



Facing the Experience of the Limit

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Font, Domènec. *La última mirada. Testamentos Fílmicos*. Valencia: Ediciones de la Mirada, 2000

*Law and time,
born one from the other,
eliminating one another and always
regenerating,
reflecting one another, the only way they can be seen,
chain of images and counter-images
that embrace time, that embrace
the primary image,
coming more and more out of time,
until in the last echo of their harmony,
until in a last symbol
the symbol of death and the symbol of life are joined,
the image that is the reality of the soul,
its mansion, its timeless now, and so
the law enacted in it,
its need (Hermann Broch) (1)*

Domènec Font's latest book, *The Last Look. Film Testaments*, starts from a beautiful idea, that of the existence of a poetics and, if you like, an aesthetics of the film testament. The film testament, as the author establishes, is not necessarily the last film of a dying director, nor a posthumous work, but the film or films in which he becomes aware of the closeness of death and embarks on a quiet, intimate conversation with it whose conclusions, doubts and emotions are expressed in the *mise en scène*. The film testament also operates as a recapitulation of a work which most often merges with a life. Moreover, the film testament usually coincides with the last stop, the last breath of the director's career.

Font begins that nocturnal, twilight, spectral journey, deliberately adrift in interpretation and the revelation of fleeting secrets, with a dedication to Hermann Broch and the guidance of Godard, and ends, in an orderly withdrawal, with Truffaut's

The Green Room. That structure is not the least of the book's achievements. Let us see: in *The Death of Virgil*, Hermann Broch expressed the poet's struggle in the face of the experience of the limit, of the advent of destiny in the shape of the dominion of death. That state of transition, the place of mystery *par excellence*, is the one explored by the author and the directors in this book. Their films are surrounded by a halo of mystery which is difficult to decipher. The poet Virgil begins his withdrawal in an exercise of navigation, like Font's hermeneutics, and under the aegis of music: we might say that the idea of a spectral sonata, the key to the book that leads Font to begin his testamental readings with *Gertrud*, is not far off. The poet Virgil, half waking and half sleeping, in a literal state of hallucination from illness, beset by visions, gives himself up to a long poetical reflection on the meaning of life, knowledge, the function of the work of art and deadly beauty. On that border between sleep and waking, between life and death, traditional categories of time decompose and realism gives way to poetics in the shape of an almost delirious monologue-stream of consciousness packed with images. Dreams, hallucination (trance), working with time, the poetics of *mise en scène*: these are ideas that appear regularly in the film testaments commented.

It is not hard to spot the tracks of Hermann Broch in Godard's writing on film, which is quite open about its debt to the German writer. *His Histoire(s) du cinéma* is set in a time of crisis, from the solitude of the author and on a diaphanous quest for a meaning in the images beyond any simple historical thread. That is why framing the eleven testaments proposed by Font within that other great testament of images, written by Godard with the intuition of a moribund cinema, seems just right. The road that leads from the end of the Second World War, when Broch's work saw the light of day, to the end of the last century, when Godard's work took shape, is the space where the so-called cinema of modernity was constructed, a cinema which, with Godard at the head, foregrounds the figure of the author and strings the images together with the critical discourses generated around them. From that point of view, the attention Font pays to the notion of author and the various critical controversies that have raged around the ones he discusses is justified, at a moment when both the notion and the controversies are tending to become watered down in the audiovisual magma.

In Godard Font also finds a wish for cinema as poetic writing in which beauty and truth are reached through death, in a melancholy, lethal exercise. Keats' Grecian urn is now a vestige, a ruin, which makes the director think on the brink of the abyss. There is Godard, after Broch, with the Romantics and their imitators; with Novalis, Rilke, Holderlin. In that mystery of the cinema, in that capacity to rescue the images of death and turn them into a cortege of shadows, in the possibility of reliving past instants in an eternal present, in Bazin's idea of the cinema as death every afternoon, Font wants to frame his twelve testamental readings.

Guided by Romantic aesthetics, all pervasive in Godard and whose tracks can be traced in the films dealt with here, Font finds the path of the legend of Orpheus to define the tragic vision of cinema exuded by the testamental work. The myth of Orpheus, related to the resurrectional character of the cinema by Font, invites an exercise in mythocriticism which the author only fully exploits when he tackles, in the first part of

the book, that apotheosis of the film testament that is Cocteau's *Le Testament d'Orphée*. In that precise *mise en scène* of the death of the poet, wandering among the ruins of his own film imaginary, we may find the key to the testamental film in its multiple presentations. Although also in the idea of the mad director who submits the real to his (fabulist's) will, like Lang's Mabuse in *The Testament of Doctor Mabuse*. And, of course, in Doctor Cordelier's exercise of freedom in the face of bourgeois conventions and appearances, perhaps a transposition of the exercise of the freedom of the director close to death, in defiance of the academic rules of harmony and balance.

Having gone through those three testamental devices which, in a kind of Godard style montage exercise, he uses to structure that poetics of the film testament, Font decides to approach its conditions and characteristics directly, without intermediaries. From that part of the book, which fills a couple of chapters, we can extract some of its juiciest conclusions. For example: the difficulty of representing the unrepresentable and the need to follow its tracks in the images, or the calm determination to incorporate death as the culmination of the life cycle, accepting the idea of destiny and stripping it of its nature as a traumatic chance. It might be said that directors approach the story of their death with an Oriental serenity. (2)

That is the moment when Font dares to characterise the film testament, to lay the foundations of a certain aesthetic. He speaks of the individualisation and self-awareness of a discourse full of clues to that assessment of the practice of film. He speaks of the artifice of representation, the recourse to theatre and the importance of the staging device: an exercise in the Baroque, closely linked to the dreamlike quality of representation, which affects the plastic nature of the images. He speaks of the importance of the word and its powers. And lastly he speaks of a phantasmagoric and spectral process located at the boundary between past and present, dream and waking, real and imaginary. It is thus that between, that represented boundary, that system in tension, which is proper to the film testament.

The author also spends time finding affinities and affections between the various directors under discussion. Oliveira's for Dreyer and Ford, not forgetting Buñuel, Fellini's for Kurosawa, Bergman's for Fellini and Tarkovsky, Tarkovsky's for Buñuel, Welles' for Renoir and vice-versa_ and he uncovers a whole web that is crying out to be extended, but which stops there. The drift then draws to a close since the navigation leads to eleven different ports. The twelfth is Godard's starting point.

The author devotes himself to eleven testamental readings which correspond to eleven authors in a choice which is always justified, although, if you wish, limited and arbitrary. That is, whenever one puts a limit on numbers, someone or other will find some director or other missing. Without going on at length about the subject, which is also rather arbitrary, we miss testaments as clear as the one mentioned but not dealt with, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Sacrifice*, the last Ozu or Satyajit Ray's last chamber films which also openly deal with the theme of the legacy, handing on and opening up a new cycle, the cycle of the child, the fundamental dimension of the testament which is not worthy of Font's consideration. However, one merit of the book could be to encourage

a reading of the films along those lines. As everyone knows, a good text is never closed, but is always open to a host of continuations and interpretations.

For the rest, the eleven short essays have the merit of working independently in spite of their obvious links. In the light of these last works of lucidity we discover keys that bring fresh fuel to the discourses on the different directors, no easy task in cases such as Buñuel, Dreyer or Welles, whilst a number of threads are thrown out for anyone who wishes to weave and complete the characterisation of this poetics of the film testament. That is the achievement of this book. Achievement because the reader can pull whichever thread he wants to and enjoy his investigations, for example, the one that moves between the Romantic imaginary of the ruin and the writing of modernity, which Font uses to characterise Welles, but which is applicable to Visconti, between aesthetic decadence and his tireless pursuit of Joyce and Proust, the same Joyce adapted by Huston at the end of his life, whose epiphanies are not far from Proust's revelations of meaning, so pertinent to a reading of these film testaments. After all, thinkers such as Durand and Deleuze (3) share positions when, talking about Proust's *magnum opus*, they place in poetic mediation, in an interiorised rereading of his own life, in writing, the possibility of revealing the meaning and retrieving "lost time". (4) And writing, in the cinema, is *mise en scène*.

Other lines: morbid, abysmal decadence of the kind displayed in *Fedora*, in which Wilder reviews his romantic imaginary. Or the theatricality of Welles repeated in Bergman and Oliveira. And if not, the pictorialism of Kurosawa, Dreyer or Ford. In the end various aesthetics are summoned up, among them decadence, the Baroque, Romanticism and Surrealism in a convergence that would please d'Ors, (5) who had already intuited that the seed of all the disorders and wounds that break down the classic systems of representations is already to be found in the Baroque.

All that evolves over eleven texts which operate in a "backward" movement. In other words, like the director's testament, Font uses his reading to enlighten the different careers from the end and in those final works he finds the traces of earlier ones, of authorial keys and the conclusion of the critical controversies raised. With no wish to be exhaustive, however.

He begins with *Gertrud*, not by chance, since as spectral sonata it links the vocabularies of dreams and music, hypnosis and the rhythms of the word, love and death, theatre and painting, opening doors and places where the other testaments more or less come to rest. And it ends, of course, with Truffaut's *The Green Room*, a ghostly story which affirms film writing as time past and raises a film-lover's altar to the dead, beloved authors. That is what Font has done: to raise a particular altar and deliver his funeral oration in a discourse which closes here with a return to the key ideas in his testamental book: creating a narrative of experience in the writing process, contemplative knowledge and interiorisation, the bond between love and death, the serene representation of one's own death which is entangled with the death of the cinema, the cinema of modernity, to which Font dedicates, and will continue to

dedicate, altars.

Between Godard and Truffaut, and after Dreyer's spectral sonata, Ford, Huston, Welles, Oliveira, Bergman, Kurosawa, Visconti, Wilder and Buñuel parade by, through a book which may be one more milestone in the attempt to define an aesthetic of the figurative representation of death in the cinema. That is said by a Japanese testamental verse: at the end, the artist opens a way through the thick snow, the road of the brush.
(6)

Notes:

(1) Broch, Hermann. *The Death of Virgil*. 1945.

(2) On the state of orientalisation of the story of death today, among many others the recent texts by two of the most talked about philosophers of the present day, can be consulted: Jullien, François. *La propension des choses pour une histoire de l'efficacité en Chine*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992, and Sloterdijk, Peter, *Extrañamiento del mundo*, Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1998.

(3) Durand, Gilbert. *Figures mythiques et visages de l'oeuvre. De la mythocritique à la mythanalyse*, and Deleuze, Gilles. *Proust et les signes*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986.

(4) Remember that Proust's work sprang from the author's enforced reclusion due to an illness which would eventually kill him. Therefore, from privacy and seclusion his own life is reread, creating a decidedly testamental work.

(5) d'Ors, Eugeni. *Lo Barroco*. Madrid: Tecnos, 1993.

(6) In Hoffmann, Yoel (ed). *Japanese Death Poems*. Charles E. Tuttle, 1998.

