

Humour and the Avant-Garde: Carlos Amorales' *The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden* (2014)

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Abstract: *The short film The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden (2014), directed and produced by artist Carlos Amorales, parted from a very distinct research project on Chilean avant-gardes during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1974–1990). While the original intention was to explore the violent affect produced by avant-garde poetry under the framework of Amorales' own vanguard (Ideological Cubism), after three years of work this version was abandoned in favour of a new one centred on an Inuit story about a Man who revolts against the established order and is terribly punished for it. Identifying parallels between this story and the history of the vanguard itself, this article will provide an overview of the film's recourse to humour, both in the artwork and the context of its realisation, tracing a few inductive insights into the particular relationship between humour and the avant-garde at large. Through the focus of aesthetics and politics, a pre-amble which is already constituted in the artist and his team's inquiries into Chilean art under oppression, the article will attempt to draw attention to the humorous 'logic' that underlines the entire endeavour but that is also possibly reflected through the fragmentary appropriation of avant-garde discourse in Amorales' Ideological Cubism. Therefore, humour is articulated as another avenue of violent conceptual critique that can have profound political and aesthetic consequences.*

Keywords: *avant-garde, humour, modern art, Latin American art, art and politics*

Guy Viau: Is there a large amount of rebellion in [...] humour?

Marcel Duchamp: A large amount of rebellion, a large amount of derision toward the serious world, *unconfirmed, naturally*.¹

Introduction

The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden (2014) [Fig. 1], a short film by artist Carlos Amorales, provides a platform through which to reflect upon the history of avant-garde practices and its relation to humour, as the film is constantly underlined by ironic juxtapositions framed within the specific political discourse of Ideological Cubism (IC), the artist's very own vanguard. This essay will attempt to operate inductively in order to offer some insights into the relationship between the concepts of humour and the avant-garde, primarily in terms of the rhetorical

¹ Emphasis by the author. Guy Viau, 'To Change Names, Simply', trans. Sarah Skinner Kilborne, Canadian Radio Television, 17 July 1960, retrieved 14 December 2015, <http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_4/interviews/md_guy/md_guy.html>.

association between aesthetics and politics.

Given the complexity of the film, I will offer a few interpretations based on various select passages from it. In general, the film is based on an Inuit story that shares its title, in which a man from an unnamed community loses his wife to natural causes, making both nature and the society that reveres it responsible for her death. Thus, he becomes a transgressor and breaks all sorts of social conventions out of spite for tradition. The film does not name any of its characters, or establishes any initial plot-related exposition. It starts with a talk-show style interview with Philippe Eustachon, the actor who plays the titular *Man* in the film.² This interview is the sole introductory background the viewer is granted, a dialogue in which Ideological Cubism is discussed to little avail. Inaugurating the narrative with a community-binding ritual murder, the *Man*, along with three other characters (another man and two women),

² From here onwards, I will refer to this character as 'the Man', in order to distinguish him from the other characters. I utilise capital 'M' to refer back to the film's title, which would arguably suggest that he is the main character, even though the others share a comparable – if not equal – role in it, not only interpretatively but also in simple terms of screen-time.

endeavour into a strange, fragmented journey across a desolate landscape, seemingly in search for a place in which to settle down. The film is not experimental in its visual qualities. Therefore, a clear narrative can be traced; one in which the ending mirrors the initial ritual murder. While the costumes of the actors suggest that the film is set in the early 20th Century, there is no clear sense of time/space, which is appropriate to the film's reproduction of a mythical background.



Fig. 1 *The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden*, 2014, film still. Image courtesy of Carlos Amoraes.

There are humorous sections throughout the film arising from various factors – such as fragile surreal juxtapositions (often ending in failure to convey specific meaning), an ironic approach to historical

subject matters, among others – which will be discussed further below. I will start this essay by analysing the initial segments of the film and connecting its ideas to the topics of the avant-garde and humour. I will proceed with an overview of the meticulous research project behind the production and how it can be framed under the concept of humour advanced by the philosopher Simon Critchley. Finally, after an analysis of the contents of the film, I will offer further possible connections between the history of the avant-garde and humour.

A Tradition of Failure

In the talk-show interview with Philippe Eustachon, which introduces the film as a whole, there are various moments of comedy born from intentional and seemingly unintentional ‘failures’. The most evident of these is the question with which Eustachon ends the interview segment: ‘Should we do this again?’ The question arises from a prolonged silence after what, in TV-show journalistic editing parlance, should have been the break, the cut into another section of the video. Both the actor’s and the interviewer’s hesitation about whether to continue or not leads to a moment of uncertainty in

which the continuity granted to this kind of television shows by means of a laborious behind-the-scenes editing is broken, producing what Simon Critchley has called ‘a novel actuality’:

We might say that humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality. Humour defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves.³

In this case, the new situation reinforces the spectator–artwork divide, disrupting an attentive process that in the terms of the historical avant-garde could be described as the attempt to dissolve the boundaries between art and life. However, emphasis needs to be added to the newness of the situation, an ironic stepping forward, not back. In this sense, the awareness of artificiality is a synthetic move that sees the art/life boundary less as part of a dichotomy and more as a rhetorical formula whose integrity depends entirely on the seriousness of *success* as an ideological apparatus; that is, the successful edition of the various components of a film, the successful conveyance of meaning in poetry, and – perhaps – even the strength that the

³ Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 1.

language of a manifesto infuses into an artwork, implying an effective act of will upon the world.

It is in such junctures where humour most incisively operates. To give an example from avant-garde history, Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades assume a bathetic mode that dissolves the high/low, art/life boundary in its ensuing deluge of 'low' creativity. The ready-made and its 'low' humour is significant, among other things, because it was developed under the context of the militarist, virile impulse of the Great War, the images and rhetoric of which constitute perhaps some of the clearest examples of 'high' discursive seriousness, infused with appeals to national spirits and ultimate sacrifices. Duchamp's own ambiguous position in the history of the avant-garde, at least in terms of his relation to the strong-willed discourses of his peers, reveals a possible strand for art historians to trace, a strand of weak wills, of failing wills that produce new situations in manners that are not necessarily connected with Romantic conceptions of power: the laughter of the Futurists (as in Umberto Boccioni's *La risata*, from 1911, or Velimir Khlebnikov's 'Incantation by Laughter', from 1910) comprises a violent

outburst, an act of defiance, a form that in confrontation finds the art/life divide broken. This is significant for the simple reason that there is, in fact, a manifesto behind the production of *The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden*, a vanguard gesture discussed by Eustachon during the interview.

About half-way through the interview, another humorous moment arises: the interviewer pushes Eustachon to explain what Ideological Cubism exactly is, to which the actor cannot help but give distinctly vague answers because the questions proceed from an entirely rational subject position, which assumes there must be clarity in communication: 'Ideological Cubism is strictly a mental construction. It establishes that future art cannot be manufactured – it must only be a product of the mind, made of words.'⁴ If an Ideological Cubist art cannot be an object, then it cannot be known. Thus, an impossibility of reason arises when something that is meant to be communicated cannot really have a definite expression. This failure has a comic effect, particularly when one pays attention to the interviewer's facial

⁴ Isaac Muñoz Olvera & Carlos Amoraes (eds.), *Never Say in Private What You (Won't) Say in Public*, Onestar Press, 2014, p. 25.

gestures before the answers, which become increasingly abstract until the actor finally cedes: 'I do not know [what form it takes].' The strength of the vanguard posture is deflated, its elevation shot to the ground. This causes a discordance in which the new actuality parodies the old, since it seems neither the interviewer nor the audience will ever get to know what Ideological Cubism is anyway... but the show must go on.

In this regard, the manifesto itself, available in text form as part of the film's research corpus, can be interpreted as an obscuring rhetorical device, not only because it adopts a tactic of concealment or the language of conspiracy (parodied, for example, by the 1960s avant-garde The Situationist International⁵) but because it states that 'the material conditions of things are not determined by a political position, but rather, they

⁵ In their fight against what they referred to as the conspiracy of power, the Situationist International (SI) appropriated the language of veiled threats by articulating it with the idea of immediate, coming insurrections. This strategy was adopted by other SI-related groups – such as King Mob in the UK – and remained important in the writings of Guy Debord, one the SI's most prolific members up until his death. See: Len Bracken, 'The Spectacle of Secrecy', 2000, retrieved 19 January 2016, <<http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/76>>.

reflect all existing positions.'⁶ Against the aestheticisation of politics (as in fascism) and the politicisation of aesthetics (as in socialist realism), vanguards like the aforementioned Situationist International offered a much more wilful alternative in the synthesis of the aesthetic and political fields through the articulation of new forms of discourse and oblique approaches to modify 'material conditions' that did not depend upon conventional, rationalist or irrationalist positions with regards to the art/life boundary. The statement made by Ideological Cubism is an echo of this 'tradition' that attempts to conceive itself as already marching beyond the enemy lines of what is normally understood as the art world as well as the political sphere. It is, perhaps inevitably, followed by other, even stronger statements:

The only possible frontiers between art and society are the same insurmountable boundaries of our own marginalist emotions. As the state has demonstrated its insufficiency, and democracy has shown its emptiness, individuals have a right to self-legislate: individuals need their own laws to be free.⁷

The implications here are that since individuality is irreducible and the very

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

first condition of existence, society does not exist, as suggested in the oft-quoted phrase by Margaret Thatcher.⁸ The flow of the manifesto's text has built a certain expectative tension, one that is not really resolved in either a call for action or, more importantly, an authorial claim. At this point, the obscurity of the manifesto (highlighted by the white font on a black background) becomes more evident, since there is a solid thematic consistency to it, adhering not only to the poetic qualities of the historical avant-garde's declarations of war and their loud inner voice (the text is written in all caps), but also to their compelling tone. The rhetoric, however, is completely off the mark, since it avoids prescription in the end. It is truly an anarchic manifesto, with no authors, no audience, no instruction, and no guides: it makes all of these things irrelevant by virtue of an ironic appropriation of what is perhaps the most straightforwardly political of literary genres. The manifesto's statements deflect; whatever it is, it can only be a product of the mind, and yet all products that are not of the mind reflect all existing

⁸ See: Douglas Keay, 'Interview for *Woman's Own* ("no such thing as society")', Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 23 September 1987, retrieved 19 January 2016, <<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>>.

political positions (the mind), the reaction to which is to draw a Cartesian separation (our mental frontiers are the frontiers of society) and enact self-legislation. It is a demand for a Rousseauian state of nature without nature, a harmony without harmony, a paradox without dialectical resolution, which, all in all, seems like a joke. But what – and on whom – is the joke?

If 'jokes are the expression of an abstract relation to the world',⁹ which is to say, an immediacy that works its way through detachment, the Ideological Cubism manifesto derails the political mission proper to its form through a series of disconnections. First it disconnects from the world, then from the mind, then from politics, then from society, then from the individual ('we are far from the spirit of the beast'¹⁰). It has a progressive and digressive motion,¹¹ it simultaneously gets closer and diverts entirely to and from what is at its very heart: a work of art.

⁹ S. Critchley, p. 62.

¹⁰ Emphasis by the author. 'The beast' can be, presumably, the Leviathan. I.M. Olvera & C. Amorales, p. 25.

¹¹ S. Critchley, p. 22.

The Mirthless Laughter

The process of filming *The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden* is interesting for its various twists and turns. It began as part of a research project undertaken by Amorales on the topic of Chile's national poetry in relation to the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1974–1990).¹²

The 'first argument' in *Never Say in Private What You (Won't) Say in Public*, which is to say the first version of the artwork, consisted of a multi-media project that explored the said relation by means of archival research and a documentary approach. This project would result in a comprehensive series of events and objects (the most important of which would be the film) that would speak, in some way or another, about the very conditions of existence of, perhaps, any avant-garde. This version of the film would have delved into a conception of words as the practical extension of politics, which would have been the consequence of analysing the word as the primary unit of political action, uniting the

¹² From here onwards, I will mostly refer to the document put together around the entire research of the project, which includes several summaries and notes by Amorales and his team. For full reference, see note #4.

rational and emotional components of political activity into a single element: expression.¹³ The connection to the avant-garde was explicit:

While doing more research on Chilean poetry I understood that it has been very important since the end of the 19th Century, with Vicente Huidobro and his *Altazor's* descending journey by parachute being the first great work of the 20th Century. Alongside Gabriela Mistral, Pablo de Rokha and Pablo Neruda, he set the stage for a modernist and experimental poetic sensibility that would later be picked up by poets like Nicanor Parra, and even later, Juan Luis Martínez, Enrique Lihn and Raúl Zurita.¹⁴

Amorales' investigation was also significantly informed by Roberto Bolaño's *Distant Star* (1994),¹⁵ in which fascist poet Carlos Wieder moves within leftist artistic circles by virtue of the extremity of his modernism, raising an arduous question that has already relegated Futurism to the dustbin of art history for its close ties to the reactionary revolutions of the first half of the early 20th Century: how can the praxis of a vanguard – always progressive, libertarian – lead directly to the oppressive spirit of a political construct like fascism? Such inquiry is vital to the history of collective art movements, and it

¹³ I.M. Olvera & C. Amorales, p. 52.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 54.

¹⁵ Ibid.

underlines the extensive research that Amoraless meticulously details in the volume that accompanies the production of *The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden*.¹⁶ During his stay in Chile, he managed to locate the poet that inspired Bolaño's character, Ronald Kay, by addressing the network of artists that survived the dictatorship and formed a sense of collectivity under duress, an elemental political act of constitution. It was, nevertheless, anything but unitary, a multiplicity that hid double lives,¹⁷ shared a home with torture,¹⁸ used guerrilla and undercover warfare tactics,¹⁹ and suffered terrible losses. The regime had little patience for art and literature, and according to Amoraless and his team it reflected its imperative to control – its pure instrumental reason – in the books it did embrace. Thus, Amoraless claims:

what is considered to be Latin America's largest private library [that of Pinochet] lacks any artistic value. The few items that could be rescued are a couple of copies of military poetry books, or as has recently been discovered, copies of magical realism books such as *La Aventura de Miguel Littín, Clandestino en Chile* (1986),

¹⁶ See the section 'First Argument', in I.M. Olvera & C. Amoraless, pp. 50-63.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 60.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 61.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 59.

which portray of the nation [sic] the General controlled.²⁰

Thus, the artists at the time found themselves in a context of continual flux, in which the reigning uncertainty turned their position into a precarious existence that needed political ambiguity when it came to expression if it wanted to survive, allowing very elaborate articulations of politics that could not strictly adhere to the conventional division of Left and Right. For example:

Manuscritos [a magazine produced by members of the anti-Pinochet group Colectivo de Acción de Arte along with Kay] is not a respite in the dictatorship, as it has been portrayed to be, it is part of the culture of the dictatorship. The Chilean artistic vanguard that arose during the second part of the dictatorship was produced by upper class youth, socially protected, who felt the need to produce art, so maybe for them it was a respite... One mustn't confuse this vanguard within Pinochet's state with the leftist art produced by exiled Chileans: this is situated elsewhere, it's [sic] aesthetic and discourse is another...²¹

This presents a panorama that is different from the Futurist affiliation with fascism, situating an avant-garde that arises as a part of a culture of extreme oppression, tracing in it a different kind of story, one that is not geared around the militaristic

²⁰ Ibid, p. 62.

²¹ Ibid, p. 36.

conceptions of victory or defeat common to the manifestations of artistic movements of that kind. It is, in any case, a deeply repressive circumstance, which would lead to the kind of self-mutilating actions of someone like the founder of Colectivo de Acción de Arte, Raúl Zurita, who burned his face and then documented it, and later on attempted to blind himself with ammonium acid.²² Those acts might have been ‘unrelated to poetry’²³ but under the terms of the historical avant-garde, they are gestures centred on the body, and the body is the very first place of political development, of public discourse; just as the Futurists had shown with their performances as vitalist declamations.²⁴

This kind of film, however, did not see the light of day. Even after arduous, long discussions between the artists, in the end

²² Sandra Maldonado, ‘Interview with Raúl Zurita’, retrieved 14 December 2015, <http://www.poesias.cl/reportaje_zurita.htm>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ ‘Performance was the surest means of disrupting a complacent public. [...] [Futurist manifestos after 1911] made these intentions very clear: they instructed painters to “go out into the street, launch assaults from theatres and introduce the fisticuff into the artistic battle”. And true to form, this is what they did. Audience response was no less hectic – missiles of potatoes, oranges, and whatever else the enthusiastic public could lay their hands on from nearby markets, flew at the performers.’ See: Roselee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*, Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York, 1979, pp. 11-12.

there was a shift provoked by the architecture of the place in which production had started, the Casa Poli (‘Poli House’), located in the sparsely inhabited peninsula of Coliumo, Chile. In a book on the building, Amorales found a myriad of visual references – from photographs of factories and ovens to modernist paintings and video stills – among the primary design documents that informed the construction.²⁵ The sheer number of elements seems like a cubist map of the house, an almost immeasurable data that both restricts and exceeds the object it is connected to, an informational precipice. ‘This is a concrete cube before the void’, the artist states, right before proposing to Eustachon that they should forget everything about the avant-garde, fascism, and Chile so as to begin anew.²⁶ The undertones of such a development are invariably humorous: three years of work and research, only to move on to something else. Nevertheless, there is a deeper layer through which the entire story could be interpreted, in the way Critchley argues for the motion of humour as simultaneously progressive and digressive. In retrospect, the entire body of research becomes a digression

²⁵ I.M. Olvera & C. Amorales, p. 46.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 47.

through which sufficient distance from the subject matter is established. This digression points at the abstract relationship anyone studying history has to time, opening a conceptual breach wide enough to allow focus on everything revealed to be genuinely close to the subject. Thus, that step forward into something new, after so long a deviation, can frame the entirety of the project as a joke, of which the result is potentially much more interesting than if it had followed a rational straight line.

Holy Jokes

Supported by a thorough archival background, the film that was produced by Amoraes connects all the documentary elements in an oblique way,²⁷ allowing for an interpretation on the grounds of avant-garde theory as well as politics/aesthetics. This approach will be constantly underlined by the workings of the humorous within and around the film with what Critchley characterised as the diversions proper to humour,²⁸ which are present even in the background story chosen for it. *The Man Who Did All Things*

²⁷ This obliqueness refers to Critchley's description of humour as an 'oblique phenomenology of ordinary life.' See: S. Critchley, p. 20.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 22.

Forbidden is an Inuit tale that tells of Artuk, a man who renounces social norms (to the extent of denouncing them as 'lies') after burying his wife.²⁹ He becomes so intimate with death that he stops believing in its limits with life, a life which in the story can be defined through social existence and the consequent conventions built around it to harmonise the community. To observe those limits was to belong to the community of the living, and to transgress them was to actively threaten its existence. After progressively breaking all the taboos of society, Artuk is punished by elemental forces, made manifest in ghostly spirits that protect the rules of society and nature, transforming him into a pile of flesh. Even after such severity, his only son is also punished for his father's rebellion, making him insane, turning him into a damaged, almost mechanical organism. While a literary analysis of the tale is irrelevant here, suffice it to say that the very theme can be translated into representations of the modernist ethos, in at least two ways. First, the death that Artuk has come to know grants him a limited cosmic perspective from which he

²⁹ Knud Rasmussen, *The People of the Polar North: A Record*, K. Paul, Trench & Trübner, London, 1908, p. 133.

draws a very dangerous conclusion: namely, that society is built through deception. It would seem that he adopts a nihilistic stance for which there is no truth, but his characterisation of social norms as false is a suggestion that he has seen the truth. In other words, his mysticism sets him against the rules of harmony, seeing in social life a vacuum when it comes to pain and anger; to an emotional intertwining with the world. While Artuk is not exactly a Romantic, the conceptual elements comparable to that great modern movement underpinning the story are relevant inasmuch they also comprise one of the negative bases of the avant-garde. Bourgeois society is inherently oppressive, and its deceitful existence must be undone, for the sake of a truth that lies beyond it (whether that is Expression, the Surreal, the Spirit, communism, anarchism...). Second, there is an inherent duality at play, that of life and death. The most explicit use of that relation, as a dialectic, comes perhaps from the vanguard movements of the 1960s – like the already mentioned Situationist International and Fluxus – but it is decisively present before that in Surrealism, in all its forms, and as far back

as in Futurism.³⁰ An overview is not necessary – the celebration of life (above death, in parallel, or even *through* it) is a staple of the avant-garde, and Artuk's punishment is a lesson that poetically echoes through the history of modernist art movements. It is a punishment that, for those under oppressing governments like the Pinochet dictatorship, ended in death, but which at other times led to a less-than-human life.³¹ This can be analogically connected to the mound of flesh or the scarred mind of the next generation in Artuk's story, a cruel joke: a joke played from positions of absolute power. The higher order, which is to say the spirits that keep social conventions in place, violently turns Artuk and his progeny into things, producing a possible

³⁰ In the case of Surrealism an extreme example could be Georges Bataille's *Acéphale* collective and its 'life-cult' opposition to fascism's 'death cult'. For a more detailed discussion on it, see: Jonathan Paul Eburne's *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2008 and Benjamin Noys' *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, Pluto Press, London, 2000. In the case of Futurism, the ninth point of the first manifesto, in which it states that the movement will glorify war (as the world's only hygiene), can be conceived of as another key example of the life/death relation held by various avant-garde groups. The whole manifesto can be found in *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*, edited by Umbro Apollonio and published in English in 1973.

³¹ Suppressed artists in the Soviet Union, even those who held amicable relations with the State, such as Dmitri Shostakovich, are a prime example of this kind of base existence.

insight when pairing two concepts of humour: the (emotionless) laughter theorised by Henri Bergson ('we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing'³²) and the further objectifying one by Thomas Hobbes ('what [he] means in suggesting that laughter is a feeling of sudden glory where I find another person ridiculous and laugh at their expense'³³). The insight is that what happens to Artuk and his family, while cautionary and horrifying to those in equal standing to him, is potentially funny when the perspective is shifted towards that of power. Thus, humour is not necessarily a liberating move, and it presents us with an ambiguity that is also contained in the life/death dialectic developed by the 1960s avant-gardes, in terms of their deep involvement with a politics that no longer saw the ghost of communism haunting Europe, but that of fascism haunting the entire world. Artuk is lessened, reduced to a mechanical existence, a synthetic objectification that has hollowed out any and all intimacy with life and death, for such a thing is

³² Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Breerton & Fred Rothwell, Project Gutenberg eBooks, 2009, retrieved 14 December 2015, <<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4352>>.

³³ S. Critchley, p. 12.

reserved for someone else: higher and more powerful.³⁴

This 'holy joke,' a joke that emerges from keeping the sacred characteristics of absolute power in place, and its direct association with the humour of the powerful is – however – turned around in the film, eradicating the higher order that enacts the punishment and making the *Man*, played by Eustachon, the leader of a group that could be conceived of as a family. His washed-out dandy appearance and the aristocratic manner with which he carries himself indicate a kind of burden of the transcendental, granted by the

³⁴ An interesting comparison arises when studying someone like Milan Kundera, who 'identifies laughter with evil, though for the novelist it does not [...] require redemption. Evil, as it was embodied in a certain novelistic humor, born as the counterpoint of an excessive faith in historical projection that might have attended the Renaissance, is good. In what constitutes the second phase of Kundera's evolving modern history of humor, the narrator distinguishes two kinds of laughter. The first and original is what he terms the Devil's laughter, equated with "[t]hings suddenly deprived of their putative meaning" (Laughter 61), recalling Bergson's dark view of the laughter and corresponding neatly to Kant's formula, presented in *The Critique of Judgement*, "Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing" (Kant 199). From the perspective of those insisting upon an absolute, or absolutely "willed," meaning the "angels," the threat is enormous: The first time an angel heard the Devil's laughter, he was horrified.' Mark Weeks, 'Milan Kundera: A Modern History of Humor amid the Comedy of History', in *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 3, spring 2005, p. 139.

transgression of having left society behind.



Fig. 2 *The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden*, 2014, film still. Image courtesy of Carlos Amoraes.

There is another, younger man with the group, who carries an axe and attempts to cut down every tree in sight. His labour does not proceed rationally, opting instead for an irrational approach, in the sense that he attempts to cut *all* trees at the same time, revealing an understanding comparable to that of the *Man* as a grasp of the totality of existence, a key concept for both critical theory and the artist collectives obliquely tied to it.³⁵ His futile dedication to the task, evidenced

³⁵ See: Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1984. Significantly, there is a small chapter dedicated to Henri Lefebvre and Surrealism in the book.

by his utter failure to do it, can be seen as both the result of his mind's destruction and the destruction of his mind by an absolute dedication to work, the sort of avant-garde critique that is comparable to Artuk's realisations regarding the maintenance of 'lies'.

Two women complete the group, performing as playful others, creating a relatively keen contrast with the utter seriousness of the profoundly short-sighted 'son' and his superficially long-sighted 'father'. One of them (the 'wife', perhaps) becomes the subject of a sort of foundational moment at the beginning of the film, when the *Man* murders her and performs a ritual before the sea [Fig. 2]. She becomes a corpse that haunts the group as it keeps moving through expansive landscapes that might come to represent a state of nature, a perfect freedom tainted with a foundational death, but also with life so passionate it cannot help being infused with the chaos of the wilderness. As the camera follows the group, sometimes together, often alone, the frames almost always prefer to focus on the landscape, a cosmos that truly cares little for the fate of the characters, a majestic void: its sublimity paralyses reason, preferring all-

encompassing living and dying as the *Man* proceeds to kill the other woman (the 'daughter') and the 'wife' comes back from the dead to terrify the 'son', stating, with bestial features, '*¡Viva la intensidad!*' ('Hurrah for intensity!').

There is a vitalist negation at work here, parting from the woman's transformation – from human to corpse to beast (a process that contains both horror and humour) – with regards to social conventions. Death and life mingle and blur into each other, a landscape devoid of animal life save an ant colony, that perfect ideal of statically hierarchical, yet industrious harmony. It is from this purely emotional state that the woman's call must be picked apart. While the sentiment of '*¡Viva la intensidad!*' is better translated as 'Hurrah for intensity!' a more literal approximation would be 'Long live intensity!' Still, the expression '*viva*' is literally 'live', which is to say that in the Spanish language the formula has a possibly inherent political division in the sense that for something to live, its opposite must die. This is what I mean by a vitalist negation, an absolute affirmation that simultaneously contains an equally absolute negation, drawing the political into a set of Romantic presuppositions

that demand unambiguity, action and commitment. However, its weaving together of death and life, finding one in the other, also points at another kind of theoretical framework: black humour. In the latter, the lessening of life becomes the starting point for unleashing it, against morality, against society; an intensity that overcomes the sentimentality Surrealists understood as inert life, turning the consciousness of death into a principle for boundless living.³⁶



Fig. 3 *The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden*, 2014, film still. Image courtesy of Carlos Amoraes.

At the end of the film, the *Man*, ecstatic, murders the other woman. In a gruesome

³⁶ 'Laughter, as one of humanity's most sumptuous extravagances, even to the point of debauchery, stands at the lip of the void, offers us the void as a pledge.' Pierre Piobb, quoted by André Breton in *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1997, p. xiv.

scene he turns her into a puppet and, presumably, dresses her like him. The image is perhaps a good example of what Critchley called 'Juvenalian disgust', in which the effect of the human becoming animal (*less than human*, in anthropocentric terms) produces something potentially funny, 'and if we laugh at all then it is what Beckett calls "the mirthless laugh", which laughs at that which is unhappy.'³⁷ The latter has a different sense than the laugh emitted from a position of power, because the ultimate target of the 'mirthless laugh' is none other than the subject that laughs, by means of an ironic and sudden detachment that enables a consciousness of death, of the cosmic solitude of the human. In other words, it is a laugh that in utter finality finds the truth of equality. The woman, dressed like the *Man*, moves mechanically thanks to strings pulled by someone unseen, an awkward mound of flesh that in exaggerating the horror of the murder could elicit a black humorous response. She becomes – to parody André Breton himself – a vessel that communicates the maddening desires of the *Man*, now as much an enemy of society as he is of nature. Dreams give

³⁷ S. Critchley, p. 32.

way to instincts and the channelling that takes place consists only of violence, of the counterpart to a vitalist negation – a vertiginous embrace of nothingness, which destroys the world in its image. The *Man's* transgressions are fulfilled: little is left, and he proceeds to dance on the beach, a mirthless dance [Fig. 3]. Everything the group did is, in the end, a failure.

Conclusion

While *The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden* is not strictly comical, its humour is constant, from the disconnectedness of the characters' dialogues, which in their surreality evoke the forms of jokes, to the distinct failures that characterise the circumstances of its production, which enact the motion of humour in a continuity of digression and progression. It also presses a historical question through its documentation of Chilean art movements during the Pinochet dictatorship: that of the avant-garde's political articulations. Together, these elements (humour and the history of the vanguard) can modify the conventional views of the operations of those artistic movements, at least when it comes to the academic reticence to take

things less seriously, by which I do not mean, of course, less rigorously. Humour is perhaps one of the avant-garde's keenest tactical weapons. After all, 'believing that humour posed a dangerous threat to both individual autonomy and rational faculties, Plato denigrated comedy in his *Republic*.'³⁸ It is in this particular militarism of thought where the concept raises the issues of aesthetics/politics still being reckoned with by artists today, as Amorales' film exemplifies. Ideological Cubism is as much a new articulation of this relation as it is a humorous take on the history of the avant-garde. After their failure, after the 'end of history', or alternatively the 'mistrust of metanarratives', what does it mean to claim the place of a vanguard? The irony at play here is layered, if only because there are as many hints of levity as there are of gravity: 'the avant-garde doesn't give up', like Asger Jorn once playfully painted in the background of a petty-bourgeois kitsch portrait of a girl, to which he gave a moustache. The joke being, of course, that the avant-garde actually fulfils that promise, eventually finding solace in its final dissolution, its

³⁸ Heather Diack, 'The Gravity of Levity: Humour as Conceptual Critique', in *RACAR: revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2012, p. 75.

slow, seeping, self-nullifying advance into everyday life.

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