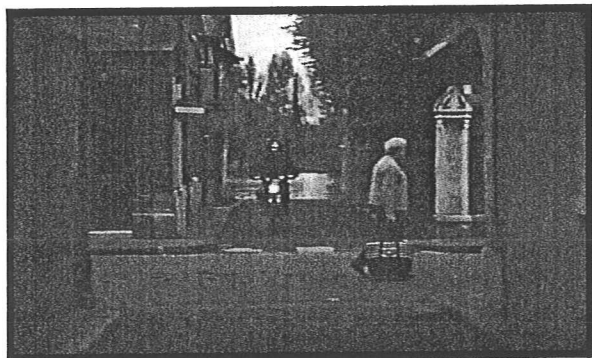
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Uncanny Visions of History

Two Experimental Documentaries from Transnational Spain— *Asaltar los cielos* and *Tren de sombras*



Guerin's static long takes capture anonymous strangers, animals, vehicles, music, light, and shadows drifting in and out of frame.



Mercader was finally buried in the Soviet Union under a tombstone marked "Ramón Ivanovich López."

On November 8, 1930, Gérard Fleury (a Parisian lawyer who was also an amateur cinematographer) went out at dawn to capture the right light for filming the provincial landscape around Lake Thuit in Normandy. He disappeared later that same day under mysterious circumstances that have never been explained, and was presumed to be dead.

On August 20, 1940, Barcelona-born Stalinist Ramón Mercader del Río, posing as Jacques Mornard, assassinated Leon Trotsky in Mexico by driving an ice pick into his brain. Mercader subsequently spent 20 years in a Mexican prison, and was finally buried in the Soviet Union under a tombstone marked "Ramón Ivanovich López."

Though radically different from each other, these historical events both took place in earlier decades in foreign nations outside Spain, and both involved a death that left many questions unanswered. The mysterious protagonists, both from families portrayed as emblematic of their era and locale, are the subjects of two fascinating feature-length documentaries made by Spanish filmmakers in the late 1990s: *Tren de sombras* (*Train of Shadows*, 1997), an evocative meditation on Fleury's silent home movies by Catalan experimental filmmaker José Luis Guerin; and *Asaltar los cielos* (*Storm the Skies*, 1996), a probing portrait of Trotsky's assassin codirected by cinematographer José Luis López Linares and journalist Javier Ríoyo.

My interest here lies less in the actual events depicted in these films than in the ways in which these documentaries renarrativize their "uncanny" protagonists as postnational subjects who speak to the specific pressures of Spanish transnational filmmaking in the late 1990s. This exploration (which builds on my earlier essay, "Documenting the National and its Subver-

sion in a Democratic Spain") is part of a larger project on a group of Spanish documentaries of the 1990s that convey a transnational vision of Spain, a vision that looks not only forward to the new millennium, when an increasingly diversified Spain becomes a strong member of the European Union, but also backward, to the beginning of the twentieth century, when Barcelona and Catalan culture were cosmopolitan sites for daring internationalist projects.¹ These films suggest that Spain, despite its long nationalist history of self-imposed hermetic isolation and continuing marginalization, still has a great deal to teach the rest of the world about the transnational or postnational condition.

In an essay on fetishism, Freud defined the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of the old and long familiar"—a fear that he ultimately traced back to the boy child's experience of seeing the mother's genitals, and the castration anxiety and turn toward fetishism which that vision aroused.² Though neither *Tren de sombras* nor *Asaltar los cielos* invites a psychoanalytic reading, they both link an uncanny death from the past to a present fear of powerlessness and obliteration, or a fear of being condemned to silence and obscurity. Significantly, both films document events that occurred in earlier decades, before Spain (and more specifically Catalan culture) was hermetically sealed and isolated under Franco's monolithically nationalist regime. Both events took place in nations with whom Spain has long had strategic transnational cultural relations. In the case of *Tren* it is France, whose cultural affinities cosmopolitan Catalonians have long used to assert their independence from the rest of Spain; in the case of *Asaltar* it is Russia, whose shifting relations with Spain (as both ally and arch enemy) helped complicate the deep polarization between the "two Spains," and Mexico, with which Spain has had complex linguistic, colonialist, and diasporic ties for centuries.

Both films suggest that the full resonance of these uncanny events can be understood only if one engages in a process of narrative investigation that Spanish filmmakers appear uniquely qualified to perform at this particular stage of transnational history. For Spain's contradictory relations to marginality have enabled it to more easily convert that limitation into an asset—a dynamic that has helped recent Spanish filmmakers broker the representation of the alien Other both inside and outside of Spain. While Spanish authorities in several periods vigorously suppressed, denied, or marginalized cultural difference (usually justified in the name of religious orthodoxy, moral purity, national

unity, social order, or economic necessity), this process helped marginalize Spain itself within the larger international arena. As a Catalan filmmaker working within a region and genre that are both highly marginal in world cinema, Guerin purposely seeks out marginal subjects in other European nations for his unconventional documentaries. Marginality itself becomes his subject. In contrast, madrileños López Linares and Rioyo use the marginalized Catalan identity disavowed by Mercader and his mother to help account for their fanatical nomadic subjectivity as postnational world revolutionaries.

Spain's experience of having been hermetically sealed for decades under the Franco regime means that a great deal of its role in history is still unknown both to Spaniards and to the rest of the world. For Spaniards, this has led to an obsession with memory, particularly in mining the gaps between authorized versions of collective history (especially in those hated government-sponsored Noticias Documentales, or "NO DO" newsreels, that had a monopoly on archival footage of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, on its narrativization through editing, and on its distribution as the official "truth") and the more anarchic collections of personal memories recorded in a wide array of popular forms that trigger uncensored private associations with subversive potential. This struggle over popular memory was central to the structure of several powerful anti-Francoist documentaries from the transitional era of the mid-1970s, such as Basilio Martín Patino's *Canciones para después de una guerra* (*Songs for after a War*, 1971, released in 1976), Jaime Chávarri's *El desencanto* (*Disenchantment*, 1976), Gonzalo Herálde's *Raza, el espíritu de Franco* (*Race, the Spirit of Franco*, 1977), and Jaime Camino's *La vieja memoria* (*Old Memories*, 1977). The ideological conflict was played out not only through the selection of images and sounds, but also through the different editing styles, which resulted in very different ways of narrativizing these recorded perceptions. This desire to unearth lost records of idiosyncratic personal memory and to find new ways of recontextualizing them is what also drives both Guerin's obsessive examination of the fragile remnants of Fleury's home movies in *Tren de sombras* and Rioyo and López Linares' recounting of Ramón Mercader's strange story in *Asaltar los cielos*.

Both films emphasize the transcultural nature of their inquiries as they pursue their archeological projects, excavating traces of a history that is on the verge of being lost. In this sense, they both fall within the category of what Laura U. Marks calls "intercultural cinema"—films which operate at the intersections of

two or more cultural regimes of knowledge so that meaningful knowledge can never be fully verified solely in the terms of one regime or the other. Marks claims that such works are frequently acts of excavation that are primarily deconstructive.

Yet once this deconstruction has been accomplished, no simple truth is uncovered. There is a moment of suspension that occurs in these works after the official discourse has been (if only momentarily) dismantled and before the emerging discourse finds its voice. This is a moment of silence, an act of mourning for the terrible fact that the histories that are lost are lost for good. Yet this moment is also enormously suggestive and productive. It is where these works begin to call upon other forms of cultural knowledge: it is where the knowledges embedded in fetish-like objects, bodily memory, and the memory of the senses . . . are found.³

It is precisely those silences that are mined so productively by these two Spanish documentaries of the 1990s.

For non-Spaniards, an unearthing of Spain's previously hidden role in international politics could potentially change the understanding not only of Spain but also of world history, particularly in its transnational phase—which is precisely what *Asaltar* demonstrates in its study of Ramón Mercader, for it renarrativizes his act of terror for the 1990s. The film suggests that only by understanding the story of Spain's complex role in the Trotsky assassination can one fully comprehend the recent fall of the Soviet Union and the construction of the post-Cold War, postnational era of the 1990s.

Asaltar los cielos

This fascinating documentary opens quite conventionally, with a pre-titles teaser introducing four of the many historical witnesses who will be interviewed throughout the film: Ramón's adopted Mexican daughter, Laura Mercader, who still doesn't understand her father's motives; Russian exile Elena Poniatowska, who is horrified that he was capable of stabbing someone with a knife from behind; his Spanish nephew, Gay Mercader, a concert promoter who takes an ironic stance toward his family's notoriety; and his aunt María, the widow of Italian filmmaker Vittorio De Sica (a major influence on Spanish cinema) and a former actress during the Neorealist era, who disavows any

connection with Ramón. All four, in fact, seem to have little insight to offer about the assassin and his deed. What this montage of talking heads does provide are quick links between Mercader and four different cultural regimes and nations (Mexico, Russia, Spain, and Italy), yet it is directly followed by a shift to Catalan specificity when we see archival footage of Barcelona at the turn of the century playing behind the opening credits.

While this juxtaposition is still consistent with the compilation documentaries from the transitional era with their dialogic clashes between official public history and contradictory private memories, *Asaltar* departs from its predecessors when we suddenly see footage of the 1976 Rolling Stones concert in Barcelona, with the androgynous Mick Jagger prancing on stage as Spanish film star Charo López tells us in voiceover that these two dates, 1900 and 1976, mark the span of Ramón's life. Although the specific date of Mercader's death makes another historical connection with the transition, the choice of the Stones concert as historical marker introduces a vision of Spain that is more compatible with the postmodernist documentaries of the mid-1990s than with the transitional documentaries of the mid-1970s. For the concert associates Mercader not only with the end of Francoist xenophobia, but also with Spain's immersion in a sexually mobile global pop culture. In a special issue of the Spanish film journal *Viridiana* devoted to *Asaltar los cielos* and Patricio Guzmán's documentary *La memoria obstinada* (1997), Rioyo and López Linares acknowledge this connection in their preface:

The mixture of archival images, black-and-white and color footage, 16mm film, digital video, Super 8, photographs, interviews, audio, united in a visual and sound montage, makes the telling of this history effective and accessible. We are addressing spectators of ARTE and of MTV with a model of audiovisual ideas that reflect modern concepts of how to look at cultural facts, documents, or music.⁴

Asaltar combines processed archival footage and a complex weave of interviews with a wide range of historical witnesses from a broad geographical range. They all had some direct connection with the film's three major characters, who were born in different nations: Mercader in Spain; his mother Caridad del Río in Cuba; and his victim, Trotsky, in Russia. The historical witnesses include journalists, scholars, and political activists of various nationalities and ideological persuasions, as well as surviving relatives and

friends of both the assassin and his victim, including several of Trotsky's bodyguards and one of Mercader's fellow prisoners in the Mexican jail. There are also occasional star cameos, like the brief interview with Sara Montiel (the leftist Spanish movie queen who met Mercader in Mexico). Yet the most famous "stars" in the story—Stalin, La Pasionaria, Diego Rivera (who convinced Mexican President Lázaro Cardenas to grant Trotsky a visa), Frida Kahlo (who had an affair with him), David Siqueiros (who tried to assassinate him)—are, like the protagonist and victim, all dead. They are ghosts who appear only in archival footage and whose direct testimonies are irretrievably lost, like those of Trotsky and Mercader.

Asaltar tells the story of an eccentric family that, as one of the film's witnesses tells us, "embodies the contradictions of the century." The Del Río-Mercaders are not a Francoist family hermetically sealed within Spain, but one of nomadic subjectivity. Hence the story ranges freely from Havana to Barcelona, Madrid, Moscow, Leningrad, Paris, New York, and Mexico City. Breaking from the familiar cliché that treats the Spanish Civil War as a micro-event, a dress rehearsal for the ideological struggles of World War II, the film suggests that Spain has always been a major player in world politics, yet one whose identity (like Ramón's) was disavowed and disguised.

The film focuses on the relationship between a strong mother and her sons, whose lives, talents, and subjectivities she shaped (or warped, depending on your ideological point of view). Like many Spanish fictional films of the 1990s, especially those representing the complex political struggles of the anarchists during the Spanish Civil War, *Asaltar* emphasizes the crucial role played by women in these historic conflicts. Ramón's fanatical Stalinist mother, Caridad del Río Mercader, is consistently criticized by veteran anarchist Teresa Palou and contrasted with Communist leader Dolores Ibarruri (La Pasionaria), who appears much less extreme. La Pasionaria emerges as the ideal Communist heroine, the model for cute little girls who are shown masquerading as their idol, while Caridad (like her son) is portrayed as a secretive killer performing Stalin's dirty work behind the scenes—a character, according to Rioyo and López Linares, whose life "seems taken out of a Greek tragedy."⁵

After the introduction, the film actually begins with the story of the fiercely independent Caridad, a focus that strengthens the uncanniness of Ramón's historic moves by suggesting that what is most mysterious in his motives is traceable back to his mother and her own fears of powerlessness. What is most striking in this

introduction to Caridad is the uncanny experience imposed on her by her rich Catholic Catalan husband: she was dragged to a Barcelona brothel and forced to watch how other women perform sexually. It is not clear whether he hoped she would learn new sexual tricks or merely be convinced that female sexuality was designed to serve male pleasure. In either event, what we see in the archival footage are two mammoth nude women striking poses that are more comic than erotic, but that also, like the glam voguing of Mick Jagger in the 1976 concert footage, suggest a potentially subversive homoerotic sexual mobility. The film implies that this uncanny vision horrified Caridad and helped drive her and her brood (and possibly the filmmakers as well) to seek empowerment in some arena other than sexuality, which became, with considerable help from the global success of Pedro Almodóvar's comic melodramas, the new libertarian stereotype of Spain under the Socialists.

Not interested in sex (or so her surviving son, Luis, Ramón's youngest brother, tells us—though sons are rarely reliable sources on their mother's sexuality), Caridad devoted all her energies to politics. We are also told she demonstrated against factories owned by her own family, which led them to confine her in an insane asylum (from which her sons helped her escape). Thus, as a world revolutionary, she struggled against the historically divided nation ("the two Spains") and the patriarchal bourgeois family (enshrined by Church, Franco, Freud, and melodrama), scattering her brood across the world. This remarkable story is told as an account not of a uniquely eccentric woman but of one whose life was shaped by cultural and historical specificity: the radical and internationalist atmosphere of Barcelona and the complex political struggles at play during the Republic and the subsequent Civil War.

The first five minutes of the film thus present us with an array not only of transnational associations but



A representation of the Barcelona brothel where Caridad was forced to watch other women perform.

also of possible primary subjects—the story of a man, woman, family, city, trauma, century—all fraught with troubling contradictions and all inextricably entangled within a complex narrative network that can be read against various conflicting cultural regimes of knowledge. Documentary is seen as the only genre capable of telling such a complicated story, a form that is sufficiently heteroglossic to incorporate a combination of other genres (including city symphony, rock documentary, melodrama, and porn) and an equally dense mélange of styles. As the codirectors put it in describing how they tried to appeal to the postmodernist, postnational spectators of ARTE and of MTV: “The documentary is a narrative form increasing in value. It has a new aesthetic language we are eager to explore.”⁶

One way into the narrative network is through the exile experience of Ramón, whose story is contextualized historically against those Spanish “war children” whom we see in archival footage being sent to the Soviet Union (or to France) by their Communist parents for a few months so that they could escape the dangerous air raids, but who ended up staying for many years. (This is the Spanish version of the story told in Mark Jonathan Harris’s Oscar-winning *Into the Arms of Strangers: The Story of the Kinder Transport*, [2000].) We hear from their testimony how, although welcomed by the Soviet population and very well treated, they were deprived of mother love and homeland and transformed into permanent postnational ex-

iles. As one of them expresses it movingly in an interview, in the USSR they were always seen as Spanish and in Spain they were always seen as Russian.

It was actually Luis who experienced this uncanny postnational fate shared by many other Spaniards, for Ramón was singled out by his mother for a unique political mission that required him to go to the Soviet Union in 1937 to be trained as a KGB spy and to shed his Spanish and Catalan identities. We are told that their relationship was not primarily mother/son but political comrades, as if they believed in their own individual power to escape those ordinary ties of blood, biology, and nationality—even if only to serve a larger, imperialist supranational master narrative of international Communism. Since we never get direct access to the subjectivity of either of them, these characterizations remain as mediated as the juxtaposition of word and image or the editing of the archival documents. We are told that as a fanatic, Caridad could always justify each new revelation about Stalinism, and yet because of her fiercely independent nature, she chose to live in Paris rather than Moscow. Luis claims she blamed herself for ruining Ramón’s life and was suicidal as a consequence, and that her intervention in Mexico to help him escape from prison inadvertently extended Ramón’s sentence, forcing him to serve the full 20 years instead of only four, as certain Mexican officials had secretly agreed. So this is also the story of a tormented mother/son relationship, which echoes similar relations in other Spanish films, yet *Asaltar* purposely discourages a psychoanalytic or melodramatic reading.

Nevertheless, Ramón’s relationships with women are emphasized throughout the film: not only the formative relationship with his mother, but also the complex relations with his lover Sylvia, a New York Jew and loyal Trotskyist whom he exploited and betrayed by living with her in Paris and New York for a number of years solely in order to gain access to Trotsky. While his Mexican wife (a dancer he met in prison) remains vaguely defined, his adopted daughter defends him, claiming that because he spent 20 years in prison, her loss was as great as that of Trotsky’s family. Within both families, domestic relations were readily sacrificed for revolutionary politics, for both assassin and victim insisted that their lives belonged to a different cultural paradigm.

Spanish “war children” sent to the Soviet Union for a few months to escape the dangerous air raids ended up staying for many years.



The mystery of Ramón's identity is linked in the film with his nomadic subjectivity: his mastery of several languages (he spoke impeccable French and perfect American English, but allegedly never said a word in Spanish) and his possession of several different names, passports, and nationalities. The goal of this film, like that of the new marker on his grave (seen in a fetishized close shot) is to restore a complex Catalan identity to Mercader. That is, to reterritorialize him as a world revolutionary from a cosmopolitan Spain and to fill that historical "twenty years of silence" with an orchestration of international voices that define his complex determinations and deeds. Yet, as Marks has argued, it is the silence that makes such an orchestration possible.

One rupture of that silence is Trotsky's final piercing scream, which Mercader heard when he drove the ice pick into his brain and which apparently haunted him the rest of his life. This obsession suggests not only that Mercader may have felt remorse, but also that this scream may have provided some solace from the silence imposed on him—by the KGB, who suppressed his identity; by Trotsky, who totally underestimated him; by the torturers in prison, who tried to make him talk; and subsequently by history, which tried to erase his identity. Ironically, he suffered a fate similar to that of his victim, whom Stalin tried to banish from the stage of history. Thus Trotsky's uncanny scream is presented as an outcry against historical erasure, which this film tries to rectify for both the assassin and his victim. This rescue mission has special resonance in the late 1990s, for who could be a more complex poster child than Mercader for a postnational Spanish identity—the unknown Spaniard who changed the course of history (by eliminating Stalin's arch rival), and whose deed has become even more resonant with the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union and the triumph of transnational capitalism in the post-Soviet, post-Cold War era of the 1990s and beyond?

Still, the film ends by suggesting that Mercader may have had a nostalgic yearning for his lost national identity. According to one witness, Ramón wondered what if he had never left Spain—or what if after serving his sentence he had returned to Spain (instead of to Cuba or the Soviet Union) to spend his remaining 15 years on one of those edenic beaches on the Costa Brava? In one of its finest ironic disjunctures between word and image, the film ends by showing us a beach swarming with anonymous tourists. As if that were not sufficiently bathetic, we see a close shot of the corpulent *derrière* of a female tourist disappearing into the sea, an image as comically deflating, misogynist, and

uncanny as the earlier shots of those rotund prostitutes in the Barcelona brothel. This bathetic image not only de-eroticizes the false paradise being promoted as a nationalist object of desire, it also makes us question the interpretation (voiced by several witnesses) that Ramón's life was wasted. Perhaps this ending implies that, regardless of how duped, deprived, or denationalized the Mercaders (and for that matter, Trotsky) may have been, life as a quixotic political idealist on the global stage of world revolution was still preferable to these mundane pleasures in a transnational consumerist Spain.

Tren de sombras: El espectro de Le Thuit

In comparison to *Asaltar los cielos*, *Tren de sombras* seems precious, poetic, and painterly rather than explicitly political, and its narrative pleasures are intellectual and contemplative rather than historically and psychologically compelling. Yet the film still serves similar drives. For though Fleury's mysterious death is not momentous like Trotsky's, the film suggests its historic ramifications can best be understood by a Catalan subject who fully appreciates the power of marginality and who questions the notion of authenticity within the local/global nexus of a postnational Europe.

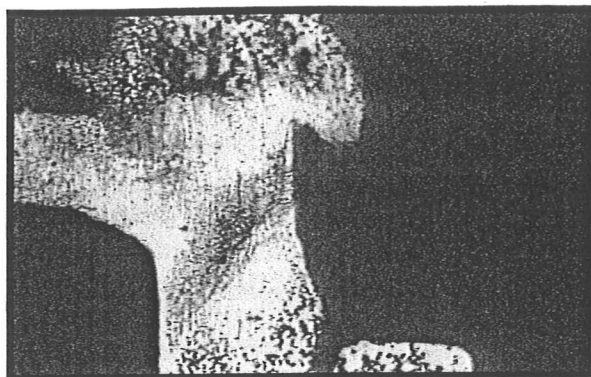
While both films privilege editing as the ultimate process of making meaning, their challenges are completely different. *Asaltar* organizes a massive array of diverse archival materials into a coherent, accessible story without sacrificing its complexity. *Tren* marshals a diverse series of layered contexts and complex reconstructions for recuperating and reinterpreting scant filmic remnants ravaged by decay, and shows how this found footage can be recontextualized within several regimes of knowledge to generate very different kinds of meaning about the mysterious disappearance of the auteur, the cultural and historical specificity of this particular region of France, the materiality and fragility of the film medium, the respective values of film preservation and historical reconstruction, the history of European silent cinema, the nature of memory and history, and the permeability of boundaries between genres and all other bordered domains, including documentary and fiction.

Both documentaries can be read as database narratives that reveal the linked processes of selection and combination which give new meaning to perceptions and history, and both employ a search engine that generates a diverse combination of stories. Or, in Laura Marks's terms, as archeological projects, they both express "the disjunction between orders of knowledge,

such as official history and private memory, by juxtaposing different orders of image, or image and sound tracks that do not correspond to each other.”⁷ Both films also belong to what Gilles Deleuze has defined as “time-image cinema,” a category that Marks tries to imbue with cultural and historical specificity by identifying it with “intercultural” cinema. In forcing “the viewer to draw upon his or her subjective resources in order to complete the image,” Marks claims the intercultural version presents the image as “barely a beginning, and any extension into narrative must be hesitant, or suspicious. In these works, thin-looking images are ultimately the richest . . . [for they] call on the viewer to search for their hidden history.”⁸ This is precisely the primary strategy in *Tren de sombras*, whose mysterious and decaying images evoke tentative narratives that are sheer projection and whose “petrified objects” are brought back to life and fetishized through repetitive restaging and reframing.

In *Tren*’s pre-titles teaser, we are confronted with abstract blotches whose meanings depend on how we contextualize them generically. On the one hand, we can read them as abstract expressionist images that offer sensory painterly pleasures. We can also see them as celluloid frames from film footage in the process of decay, which reminds us of the materiality of the medium (a frequent preoccupation with a certain mode of experimental cinema associated with filmmakers like James Benning and Pat O’Neill). Purely aesthetically, these blotches call our attention to figure/ground relations and resonate with the recurring patterns of lace, grillwork, and shadows that similarly layer and texture Guerin’s contemporary color footage of interiors. But when these blotches are eventually associated with the deteriorating footage on which we recognize filmic representations of people from an earlier era, we reinterpret them as signs of the film’s historic authenticity. At that point they become part of the general thematic around issues of loss, temporality, disappearance, and death.

On the other hand, these blotches also function as obstacles or even as a means of censoring certain readings of a gradually unfolding melodramatic narrative. Centering on a complex network of erotic relations within the family, melodrama cuts across many periods, cultures, and media, and can even be found in fragmented home movies. The ubiquitous nature of melodrama and its hybridization with so many other genres make it an effective pattern against which to read and make sense out of fragmented or incoherent story materials. Guerin demonstrates (with his ever-changing soundtracks) how the generic tone of Fleury’s



These blotches can be read either as processed, painterly images evoking abstract expressionism, or film footage in the process of decay.

amateur form of melodrama can shift fluidly from domestic comedy to psychological thriller depending on the accompanying music or silence. We see how genre contextualizes the meaning of images and sounds, and that all generic options foregrounded by Guerin—melodrama, mystery-detection, documentary, art film, and historical reconstruction—can be applied to any movie. He employs genres the way he uses music, as a database of alternatives that alter the meaning of perceptions and that call attention to how we actually read the combination of sounds, images, and words.

When we see the bright blue graphics of the opening titles (*Tren de sombras: El espectro de Le Thuit*), these few words (in this basically wordless film)⁹ begin to contextualize the images and sounds that follow. *Sombras* (shadows) and *espectro* (specter) bring to mind the light, shadow, vision, and spectacle that are central to a reflexive meta-commentary on film, but they also evoke the ghosts, death, disappearance, and time that are frequently crucial in melodrama. Both domains (of experimental film and melodrama) are motored by the opening word, *Tren*, which sets in motion the train of images and sounds pulsing rhythmically through human minds and cinematic machines as well as the narrative drive that enables us to interpret these sensory perceptions as highly textured, multilayered stories. In fact, the first human figures we see (behind the blotches) are waving goodbye to a train, an association underscored by a train whistle emerging from the edgy music.

An explanatory title in Spanish, more suggestive than definitive, tells us that the film is set in Le Thuit, in Upper Normandy. Some spectators might associate this region with those French literary masters of family melodrama, Flaubert (who was born in Rouen) and Proust (who used to summer in Cabourg, which he de-

picted as Balbec).¹⁰ This text also describes the collaborative relationship between *Tren*'s more obscure regional filmmakers, Fleury and Guerin:

Three months before [Fleury's death] he made one of his modest family productions, which would turn out to be his last film. Inadequately preserved for almost seven decades, it has been rendered almost irretrievable by the harmful effects of humidity, making its projection impossible. Starting from some photographs, we have tried to remake it; we have refilmed it all over again. Adhering to the criterion of maximum fidelity, we have recreated the original circumstances, reconstructing locations and scrupulously reproducing gestures, framings, and movements.

The first few minutes give an account of this labor. It would have been unthinkable without the complicity of the brothers Ives and Mireille Fleury to whom we are indebted with most sincere gratitude, which also extends to the Laquest, Gauthier and Ferri de Le Thuit families for their most valuable collaboration on the restoration of these old scenes of familial cinema: images which may be rudimentary but which are vital to remembering the infancy of cinema.

In the post-titles teaser that dramatizes the film's reconstructive "labor," the music disappears and we see a series of black-and-white photographs that remind us not only that cinema grew out of photography, but also how quickly the sequencing of still images begins to generate narrative. First, we see a close-up of a man smiling (whom we probably take to be Fleury), then a two-shot of him and his wife in which he is no longer smiling. The juxtaposition makes us wonder whether we are to infer an unhappy marriage—a question that launches the melodrama. Then follows a framed photograph of Fleury standing alone beside a lake near his boat, holding his camera, which suggests the actions he was presumably performing the day he disappeared. The image dissolves to a shot of that same photograph recontextualized within a richly furnished room, suggesting a broader subject of a specific family, class, region, and historical era. Yet the attention to light and shadow also encourages us to read the image as a painterly still life. The next dissolve takes us to a deteriorating photo of Fleury standing beside a tripod on which his camera is mounted, the physical deterioration of the image evoking the loss both of his films and his life. The music resumes as the



The deteriorating photo of Fleury standing beside his tripod evokes the loss of both his films and his life.

next dissolve reveals a color image of what looks like the same man standing by the lake, an image which we could read as an uncanny modern replication of the earlier "authentic" photograph. Ducks glide gracefully across the lake and water subtly ripples near the boat as ambient sounds merge with the music.

There are three ways in which this shot makes us question what we have already perceived. First, how do we know that what we presumed to be the earlier authentic photographs were not also contemporary images made to look old through these artificial signs of deterioration? In other words, how do we know this so-called documentary is not a hoax, like *The Blair Witch Project*? Secondly, do we know that what we previously saw were still images, or were they merely static long takes of photographs? Finally, are we sure there was really silence, or were the sounds merely below the threshold of our attention or hearing? The grounds of our perceptions and assumptions are called into question by these simple juxtapositions in these so-called thin images, which generate all sorts of new and probing questions about the medium and the melodrama.

At this point the man disappears from the scene and there is a dissolve to the boat alone, an image which gradually fades to black. But the moon (or is it the sun?) and its reflection in the water remain clearly visible, making us wonder whether these are really authentic natural bodies as we assumed, or merely circles of light digitally inserted into the image. This shot demonstrates how easily images, sounds, and lights are manipulated—a realization that weakens any remaining belief in the boundaries between the so-called authentic footage and the historical recreation, between documentary and fiction, between Fleury and Guerin. The very act of obsessive scrutiny makes the fetishized object of scrutiny all the more uncanny and obscure: it

becomes a mere reflection, image, sign, substitution—like any fetish.

At some point in the film we probably wonder why a Barcelona-born experimental filmmaker like Guerin should be interested in making a film about this obscure French subject, particularly if he is interested in reaching a European or global audience. Perhaps there is something wrong with this question, for why shouldn't other regions or nations be able to make films about "foreign" subjects? Why should they be expected to make only national allegories about their own locales while Hollywood freely colonizes the rest of the world for subjects? This issue has been a sore point for both Spanish and Catalan cinema, for both have historically been marginalized in world cinema. Perhaps the connection between Catalonia and the Thuit region of France makes more sense in the new macro-regional context of a transnational European cinema, where the nation is under erasure. At one point in the film we even see a map marked "Euro," just as we literally see signs pointing to nearby cities such as Rouen. There is no mention of nations.

In the frequent crosscutting between the reconstructions of the apparently historic black-and-white or sepia footage and Guerin's contemporary color footage of the same locales, what is blatantly obvious are the historical differences in the way this same space is documented within these two allegedly distinct time periods. The comparison does not evoke nostalgia or judgment; rather, it calls our attention to the differences in the ordinary daily activity occurring in that space and being captured or reconstructed on celluloid. While the apparently historic footage records a complex network of erotic relations within an extended bourgeois family (the kind that Foucault has theorized and that Caridad del Río Mercader was escaping), Guerin's contemporary static long takes capture anonymous strangers, sheep, cars, music, light, and shadows drifting in and out of the frame. And while the former raises provocative narrative questions about the characters and their adulterous relations, the latter move us with the sheer beauty of the crisp images and lighting. They are both compelling, but in very different ways, for they must be read against different cultural regimes of knowledge and pleasure.

At certain points in the contemporary footage, Guerin presents a blatant historical reconstruction of the earlier period (a technique also used in his 1990 documentary, *Innisfree*). Casting contemporary locals to reproduce the historic subjects, he succeeds exceptionally well with the simulacrum for Hortense, the young woman with whom Fleury and his brother Eti-

enne were possibly erotically obsessed (or at least that is what Guerin's film leads us to suspect). But when we see several of the characters from the so-called historic footage appear, we are reminded that the alleged original is also a reconstruction, and that the contemporary simulation (however stagy and artificial) is the more honest. We begin to wonder what portion of this footage or photographs, if any, was actually remnants shot by Fleury, and even whether this French filmmaker is truly a historical figure or merely a fictional character invented by Guerin. Ironically, the more accurate the historical reconstruction, the weaker the boundary between the so-called original film being preserved and the docudrama that seeks to reproduce it. This uncanny resemblance, triggered by the recognition of a woman from the past, threatens the symbolic order and all its restrictive boundaries. How paradoxical that this challenge of authenticity occurs in a film that appears to celebrate "the small scale and the local . . . [as] the places of greatest integrity . . . in the age of global flows and networks" (to use Jean Franco's terms),¹¹ for this challenge undermines any attempt to essentialize or idealize the local.

Similarly, even though this is allegedly a film about one auteur recuperating another, and even though we see at least two cameramen—Fleury and "Uncle Etienne"—the auteur's identity still remains as elusive as that of Ramón Mercader. The two on-screen men with a camera evoke the historic French binary between Lumière and Méliès, with Fleury as an active figure striding across the landscape with his camera mounted on a tripod (like Vertov's "man with a movie camera") to document the same kinds of subjects found in the Lumière brothers' early *actualités* (including the dramatic presence of a train, and a domestic prank with a garden hose). In contrast, his mustached rival uses Méliès's theatrical-type magic to make himself and other figures disappear. The film enables us to see that we are never really certain who has authored the image: Fleury or Guerin, or any of the film's many intertexts from world cinema: Lumière, Vertov, Méliès, Buñuel, Marker, Antonioni.¹²

In the global context, *Tren de sombras* can be compared with *The Blair Witch Project*, another faux documentary built around footage allegedly left by filmmakers who died under mysterious circumstances. As a low-budget American independent, *The Blair Witch Project* was as potentially marginal as *Tren de sombras*, yet its innovative use of the Internet enabled it to achieve a totally unexpected commercial success (duly noted by the Hollywood establishment), and the film thereby challenged many reigning assumptions

about marginality. Perhaps this surprising success even suggests that the present form of cinema itself may soon be peripheral. At one point in *Tren de sombras* we see a poster marked "Mémoires du Cinéma" in the foreground, with a man sweeping trash in mid-ground and a cemetery in the background, and a line of young schoolchildren and cars passing through this space, apparently indifferent to the loss. We know that there has been a widespread closing down of old theaters in smaller towns throughout Europe—a process memorialized with sentiment in *Cinema Paradiso*.

Tren avoids such sentimentality. Instead, like *The Blair Witch Project*, it leads us to consider how cinema can be reimagined through a convergence with new media, a restructuring process that is particularly reflected in its innovative approach to editing (the way it restructures the "train" of images) and that is analogous to the restructuring of communities (evoked in the contrast between Fleury's home movies structured around the family and Guerin's contemporary footage of anonymous strangers). A similar analogy is made to train travel—an image with great resonance for documentary cinema because of its historic associations with the early Lumière *actualités*. Guerin evokes the comparison with trains not only in the film's opening teaser and title, but also with a comparison between fragile images of the Fleury family waving at a passing train and contemporary shots of abandoned train tracks overgrown with weeds. Yet the success of high-speed trains in Europe and Japan has extended the life of this earlier form of transportation. Similarly, *Tren de sombras* shows how vintage cinema can function as a viable engine for expanding the kinds of interactive narrative that are usually associated with new digital media and hypertexts.

In the current context of media history, film is fragile not only because celluloid and nitrate deteriorate when exposed to humidity, but also because backers of new media rivals like video, CD-ROMs, the Internet, DVD, and interactive television are trying to absorb or replace it. Amazingly, at the same time that *Tren de sombras* demonstrates the unique visual power of cinema, its innovative stylistics also expand our conception of interactive narrative and its potential pleasures far more powerfully than do most of these new digital media.

In fact, *Tren de sombras* is one of several experimental nonlinear European films from the 1990s that enable us to imagine new modes of interactive spectatorship through expanded forms of montage, database structures, and simulations of randomness—a combination which generates new narrative pleasures. Such

films include European coproductions like Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World*, Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book*, Chris Marker's *Level 5*, Raul Ruiz's *The Shattered Image*, Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*, Mike Figgis's *Time Code* and *Hotel*, Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*; and from Spain, Bigas Luna's *The Chambermaid on the Titanic*, Julio Medem's *Lovers of the Arctic Circle*, and Alejandro Amenábar's *Open Your Eyes* (remade in Hollywood as *Vanilla Sky*). It is as if such films were designed to ensure that Hollywood action films like *The Matrix* do not totally dominate the emerging transmedia convergence between movies and interactive games. Thus, the narrative experimentation potentially has economic as well as aesthetic implications, particularly within a transnational market still dominated by Hollywood exports.¹³

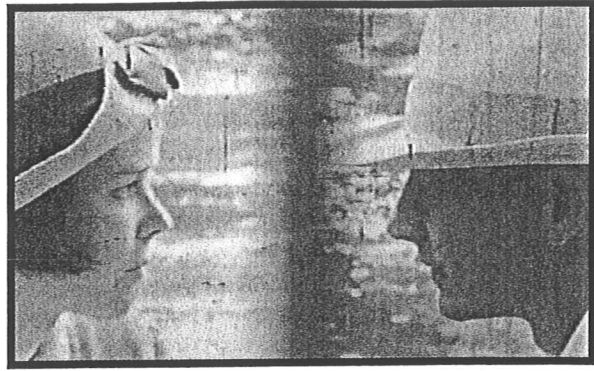
Except for his most recent documentary feature, *En construcción* (*Work in Progress*, 2001), Guerin's films have not proved successful at the box office (even within Spain), yet they still expand the formal and conceptual possibilities of the medium. In *Tren de sombras* he frequently replays the same footage but with varied soundtracks—a strategy that brings to mind Genette's point that all repetition is a mental construction; no repetition is identical, for some elements of difference are always being suppressed.¹⁴ The film demonstrates that no matter how many times you watch Fleury's reconstructed footage, you still perceive new meanings with each new projection, which is a crucial means of achieving "playability" in a medium like electronic games that demand 20 to 40 hours of play time. The film also displays evocative forms of vertical editing, in which meaningful juxtapositions are arrived at through a process that is made to appear haphazard.

At one point, two strips of film are laid side by side, as the off-screen editor carefully pairs two figures, Hortense and Etienne, suggesting a latent love story that may somehow have been related to Fleury's disappearance. The way they are positioned perhaps implies they are a couple, their juxtaposition against the water the link with death, the stirring music the range of their emotions, and the blotches both the fragility of their relationship and its secretive nature. When we watch Hortense ride forward on a bicycle and then see that same footage in reverse, we realize the linear drive is being abandoned. Instead, the narrative is driven by an obsessive desire to solve the enigma—to find the hidden figure in the bushes (as in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*) or the revealing detail in faces or gestures (as in Marker's *La Jetée*), or a conceptual link between any two images juxtaposed in time or

space (as in Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*) though here these links serve narrative ends. We keep compulsively returning to the same images, slowing them down or freezing on an incriminating detail, possibly to unearth a class-crossed love triangle between Hortense, Etienne, and the maid. Later, we see a blurred strip of film freely streaming through a movieola and hear the whirring sound of the mechanical apparatus and then the punching of a button that captures and freezes a specific frame as if by chance. The experience is like playing a slot machine, for we get a similar visceral rush of anticipation waiting for the winning or "right" combination to appear. Yet the element of randomness weakens any lingering faith we might have in any singular explanation or narrative closure. Although the mystery is never really "solved," the darkness of the randomly chosen images and the melancholy music create a tonal shift that invites us to meditate on Fleury's disappearance.

This thrilling sequence reveals how editing always functions as a search engine, for the unseen person whose hand controls the switch seems to be seeking the most meaningful and resonant combinations of images and sounds, those that will create a moving story out of these fragments. The fact that we never see the editor facilitates our identification with that role as well as our own immersion in this narrative quest. Despite the intellectual nature of this meta-narrative inquiry, the sequence's remarkable sensory qualities and emotional connotations also arouse a visceral excitement. This sequence brilliantly dramatizes the database narrative structure of all narrative: the process of selecting specific images from a paradigm or database of alternatives and then recombining them to generate a meaningful syntagmatic combination—a specific sentence, sequence, or narrative that addresses both the editor's and the viewer's desire. Thus, database and narrative are shown to be not alternative ways of organizing images but rather two sides of the same process.

Similar insights can also be found in Guerin's contemporary footage, where we see the spatializing of time and the temporalizing of space. For example, the shadow of a clock's pendulum creates a rhythmic arc that spatially links the static photographs of the two suspected lovers (Etienne and Hortense), a temporal instrument used to spatialize their emotional connection. Nearby, a warm light rhythmically pulses against the heart of Fleury, pictured in an adjacent photograph, as if he was disturbed or aroused by the secret romantic entanglement between Hortense and Etienne. Meanwhile, the image of Fleury's wife is eclipsed by a



Two strips of film are laid side by side as the editor pairs two figures, Hortense and Etienne, suggesting a latent love story that may somehow have been related to Fleury's death.

shadow. Conversely, static shots of a restricted space in the local village become a means of registering time and movement as people, vehicles, and shadows drift in and out of the clearly locked frame, sometimes linked by elliptical dissolves. This focus on reading nonverbal gestures, expressions, and temporal and spatial juxtapositions transforms fragmentary footage into a fascinating text of great sensory and emotional richness. It clearly demonstrates that cinema (regardless of subject, genre, or culture) has always been a medium of interactive narrative that requires spectators to engage in a process of mental editing—to make associative links between images and sounds and conceptual leaps that historicize their meaning. *Tren* provides us with a rich narrative field in which we can generate our own melodramatic plots, our own meta-narrative theories, and our own cultural reinscriptions of images from another locale—processes, like musical sampling, that do not depend primarily on verbal language or strict lines of causality. It also reminds us that cinema is a medium of light, and that every film is a moving train of shadows that documents the passing of time.

At one point in the blatant color reconstruction of a scene between the maid and the libidinous Uncle

Etienne, with whom she is presumably having an affair, she speaks the film's singular line of scripted spoken dialogue: "They have seen us." This line is then repeated in a replaying of the scene, as if to make certain that we have not missed the sexual implications of their tryst. Yet we still don't know to whom the "they" refers—to the lovely Hortense, with whom he is also repeatedly linked romantically by Guerin's editing; or to the other young members of the Fleury family, whose anxious faces are repeatedly scrutinized by the camera in Guerin's reediting of the footage; or to us in Guerin's audience, who are constantly forced to revise and expand the narrative field against which we are reading these images and sounds as each reiteration or new frame of footage unfolds.

Through all of these iterations, the mystery remains and grows more resonant. Finally, it is not merely the melodramatic disappearance of a particular Frenchman one morning in the mist, but the disappearance of an entire family, an era, and a way of life. And also the threatened disappearance of an artistic medium that is capable of documenting and projecting the incredible beauty and resonance of the most banal moments of everyday experience. So that when we see the contemporary color reenactment of Fleury rowing his boat out onto the lake and disappearing into the fog, we may associate this image with the earlier deteriorating film fragments of a man running after a train, or of the family car driving down the country road toward the horizon. Perhaps we conclude that Gérard Fleury has merely ridden into the future, with its faster-paced rhythmic movements of anonymous persons and vehicles, and of raindrops, leaves, and shadows whose extraordinary sensory beauty a Catalan filmmaker has so meticulously captured on film at this other end of the cinematic century.

By the end of *Tren de sombras*, we still may not know exactly how or why Fleury disappeared or whether we have actually seen any of his authentic images, just as we never fully decipher Ramón Mercader's motives for killing Trotsky or shedding his Catalan identity, but we do know that both of these uncanny figures have been rescued from obscurity and that this fascinating process of recuperation also seeks to enhance the visibility of Spain and its most marginalized filmmakers in the global sphere of the late 1990s. Like Trotsky, we underestimate these "obscure" Spaniards at our own peril.

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yrinth Project, an art collective and research initiative on interactive narrative at USC's Annenberg Center for Communication.

Notes

This essay is based on a paper presented at the "Brokering Spanish Postnationalist Culture" conference, organized by Teresa Vilaros at Duke University in November, 1999.

1. "Documenting the National and Its Subversion in a Democratic Spain," in *Refiguring Spain: Cinema/Media/Representation*, ed. Marsha Kinder (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 65-98. Particularly relevant is the discussion of two films from the early 1990s that play at the borders between documentary and fiction and that have strong auteurist links with *Tren de sombras* and *Asaltar los cielos*. The first was Guerin's previous documentary, *Innisfree* (1990), another obsessive examination of found footage (in that case, John Ford's *The Quiet Man*, a 1952 Hollywood movie that had a profound and uncanny effect on the small Irish village where it was shot, which is the subject of Guerin's documentary). The second documentary was Victor Erice's *El sol del membrillo* (1991), for which José Luis López Linares (the codirector on *Asaltar los cielos*) shot all the video footage. Like *Tren de sombras*, *El sol del membrillo* (*The Dream of Light*) emphasizes the materiality of the film medium while focusing on an artist (Spanish painter Antonio López) who failed to capture his local landscape (in that case, a quince tree in his own backyard in Madrid) in the "right light," but who succeeded almost inadvertently in documenting the historical specificity of his times. Erice's influence on Guerin was also apparent in the latter's debut feature, *Los motivos de Berta* (*Berta's Motives*, 1984), which has many similarities with Erice's best-known features, *El espíritu de la colmena* (*Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973) and *El sur* (*The South*, 1983). Erice also served as a model for Guerin's slow-paced career: whereas Guerin has made only four features and an episode in an anthology film over a span of 18 years, Erice (who is far better known) took 30 years to produce almost the equivalent output (three features and one episode). This rhythm suggests one possible reason why Guerin might be interested in recuperating the work of a marginal French filmmaker whose films would otherwise remain unknown.
2. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), Vol. 21, 155.
3. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 24-26.
4. Javier Rioyo and José Luis López Linares, "Los Mercader: Excéntricos y revolucionarios: Memoria," *Viridiana* 17 (September, 1997): 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 9.
7. Marks, 29, 31.
8. *Ibid.*, 42.
9. For a Catalan filmmaker in the 1990s, a key question is language: Should he be using Castilian or the Catalan language, a choice that proclaims his cultural specificity (particularly since both will have to be translated outside of

Spain)? Guerin sidesteps the issue by making his film almost wordless (except for the opening explanatory titles, printed signs, and a single line of dialogue), and by relying on a cinematic language of visual images and sounds that is presumably universal.

10. In some ways, the film title *Tren de sombras* and the brief description "in search of the right light" evoke Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (literally, *In Search of Lost Time*, though it is best known in English as *Remembrance of Things Past*). Proust was also considered to be a dilettante or amateur by many of his contemporaries. Fortunately, the final volumes of his great French masterpiece were discovered and published shortly after his death, which occurred in 1922, only eight years before that of Fleury. Perhaps Guerin is suggesting that whereas time may be the best way for the novel to capture and express life, memory and subjectivity, they are best captured and expressed on film through light and movement (to both of which Proust considered himself allergic).
11. Jean Franco, as quoted by Alberto Moreiras, "A Storm Blowing from Paradise: Negative Globality and Latin American Cultural Studies," *Siglo XX/Twentieth Century* 14 (1996): 75.
12. In Guerin's scene where the curious sheep peers into the playhouse as if looking for the absent children, one thinks of the inquisitive ostrich at the end of Buñuel's *Phantom of Liberty* witnessing the massacre of student demonstrators. The camera's return to empty spaces earlier occupied by human figures also evokes the famous montage at the end of Antonioni's *L'eclisse*.
13. That is one reason why I screen *Tren de sombras*, along with many of these other films, in my graduate seminar on Interactive Narrative Theory. Because of the richness of its structure and the emotionally compelling nature of its images, *Tren* is the only film I screened for filmmaker Pat O'Neill and the creative team of interface designers, programmers, and graphic artists with whom I am currently collaborating on a DVD-ROM project entitled "Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounter with a Film by Pat O'Neill" (2003).
14. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 113.

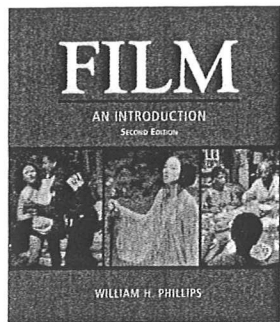
Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

Everything our mothers told us was good causes cancer: fresh air, sunshine, and milk. What next? Grammar. I'm going to blame my well-meaning English teachers for my misquotation of Tommy Powers (from *The Public Enemy*) in my article on "The Sopranos" (*FQ* 56.2, Winter 2002–03). Tommy said, "I ain't so tough," not "I'm not so tough." I feel the ghost of James Cagney shoving an ectoplasmic grapefruit in my face. Some grammatical brainstorm made me do it. Apologies, Jimmy.

Sincerely,
Martha P. Nochimson

For all the ways you teach film

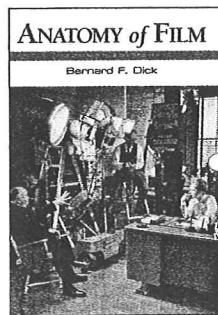


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before the exploratory surgery, I took out a camera I had recently bought. I don't know why I had that damned camera. I hadn't worked with a camera for several years at that point, didn't expect to work with one again: I simply could no longer afford to shoot film. I'd gone back to painting on film. But I'd seen this camera on sale, and it was a very good deal, and for some reason I'd bought it.

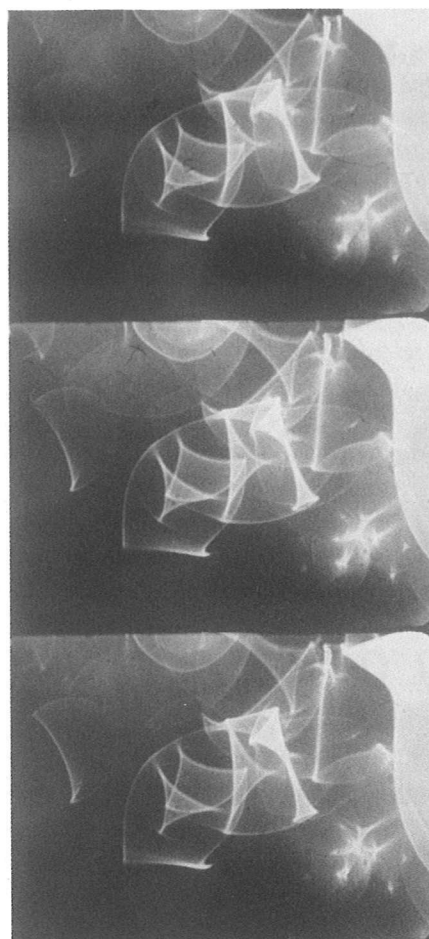
I knew I had to test the camera before the warranty ran out and I thought, "Well, Boulder Creek is always good for something." I went and sat down by the creek. Then I reached in my bag and I pulled out some extension tubes that I'd carried around since my father bought me movie equipment, in lieu of my going back to college. I'd never really been able to use them. I'd carried these tubes around for 35, 40 years, pulling them out every now and then and looking at them, and not throwing them away.

So, suddenly—who knows why—I pulled them out, put them on the camera and got myself macro, and stuck the lens partway into the water against some rock. I cannot tell you what moved me to do that. I didn't worry about whether I would get a particular image, but I also can't tell you how I'd get into a state where I *wouldn't* worry about that.

I won't say I don't know what I'm doing, but I *will* say that the whole point of being trained and adept with the camera, the whole point of craftsmanship, is that I can *work* this camera and wring it to do extraordinary things in a trance during which I cannot remember my name. This whole experience was an expression of what was tearing me up inside, which was, What's the point of checking out this camera? One, you don't intend to photograph anymore; it's become too expensive. Two, you're probably going to die (which is really what I thought). Why are you doing this? But then, on the other hand, if you're to die, what difference does it make if you have the right light reading on these god-damn tubes you've been carrying around all these years? Use them! And so there it was.

And all of that thinking is translating into: There's the *surface* of the water, which is like all the fussiness of our daily life; then right *under* that surface, visible because of the play across these rocks, is this very organic-feeling bubble-world, slowly evolving—you can't even really call them bubbles. They *are* bubbles—they're the result of friction of air and water—but they're all these different, extraordinary shapes that look organic in their fluidity of movement.

And deeper than that, there's something spiritual about them. I can't quite say what it is, but I'm cer-



Light reflections in
Commingle Containers

tainly recognizing it, and there I am, sweating away over this stream with one foot in the water and the other knee on this rock and bent over and a long time passed—I think I was there about an hour and a half shooting very carefully. And when the roll came back from the lab, between the exploratory surgery and the removal of the bladder, I was so moved by it, and said, "O.K., this is my last film," and sat and edited it.

I think every work should have, whatever one means by this term, something of God in it, so that you have a sense of the presence of the divine. And I think I share that feeling with artists of all kinds.

Scott MacDonald is author of *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place and Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society*; he is currently preparing Volume 4 of his "Critical Cinema" series of interviews with independent filmmakers.

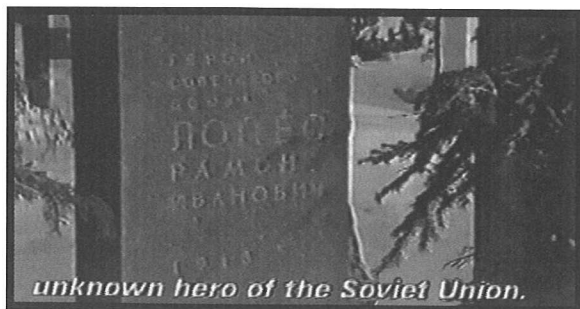
The films of Stan Brakhage are available from Canyon Cinema, 2325 Third Street, Suite 338, San Francisco, CA 94720.

Uncanny Visions of History

Two Experimental Documentaries from Transnational Spain— *Asaltar los cielos* and *Tren de sombras*



Guerin's static long takes capture anonymous strangers, animals, vehicles, music, light, and shadows drifting in and out of frame.



Mercader was finally buried in the Soviet Union under a tombstone marked "Ramón Ivanovich López."

On November 8, 1930, Gérard Fleury (a Parisian lawyer who was also an amateur cinematographer) went out at dawn to capture the right light for filming the provincial landscape around Lake Thuit in Normandy. He disappeared later that same day under mysterious circumstances that have never been explained, and was presumed to be dead.

On August 20, 1940, Barcelona-born Stalinist Ramón Mercader del Río, posing as Jacques Mornard, assassinated Leon Trotsky in Mexico by driving an ice pick into his brain. Mercader subsequently spent 20 years in a Mexican prison, and was finally buried in the Soviet Union under a tombstone marked "Ramón Ivanovich López."

Though radically different from each other, these historical events both took place in earlier decades in foreign nations outside Spain, and both involved a death that left many questions unanswered. The mysterious protagonists, both from families portrayed as emblematic of their era and locale, are the subjects of two fascinating feature-length documentaries made by Spanish filmmakers in the late 1990s: *Tren de sombras* (*Train of Shadows*, 1997), an evocative meditation on Fleury's silent home movies by Catalan experimental filmmaker José Luis Guerín; and *Asaltar los cielos* (*Storm the Skies*, 1996), a probing portrait of Trotsky's assassin codirected by cinematographer José Luis López Linares and journalist Javier Ríoyo.

My interest here lies less in the actual events depicted in these films than in the ways in which these documentaries renarrativize their "uncanny" protagonists as postnational subjects who speak to the specific pressures of Spanish transnational filmmaking in the late 1990s. This exploration (which builds on my earlier essay, "Documenting the National and its Subver-

sion in a Democratic Spain") is part of a larger project on a group of Spanish documentaries of the 1990s that convey a transnational vision of Spain, a vision that looks not only forward to the new millennium, when an increasingly diversified Spain becomes a strong member of the European Union, but also backward, to the beginning of the twentieth century, when Barcelona and Catalan culture were cosmopolitan sites for daring internationalist projects.¹ These films suggest that Spain, despite its long nationalist history of self-imposed hermetic isolation and continuing marginalization, still has a great deal to teach the rest of the world about the transnational or postnational condition.

In an essay on fetishism, Freud defined the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of the old and long familiar"—a fear that he ultimately traced back to the boy child's experience of seeing the mother's genitals, and the castration anxiety and turn toward fetishism which that vision aroused.² Though neither *Tren de sombras* nor *Asaltar los cielos* invites a psychoanalytic reading, they both link an uncanny death from the past to a present fear of powerlessness and obliteration, or a fear of being condemned to silence and obscurity. Significantly, both films document events that occurred in earlier decades, before Spain (and more specifically Catalan culture) was hermetically sealed and isolated under Franco's monolithically nationalist regime. Both events took place in nations with whom Spain has long had strategic transnational cultural relations. In the case of *Tren* it is France, whose cultural affinities cosmopolitan Catalonians have long used to assert their independence from the rest of Spain; in the case of *Asaltar* it is Russia, whose shifting relations with Spain (as both ally and arch enemy) helped complicate the deep polarization between the "two Spains," and Mexico, with which Spain has had complex linguistic, colonialist, and diasporic ties for centuries.

Both films suggest that the full resonance of these uncanny events can be understood only if one engages in a process of narrative investigation that Spanish filmmakers appear uniquely qualified to perform at this particular stage of transnational history. For Spain's contradictory relations to marginality have enabled it to more easily convert that limitation into an asset—a dynamic that has helped recent Spanish filmmakers broker the representation of the alien Other both inside and outside of Spain. While Spanish authorities in several periods vigorously suppressed, denied, or marginalized cultural difference (usually justified in the name of religious orthodoxy, moral purity, national

unity, social order, or economic necessity), this process helped marginalize Spain itself within the larger international arena. As a Catalan filmmaker working within a region and genre that are both highly marginal in world cinema, Guerin purposely seeks out marginal subjects in other European nations for his unconventional documentaries. Marginality itself becomes his subject. In contrast, madrileños López Linares and Rioyo use the marginalized Catalan identity disavowed by Mercader and his mother to help account for their fanatical nomadic subjectivity as postnational world revolutionaries.

Spain's experience of having been hermetically sealed for decades under the Franco regime means that a great deal of its role in history is still unknown both to Spaniards and to the rest of the world. For Spaniards, this has led to an obsession with memory, particularly in mining the gaps between authorized versions of collective history (especially in those hated government-sponsored Noticias Documentales, or "NO DO" newsreels, that had a monopoly on archival footage of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, on its narrativization through editing, and on its distribution as the official "truth") and the more anarchic collections of personal memories recorded in a wide array of popular forms that trigger uncensored private associations with subversive potential. This struggle over popular memory was central to the structure of several powerful anti-Francoist documentaries from the transitional era of the mid-1970s, such as Basilio Martín Patino's *Canciones para después de una guerra* (*Songs for after a War*, 1971, released in 1976), Jaime Chávarri's *El desencanto* (*Disenchantment*, 1976), Gonzalo Heralde's *Raza, el espíritu de Franco* (*Race, the Spirit of Franco*, 1977), and Jaime Camino's *La vieja memoria* (*Old Memories*, 1977). The ideological conflict was played out not only through the selection of images and sounds, but also through the different editing styles, which resulted in very different ways of narrativizing these recorded perceptions. This desire to unearth lost records of idiosyncratic personal memory and to find new ways of recontextualizing them is what also drives both Guerin's obsessive examination of the fragile remnants of Fleury's home movies in *Tren de sombras* and Rioyo and López Linares' recounting of Ramón Mercader's strange story in *Asaltar los cielos*.

Both films emphasize the transcultural nature of their inquiries as they pursue their archeological projects, excavating traces of a history that is on the verge of being lost. In this sense, they both fall within the category of what Laura U. Marks calls "intercultural cinema"—films which operate at the intersections of

two or more cultural regimes of knowledge so that meaningful knowledge can never be fully verified solely in the terms of one regime or the other. Marks claims that such works are frequently acts of excavation that are primarily deconstructive.

Yet once this deconstruction has been accomplished, no simple truth is uncovered. There is a moment of suspension that occurs in these works after the official discourse has been (if only momentarily) dismantled and before the emerging discourse finds its voice. This is a moment of silence, an act of mourning for the terrible fact that the histories that are lost are lost for good. Yet this moment is also enormously suggestive and productive. It is where these works begin to call upon other forms of cultural knowledge: it is where the knowledges embedded in fetish-like objects, bodily memory, and the memory of the senses . . . are found.³

It is precisely those silences that are mined so productively by these two Spanish documentaries of the 1990s.

For non-Spaniards, an unearthing of Spain's previously hidden role in international politics could potentially change the understanding not only of Spain but also of world history, particularly in its transnational phase—which is precisely what *Asaltar* demonstrates in its study of Ramón Mercader, for it renarrativizes his act of terror for the 1990s. The film suggests that only by understanding the story of Spain's complex role in the Trotsky assassination can one fully comprehend the recent fall of the Soviet Union and the construction of the post-Cold War, postnational era of the 1990s.

Asaltar los cielos

This fascinating documentary opens quite conventionally, with a pre-titles teaser introducing four of the many historical witnesses who will be interviewed throughout the film: Ramón's adopted Mexican daughter, Laura Mercader, who still doesn't understand her father's motives; Russian exile Elena Poniatowska, who is horrified that he was capable of stabbing someone with a knife from behind; his Spanish nephew, Gay Mercader, a concert promoter who takes an ironic stance toward his family's notoriety; and his aunt María, the widow of Italian filmmaker Vittorio De Sica (a major influence on Spanish cinema) and a former actress during the Neorealist era, who disavows any

connection with Ramón. All four, in fact, seem to have little insight to offer about the assassin and his deed. What this montage of talking heads does provide are quick links between Mercader and four different cultural regimes and nations (Mexico, Russia, Spain, and Italy), yet it is directly followed by a shift to Catalan specificity when we see archival footage of Barcelona at the turn of the century playing behind the opening credits.

While this juxtaposition is still consistent with the compilation documentaries from the transitional era with their dialogic clashes between official public history and contradictory private memories, *Asaltar* departs from its predecessors when we suddenly see footage of the 1976 Rolling Stones concert in Barcelona, with the androgynous Mick Jagger prancing on stage as Spanish film star Charo López tells us in voiceover that these two dates, 1900 and 1976, mark the span of Ramón's life. Although the specific date of Mercader's death makes another historical connection with the transition, the choice of the Stones concert as historical marker introduces a vision of Spain that is more compatible with the postmodernist documentaries of the mid-1990s than with the transitional documentaries of the mid-1970s. For the concert associates Mercader not only with the end of Francoist xenophobia, but also with Spain's immersion in a sexually mobile global pop culture. In a special issue of the Spanish film journal *Viridiana* devoted to *Asaltar los cielos* and Patricio Guzmán's documentary *La memoria obstinada* (1997), Rioyo and López Linares acknowledge this connection in their preface:

The mixture of archival images, black-and-white and color footage, 16mm film, digital video, Super 8, photographs, interviews, audio, united in a visual and sound montage, makes the telling of this history effective and accessible. We are addressing spectators of ARTE and of MTV with a model of audiovisual ideas that reflect modern concepts of how to look at cultural facts, documents, or music.⁴

Asaltar combines processed archival footage and a complex weave of interviews with a wide range of historical witnesses from a broad geographical range. They all had some direct connection with the film's three major characters, who were born in different nations: Mercader in Spain; his mother Caridad del Río in Cuba; and his victim, Trotsky, in Russia. The historical witnesses include journalists, scholars, and political activists of various nationalities and ideological persuasions, as well as surviving relatives and

friends of both the assassin and his victim, including several of Trotsky's bodyguards and one of Mercader's fellow prisoners in the Mexican jail. There are also occasional star cameos, like the brief interview with Sara Montiel (the leftist Spanish movie queen who met Mercader in Mexico). Yet the most famous "stars" in the story—Stalin, La Pasionaria, Diego Rivera (who convinced Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas to grant Trotsky a visa), Frida Kahlo (who had an affair with him), David Siqueiros (who tried to assassinate him)—are, like the protagonist and victim, all dead. They are ghosts who appear only in archival footage and whose direct testimonies are irretrievably lost, like those of Trotsky and Mercader.

Asaltar tells the story of an eccentric family that, as one of the film's witnesses tells us, "embodies the contradictions of the century." The Del Río-Mercaders are not a Francoist family hermetically sealed within Spain, but one of nomadic subjectivity. Hence the story ranges freely from Havana to Barcelona, Madrid, Moscow, Leningrad, Paris, New York, and Mexico City. Breaking from the familiar cliché that treats the Spanish Civil War as a micro-event, a dress rehearsal for the ideological struggles of World War II, the film suggests that Spain has always been a major player in world politics, yet one whose identity (like Ramón's) was disavowed and disguised.

The film focuses on the relationship between a strong mother and her sons, whose lives, talents, and subjectivities she shaped (or warped, depending on your ideological point of view). Like many Spanish fictional films of the 1990s, especially those representing the complex political struggles of the anarchists during the Spanish Civil War, *Asaltar* emphasizes the crucial role played by women in these historic conflicts. Ramón's fanatical Stalinist mother, Caridad del Río Mercader, is consistently criticized by veteran anarchist Teresa Palou and contrasted with Communist leader Dolores Ibarruri (La Pasionaria), who appears much less extreme. La Pasionaria emerges as the ideal Communist heroine, the model for cute little girls who are shown masquerading as their idol, while Caridad (like her son) is portrayed as a secretive killer performing Stalin's dirty work behind the scenes—a character, according to Rioyo and López Linares, whose life "seems taken out of a Greek tragedy."⁵

After the introduction, the film actually begins with the story of the fiercely independent Caridad, a focus that strengthens the uncanniness of Ramón's historic moves by suggesting that what is most mysterious in his motives is traceable back to his mother and her own fears of powerlessness. What is most striking in this

introduction to Caridad is the uncanny experience imposed on her by her rich Catholic Catalan husband: she was dragged to a Barcelona brothel and forced to watch how other women perform sexually. It is not clear whether he hoped she would learn new sexual tricks or merely be convinced that female sexuality was designed to serve male pleasure. In either event, what we see in the archival footage are two mammoth nude women striking poses that are more comic than erotic, but that also, like the glam voguing of Mick Jagger in the 1976 concert footage, suggest a potentially subversive homoerotic sexual mobility. The film implies that this uncanny vision horrified Caridad and helped drive her and her brood (and possibly the filmmakers as well) to seek empowerment in some arena other than sexuality, which became, with considerable help from the global success of Pedro Almodóvar's comic melodramas, the new libertarian stereotype of Spain under the Socialists.

Not interested in sex (or so her surviving son, Luis, Ramón's youngest brother, tells us—though sons are rarely reliable sources on their mother's sexuality), Caridad devoted all her energies to politics. We are also told she demonstrated against factories owned by her own family, which led them to confine her in an insane asylum (from which her sons helped her escape). Thus, as a world revolutionary, she struggled against the historically divided nation ("the two Spains") and the patriarchal bourgeois family (enshrined by Church, Franco, Freud, and melodrama), scattering her brood across the world. This remarkable story is told as an account not of a uniquely eccentric woman but of one whose life was shaped by cultural and historical specificity: the radical and internationalist atmosphere of Barcelona and the complex political struggles at play during the Republic and the subsequent Civil War.

The first five minutes of the film thus present us with an array not only of transnational associations but



A representation of the Barcelona brothel where Caridad was forced to watch other women perform.

also of possible primary subjects—the story of a man, woman, family, city, trauma, century—all fraught with troubling contradictions and all inextricably entangled within a complex narrative network that can be read against various conflicting cultural regimes of knowledge. Documentary is seen as the only genre capable of telling such a complicated story, a form that is sufficiently heteroglossic to incorporate a combination of other genres (including city symphony, rock documentary, melodrama, and porn) and an equally dense *mélange* of styles. As the codirectors put it in describing how they tried to appeal to the postmodernist, postnational spectators of ARTE and of MTV: “The documentary is a narrative form increasing in value. It has a new aesthetic language we are eager to explore.”⁶

One way into the narrative network is through the exile experience of Ramón, whose story is contextualized historically against those Spanish “war children” whom we see in archival footage being sent to the Soviet Union (or to France) by their Communist parents for a few months so that they could escape the dangerous air raids, but who ended up staying for many years. (This is the Spanish version of the story told in Mark Jonathan Harris’s Oscar-winning *Into the Arms of Strangers: The Story of the Kinder Transport*, [2000].) We hear from their testimony how, although welcomed by the Soviet population and very well treated, they were deprived of mother love and homeland and transformed into permanent postnational ex-

iles. As one of them expresses it movingly in an interview, in the USSR they were always seen as Spanish and in Spain they were always seen as Russian.

It was actually Luis who experienced this uncanny postnational fate shared by many other Spaniards, for Ramón was singled out by his mother for a unique political mission that required him to go to the Soviet Union in 1937 to be trained as a KGB spy and to shed his Spanish and Catalan identities. We are told that their relationship was not primarily mother/son but political comrades, as if they believed in their own individual power to escape those ordinary ties of blood, biology, and nationality—even if only to serve a larger, imperialist supranational master narrative of international Communism. Since we never get direct access to the subjectivity of either of them, these characterizations remain as mediated as the juxtaposition of word and image or the editing of the archival documents. We are told that as a fanatic, Caridad could always justify each new revelation about Stalinism, and yet because of her fiercely independent nature, she chose to live in Paris rather than Moscow. Luis claims she blamed herself for ruining Ramón’s life and was suicidal as a consequence, and that her intervention in Mexico to help him escape from prison inadvertently extended Ramón’s sentence, forcing him to serve the full 20 years instead of only four, as certain Mexican officials had secretly agreed. So this is also the story of a tormented mother/son relationship, which echoes similar relations in other Spanish films, yet *Asaltar* purposely discourages a psychoanalytic or melodramatic reading.

Nevertheless, Ramón’s relationships with women are emphasized throughout the film: not only the formative relationship with his mother, but also the complex relations with his lover Sylvia, a New York Jew and loyal Trotskyist whom he exploited and betrayed by living with her in Paris and New York for a number of years solely in order to gain access to Trotsky. While his Mexican wife (a dancer he met in prison) remains vaguely defined, his adopted daughter defends him, claiming that because he spent 20 years in prison, her loss was as great as that of Trotsky’s family. Within both families, domestic relations were readily sacrificed for revolutionary politics, for both assassin and victim insisted that their lives belonged to a different cultural paradigm.

Spanish “war children” sent to the Soviet Union for a few months to escape the dangerous air raids ended up staying for many years.



The mystery of Ramón's identity is linked in the film with his nomadic subjectivity: his mastery of several languages (he spoke impeccable French and perfect American English, but allegedly never said a word in Spanish) and his possession of several different names, passports, and nationalities. The goal of this film, like that of the new marker on his grave (seen in a fetishized close shot) is to restore a complex Catalan identity to Mercader. That is, to reterritorialize him as a world revolutionary from a cosmopolitan Spain and to fill that historical "twenty years of silence" with an orchestration of international voices that define his complex determinations and deeds. Yet, as Marks has argued, it is the silence that makes such an orchestration possible.

One rupture of that silence is Trotsky's final piercing scream, which Mercader heard when he drove the ice pick into his brain and which apparently haunted him the rest of his life. This obsession suggests not only that Mercader may have felt remorse, but also that this scream may have provided some solace from the silence imposed on him—by the KGB, who suppressed his identity; by Trotsky, who totally underestimated him; by the torturers in prison, who tried to make him talk; and subsequently by history, which tried to erase his identity. Ironically, he suffered a fate similar to that of his victim, whom Stalin tried to banish from the stage of history. Thus Trotsky's uncanny scream is presented as an outcry against historical erasure, which this film tries to rectify for both the assassin and his victim. This rescue mission has special resonance in the late 1990s, for who could be a more complex poster child than Mercader for a postnational Spanish identity—the unknown Spaniard who changed the course of history (by eliminating Stalin's arch rival), and whose deed has become even more resonant with the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union and the triumph of transnational capitalism in the post-Soviet, post-Cold War era of the 1990s and beyond?

Still, the film ends by suggesting that Mercader may have had a nostalgic yearning for his lost national identity. According to one witness, Ramón wondered what if he had never left Spain—or what if after serving his sentence he had returned to Spain (instead of to Cuba or the Soviet Union) to spend his remaining 15 years on one of those edenic beaches on the Costa Brava? In one of its finest ironic disjunctures between word and image, the film ends by showing us a beach swarming with anonymous tourists. As if that were not sufficiently bathetic, we see a close shot of the corpulent derriere of a female tourist disappearing into the sea, an image as comically deflating, misogynist, and

uncanny as the earlier shots of those rotund prostitutes in the Barcelona brothel. This bathetic image not only de-eroticizes the false paradise being promoted as a nationalist object of desire, it also makes us question the interpretation (voiced by several witnesses) that Ramón's life was wasted. Perhaps this ending implies that, regardless of how duped, deprived, or denationalized the Mercaders (and for that matter, Trotsky) may have been, life as a quixotic political idealist on the global stage of world revolution was still preferable to these mundane pleasures in a transnational consumerist Spain.

Tren de sombras: El espectro de Le Thuit

In comparison to *Asaltar los cielos*, *Tren de sombras* seems precious, poetic, and painterly rather than explicitly political, and its narrative pleasures are intellectual and contemplative rather than historically and psychologically compelling. Yet the film still serves similar drives. For though Fleury's mysterious death is not momentous like Trotsky's, the film suggests its historic ramifications can best be understood by a Catalan subject who fully appreciates the power of marginality and who questions the notion of authenticity within the local/global nexus of a postnational Europe.

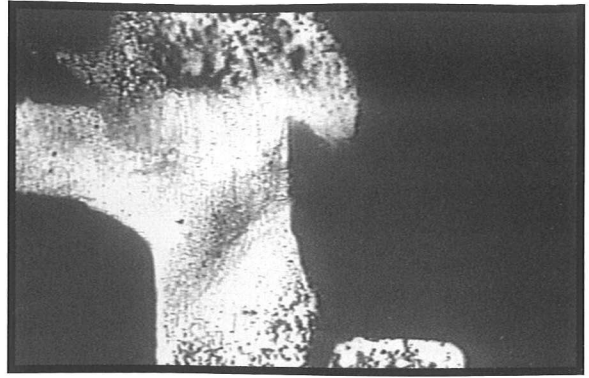
While both films privilege editing as the ultimate process of making meaning, their challenges are completely different. *Asaltar* organizes a massive array of diverse archival materials into a coherent, accessible story without sacrificing its complexity. *Tren* marshals a diverse series of layered contexts and complex reconstructions for recuperating and reinterpreting scant filmic remnants ravaged by decay, and shows how this found footage can be recontextualized within several regimes of knowledge to generate very different kinds of meaning about the mysterious disappearance of the auteur, the cultural and historical specificity of this particular region of France, the materiality and fragility of the film medium, the respective values of film preservation and historical reconstruction, the history of European silent cinema, the nature of memory and history, and the permeability of boundaries between genres and all other bordered domains, including documentary and fiction.

Both documentaries can be read as database narratives that reveal the linked processes of selection and combination which give new meaning to perceptions and history, and both employ a search engine that generates a diverse combination of stories. Or, in Laura Marks's terms, as archeological projects, they both express "the disjunction between orders of knowledge,

such as official history and private memory, by juxtaposing different orders of image, or image and sound tracks that do not correspond to each other."⁷ Both films also belong to what Gilles Deleuze has defined as "time-image cinema," a category that Marks tries to imbue with cultural and historical specificity by identifying it with "intercultural" cinema. In forcing "the viewer to draw upon his or her subjective resources in order to complete the image," Marks claims the intercultural version presents the image as "barely a beginning, and any extension into narrative must be hesitant, or suspicious. In these works, thin-looking images are ultimately the richest . . . [for they] call on the viewer to search for their hidden history."⁸ This is precisely the primary strategy in *Tren de sombras*, whose mysterious and decaying images evoke tentative narratives that are sheer projection and whose "petrified objects" are brought back to life and fetishized through repetitive restaging and reframing.

In *Tren's* pre-titles teaser, we are confronted with abstract blotches whose meanings depend on how we contextualize them generically. On the one hand, we can read them as abstract expressionist images that offer sensory painterly pleasures. We can also see them as celluloid frames from film footage in the process of decay, which reminds us of the materiality of the medium (a frequent preoccupation with a certain mode of experimental cinema associated with filmmakers like James Benning and Pat O'Neill). Purely aesthetically, these blotches call our attention to figure/ground relations and resonate with the recurring patterns of lace, grillwork, and shadows that similarly layer and texture Guerin's contemporary color footage of interiors. But when these blotches are eventually associated with the deteriorating footage on which we recognize filmic representations of people from an earlier era, we reinterpret them as signs of the film's historic authenticity. At that point they become part of the general thematic around issues of loss, temporality, disappearance, and death.

On the other hand, these blotches also function as obstacles or even as a means of censoring certain readings of a gradually unfolding melodramatic narrative. Centering on a complex network of erotic relations within the family, melodrama cuts across many periods, cultures, and media, and can even be found in fragmented home movies. The ubiquitous nature of melodrama and its hybridization with so many other genres make it an effective pattern against which to read and make sense out of fragmented or incoherent story materials. Guerin demonstrates (with his ever-changing soundtracks) how the generic tone of Fleury's



These blotches can be read either as processed, painterly images evoking abstract expressionism, or film footage in the process of decay.

amateur form of melodrama can shift fluidly from domestic comedy to psychological thriller depending on the accompanying music or silence. We see how genre contextualizes the meaning of images and sounds, and that all generic options foregrounded by Guerin—melodrama, mystery-detection, documentary, art film, and historical reconstruction—can be applied to any movie. He employs genres the way he uses music, as a database of alternatives that alter the meaning of perceptions and that call attention to how we actually read the combination of sounds, images, and words.

When we see the bright blue graphics of the opening titles (*Tren de sombras: El espectro de Le Thuit*), these few words (in this basically wordless film)⁹ begin to contextualize the images and sounds that follow. *Sombras* (shadows) and *espectro* (specter) bring to mind the light, shadow, vision, and spectacle that are central to a reflexive meta-commentary on film, but they also evoke the ghosts, death, disappearance, and time that are frequently crucial in melodrama. Both domains (of experimental film and melodrama) are motored by the opening word, *Tren*, which sets in motion the train of images and sounds pulsing rhythmically through human minds and cinematic machines as well as the narrative drive that enables us to interpret these sensory perceptions as highly textured, multilayered stories. In fact, the first human figures we see (behind the blotches) are waving goodbye to a train, an association underscored by a train whistle emerging from the edgy music.

An explanatory title in Spanish, more suggestive than definitive, tells us that the film is set in Le Thuit, in Upper Normandy. Some spectators might associate this region with those French literary masters of family melodrama, Flaubert (who was born in Rouen) and Proust (who used to summer in Cabourg, which he de-

picted as Balbec).¹⁰ This text also describes the collaborative relationship between *Tren*'s more obscure regional filmmakers, Fleury and Guerin:

Three months before [Fleury's death] he made one of his modest family productions, which would turn out to be his last film. Inadequately preserved for almost seven decades, it has been rendered almost irretrievable by the harmful effects of humidity, making its projection impossible. Starting from some photographs, we have tried to remake it; we have refilmed it all over again. Adhering to the criterion of maximum fidelity, we have recreated the original circumstances, reconstructing locations and scrupulously reproducing gestures, framings, and movements.

The first few minutes give an account of this labor. It would have been unthinkable without the complicity of the brothers Ives and Mireille Fleury to whom we are indebted with most sincere gratitude, which also extends to the Laquest, Gauthier and Ferri de Le Thuit families for their most valuable collaboration on the restoration of these old scenes of familial cinema: images which may be rudimentary but which are vital to remembering the infancy of cinema.

In the post-titles teaser that dramatizes the film's reconstructive "labor," the music disappears and we see a series of black-and-white photographs that remind us not only that cinema grew out of photography, but also how quickly the sequencing of still images begins to generate narrative. First, we see a close-up of a man smiling (whom we probably take to be Fleury), then a two-shot of him and his wife in which he is no longer smiling. The juxtaposition makes us wonder whether we are to infer an unhappy marriage—a question that launches the melodrama. Then follows a framed photograph of Fleury standing alone beside a lake near his boat, holding his camera, which suggests the actions he was presumably performing the day he disappeared. The image dissolves to a shot of that same photograph recontextualized within a richly furnished room, suggesting a broader subject of a specific family, class, region, and historical era. Yet the attention to light and shadow also encourages us to read the image as a painterly still life. The next dissolve takes us to a deteriorating photo of Fleury standing beside a tripod on which his camera is mounted, the physical deterioration of the image evoking the loss both of his films and his life. The music resumes as the



The deteriorating photo of Fleury standing beside his tripod evokes the loss of both his films and his life.

next dissolve reveals a color image of what looks like the same man standing by the lake, an image which we could read as an uncanny modern replication of the earlier "authentic" photograph. Ducks glide gracefully across the lake and water subtly ripples near the boat as ambient sounds merge with the music.

There are three ways in which this shot makes us question what we have already perceived. First, how do we know that what we presumed to be the earlier authentic photographs were not also contemporary images made to look old through these artificial signs of deterioration? In other words, how do we know this so-called documentary is not a hoax, like *The Blair Witch Project*? Secondly, do we know that what we previously saw were still images, or were they merely static long takes of photographs? Finally, are we sure there was really silence, or were the sounds merely below the threshold of our attention or hearing? The grounds of our perceptions and assumptions are called into question by these simple juxtapositions in these so-called thin images, which generate all sorts of new and probing questions about the medium and the melodrama.

At this point the man disappears from the scene and there is a dissolve to the boat alone, an image which gradually fades to black. But the moon (or is it the sun?) and its reflection in the water remain clearly visible, making us wonder whether these are really authentic natural bodies as we assumed, or merely circles of light digitally inserted into the image. This shot demonstrates how easily images, sounds, and lights are manipulated—a realization that weakens any remaining belief in the boundaries between the so-called authentic footage and the historical recreation, between documentary and fiction, between Fleury and Guerin. The very act of obsessive scrutiny makes the fetishized object of scrutiny all the more uncanny and obscure: it

becomes a mere reflection, image, sign, substitution—like any fetish.

At some point in the film we probably wonder why a Barcelona-born experimental filmmaker like Guerin should be interested in making a film about this obscure French subject, particularly if he is interested in reaching a European or global audience. Perhaps there is something wrong with this question, for why shouldn't other regions or nations be able to make films about "foreign" subjects? Why should they be expected to make only national allegories about their own locales while Hollywood freely colonizes the rest of the world for subjects? This issue has been a sore point for both Spanish and Catalan cinema, for both have historically been marginalized in world cinema. Perhaps the connection between Catalonia and the Thuit region of France makes more sense in the new macro-regional context of a transnational European cinema, where the nation is under erasure. At one point in the film we even see a map marked "Euro," just as we literally see signs pointing to nearby cities such as Rouen. There is no mention of nations.

In the frequent crosscutting between the reconstructions of the apparently historic black-and-white or sepia footage and Guerin's contemporary color footage of the same locales, what is blatantly obvious are the historical differences in the way this same space is documented within these two allegedly distinct time periods. The comparison does not evoke nostalgia or judgment; rather, it calls our attention to the differences in the ordinary daily activity occurring in that space and being captured or reconstructed on celluloid. While the apparently historic footage records a complex network of erotic relations within an extended bourgeois family (the kind that Foucault has theorized and that Caridad del Río Mercader was escaping), Guerin's contemporary static long takes capture anonymous strangers, sheep, cars, music, light, and shadows drifting in and out of the frame. And while the former raises provocative narrative questions about the characters and their adulterous relations, the latter move us with the sheer beauty of the crisp images and lighting. They are both compelling, but in very different ways, for they must be read against different cultural regimes of knowledge and pleasure.

At certain points in the contemporary footage, Guerin presents a blatant historical reconstruction of the earlier period (a technique also used in his 1990 documentary, *Innisfree*). Casting contemporary locals to reproduce the historic subjects, he succeeds exceptionally well with the simulacrum for Hortense, the young woman with whom Fleury and his brother Eti-

enne were possibly erotically obsessed (or at least that is what Guerin's film leads us to suspect). But when we see several of the characters from the so-called historic footage appear, we are reminded that the alleged original is also a reconstruction, and that the contemporary simulation (however stagy and artificial) is the more honest. We begin to wonder what portion of this footage or photographs, if any, was actually remnants shot by Fleury, and even whether this French filmmaker is truly a historical figure or merely a fictional character invented by Guerin. Ironically, the more accurate the historical reconstruction, the weaker the boundary between the so-called original film being preserved and the docudrama that seeks to reproduce it. This uncanny resemblance, triggered by the recognition of a woman from the past, threatens the symbolic order and all its restrictive boundaries. How paradoxical that this challenge of authenticity occurs in a film that appears to celebrate "the small scale and the local . . . [as] the places of greatest integrity . . . in the age of global flows and networks" (to use Jean Franco's terms),¹¹ for this challenge undermines any attempt to essentialize or idealize the local.

Similarly, even though this is allegedly a film about one auteur recuperating another, and even though we see at least two cameramen—Fleury and "Uncle Etienne"—the auteur's identity still remains as elusive as that of Ramón Mercader. The two on-screen men with a camera evoke the historic French binary between Lumière and Méliès, with Fleury as an active figure striding across the landscape with his camera mounted on a tripod (like Vertov's "man with a movie camera") to document the same kinds of subjects found in the Lumière brothers' early *actualités* (including the dramatic presence of a train, and a domestic prank with a garden hose). In contrast, his mustached rival uses Méliès's theatrical-type magic to make himself and other figures disappear. The film enables us to see that we are never really certain who has authored the image: Fleury or Guerin, or any of the film's many intertexts from world cinema: Lumière, Vertov, Méliès, Buñuel, Marker, Antonioni.¹²

In the global context, *Tren de sombras* can be compared with *The Blair Witch Project*, another faux documentary built around footage allegedly left by filmmakers who died under mysterious circumstances. As a low-budget American independent, *The Blair Witch Project* was as potentially marginal as *Tren de sombras*, yet its innovative use of the Internet enabled it to achieve a totally unexpected commercial success (duly noted by the Hollywood establishment), and the film thereby challenged many reigning assumptions

about marginality. Perhaps this surprising success even suggests that the present form of cinema itself may soon be peripheral. At one point in *Tren de sombras* we see a poster marked "Mémoires du Cinéma" in the foreground, with a man sweeping trash in mid-ground and a cemetery in the background, and a line of young schoolchildren and cars passing through this space, apparently indifferent to the loss. We know that there has been a widespread closing down of old theaters in smaller towns throughout Europe—a process memorialized with sentiment in *Cinema Paradiso*.

Tren avoids such sentimentality. Instead, like *The Blair Witch Project*, it leads us to consider how cinema can be reimagined through a convergence with new media, a restructuring process that is particularly reflected in its innovative approach to editing (the way it restructures the "train" of images) and that is analogous to the restructuring of communities (evoked in the contrast between Fleury's home movies structured around the family and Guerin's contemporary footage of anonymous strangers). A similar analogy is made to train travel—an image with great resonance for documentary cinema because of its historic associations with the early Lumière *actualités*. Guerin evokes the comparison with trains not only in the film's opening teaser and title, but also with a comparison between fragile images of the Fleury family waving at a passing train and contemporary shots of abandoned train tracks overgrown with weeds. Yet the success of high-speed trains in Europe and Japan has extended the life of this earlier form of transportation. Similarly, *Tren de sombras* shows how vintage cinema can function as a viable engine for expanding the kinds of interactive narrative that are usually associated with new digital media and hypertexts.

In the current context of media history, film is fragile not only because celluloid and nitrate deteriorate when exposed to humidity, but also because backers of new media rivals like video, CD-ROMs, the Internet, DVD, and interactive television are trying to absorb or replace it. Amazingly, at the same time that *Tren de sombras* demonstrates the unique visual power of cinema, its innovative stylistics also expand our conception of interactive narrative and its potential pleasures far more powerfully than do most of these new digital media.

In fact, *Tren de sombras* is one of several experimental nonlinear European films from the 1990s that enable us to imagine new modes of interactive spectatorship through expanded forms of montage, database structures, and simulations of randomness—a combination which generates new narrative pleasures. Such

films include European coproductions like Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World*, Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book*, Chris Marker's *Level 5*, Raul Ruiz's *The Shattered Image*, Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*, Mike Figgis's *Time Code* and *Hotel*, Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*; and from Spain, Bigas Luna's *The Chambermaid on the Titanic*, Julio Medem's *Lovers of the Arctic Circle*, and Alejandro Amenábar's *Open Your Eyes* (remade in Hollywood as *Vanilla Sky*). It is as if such films were designed to ensure that Hollywood action films like *The Matrix* do not totally dominate the emerging transmedia convergence between movies and interactive games. Thus, the narrative experimentation potentially has economic as well as aesthetic implications, particularly within a transnational market still dominated by Hollywood exports.¹³

Except for his most recent documentary feature, *En construcción (Work in Progress, 2001)*, Guerin's films have not proved successful at the box office (even within Spain), yet they still expand the formal and conceptual possibilities of the medium. In *Tren de sombras* he frequently replays the same footage but with varied soundtracks—a strategy that brings to mind Genette's point that all repetition is a mental construction; no repetition is identical, for some elements of difference are always being suppressed.¹⁴ The film demonstrates that no matter how many times you watch Fleury's reconstructed footage, you still perceive new meanings with each new projection, which is a crucial means of achieving "playability" in a medium like electronic games that demand 20 to 40 hours of play time. The film also displays evocative forms of vertical editing, in which meaningful juxtapositions are arrived at through a process that is made to appear haphazard.

At one point, two strips of film are laid side by side, as the off-screen editor carefully pairs two figures, Hortense and Etienne, suggesting a latent love story that may somehow have been related to Fleury's disappearance. The way they are positioned perhaps implies they are a couple, their juxtaposition against the water the link with death, the stirring music the range of their emotions, and the blotches both the fragility of their relationship and its secretive nature. When we watch Hortense ride forward on a bicycle and then see that same footage in reverse, we realize the linear drive is being abandoned. Instead, the narrative is driven by an obsessive desire to solve the enigma—to find the hidden figure in the bushes (as in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*) or the revealing detail in faces or gestures (as in Marker's *La Jetée*), or a conceptual link between any two images juxtaposed in time or

space (as in Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*) though here these links serve narrative ends. We keep compulsively returning to the same images, slowing them down or freezing on an incriminating detail, possibly to unearth a class-crossed love triangle between Hortense, Etienne, and the maid. Later, we see a blurred strip of film freely streaming through a moviola and hear the whirring sound of the mechanical apparatus and then the punching of a button that captures and freezes a specific frame as if by chance. The experience is like playing a slot machine, for we get a similar visceral rush of anticipation waiting for the winning or "right" combination to appear. Yet the element of randomness weakens any lingering faith we might have in any singular explanation or narrative closure. Although the mystery is never really "solved," the darkness of the randomly chosen images and the melancholy music create a tonal shift that invites us to meditate on Fleury's disappearance.

This thrilling sequence reveals how editing always functions as a search engine, for the unseen person whose hand controls the switch seems to be seeking the most meaningful and resonant combinations of images and sounds, those that will create a moving story out of these fragments. The fact that we never see the editor facilitates our identification with that role as well as our own immersion in this narrative quest. Despite the intellectual nature of this meta-narrative inquiry, the sequence's remarkable sensory qualities and emotional connotations also arouse a visceral excitement. This sequence brilliantly dramatizes the database narrative structure of all narrative: the process of selecting specific images from a paradigm or database of alternatives and then recombining them to generate a meaningful syntagmatic combination—a specific sentence, sequence, or narrative that addresses both the editor's and the viewer's desire. Thus, database and narrative are shown to be not alternative ways of organizing images but rather two sides of the same process.

Similar insights can also be found in Guerin's contemporary footage, where we see the spatializing of time and the temporalizing of space. For example, the shadow of a clock's pendulum creates a rhythmic arc that spatially links the static photographs of the two suspected lovers (Etienne and Hortense), a temporal instrument used to spatialize their emotional connection. Nearby, a warm light rhythmically pulses against the heart of Fleury, pictured in an adjacent photograph, as if he was disturbed or aroused by the secret romantic entanglement between Hortense and Etienne. Meanwhile, the image of Fleury's wife is eclipsed by a



Two strips of film are laid side by side as the editor pairs two figures, Hortense and Etienne, suggesting a latent love story that may somehow have been related to Fleury's death.

shadow. Conversely, static shots of a restricted space in the local village become a means of registering time and movement as people, vehicles, and shadows drift in and out of the clearly locked frame, sometimes linked by elliptical dissolves. This focus on reading nonverbal gestures, expressions, and temporal and spatial juxtapositions transforms fragmentary footage into a fascinating text of great sensory and emotional richness. It clearly demonstrates that cinema (regardless of subject, genre, or culture) has always been a medium of interactive narrative that requires spectators to engage in a process of mental editing—to make associative links between images and sounds and conceptual leaps that historicize their meaning. *Tren* provides us with a rich narrative field in which we can generate our own melodramatic plots, our own meta-narrative theories, and our own cultural reinscriptions of images from another locale—processes, like musical sampling, that do not depend primarily on verbal language or strict lines of causality. It also reminds us that cinema is a medium of light, and that every film is a moving train of shadows that documents the passing of time.

At one point in the blatant color reconstruction of a scene between the maid and the libidinous Uncle

Etienne, with whom she is presumably having an affair, she speaks the film's singular line of scripted spoken dialogue: "They have seen us." This line is then repeated in a replaying of the scene, as if to make certain that we have not missed the sexual implications of their tryst. Yet we still don't know to whom the "they" refers—to the lovely Hortense, with whom he is also repeatedly linked romantically by Guerin's editing; or to the other young members of the Fleury family, whose anxious faces are repeatedly scrutinized by the camera in Guerin's reediting of the footage; or to us in Guerin's audience, who are constantly forced to revise and expand the narrative field against which we are reading these images and sounds as each reiteration or new frame of footage unfolds.

Through all of these iterations, the mystery remains and grows more resonant. Finally, it is not merely the melodramatic disappearance of a particular Frenchman one morning in the mist, but the disappearance of an entire family, an era, and a way of life. And also the threatened disappearance of an artistic medium that is capable of documenting and projecting the incredible beauty and resonance of the most banal moments of everyday experience. So that when we see the contemporary color reenactment of Fleury rowing his boat out onto the lake and disappearing into the fog, we may associate this image with the earlier deteriorating film fragments of a man running after a train, or of the family car driving down the country road toward the horizon. Perhaps we conclude that Gérard Fleury has merely ridden into the future, with its faster-paced rhythmic movements of anonymous persons and vehicles, and of raindrops, leaves, and shadows whose extraordinary sensory beauty a Catalan filmmaker has so meticulously captured on film at this other end of the cinematic century.

By the end of *Tren de sombras*, we still may not know exactly how or why Fleury disappeared or whether we have actually seen any of his authentic images, just as we never fully decipher Ramón Mercader's motives for killing Trotsky or shedding his Catalan identity, but we do know that both of these uncanny figures have been rescued from obscurity and that this fascinating process of recuperation also seeks to enhance the visibility of Spain and its most marginalized filmmakers in the global sphere of the late 1990s. Like Trotsky, we underestimate these "obscure" Spaniards at our own peril.

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yrinth Project, an art collective and research initiative on interactive narrative at USC's Annenberg Center for Communication.

Notes

This essay is based on a paper presented at the "Brokering Spanish Postnationalist Culture" conference, organized by Teresa Vilaros at Duke University in November, 1999.

1. "Documenting the National and Its Subversion in a Democratic Spain," in *Refiguring Spain: Cinema/Media/Representation*, ed. Marsha Kinder (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 65-98. Particularly relevant is the discussion of two films from the early 1990s that play at the borders between documentary and fiction and that have strong auteurist links with *Tren de sombras* and *Asaltar los cielos*. The first was Guerin's previous documentary, *Innisfree* (1990), another obsessive examination of found footage (in that case, John Ford's *The Quiet Man*, a 1952 Hollywood movie that had a profound and uncanny effect on the small Irish village where it was shot, which is the subject of Guerin's documentary). The second documentary was Victor Erice's *El sol del membrillo* (1991), for which José Luis López Linares (the codirector on *Asaltar los cielos*) shot all the video footage. Like *Tren de sombras*, *El sol del membrillo* (*The Dream of Light*) emphasizes the materiality of the film medium while focusing on an artist (Spanish painter Antonio López) who failed to capture his local landscape (in that case, a quince tree in his own backyard in Madrid) in the "right light," but who succeeded almost inadvertently in documenting the historical specificity of his times. Erice's influence on Guerin was also apparent in the latter's debut feature, *Los motivos de Berta* (*Berta's Motives*, 1984), which has many similarities with Erice's best-known features, *El espíritu de la colmena* (*Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973) and *El sur* (*The South*, 1983). Erice also served as a model for Guerin's slow-paced career: whereas Guerin has made only four features and an episode in an anthology film over a span of 18 years, Erice (who is far better known) took 30 years to produce almost the equivalent output (three features and one episode). This rhythm suggests one possible reason why Guerin might be interested in recuperating the work of a marginal French filmmaker whose films would otherwise remain unknown.
2. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), Vol. 21, 155.
3. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 24-26.
4. Javier Rioyo and José Luis López Linares, "Los Mercader: Excéntricos y revolucionarios: Memoria," *Viridiana* 17 (September, 1997): 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 9.
7. Marks, 29, 31.
8. *Ibid.*, 42.
9. For a Catalan filmmaker in the 1990s, a key question is language: Should he be using Castilian or the Catalan language, a choice that proclaims his cultural specificity (particularly since both will have to be translated outside of

Spain)? Guerin sidesteps the issue by making his film almost wordless (except for the opening explanatory titles, printed signs, and a single line of dialogue), and by relying on a cinematic language of visual images and sounds that is presumably universal.

10. In some ways, the film title *Tren de sombras* and the brief description "in search of the right light" evoke Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (literally, *In Search of Lost Time*, though it is best known in English as *Remembrance of Things Past*). Proust was also considered to be a dilettante or amateur by many of his contemporaries. Fortunately, the final volumes of his great French masterpiece were discovered and published shortly after his death, which occurred in 1922, only eight years before that of Fleury. Perhaps Guerin is suggesting that whereas time may be the best way for the novel to capture and express life, memory and subjectivity, they are best captured and expressed on film through light and movement (to both of which Proust considered himself allergic).
11. Jean Franco, as quoted by Alberto Moreiras, "A Storm Blowing from Paradise: Negative Globality and Latin American Cultural Studies," *Siglo XX/Twentieth Century* 14 (1996): 75.
12. In Guerin's scene where the curious sheep peers into the playhouse as if looking for the absent children, one thinks of the inquisitive ostrich at the end of Buñuel's *Phantom of Liberty* witnessing the massacre of student demonstrators. The camera's return to empty spaces earlier occupied by human figures also evokes the famous montage at the end of Antonioni's *L'eclisse*.
13. That is one reason why I screen *Tren de sombras*, along with many of these other films, in my graduate seminar on Interactive Narrative Theory. Because of the richness of its structure and the emotionally compelling nature of its images, *Tren* is the only film I screened for filmmaker Pat O'Neill and the creative team of interface designers, programmers, and graphic artists with whom I am currently collaborating on a DVD-ROM project entitled "Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounter with a Film by Pat O'Neill" (2003).
14. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 113.

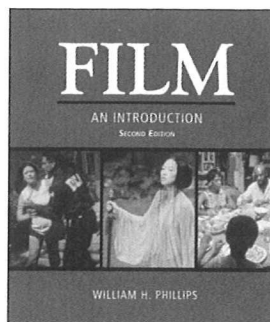
Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

Everything our mothers told us was good causes cancer: fresh air, sunshine, and milk. What next? Grammar. I'm going to blame my well-meaning English teachers for my misquotation of Tommy Powers (from *The Public Enemy*) in my article on "The Sopranos" (*FQ* 56.2, Winter 2002–03). Tommy said, "I ain't so tough," not "I'm not so tough." I feel the ghost of James Cagney shoving an ectoplasmic grapefruit in my face. Some grammatical brainstorm made me do it. Apologies, Jimmy.

Sincerely,
Martha P. Nochimson

For all the ways you teach film

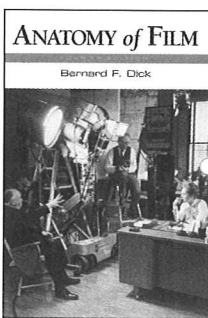


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