

ARREBATO RAPTURE

IVÁN ZULUETA, SPAIN, 1980

The premiere of *Arrebato* (*Rapture*), on 9 June 1980 at the Azul cinema in Madrid, went almost unnoticed. However when, a few months later, the Alphaville cinema in Madrid scheduled this unusual Spanish film, with its crude, no-punches-pulled depiction of drug use, in its weekend late-night programme, it remained there for an entire year, ultimately gaining the popular cult status which it retains to this day. Not only is the success of this strange, experimental film with audiences who would normally have paid it little or no attention, surprising, but also the fact that neither its author, Iván Zulueta, nor its style have spawned either a sequel or an imitation in more than two decades. Its very originality would seem to have ensured *Rapture's* immunity to imitators and the film has risen to become an object of veneration over the years. The journey which Zulueta's film took from the smaller circle of the faithful to that of the much wider mainstream arena could be justified through its unashamed cinematic flourishes, its reflections on the essence of cinema itself, its treatment of drugs and drug use and the way it spoke for a generation.

Interweaved in a relatively conventional, although at times enigmatic, linear plot are some of the key elements of experimental film: home-movie style is used to adopt an analytic perspective on the dispositive of capturing images and the practices of recycling and re-shooting. What is unique is how all these phenomena appear together, woven into a highly original tale, a tragic adventure in which heroin becomes the metaphorical driving force and which heads to a passionate climax which the author not unintentionally baptised with a name of mystical resonance: the Spanish word *arrebato* actually means 'rapture' but also 'ecstasy'.

Let us begin with the attractions which this film offers to its public. An unashamed celebration of the cinema, *Rapture* is very much of its time, as references to and quotes from other films are embedded throughout, which one would most certainly not consider to be of the intellectual elite but of the mainstream. First and foremost, film features centrally within the film via its protagonist José Sirgado (Eusebio Poncela), a mediocre filmmaker specialising in Z-series horror movies; it also features as background in the numerous cinema posters which cover the walls of José's apartment and the editing studio in which he works (Zulueta himself

is renowned as a poster artist). It makes an additional ambient contribution at the beginning of the film with billboards for *Quo Vadis*, *The Humanoid*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Phantasm* and *Bambi* oozing film fetishism and accompanying Poncela on his night-time drive down Madrid's Gran Via.

Even more relevant is how cinema is present in *Rapture* as a re-elaboration, reference or whimsical allusion. Thus, throughout the film, we see frames and fragments of lesser or greater relevance to the story, to remind us of, for example, the enigmatic 'Rosebud' of Charles Foster Kane immediately prior to his death in *Citizen Kane*, the mysterious monolith of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the fall of the brutally-butchered Janet Leigh in the infamous *Psycho* shower scene, the cross of Saint Andrew which forebodes the violent murders of Howard Hawks' *Scarface*. For a generation brought up in the cinema and in a period where pastiche equalled style, *Rapture* contains much for those looking for familiar territory.

Such elements, although not totally unique within the Spanish cinematic panorama, are no doubt relatively infrequent. Nevertheless there is nothing closer to a postmodern rhetoric than these frequent nods to popular culture, a tapestry of varied references often discordant amongst themselves, where irony, parody and pastiche capriciously combine. A brief examination of a contemporary instance of similar elements will help us discover the originality of Zulueta's view. In *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (*Pepi, Luci, Bom*, 1981) Pedro Almodóvar hangs his story on a very similar collection of meetings to that which serves as the starting point for Zulueta. The origins of the film only confirm this: *Star* magazine asked the filmmaker for a short story parodying the punk movement, from this sprang the idea for a script which started life being filmed in 16mm before growing to 35mm and then jumping to unexpected success on the commercial circuit. The result is an eccentric film which tells us of the deeds and misdeeds of three girls, interspersed with grotesque-penis competitions, publicity spots and musical numbers. Eccentric but weak on structure *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, like *Rapture* makes innumerable cultural references to comic book culture, uses cheeky musical and cinematic quotations, and turns day-to-day events bizarrely on their heads.

In spite of all such connections, *Rapture* and *Pepi, Luci, Bom* are still separated, in terms of materials, by an enormous gulf as Zulueta seeks to create not a pastiche burlesque but a real drama, at the centre of which is cinema, and a story which gains more and more force and ultimately winds up sweeping away the life and soul of the protagonists. What is more, as we shall see, Zulueta ponders a series of questions and problems more specific to the cinematic avant garde.

Cinema is the real crux of *Rapture* in the most intense and radical manner imaginable; it is seen as cruel, vampire-like and capable of nothing short of draining the very life-blood from the characters. Within the first few moments of the film a vampire woman looks into the camera from her sepia-toned celluloid and we soon learn that this is the film which José is busy editing. With this simple look which is echoed in the final moments the film will come full circle; as well as inspiring the closing image of the film it also closes the protagonist's mind to all that exists outside the camera. In fact the camera is transformed into something of a free spirit and given a life of its own, deciding what it chooses to film and when, selecting objects and people at will, and moving with an unnerving liberty which results in the successive disappearance of the two main characters in some kind of technical vampirism.

Rapture opens with a prologue where a husky voice, bordering on inaudibility, is heard recording words of invitation onto a cassette for an absent listener. These words of instruction, which are seen to have come from some type of pallid, living corpse, are packed on their audio cassette into an envelope along with a spool of Super 8 and a key. We also hear the recorded plea that the addressee should study the enclosed reel of images and then set off to look for a final film which one presumes has yet to be made. As the envelope is sealed with a red stamp the titles are suddenly superseded by fragments of a vampire woman in black-and-white celluloid, the very fragments which José, the recipient of the parcel, is editing together.

These recorded words contain the central theme of Pedro's (Will More) cinematic suffering, namely images and their capturing in the eye of the camera. The first fortuitous meeting between Pedro and José in a country house in Segovia for the filming of a subsequently uncompleted film, is followed in the recording by the different stages of his cinematic experimentation and his obsession for interval shooting. Back home, José listens to the cassette and, after shooting up, the story continues, mixing his memories with an overdose of hallucinatory imagery. Amongst this mosaic of memory we see the meetings and separations of José and his partner Ana (Cecilia Roth), their fall into the world of drugs, and their sexual and spiritual decadence. These and other changes offer some backbone to an otherwise broken up and deliberately ambiguous tale. But what exactly *is* the journey on which Pedro invites José?

At 29 Pedro remains an infantile being, obsessed by the simple act of filming the people and objects which surround him: his aunt, his cousin, the different rooms of the country house where he lives, the trees, and of course himself. One might say that his films are a species of home movies but lacking in the individual passion which drove filmmakers like Jonas Mekas (the writing of memory), Stan Brakhage (the inner eye and the transfiguration of reality),

Carolee Schneemann (the representation of intimacy) and so many others. Still, behind the apparent banality there lurks a deeper question about the mechanism which connects with the other great movement of the avant-garde: the conceptual. Pedro in fact proclaims himself to be spurred on by an anxiety to investigate the interval (the suspension of time between frames). On more than one occasion he claims to have spent hours (he could spend days, weeks he adds) observing a single frame of *King Solomon's Mines* (1950) and other such works. He also feels unspeakable pain when viewing what he himself has filmed. It would seem that, unnoticed, the meeting with José must have sparked off, deep inside, the investigation which he is close to finishing.

The majority of what José sees on that reel is indeed made up of home movies (a sight-seeing trip through the highlights of Thailand, the Ganges and Los Angeles amongst others and which may itself have been pirated from someone else; a high-speed trip from Segovia to Madrid; emblematic images of the Spanish capital). Here again Pedro's work draws deeply on experimental cinema: on one hand it connects with the travelogue style of amateur filmmaking while on the other, much more importantly, it practises re-shooting (the recycling of images for other ends; so-called found footage), an idea which Zulueta had already practised in his short films and which has come to be one of the most successful crops in the cinematic avant-garde of recent years.

Pedro's obsession with filmmaking brings up another source for reflection which also belongs by rights to experimental cinema, namely the analysis of the base mechanisms, the minimalist elements of cinematographic expression. The use of interval shooting, of perception, the capturing of images, and the transformation of said images are questions which have, since the 1970s, interested Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr and Hollis Frampton in North America and also Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka in Europe. Even so, Pedro seems little moved by theoretical and abstract discussions and is more concerned with an enigmatic emotion about the capturing of real images, as if his experiment were to be attributed not to a cold study of the camera as machine but to the possibility it offers of revealing reality and causing tears and shock.

To recapitulate then, in one way *Rapture* touches on the themes of domesticity and family, following in the footsteps of the American avant-garde led by Marie Menken and Jonas Mekas, while at the same it aims at a seemingly opposite current which analyses film as a dispositive. *Rapture* certainly feeds on such distinct sources and equally certainly it blends them together in a path of initiation, a tragic path along which the subject discovers something which leads him to delirium, something which cannot become either a memory or a treatise for reflection,

something truly devastating. It is right here where the innovative power of heroin intervenes becoming a source of rhetoric, governing delirious connections and boundless experiences.

Rapture is the story of a journey and a learning process, a highly original *bildungsroman* which demands that the viewer look deeply but disconnect from logic and reason. From this comes the first and most evident paradox: the complete story of the adventure which Pedro lives seems to respond, in its own language, to a hidden agenda minutely plotted by something unknown (the camera) and to an initiation process whose keys are slowly to be revealed after a series of challenges. The key script device consists in presenting this journey as something shared between the two protagonists or, more accurately, initially shared and later experienced successively. Their two stories are superimposed, metamorphosing and mingling into each other and the joins barely show; two delirious minds collide in a pained voice, pained for reasons we do not know and a tortured look at the very edge of the abyss. Thus we start from this blind spot, this intimate, irrational communion born from Pedro's voice and the abyss which opens up before José's eyes as he starts to absorb the mysteries hidden within the seemingly harmless reel of *Super 8*.

The voice invites him to dive head-first into his own adventure. José ponders the grainy image from a car advert, a series of compulsively repeated shots as a car crashes against a rock placed in the centre of the road, and this image blends into a more familiar road and a more familiar vehicle. José and his friend Marta (Marta Fernández Muro) are traveling together as the voice from the tape recorder summons up the images, going back to the first meeting of the two protagonists. In so doing, José infiltrates Pedro's story but goes beyond what he could possibly have seen and known and imposes his own memories within Pedro's words. Pedro's adventure thus becomes José's and the coherence of a single viewpoint is discarded as unnecessary and the ties with daily life are cut as this is a journey which can only be made alone.

Everyday life, the central theme of all home movies, is treated in *Rapture* simply as irritating background noise. The spectator will never feel more asphyxiated than in those moments where cotidianity bursts into the film (the banal conversation of Marta's aunt about movie stars of yesteryear, Ana's reflections on couplehood). Amongst complicities and fake ecstasies managed only with help from the drug, the projection of the enigmatic spools filmed by Pedro sentence the element of cotidianity, and the unstoppable interior adventure to oblivion becomes clear: 'You have to remember,' the voice says, 'that I still believed in the cameras that filmed, the things that they filmed and the projectors that projected them. You must understand that I could never have guessed how far I was from my real course in life.' To the sound

of Pedro's words, once the projection is over, there is a hallucination uncertain in origin, as images from all over the world appear with that grainy, aged quality which makes them seem somehow more distant, unusually pure, uncontaminated and for this reason strangely incomplete. Some blank frames precede the arrival at Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles before both sound and picture are inexplicably interrupted. The interruption is external to the sound and to the images themselves and is in reality ludicrously prosaic, we see how Ana ham-fistedly puts on a record and this simple action returns us to a totally empty 'here and now'. She breaks this feast of images with her puerile chatter about giving up heroin and implausible proposals for fraternisation of the couple. Rarely has domesticity and everyday life been so ruthlessly and publicly X-rayed.

From the brink of the abyss, once again it is the cracked voice which heralds the next development: the contents of the reel of film accompanying the cassette tape. At the same time José, and the audience, are brought back to earth with a bump as Ana, masquerading as Betty Boop, performs an entertaining little number in front of the screen, lit by the projector's glare. In this vignette she plays out a scene from her relationship with the dual José/Pedro character in which she gives free reign to her ecstasy. José gives a satisfied smile, willingly enjoying her uninhibited performance but nevertheless proceeds to violently reject her attempts at lovemaking, embarking instead upon an infinitely more interesting and risky venture which will erase the girl from the picture forever.

In the projection which follows there is a moment in which José's gaze is finally possessed by whatever lies deeply hidden inside Pedro. The appearance of a red frame in Pedro's home movies marks this point of no return. In fact it is another cinematic reference, this time to *Schwechater* by Peter Kubelka, a publicity film commissioned by the Austrian brewery Schwechater Bier. The piece is composed of 1,440 different black-and-white fragments, some of which appeared in red. Kubelka filmed with an old hand-crank camera from the 1920s without a viewfinder and, during the editing process, printed a sequence of 30 frames based on the red element which recur throughout the film at ever decreasing intervals in line with his 'Metric Cinema'.

There is, however, no other similarity between the two filmmakers' use of the red frames. In *Rapture* the development of Pedro's untiring filming of himself sleeping and waking, locked away in his apartment, carries with it an enigmatic extension related to the red frames which, in contrast to Kubelka's usage, represents not a cold, analytical principle but a fatal chance intervention. Pedro's disembodied voice draws attention to this fact when, before the red frame

appears, there is something which the camera appears to refuse to film. Later the camera recovers its regularity and continues filming according to the conventions of submission to reality.

At one point Pedro asks his cousin Marta to stay awake and observe the behaviour of the camera while he falls asleep within its gaze. As he drifts off we see the camera turn on its tripod, focusing its attention menacingly on the girl. This is the very sequence mailed by Pedro at the beginning of the film and it has had the desired effect, as by this point José finds himself inextricably caught up in the delirious whirlpool into which his friend and colleague has thrown him.

Zulueta closes the circle by repeating the pre-credits sequence to avoid confusion: the husky voice of the decrepit Pedro returns, the cassette with its explanation of the itinerary, the key to the apartment, and of course the Super 8. José, intrigued by the mysterious and incomplete summons arrives at the apartment. From the shadows we hear the click of the shutter as the camera, still running on its self timer, continues to take shots of the bed where Pedro is no longer to be seen. José removes the film from the machine and takes it to be developed. After three days of walled-up waiting, three days reminiscent of the entombment of Christ, three days of which the viewer sees and learns nothing, José, wrapped in Pedro's overcoat, begins to pore over the developed images. This physical transformation is an eloquent metaphor for the inner metamorphosis which has been taking place within him.

The projection of the final reel confirms our suspicions – the red frames come thick and fast and the camera has captured nothing of reality except for a single frame of Pedro in close-up, the final trace of the meeting of camera and the outside world. But when José freezes this frame it suddenly and unexpectedly comes to life on the screen, denying its own inanimate condition as the face of Pedro trapped in the celluloid hints that his friend should take his place on the bed. José feels like the prey of some optical hallucination and consequently waves his hand in the shaft of light coming from the projector only to discover that it is in no way affected by this intrusion. The intrigue becomes still greater for José, who, we must not forget, has spent days shut away in this room wearing Pedro's coat and reliving his disturbing disappearance. Suddenly the image of Pedro becomes his own face projected on the wall above the bed and immediately the two images begin to alternate. Behind José the camera begins to move towards him and José finally makes the decision to move to the bed and takes up Pedro's last known position. The camera tacitly follows José and resumes its regular shots. José surrenders completely to the situation and the moment, searching among the sheets for the blindfold which Pedro used to protect himself from the sun's glare. When he does not find it, he tears off

a strip from the sheet and binds his eyes. The shutter clicks speed up to a ferocious crescendo like a frenzied machine gun which leaves José's convulsing body weakened and broken on the bed. And there *Rapture* ends, cutting to some fragments of an old movie, a black-and-white sequence of José which echoes that of the vampire woman of the opening sequence and finally includes José in the film-*within-the-film*.

One reading of the film, not only transparent but almost banal, is that the camera progressively consumes the protagonist since the first revelation symbolised by the red frames. This is probably the interpretation which Pedro himself gives Marta when he asks her to start her bedside vigil but, as if aware of its own banality, the idea is not expressed by any of Zulueta's characters caught up in the drama. Such an allegory, although not completely false, would dilute the tragic nature of the process through which the characters pass when, in fact, both Pedro and José revel in the experience, surrendering to it completely as if to an investigation in which they knowingly offer their lives. In one of his moments of weakness on hearing the shutter click on automatic Pedro says, 'And then ... I knew who my allies were and I only had to place myself in their hands. They possessed me, they devoured me and I was happy in that surrender. I had needed to stand on the edge of the abyss to understand what was happening. It was the point not to do but be done to.'

The film stands at the edge of a precipice. Subject becomes object within the film and only in seeing this process can we understand why Pedro and José walk so close to the edge of that abyss. And there at the cliff's edge, mixing delirium and ecstasy, heroin plays its key role. It is not an inducement to action nor is it sign of the times, it is an instrument for discussion. *Rapture* is not a film made about drugs but a film made *on* drugs, with all the hypersensitivity, fascination and leaps of imagination which they induce. Augusto Martínez Torres noted in the preface to the published version of the script that the shooting of *Rapture* was plagued by drug-related problems, both in front of and behind the camera, including those of Zulueta himself.

To conclude then, the film's originality lies in its desire to go beyond the conventional bounds. When considered as a home movie we see how, rather than providing a crutch to get through life, it winds up tearing apart the subject who films his daily life. When viewed as a studied analysis of the technical aspects of capturing images and cinematic reproduction, *Rapture* is passionate, even ecstatic, overheating the already hot world of conceptual experimentation and investigation. If looked at from the point of view of recycling and re-shooting we see how it annihilates not only the idea of re-shooting, but the very idea of film itself. Compared with the other films on drug-related themes which began to circulate in the 1970s, *Rapture* makes no

statement on heroin but merely explores the world as seen through the drug. Perhaps for this very reason Zulueta chose such a resonant title, a title which signals both toward the lower limit of cinema (pause, interval, absence of movement) and that mystic ecstasy where one becomes the channel for forces beyond ourselves. Translating *Rapture*'s ineffability into words or beyond to the realms of allegory would be to strip the film of its essence. Maybe that is what makes *Rapture* so unique and unrepeatably.

Vicente Sánchez Biosca

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ALBERTO MIRA

ROMÁN GUBERN



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