

Projection as a Magnetic Field: The Overflowing of Val del Omar*

ESPERANZA COLLADO

1. Cinemist

José Val del Omar is one of the greatest visionary personalities of the 20th century, an eccentric creator *maudit* within the heart of Spanish cinematography. As a believer in the cinema and a 'cinemist' (a term derived from 'alchemist' he often used to define his unclassifiable occupation), Val del Omar had a clearly defined transcendental mission: to combine "*the horizontal frenzied gears of the machine*" with the "*vertical, mystic tradition*"* of Spanish culture.

He envisioned a different kind of cinema, one of visual poetry driven by what he called '*meca-mística*', a mechanical mystic belief based on the philosophical idea of a technology, of which cinema is the revealing instrument, capable of transmitting emotion into our culture. Val del Omar wanted to make visible the invisible in order to awake, provoke a reaction in and penetrate the senses of "*passive audiences that live in a world of machines that stain our brains*". And, in order to achieve his mission, he expanded his films or '*cinographs*' with inventive devices of his own making. As a tenacious researcher, Val del Omar combined the sensibility of a poet and the technical knowledge of an engineer to develop a cinema of aesthetic preoccupations in which the centrifugal, mystic machine overflows both the confines of a medium and the architectures of perception.

Val del Omar was born in 1904 in Granada. His works and writings emphasise this fact as absolutely vital. Even though he lived in other cities, he always felt a special connection with Granada. The Andalusian city had experienced historical periods of artistic and scientific splendor, especially during the Middle Ages whilst under the reign of Al-Andalus, when the Alhambra palace was built. But it had also known dark periods dominated by strong political and religious conservatism. Living through the Civil War, when the Nationalists took over the city and killed thousands of Granadans, Val del Omar lost his friend Federico García Lorca, but not his convictions. A decade before, inflamed by the French avant-garde he discovered in Paris, he also realized that cinema could be transformed into a supreme art of experience.

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In the late 1920s, Val del Omar began to publish enthusiastic accounts of ideas and projects in specialized journals. His subjects ranged from the invention of a camera lens of variable angle capable of capturing time, later known as a 'zoom lens', to concave screens and other remarkable systems that could present sounds and images in relief as well as light in motion. He tried to patent these and other inventions, but his continuous efforts to find substantial recognition and financial support, even internationally, were ineffectual. He applied his techniques to his own film experiments, though, including the monumental *Tríptico Elemental de España*. But he was condemned to remain an insular genius. In fact, his work, probably too far ahead of its time and context, wasn't adequately acknowledged until near the end of his life. Val del Omar died in a car accident in 1982 when he was working on a prelude to his *Tríptico* entitled *Ojalá*, and Eugeni Bonet was preparing a screening series of Spanish avant-garde cinema that included his films for the Centre Pompidou.

2. Overflows and Expansions

Val del Omar believed projection must be a liturgical act, and considered his '*commotional spectacle*', his synthesis of spectacle and mysticism, an overflowing cinema with a vertical direction. His three main inventions prefigure the adventure of chasing the ghost from the machine to superimpose it upon another labyrinth, an open, infinite maze that finds its reflection in the '*sinfin*' ('*without end*') title with which his films usually ended.

Between the spiritual and the technological, his visionary spectacle included the Sistema Diafónico ('diaphonic system'), an electro-acoustic sound system created in 1944 as a critical response to the stereophonic method common in Hollywood movies. Sistema Diafónico was based on sonic polarization rather than on the opposition of the ears, and it was first used in Val del Omar's *Aguaespejo Granadino* (1953-55), the first part of his triptych.

'Desbordamiento Apanorámico de la Imagen' ('a-panoramic overflowing of the image'), an experiment finished in 1957, consists of penetrating the peripheral vision through non-figurative inductor images arranged on the walls, floor and ceilings while a concentric figurative film is screened. 'Desbordamiento' was first tested publicly during a show of *Aguaespejo Granadino* in Berlin. His third major experiment, Tactilvisión or Tactilevision (1956-59), is a method aimed at bringing cinema to the body through approaching the senses in a direct way by using a complex series of devices based on the vibration of light. Some of his 'tactile' experiments were applied to the second part of *Tríptico Elemental de España*, *Fuego en Castilla* (1956-59), which he described as a "*somnambulist essay of tactile vision*".

Since 2010, these and other inventions have been on public display for the first time in thirty years. This is thanks to a touring exhibition, *Desbordamiento de Val del*

Omar ('Overflowing of Val del Omar'), doing the rounds of some of Spain's more prominent art galleries. It consists of a comprehensive selection of his works that provides a rich understanding of the multiple facets of the artist. Additionally, after such longstanding neglect, the exhibitions have led to the publication of some substantial volumes on Val del Omar, including his own writings, research notes, and poetry.

The show, curated by Eugeni Bonet, encompasses Val del Omar's films, writings, collages, drawings and all sorts of documentation and artefacts relating to his explorations in the fields of cinema, television, radio and electro-acoustics, as well as to *Las Misiones Pedagógicas*. The latter was a collective endeavour, a travelling educational project developed during the republican years before the Civil War to bring art and culture to remote areas of rural Spain. Val del Omar participated in it, and *Las Misiones Pedagógicas* now represents the formative years of the 'cinemist' as a documentary maker, photographer and projectionist.

However, the most outstanding experience of the exhibition is probably the recreation of the artist's laboratory in Madrid. Known as PLAT. An acronym for 'Picto-Luminic-Audio-Tactile', it contains his numerous patents and inventions, a true garden of machines. The laboratory was initiated in the late 1970s, when Val del Omar became a widower, and it served him as a space to put his experiments to the test as well as providing a rather monastic home. The 'cinemist' continued his laser research here, while developing other projects with video and multimedia equipment, including the ultimate focus of his techno-artistic interest, something he named 'Óptica Biónica' ('bionic optics'). Similar to certain other inventions developed in PLAT, Óptica Biónica, a device with an anamorphic lens and rotating blades, was an attempt to generate volumetric images. Spectators would physically perceive these images as if they were moving around them, while the impression of frame limits disappeared in favour of a seemingly floating screen.

3. The Art of Projection as a Magnetic Field

Last spring I was invited to present a screening of avant-garde films at the Reina Sofía museum in Madrid. This projection was part of a series entitled Archipelago Val del Omar, and its intention was to complement the exhibition by showing Val del Omar's works alongside other coeval international landmarks of experimental cinema. These screenings made visible the crossroads and contrasts between Val del Omar's filmic experiments and the broader development of the avant-garde.

'Cinema as Experience: Overflows and Expansions' was the closing event of the series. It included films by Val del Omar, Peter Kubelka and Stan Vanderbeek. These films were selected to frame Val del Omar within the conditions that allow us to call this kind of work 'paracinema'. That is, works which contribute to the process of the dematerialization of a medium in order to find different, a-disciplinary ways to expand on and continue it. Perhaps the films selected were not the most

representative of this but the wider artistic trajectory of the filmmakers included provided the notes of a rich and complex chord that, to my understanding, reveals the context and motivations that transformed cinema into an art of action beyond the black cube.

As I've stated in a previous piece published in this journal (1), I find flicker cinema an essential phenomenon leading to cinema's dematerialization and subsequent expansion into the other arts, and Peter Kubelka's presence in the programme represented this. The Austrian filmmaker, creator of *Arnulf Rainer* (1954), an orchestration of black and white frames resulting from an exhaustive economy of materials (light, darkness, sound and silence), also designed a theatre venue, now lesser known due to its short existence, in an attempt to improve the conditions of experiencing film. All architectural reference in his 'Invisible Cinema' (housed in Anthology Film Archives' first building, 1970-1974) was black, and therefore, 'invisible'. The only remaining point of visual reference in the venue became the screen, while the spectator could accommodate herself to a matrix-like experience of audio-visual immersion.

On the one hand, the ultimate intention of these experiments focused on the transformation of the projection space seems to emerge, as Invisible Cinema demonstrates, as ways to reach the spectator through various physical, corporeal means and to achieve an experience of immersion. On the other hand, if Stan Vanderbeek aspired to reach the human nervous system through more complex technology, Val del Omar's films and writings abound in ideas and techniques such as vibration, pulsation, flicker, palpitation and ecstasy, the ecstasy and tactile potentialities of '*static images that nonetheless move*'. His conference on Óptica Biónica, Ciclo-tactil, is revealing about what I understand as the magnetism of film projection as physical energy, or as Hollis Frampton put it, the fact that none of the arts expresses so thoroughly and complexly the flux of vital breathing as cinema.

Moreover, Val del Omar's 'systems of commotional communication', subtle interventions and devices arranged in the spectators' seats (including the insertion of electric currents activated by induction, and devices that generated aromas to compliment the film screened), is a clear attempt to penetrate the senses. The Experience Machine, the dream of Vanderbeek that led him to create Movie-Drome (Stony Point, New York, 1965), comprises a similar search: an experience of immersion that functions by prioritizing multisensory perception. Inspired by the geodesic domes of Buckminster Fuller, Movie-Drome was a spherical theatre in which the audience could lie down and contemplate, from that position, a diversity of films projected on concave screens that commanded the whole visible area.

Cinema could become simultaneously an art of action, a performance or an environment, as well as the critical means to engage with the effects of mass media on the wider social and cultural experience. If images were language, a means of achieving universal communication, Val del Omar and Vanderbeek shared the

conviction that technology would sooner or later realize a radical and heterogeneous idea of cinema.

According to Vanderbeek, his experiment's intention was to replace the traditional rigid images of uni-directional screenings, with a new floating and curved experience of the image-movement, an approach that apparently shares some methods with Val del Omar's conception of his mechanical mysticism. Nonetheless, Vanderbeek's project was more ambitious, since the drome was conceived as a prototype for a telecommunications system in which several dromes would be positioned throughout the world linked by an orbiting satellite to transmit images.

In his modest, insular way, Val del Omar imagined the future transformation from a mechanical to a more unifying, electronic information age less enthusiastically than Vanderbeek. Val del Omar felt that the new technologies of the image, and television, were progressing towards a deformed world, and blamed himself for being '*one of the founders of such collective cretinization*'; *burning the virginal sensibility for the devil*', and, as a last resort, contributing in making art an active accomplice of the banal aesthetization of mass media. Perhaps for this reason, and because '*gravity force is a curse of which man cannot be liberated but by burning out*', Val del Omar, who had dedicated his life to exploring the possibilities of cinematic space, focused almost exclusively on a smaller scale format, Super8, towards the end of his life.