

# Reading Intermediality: Lorca's *Viaje a la luna* ('Journey to the Moon,' 1929) and *Un chien andalou* (Buñuel/Dalí, 1929)

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This article examines two experimental short films: the first one of the most famous in cinema history; the second a little-known script, lost for many years and brought to the screen sixty years after it was written. The former is *Un chien andalou* of 1929, generally attributed to both director Luis Buñuel and Catalan painter Salvador Dalí (who claims first screenwriting credit in the film itself). The latter is *Viaje a la luna*, written also in 1929 by poet and dramatist Federico García Lorca and filmed by Frederic Amat, a contemporary Catalan painter, in 1998, the centenary of Lorca's birth.

I will argue, firstly and unsurprisingly perhaps, that the two texts have much in common, in spite of the extreme disparity in their respective reputations and fortunes. (Lorca may have read the script of *Un chien* before writing his own, but could not have seen the film.) Secondly, the two works should be read not, as is commonly the case especially in Spain (see Sánchez Vidal), as products of intersubjectivity (that is, the collaboration between individual creative minds) but rather as manifestations of intermediality (the intersection of distinct creative media). I conclude with a close analysis of two sequences in order to extend the argument into the textual detail of these fascinating films.

While *Un chien andalou* has, of course, inspired a huge body of critical literature, much of it devoted to psychoanalytic readings of the film, *Viaje a la luna* has for evident reasons of accessibility given rise to less commentary. What is striking, however, is that this commentary, inevitably produced by Hispanists rather than film scholars and mostly published in a flurry at the turn of the millennium, reveals an awareness of the historicity of media in the early twentieth century and of the sometimes unlikely connections or distinctions drawn between film, poetry, drama and visual arts in the period. I thus offer a sketch of this invaluable historical research before giving a more theoretical account of the somewhat controversial status of intermediality in current film and media studies.

The readings of the film themselves are thus informed by both historical and theoretical contexts, and benefit from that hysteresis (or temporal staggering) implicit in *Viaje a la luna*'s uniquely delayed journey from composition in the 1920s to publication and production in the 1990s and reception today. (Of course our response to *Un chien andalou* is also likely to be very different from that of audiences of the time of its release.) I should stress here that Amat, although ostentatiously faithful to his source, is not engaged in cultural archeology and exploits all the modern resources which Lorca could not have known: colour photography, a multilayered soundtrack and digital elaboration of the filmic image, although many of the special effects were realized in the camera or through expert make up or modelling. Cinema and painting or literature, subject and object of representation, time past and time present flicker and merge in my two chosen texts, engaging a figural quality which is indeed difficult to pin down.

To begin, I give a brief descriptions of the two films, which I take to be non-identical twins with a marked family resemblance. *Un chien*'s script was written by Dalí and Buñuel at Dalí's family summer house in Catalonia in 1929, during a stay which echoed that of Dalí and Lorca's much studied and intimate vacation just four years earlier. Lasting only 16 minutes, it was shot and shown for the first time in Paris, where its supporters hoped it would inspire riots in theatres. Plot summary is not surprisingly impossible: fragmented sequences include a razor slicing of an eye as a cloud moves in front of the moon; a young man from whose hand ants emerge; and the same man's attempt to caress a woman's suddenly naked breasts and buttocks. The presence of the same two actors throughout *Un chien*, however, lends some continuity in spite of the film's transparent transgressions of time, space, and narration.

*Viaje a la luna* was written in that surge of avant garde creativity inspired in Lorca by his stay in New York from 1929-30, which included the better-known poetry collection *Poeta en Nueva York* and the radically experimental play *El publico*. *Viaje* may have been intended to rival *Un chien*, whose title (and somewhat effeminate protagonist) Lorca believed to be a slur on himself (Delgado, 26). The manuscript, which was believed lost, was retrieved from a drawer in the home of the widow of Lorca's friend, the Mexican filmmaker Emilio Amero, by scholar Christopher Maurer only in 1989. It was then edited in 1994 by Antonio Monegal, still the best and subtlest scholar of the work, and finally meticulously visualized by Frederic Amatin 1998. While a one minute fragment of *Viaje* is posted on YouTube, Amat's film has been for many years inaccessible as the director has refused permission for it to be shown in theatres. Curiously in 2011 he uploaded himself a 26 minute 'making of' video, while the film itself (shorter at just 20 minutes) remains little seen. In Amat's own resonant words *Viaje* remains an example of 'invisible cinema' (Amat, 'Making of').

Lorca's text for *Viaje* is divided into seventy-two brief fragments, which are sometimes too long and complex to correspond to shots but generally too short and inconclusive to be called scenes. *Viaje* is yet more discontinuous in both narrative and technique than *Un chien*. A tentative summary would include such recurrent images as the moon, ants and eyes, coinciding of course with *Un chien*: a 'man of veins', who recurs in a Harlequin costume, perhaps analogous to *Un chien*'s man in a nun's habit, and fragments of bodies which include a woman's genitals.

It is evident, then, that there is a significant overlap of theme and image between two texts that were created so close together in time if not space. However, as we see when we look at secondary literature by Hispanists on the films, the same is also true of their engagement with intermediality as it was historically understood in the period.

A good point of entry here is the essay by Ignacio Javier López's 'Film, Freud, and Paranoia: Dalí and the Representation of Male Desire in *An Andalusian Dog*' (2001). López's essay falls well within the dominant modes of criticism of this first film, namely intersubjective collaboration and psychoanalytic exploration. Thus, beyond Buñuel's auteurist appropriation of the film, López confidently claims Dalí's creative contribution to the work as being the more significant (35).

Yet if that collaboration between men in the world is held to be self-evident, masculinity in the film itself is said to be in distress: male identity is a fragile form of 'subsistence' between desire and fear, with sex leading only to disease and death. In this spirit, López offers a compilation of the various (and mutually incompatible) psychosexual readings of *Un chien* penned by previous critics, which claim in turn that its 'true' (but artfully masked) subjects are homosexuality, incest, misogyny or the supposed progression from onanism to heterosexuality. While López stops short of calling male collaboration 'homosocial' in this case, it is clear that it is based, in his own model, on ceaseless rivalry for rights of ownership outside the text and on continuing undecidability of interpretation within it.

More promising, then, is López's account of intermediality. 'Dalí and Buñuel believed,' he writes un-controversially, 'that cinema was closer to the immediacy of thought than any other artistic form and that it could be used to represent unconscious processes, dreams, and basic human emotions' (37). Somewhat contradictorily, however, as López notes, Dalí also insisted on the objectivity of the medium. This importance of objectivity, held to be achieved visually through the representation of objects, and therefore free from the arbitrariness of human emotions, is expressed in a letter Dalí sent to García Lorca in 1928. López concludes that: 'Given the fact that cinema combines the representation of time and movement, it was ideally suited to depict

human sexuality and the cyclical manifestation of desire and death' (48). Ironically, however, these themes can hardly be a necessary or sufficient means of defining the new medium since they are the same ones obsessively treated by Dalí's paintings (which are also openly dedicated to 'objectivity').

This debate on the problems of film form, expressivity and intermediality is taken up by the few critics to treat *Viaje a la luna*. In her article "'Viaje a la luna": del texto óστακον a la imagen onírica' (2001) María Teresa García-Abad García vindicates the óστακον (the broken shard of pottery) as the expressive form of a script which offers itself as a succession of fragments radically resistant to narrative, privileging silence over speech. Sacrificing artistic unity, Lorca also forsakes drama for metaphor, thus contesting those theorists of cinema who saw the film medium as one of realism (Dalí's 'objectivity', once more).

It is here that García Abad makes the connection with the accounts of media specificity in the early twentieth century, citing a text by filmmaker Jean Epstein, which was translated into Spanish in 1928: 'Una de las más grandes potencias del cine es su animismo. En el écran no hay naturaleza muerta. Los objetos tienen actitudes.' ('One of the great powers of cinema is its animism. On the screen there is no nature morte. Objects have attitudes', García Abad 39). For García Abad the link between the poet Lorca and the painter Amat are in their shared aesthetic: the aspiration to silence, modernity anchored firmly in traditional roots, and the craftsman like care for the well-made work.

In his article '*Viaje a la luna: Federico García Lorca y el problema de la expresión*' (2000), Nigel Dennis coincides with García Abad's stress on the avant garde as the engagement with the inexpressible. Dennis writes that *Viaje* is not just an 'unrealized' script but an 'unrealizable' one, not because of the technical problems posed by its shooting but because the cultural context in which it was written no longer exists (139). Yet if Lorca turned here, almost uniquely, to the film medium it was because of its specificity: briefly rejecting writing as a means of expression, he embraced the succession of images in silent film as an attempt to overcome a problem of expressivity linked by many scholars, autobiographically, to personal crisis.

Beyond this expressive or existential reading, Dennis notes what he calls Lorca's 'surprising' mastery of the expressive resources of silent film, listing specific techniques suggested by the script: close ups, camera movement, rhythmic editing, fast and slow motion, fades and dissolves, double and triple superimpositions and the incorporation of still images (143). This technical skill in the specific techniques of cinema is, however, as is commonplace in Lorca criticism, trumped by psychic allegory and tragic destiny. For Dennis, as for López, erotic desire (perhaps 'forbidden') leads not to consummation but to frustration and death (143).

This kind of abstraction or allegorization is replaced by historicism and

intermediation in two final critics who treat the curious crossovers between film and poetry and film and theatre in the early twentieth century. In her study of 'Cinema', published in *A Companion to Federico García Lorca* (2007), Xon de Ros notes that: 'Paradoxically it was during this period [of silent cinema] that poetry and film were to be most closely associated' (101–2). Not only was there a shared affinity through 'lyricism' (a term much used in the period), but cinema was appropriating the experience of the numinous: the movie theatre was thus compared to a 'cathedral', in which the celebrant came to experience transcendence of everyday life (103). Conversely, as Ros claims Lorca suggested in his brief text *El paseo de Buster Keaton* (which features a bicycle), 'the urban, manufactured and mechanical world ... may be sophisticated but it is blind to poetic nuance ... the protagonist [is thus] estrange[d from] the modern transformation of traditional forms of perception, for which the cinema was both expression and effect' (105).

Dru Dougherty goes further. In 'El teatro a la luz del cine, 1914–36' (2001) he documents how in Spain theatre presented itself, in a curious temporal inversion, as dependent on cinema. Commentators wrote that the old medium would be 'purified' by the new, and the specificity or 'singularity' of theatre would be rediscovered (9). Strangely perhaps the aesthetic of the stage was held to be 'horizontal' and that of the screen 'vertical' (10). While some commentators celebrated the 'cathartic' and 'destructive' effect of film (with its ceaseless action and speed) on traditional cultural heritage (13), others lamented the 'mechanical character' of cinema, claiming that the film spectator was typically 'colder' than the theatergoer, dehumanized and attentive only to becoming (15). Yet if cinema offered (supposedly) no internal activity, no access to the 'soul' beneath the image (Is this Dalí's objectivity once more?), then cinema, as the art of spectacle, is also held by some to be the 'forma genuina y real de arte teatral popular' ('real and genuine theatrical art of the people') (18), more so than theatre itself.

Clearly, then, Spanish historical accounts of the medium are full of contradictions: cinema is at once emotional and emotionless; avant garde and popular; numinous and mechanical; objective and subjective. There can be no doubt, however, that film at its earliest in Spain was felt to be indelibly marked by the trace of other media. Rather than reading my two films as examples of homosocial intersubjectivity (amorous or rivalrous commerce between intimate male friends), I intend then to address their intermediality. Ironically, as we have seen, such readings are already prefigured by historical debates about film and its others in the time of Buñuel, Dalí, and Lorca, when commentators were of course untroubled by the nostalgia for the lived experience of the three charismatic artists that now mesmerizes many viewers or scholars.

The best and clearest theoretical account of intermediality I know is Agnes Petho's 'Intermediality in Film: A Historiography of Methodologies'. Petho begins by noting the continuing suspicion of a term which remains perilously poised between film and media studies, asking whether it still a maverick scholarly enterprise. Further questions arise: is intermediality a rift in film theory or just a blind spot? Is film itself, threatened as it is by digital media, an incredible shrinking medium or an intermedium?

Seeking routes along the historical research axis (as I did in the case of Spain) Petho returns to early models of film as synesthetic experience: The idea that cinema is unavoidably interconnected with other media and arts has been a constant issue ... ever since the first moving picture shows were presented in a theatrical environment and ever since movies attempted to present narratives and to produce emotions by a combination of images in movement, music and words. [Rudolf] Arnheim's *New Laocoön* (1938) dealing with the advent of the talkies and dismissing sound as an unwelcome interference with the purity of the medium is one example in point. In a later article, however, Arnheim revised his attitude and admitted that: in film 'a variety of media could be involved, as is the case of an orchestra where every instrument plays its part in the whole performance. [...] I see now that there is no such thing as a work limited to a single medium. [...] The film medium, as I recognize now, profits from a freedom, a breathing space that I could not afford to consider when I fought for the autonomy of the cinema. ... This freedom puts the film more closely in the company of the other performing arts, such as the theater, the dance, music, or pantomime'. This is an internal reference made by Petho. Thus Arnheim returns to a synesthetic or *Gesamtkunstwerk*-like model (50–2).

Turning to a more textual arena, Petho cites Yvonne Spielmann's study of Peter Greenaway's films in which the latter finds the cluster, i.e. 'multiple layering of different images or image elements, resulting in a spatial density' (61). More theoretically, once more, for Lyotard, the figural, characteristic of intermedia's stubborn alterity, is 'an unspeakable other necessarily at work within and against discourse, disrupting the rule of representation ... the figural is the resistant or irreconcilable trace of a space or time that is radically incommensurable with that of discursive meaning' (65).

As Petho herself concludes:

The mapping of such tendencies has brought the study of cinematic intermediality far from the mere listing of media combinations or analogies of intertextual relations. ... there has been, in general, a major shift 'from the utopia of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to the heterotopia of intermediality,' [and] a similarly important shift towards a scholarship acknowledging cinema's non-discursive domains and more sensual modes of perception.

Let us return finally to the films themselves and examine the first five minutes of each. What is striking about the opening sequences of *Un chien* is how closely they conform to classical modes of editing and narration. Thus in the first scene, Buñuel as actor looks out of shot and, in a classic point of view, we see what he sees: the ominous moon. While the following montage is of course associative (the slicing of the cloud and blade linked by their common movement, the moon and eye by their shared shape), the cut in to extreme close up is by no means unmotivated.

Likewise, in the scene that follows, continuity editing is preserved to create a seamlessness in time and space. The man riding the bicycle is crosscut with the woman in the domestic interior, suggesting that they are temporally simultaneous, a hint that is confirmed when she looks down from the window and we see once more a POV shot: a high angle of the man in the street. Buñuel next gives us an equally traditional match on action, as he cuts from the woman exiting the front door to her reaching the man, now lying in the gutter. He then exploits the well-known editing technique known as the Kuleshov effect: by showing a close up of the woman staring intently at the clothes she has laid out on the bed, he suggests that her look has somehow materialized the man into her flat. The dissolve from armpit hair to sea urchin is purely associative or poetic, but the authentic location of the Parisian street, in which the androgynous woman now toys with the severed hand, reads as a concrete and contemporary urban space.

Clearly here there are a number of transparent references to Dalí's paintings and indeed texts (the sea urchin makes an uncomfortable appearance in his autobiography). As suggested by Buñuel's surprising respect for continuity editing, however, film remains relatively autonomous here; and surely it is no accident that the soundtrack should feature Wagner. The originator of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is of course mocked here for his pretensions to totalization and transcendence. Nonetheless, Buñuel and Dalí seem to aspire, like Wagner, to an art of synthesis which does not wholly reject narrative. Indeed, in spite of its synaesthesia, *Un chien* relies on a partial preservation of the conventions of narrative discourse in order to register its own transgressive challenge to that narrative, that discourse. For example, as mentioned above, the central couple recur throughout the brief running time.

*Viaje a la luna* is very different, and its radical disruptions cannot be explained by its more recent production, as Amat faithfully reproduces Lorca's sequence of images. A circle (moon?) rises out to reveal a stark bed, superimposed with scratches, ants, and numbers. (The soundtrack is a guitar whose strings have been cut.) A close up of the harlequin's feet leads to a woman's face and sexual organs, the celluloid image once more degraded, with the word 'socorro' ('help') superimposed. A brief colorized shot of Times

Square at night gives way to a woman beating a child (a visual reference to a Max Ernst painting). A single eye (like Buñuel's) is here overlaid with swimming fish before we cut to a vertiginous shot from a rollercoaster, the very image of that constant unmotivated movement which so troubled early critics of cinema. Footprints team with maggots and the moon becomes a balloon bursting into smoke.

While *Un chien*, typically, still respects the conventions of cinema as autonomous medium (even as it cites the visual arts), *Viaje* employs rather the radical technique of the cluster, the 'multiple layering of different images or image elements, resulting in a spatial density' (Petho 61). For Petho, it thus gestures towards Lyotard's figural. We remember that unspeakable other within and against discourse which disrupts representation, the resistant trace of a space or time that is radically incommensurable with that of discursive meaning.

Amat's work is itself inextricably intermedial: his first version of the script was not the film but a minutely painted storyboard that was exhibited in its own right. Here, he and Lorca also coincide more closely than Buñuel and Dalí with trends in the current study of cinematic intermediality. No longer do they (can we) simply list media combinations or analogies but rather we (and they) have shifted from the utopia of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, still glimpsed in *Un chien*'s self-conscious radicalism, to the heterotopia of intermediality that acknowledges cinema's non-discursive domains and sensual modes of perception.

*Un chien* will no doubt remain one of the most famous short films in cinema history, while *Viaje*, its accessibility limited by language and distribution, will stay in the shadows. In the radical challenge it poses in its text to discursive coherence, as in the historical discontinuity exhibited by its delayed production, *Viaje* offers, nonetheless, a more demanding and disturbing instance of intermediality as an artistic practice that spans creators, continents, and the course of the twentieth century.

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