

“HIER IST KEIN WARUM”: BERNARDÍ ROIG’S FILMS

On the morning of April 11, 1987, the great Italian writer Primo Levi — best known for his first-hand account of his internment in the Auschwitz concentration camp — fell to his death in the interior stairwell of the building in which he lived in Turin. It was a Saturday. The concierge had just delivered the day’s mail to Levi’s third-floor apartment, the same apartment where Levi had been born 67 years earlier and where he lived at the time with his wife, elderly mother and mother-in-law (his adult children had moved across the landing.) Levi had opened the door in response to the concierge’s ringing of the doorbell, amiably collected the mail, and withdrawn into the apartment. He then suddenly turned around, retraced his steps and exited the apartment, telling his mother’s nurse to momentarily mind the telephone for him while he sought the concierge. Within moments Levi was hurtling headlong into the empty space of the elevator shaft at the building’s core; barely enough time had elapsed for the concierge to descend the three flights of stairs and resume her post on the ground floor. The thud of the body’s impact caused the concierge to begin screaming uncontrollably. A dentist who lived in the building, hearing the screams, ran to the scene and found that Levi was already dead. The cause of his death was a “crushed skull.”

After a somewhat perfunctory investigation, the coroner determined Levi’s death to be a suicide — a determination not without controversy among Levi’s colleagues, biographers and readers, with vehement arguments as to whether his fall was intentional or accidental. These arguments continue even to the present day, descending into pseudo-forensic quibbling over the height of the stairwell’s railing (96.5 cm); the stairwell’s odd triangular configuration; Levi’s height and weight (165 cm, 54.4. kg); the contents of the mail he received moments before, including the (uneventful) news of the day; the time it took for the concierge to return to her cubicle (less than five minutes); and, strikingly, the estimated weight of Levi’s head (4.5 - 5 kilograms) — which, given the slightness of his physique, was disproportionately large for his body, and thus may have contributed to his unintentional toppling over the railing.

Whether Levi leapt or fell is a mystery that will of course never be resolved. But neither will it simply dissipate for lack of resolution. For Levi’s extraordinary and unique legacy is not only as witness to the Holocaust, but also as its survivor; and Levi’s particular psychic and existential survival, as shared with such power and grace in his writing, has provided later generations — i.e. us — with at least some of the tools to deal, however imperfectly, with the knowledge of that unspeakable atrocity. Even if we might wish it were otherwise, the

unanswerable question of whether Levi's death was a suicide or an accident — of *why* his body fell that day — inevitably informs our reading of his work; and, in return, the manner in which that work informs us. His fall, in some fundamental ways, is our own.

II

It is precisely to avoid such falls (accidental or otherwise) that signs were often posted in the stairwells of early 20th-century apartment buildings admonishing people not to draw near the open inner shaftways: in Paris, for instance, such once-common signs read “Dangereux de se pencher en dedans” a phrase that might be loosely rendered in English as “It is dangerous to approach the edge” It is this same phrase that Bernardí Roig, availing himself of its potential psychological secondary meaning — i.e. cautioning against the pitfalls of leaning too far over the protective guardrails of the psyche — initially chose as the working title¹ of what would become *Bernardí Roig: Films 2000 - 2018*², his survey exhibition of his work with film and video, the same body of work that is catalogued in this publication. And even though this working title was later discarded in favor of a more generic version, it nonetheless points us toward a key characteristic of Roig's work in this medium.

Roig has been exhibiting regularly for nearly 30 years, during which time he has become best known for his work with sculpture, drawings and installation. In these media Roig has established a highly distinctive visual idiom — invariably figurative; often incorporating intense and glare-producing light sources as part of the work; generally limited to a stark black-and-white palette, with occasional sudden intrusions of explosive color; of a mood and tone that is by turns macabre, angst-ridden, erotic, violent, scatological; highly referential to a wide range of art historical, literary and cultural sources, and at the same time equally self-referential to his own work, immediate circle of family and friends, and to himself — which he maintains to this day with a persistence that verges on the obsessive. Yet the very distinctness, consistency and prominence of Roig's work in these formats has to some degree overshadowed the fact that he has also created numerous films and videos over the last 20 years, a body of work that is not ancillary but rather braided so inextricably into every level of his larger artistic practice that it might even be thought of as providing the

¹ Luis Buñuel used the same phrase — “Dangereux de se pencher en dedans”, which he encountered between the cars of a French passenger train — as the initial title for the film that would become *Un chien andalou* — a cinematic/historical allusion that, typically, was not lost on Roig.

² Es Baluard Museu d'Art Modern i Contemporani de Palma, from 21st April to 2nd September 2018.

interstitial material that, like the synapses of the human nervous system, is precisely what allows the whole to function as a whole.

On the most basic and immediate level, Roig's films³ have more often than not been exhibited as parts of mixed-media installations, sharing equal footing with a range of diverse components, as when a sculpture is placed in front of a video monitor, or a drawing hangs side-by-side with a projected image. None can be said either to form or occupy the center, for the simple reason that there is no center; the relationship among the various components resembles that of an ensemble engaged in a multi-part dialogue — or rather, given the prevalence of Roig's use of motifs such as willful blindness and imposed silence within these figurative elements, it might be better described as a non-dialogue of incommunication, mis-communication or anti-communication. Furthermore, many of Roig's sculptures and drawings appear *within* the films, even as the films form part of installations that include those same sculptures and drawings, twisting the entirety into a kind of Moebius-strip configuration of form and format. Works of this sort include *Father (Miscommunication Exercises)* (2003), *Frost (The Film)* (2006), *Repulsion Exercises (Salomé)* (2006), or iterations of various components related *Leidy B.* (2002), to name only a few.

On a different level — that of what might be considered 'content' — Roig's oeuvre is everywhere and to an extreme degree characterized by the presence of tenaciously persistent motifs in the form of recurring symbols, metaphors, allusions, references and themes. For instance, surveying Roig's work one repeatedly encounters severed heads; unkempt male figures folding and crumpling beneath the weight of the impossible burdens they bear; painfully glaring light, the kind of light that blinds rather than illuminates; eyes and ears that have been forcibly shut; faces expressive of acute anguish and pain, at times overlapping with madness; weird hybrid and metamorphosing human-animal-technological creatures; voyeurism; mind-body schisms; light-dark dualities; references to 20th-century literature, theater, cinema and art; references to classical themes; representations of explicit and at times sado-masochistic sexual activity. The films are no exception. Moreover the films — with their dual capacity to both show and to tell; their combination of directness and flexibility; their simultaneous immediacy and ephemerality — offer a crucial link in establishing the network of intersections that enables the larger nexus of more static formats (sculpture and drawings, as already discussed, but also Roig's photography and writing) to come together into a fluid yet cohesive and interdependent whole.

³ "Films" is Roig's preferred term for his work with moving images, including those that use video and digital technology, and will be used henceforth in this essay.

But it is important to keep in mind that at the same time this sort of porous interdependency extends beyond form and content in Roig's oeuvre; on yet another level, the different formats promiscuously share their very essences, like the sexual partners indiscriminately sharing their bodily fluids in Roig's more explicit films. And again, this might be said to be primarily achieved in — and through — Roig's films. For instance, many of Roig's films (particularly the earlier ones) are of a nature that is essentially sculptural, presenting figures — inanimate or otherwise — that are given a cinematographic treatment that is far more sculptural in formal terms than narrative in any traditional cinematographic manner. To put it another way: these 'moving pictures' may, and indeed do, move, but their particular sort of movement is distinctly that of sculpture-in-movement, a kind of kinesis that is rooted in stasis. Among these might be cited, as an example, *El hombre de la lámpara* (2000) — the earliest video in the exhibition, and a work that might serve as an emblem for much of Roig's work in the genre — as well as films such as *The Man With the Fire Eyes*, (2003) *L'Uomo della Luce* (2008), *Shadows Must Dance* (2008) and *Ejercicios de invisibilidad* (2012). On the other hand, and not unrelatedly, many of the sculptures themselves are intriguingly possessed of cinematographic qualities in their own right — as, for instance, in their possession of their own light-sources, or in their dualistic alternation of light and darkness (the basis of the phenomenon of "persistence of vision" that is fundamental to all cinema.)

In fact, in a highly illustrative statement, Roig has declared that he considers that his three-dimensional figures — i.e. the sculptures — are not indeed sculptures *per se* but rather "fixed images that cast a shadow⁴." By this token, Roig's films in general might be considered not films *per se*, but rather images that do not cast shadows (even as they are composed of shadow and light.)

Similar to what might be considered the 'sculptural' films referred to above, a number of Roig's films might be seen as approximating a different medium: that of drawing, and in particular Roig's own signature style of draughtsmanship and portraiture. These films generally present single, isolated figures, visible from the chest up. Their positions are fixed, a stasis the camera itself shares and that is in distinct contrast to the darkly anxious mood they convey, the uneasiness, the barely contained nervous energy. There is no background to these spare, black-and-white films, or perhaps, as in Roig's spare, black-and-white works on paper, the background is blankness itself, the blankness of the screen or monitor or support surface, the underlying ontological emptiness that is the point of contact between the artist and the emergent image. Moreover, a number of these films have, in their digital processing, been manipulated so as to emphasize their graphic quality, at times

⁴ <https://www.esbaluard.org/coleccion/artistas/bernardi-roig/>

lending an element of *sfumato* to the image and at other times emphasizing the jittery energy of the depicting 'line'; or reducing or heightening the degree of contrast; or reversing the positive and negative tonalities. Films of this category include *Insultos al público* (2006), *Aliento de humo (El Clown)* (2008), *Smokebreath (The Monologue)* (2004) or *Father (Miscommunication Exercises)* (2003.)

III

Thus Roig's films might be seen as providing a kind of connective tissue spanning form, content and essence across the length and breadth of his full body of work; and yet there is another point of convergence achieved in and channeled through Roig's films, a point of convergence that might be considered to lie at the heart not only of his practice, but of his artistic vision. This point of convergence is somewhat more elusive, but might be approached through a deceptively simple question: where can these films be said to take 'place'?

Even the most cursory examination reveals that the place where these films 'take place' is a place of Roig's own devising, and by extension, under his own control. Again, a revealing parallel presents itself between the films and the rest of Roig's work. For instance, as discussed earlier, a signature characteristic of Roig's sculpture is its incorporation of intense light sources that serve various functions simultaneously, whether as metaphoric — as in the recurring metaphor of the blindness induced by an excess of light, and by extension from excess scrutiny or rationality — or as reference, as in the allusions to the use of light itself as a sculptural material, a development in the art of the 1960's to which Roig often makes reference. But these same internal light sources also serve as an ingenious means by which to demarcate, establish and take ownership of space, so that the sculptures seem to occupy a place of their own creation, *in* but not *of* the larger world. Moreover, the space created is a specific kind of space, almost a kind of negative space, emptied rather than empty, blanched of meaning but at the same time a charged space, endowed with a heightened physical palpability, akin to the initial blank space of paper.

The films, too succeed in establishing space, not by casting light but rather by conveying place in a tangible, palpable and highly charged manner; and yet what is striking is that they do so without conveying a sense of any particular place. Exterior locations, viscerally sensed as outdoors, are shrouded in a dislocating darkness, as in variants of *El hombre de la lámpara* (2000 and 2008) or *Repulsion Exercises (Salomé)* (2006). Interiors, claustrophobically sensed as indoors, are composed of indeterminate and interminable white walls, as in *Shadows Must Dance* (2008) or *Wittgenstein House (Vienna)* (2017). Orienting sight-lines are best disjunctive, incomplete and disorienting, as in *The Man*

With the Fire Eyes, (2003) or *Cuidado con la cabeza (El baño de Acteón)* (2016). Dream-world, fiction and memory are conflated, as in *Otras manchas del silencio* (2011) and *Leidy B.* (2002), while the sands and the winds of the desert shift endlessly yet ultimately do not shift at all, as in *POET* (2014). Indeed, if any particular aspect of Roig's films might be said to be most salient, it is precisely this: their powerful and unsettling non-sense of place.

This same filmic characteristic is apparent even when the location of the film is *a priori* known, as in Roig's most recent series of films centering on Ludwig Wittgenstein and certain specific places of his life: the house Wittgenstein helped design for his sister in *Wittgenstein House (Vienna)* (2017); the mountain-climbing ascent to the solitary cabin Wittgenstein built for himself in Norway in *Primera Directísima a la Cabaña Wittgenstein (Skjolden, Norway)* (2017); and in *J.F. Concierto para la mano izquierda de Ravel (a Paul Wittgenstein)* (2018) the musical "place" of Ravel's "Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in D major," a piece composed in 1930 for Wittgenstein's brother Paul (who had lost his right hand during World War I) and reinterpreted on electric guitar by a contemporary musician in Roig's film. In each of these, the site is specifically named, providing us with key information that contributes to the conceptual underpinnings of the work; and yet in each, Roig's unrelenting filmic vision yet again converts these real, concrete spaces into unreal, abstract hells — rooms of no exit, a mountain slope of no ascent, a unresolving sound-scape of no escape.

At the same time, within these semi-abstracted spaces, the figures of Roig's films are with almost always trapped in repetitive and apparently absurd actions; in other words, this is a senseless place, appositely matched to its non-sense of place. We might (in keeping with Roig's favoring of classical allusions) be in Tartarus, that specific variant of hell in ancient Greek cosmology, the eternal home of Sisyphus, Tantalus and other eternally doomed wretches; a place, described by Homer in purely relative terms as being "as far beneath Hades as Heaven is above earth"⁵ — and thus, tellingly, a place of indefinite location but lying somewhere "within", at an inner psycho-geologic remove from the inuring surface externals of life as we know it.

IV

Or then again, we might be in a different kind of hell, a hell like that of the Auschwitz described by Primo Levi, a place depicted (in his masterpiece *Se questo è un uomo*) with astonishingly vivid clarity and detail, a place of sights and

⁵ *Iliad*, 8. 17. Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, A. T. Murray, translator, 1924.

sounds and smells; and yet at the same time a place of indefinite location, quite literally and forcefully isolated, removed from the externals of life as we know it, whose populace are not serving any sentence, but instead are simply and suddenly *there*. Above all, it, too, is a senseless place, in the magnitude of its horror as well as in the horror of its details, as Levi discovered only a few days after his arrival, when he found himself inexplicably herded into an unidentified room, waiting for hours on end:

“Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hand’s reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. “*Warum?*” I asked him in my poor German. “*Hier ist kein warum*” (there is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove⁶.

“*Hier ist kein warum*” — the phrase might be the only appropriate response to the mystery of the nature of Levi’s fall that fatal Saturday morning. It also might be inscribed across the perilous proscenium entrance into the internal, infernal world of Bernardi Roig’s films, an entrance that leads to a downward psychic abyss that indeed should be approached with great care if at all, a shaftway-like void into which one might just as easily fall as leap, leaving others behind to scurry for sense and quibble as to “why.”

George Stolz, April 2018

⁶ *Survival in Auschwitz: If This Is a Man*, The Orion Press, New York, 2008 Stuart Woolf, translator, p. 24.