

Val del Omar

The Mechemysticism of cinema

CENTRO GALEGO DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEA
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Curated by Cristina Cámara Bello

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Basement

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Val del Omar

The Mechamysticism of cinema

The work of José Val del Omar has accompanied the history of the Reina Sofía Museum ever since its inauguration as a Centre of Art in 1986. His film *Fuego en Castilla* [*Fire in Castile*] appeared in *Procesos: cultura y nuevas tecnologías* [*Processes: culture and new technologies*], one of the three exhibitions with which the Centre opened to the public. In 1992 and 1995, his films were screened in two audio-visual programmes, but would not be until November 2009 when they would be seen for the first time in the setting of the Museum's collection. The screening of *Tríptico elemental de España* [*Elemental Triptych of Spain*] would be a declaration of intent in terms of recovering his output (which, in its creative complexity, represents a nexus between the historical avant-garde and the emergence of video-based work in the seventies) with the aim of incorporating it into the institution's collection. At that moment, he had already started on the research and restoration work for part of the archive kept by his son-in-law, Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga, for the retrospective exhibition *Desbordamiento de Val del Omar* [*Overflow from Val del Omar*], curated by Eugeni Bonet, which would go on show in 2010, initially in the José Guerrero Centre in Granada and subsequently in the Reina Sofía Museum.

The Museum's efforts to restore and digitalise a large part of the artist from Granada's film production, as well as to disseminate his work (through taking the exhibition to the Palau de la Virreina in Barcelona and the CAAM in Las Palmas), would eventually result in the donation of the films and the subsequent depositing of practically his entire legacy by the Val del Omar family.

The principal commitment the Museum acquired by accepting the donation and deposit was to make his work accessible to the public from new platforms and spaces, beyond the cinema. In 2012, the museum devoted six rooms of the Collection to the presentation of an important part of the deposit. It is this revised selection which is now on show in the CGAC, thanks to the

invaluable support of the "la Caixa" Cultural Outreach Programme, whose social and educational projects include that of making culture more accessible to the general public.

The work of José Val del Omar (Granada, 1904 – Madrid, 1982), of a multifaceted nature, visionary and rich in nuances, stems from his aspects as an inventor, visual poet and *cinemist*. The artist himself coined this neologism, combining cinema with alchemy to thus define his original approach to the film-making: through technological research and his own experimental aesthetics.

Val del Omar embarked on his film career in the nineteen twenties, when he published his first three technical inventions: the "variable angle temporal lens" (which we know as the *zoom*), the "concave apanoramic screen" and cinema in relief, which he would later develop and which would give rise to *tactile-vision*. Between 1932 and 1937, along with other members of the generation of 27, he took part in the Pedagogic Missions, the Second Republic's flagship cultural democratisation project, for which he made more than 40 documentaries, most of which have since disappeared. After the Civil War, Val del Omar continued with his research in the field of audiovisual technique, particularly audio, to return, by the nineteen fifties, to his work as a film-maker.

This exhibition offers a tour through Val del Omar's work on the basis of a concept which looms over his entire career: *mechamysticism*, another of his many neologisms. Through the association of two seemingly disparate concepts as mechanics and mysticism, the Granada-born artist referred to the "universe of machines", created throughout his life from a mystical outlook with which he also addressed reality, seeking to glimpse beyond the immediacy offered by technology. The term is documented



Diakine from the series *Maniqués*, ca. 1977–1982. © Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga



Acariño galaico (De barro), 1961, 1981-1982, 1995
 © Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga

for the first time in 1955, although Val del Omar had already spoken about the *meta-mystical* in 1935. This mystical sense of creation also appears in the *Corporación del Fonema Hispánico (Hispanic Phoneme Corporation)*. Written in 1942 and considered as a manifesto, the text includes his reflections on audio and on the importance of *voiced*, spoken, language, as opposed to *silent*, written language. This concern (which arose subsequent to his attendance of 1931 Hispano-American Cinematography Congress, in which the impact of language in the new sound films had been spoken of, *talking cinema*) took the form of his desire to organise an acoustic recording and reproduction service, a large phonetic publishing house, which coincided in time with the early post-war years, a politico-religious time of exalting everything Spanish. Val del Omar did not participate the doctrinal aspects of the period, in his text he examined and spoke of the Spanish mystical tradition, at the same time as he provided definitions and nuances of themes which would be key in his work: the cinematograph, the documentary, technique and the spectacle, as well as research into the aforesaid fields of audio and the mystical.

For Val del Omar, it was the very realism of cinema which laid the foundations for the mystical outlook, precisely as it was a medium capable of recording the most mundane actions. In this regard, he referred to his documentaries as *elementary*, in allusion to the natural elements with which they were related, but also to his interest for the poetic, as a form of examination, of going straight for the elemental, in each one of them.

Aguaespejo granadino [Water-Mirror of Granada] (1953-1955), also titled *La gran siguriya*, is a film in the form of an audio-visual symphony on the Andalusian city, made on the basis of the music of Manuel de Falla and flamenco, images of Fountains in the Alhambra and close-ups of the Gypsies from Sacromonte. The use of cross talk was essential in the film. It was patented by Val del Omar in 1944, a number of years after the consolidation of the stereo system: if the latter was based on the use of two lateral sound sources, in crosstalk one source was located behind the screen, transmitting the sound associated with images, and the other at the back of the hall, emitting a subjective sound of echoes and reflections. The spectator would sit in the middle, where the two audio sources would meet, collide and cross.

Fuego en Castilla [Fire in Castile] (TactilVisión del páramo del espanto) [Tactile-Vision of the wasteland of fear] (1958-1960) was filmed in the National Sculpture Museum of Valladolid and in the Chapel of the Benavente, in Medina de Rioseco. Val del Omar made a film interpretation of Holy Week and of the baroque religious imaginary conserved in the Museum and Chapel (paying particular attention to the *Saint Ann* by Juan de Juni and the *Martyrdom of St Sebastian* by Alonso Berruguete). On this occasion, the principal technical invention implemented was tactile-vision, consisting in projecting a pulsating light source over surfaces to highlight their relief and material

texture. The soundtrack includes the dancer from Valladolid, Vicente Escudero, tapping his fingernails against the wood of a dry church altarpiece.

With the first two *elementales* [elementals] finished, and when starting on the filming of the third, *Acariño galaico (De barro)* [Galician Warmth (In clay)] in 1961, Val del Omar unveils his intention of making a *Tríptico elemental del agua, el fuego y la tierra* [Elemental Triptych of earth, water and fire] or *Retablo del Duende de España*, but he would never complete it. In 1981 he returned to the project, naming it *Tríptico elemental de España* [Elemental Triptych of Spain]. His idea was to finish off the elements trilogy by putting together a film on Galicia and making a new, very short, production titled *Ojala*, which would function as a vortex (circular maelstrom) or appendix, for the other three films. The notion of *sin fin* [with no end], which appears in the final credits for both *Aguaspejo granadino* [Water-Mirror of Granada] and *Fuego en Castilla* [Fire in Castile], is present and describes a manner of conceiving the creative process, in a constant state of flux.

Throughout the production of the elements, Val del Omar reformulates the series as a diagonal line crossing Spain "From West to East", through three regions: Galicia, Castile and Andalusia, associating each one with one of the elements of nature (land, fire and water, respectively) and embodying a vision of Spain steeped in a distinctive heterodox mysticism.

In *Acariño galaico* [Galician Warmth], the emphasis on technique is more relaxed, but not the production and editing of the image, with jumps from negative to positive and the use of different distortion lenses. The sculptor, Arturo Baltar, and his work in clay inspired the choice of this element instead of "air", which led him to Galicia. However, Val de Omar would never finish the film. In one audio recording he referred to his powerlessness to finish of the piece, owing to its "purely tragic" quality, to its entailing a "negative statement, incapable of being communicated" In 1995, the artist, film-maker and poet, Javier Codesal, reconstructed and completed the film, based on the notes and that attempts at production and audio that Val del Omar has made before his death.

Throughout his work, Val del Omar offered an open, poetic notion of the documentary, as well as a reflection and practice on cinema as an experience. His film work revolved around the invention of devices and the making of films which promoted a total experience, involving all the senses, which would take the form of what he called the "Picto-Luminic Audio Tactile" unit.

The PLAT Laboratory was the space in which the final stage of Val del Omar's work would be focused, a *sin fin* in a state of continual flux. This is where the film-maker would spend the final years of his life, concentrating on the production of a body of audio-visual variations, texts and collages, kept in their original location until 2010, when they were moved to the halls of the Reina Sofía Museum.



Aguaspejo granadino, 1953–1955

© Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga



Fuego en Castilla (Táctil Visión del páramo del espanto), 1958–1960
© Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga

Since the nineteen thirties, Val del Omar had acquired and kept an endless number of devices in the laboratories of the different institutions where he worked, such as the Experimental Electro-acoustic Laboratory he founded for Spanish National Radio (1948), or the one he established in the Experiments and Research Section of the Official School of Cinema (1963). His relationship with the film industry and with the institutions was marked by a series of failures and misunderstandings which would result in his home, in the Colonia de los Cármenes in Madrid, being transformed into the location for storing these machines. In 1977, after the death of his wife, M^ª Luisa Santos, Val del Omar moved to a studio in the El Pilar district, where he lived, surrounded by the “garden of machinery” until his death in 1982.

There he created a experiment and life workshop, where he amassed and tinkered with devices, tools and work materials. In the PLAT we find numerous objects which illustrate his career and which can also be seen photographed and reproduced in his collages: his cameras, from the film camera used in the Pedagogic Missions in the nineteen thirties, to the video he used at the end of his life; objects related with the film-maker, such as the Debie film copier and the production console; super-8 projectors, slide projectors and adiscopes (tetra-projection machines adapted by Val del Omar during his time in ENOSA (National Optics Company); a multitude of lenses, and even a laser, one of the first on sale in Spain.

The core of the PLAT lab was the “Trick”, a complex trick photography console, manufactured entirely by Val del Omar, from the basic structure to the projection device activated by means of a mixing console designed to control the mechanism. A Fresnel rear-projection screen, set in the centre of a large black cloth separated the work he conducted on each side of the same.

On one side of the Trick, the slide projectors and modified adiscopes simultaneously projected fixed images. To alter their aspect and endow them with movement, Val del Omar passed light through different filters, hand-painted crystals and motor-driven revolving lenses designed by himself. He also aimed the projectors at still lives of everyday objects which can still be found in his laboratory, such as the pomegranates, plaster sculptures, sea shells and mannequins. While on the other side of the screen the resulting images were filmed, photographed or recorded on video, resulting in twin compositions and altered images which comprised experimental essays geared towards the longed-for PLAT unit.

In his final years, living and working in the PLAT, Val del Omar filled his texts with an overall reflection on the sense of his work and of the key themes, such as time, culture and the media. The numerous collages he produced, understood as another form of writing, and the use of montages of images and ideas, reflect this concern and comprise another part of this corpus of unfinished pieces. This work in process, along with essays, tests, fragments, notes and images, make sense understood as a



Laboratorio PLAT, 1975–1982. The PLAT Lab original site, partial view. © Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga and © Raúl Lorenzo Cano, fotógrafo

network of ideas and plastic offerings which are inter-related and completed by each other. Many of his collages revolve around the notion of mechamysticism, technology, the media and the information society, and are indebted to the ideas of Marshal McLuhan. One of these in particular, *Untitled* (referred to as *Where is Spanish going?*), superimposes two images taken from the press and incorporates a message in the form of a question: “Where is Spanish going?”, returning inevitably to the reflection on language and word as transmitters of culture, present in the text of the *Hispanic Phoneme Corporation*.

Cristina Cámara Bello

VAL DEL OMAR’S NEW JOURNEY: FROM PEDAGOGIC MISSIONS TO THE MECHAMYSTICISM OF CINEMA

In 2015, the selection from the Val de Omar repository, exhibited between 2012 and 2014 in the rooms of the collection in the Reina Sofía Museum, embarked on its tour of 3 Spanish museum institutions and, in 2016, it will be taken to a number of foreign institutions. This is not the first time that Val del Omar’s work has travelled both within and outside Spain: one highly significant example, under the name of *Galaxia VdO*, was sponsored by the Cervantes Institute in a number of its cultural centres in the USA, Europe and North Africa between 2002 and 2004.

If the truth be told, Val del Omar has always been well accustomed to voyages of discovery, beyond the *terra firma* of the consolidated and explored. In the 1956 Berlin Film Festival, the astonishment and fascination aroused by the screening of *Aguaespejo granadino* [*Water-Mirror of Granada*] led to his being labelled the “Schönberg of the camera”. A little later, in 1961, the Cannes film Festival recognised the technical innovations of tactile-vision in *Fuego en Castilla* [*Fire in Castile*]. But perhaps more important than these foreign forays were the journeys which, 30 years before, the young Val del Omar made to the deepest Spain, with the Spanish Republic’s Pedagogic Missions. There, alongside many other lay missionaries, such as Luis Cernuda, Rafael Dieste, Ramón Gaya



Anónimo: *Misiones pedagógicas. José Val del Omar en la plaza de Pedraza (Segovia) rodeado de niños, 1933*
© Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga

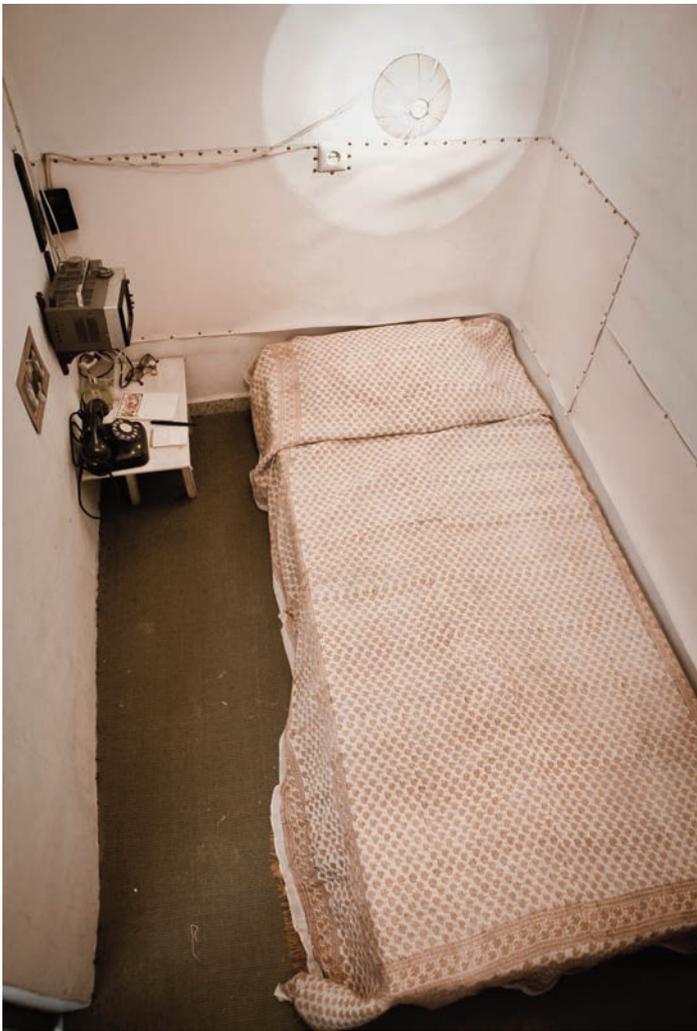
and María Zambrano, Val del Omar for the first time taught cinema, records, libraries and culture to the humblest of people in the most isolated of villages. This experience was ever present in Val del Omar's life and work.

All these voyages, both internal and external, transformed Val del Omar into a pioneering explorer, and a visionary discoverer of those visual arts which will end up being unveiled in the 21st-century, transcending the narrative cinema that fills our screens, both large and small, all over the world. Val del Omar, both in life (Granada 1904) and in death (a car accident, Madrid 1982) was constantly travelling, envisioning that which cannot be seen or heard; that is, the ineffable, that which is revealed to oneself, in short, mysticism. Just as Paul Valéry, Val del Omar believed that "that which is not ineffable is of no importance" which explains why he was barely interested in film-makers, inhabitants of *terra firma*, many of them mere "repetitive monkeys" or translators of constantly repeated literary stories. His cinema, which combines the historical avant-gardes of the nineteen-thirties and the more recent ones from the end of the twentieth century, transcends cinema itself: it is a multimedia art, a work in continual progress, which he called Picto-Luminic Audio Tactile. In his PLAT laboratory of the seventies and early eighties, he started

along the route towards the twenty-first century: the origin of his technical skills still lay in the everyday elements of nature—in creatures, rocks and plants, crystals, flowers and colours—but he constantly, *endlessly*, transcended them, since, as he would say, "the distance between clay and electronics can only be bridged by mysticism".

However, we need to be careful with Val del Omar's mysticism: it has more to do with a cosmic context than with religion. In this regard, the Hindu-Catalan, engineer-philosopher, whom he so admired, Salvador Pániker, warned (in the prologue to *Ínsula Val del Omar*, CSIC, 1995): "He is not a man who adopts any institutional religion, rather he is a mystic; that is, someone for whom the absolute or divine is not the object of belief but something to be *experienced*. Val del Omar is fully aware that mysticism and religion must not be confused, and he understands individual human life within a cosmic context, and is fascinated by the view of many subatomic scientists".

In another book by the same author, published in the year of Val del Omar's death, the latter, with his green marker pen, underlines: "the mystical is virtually the opposite of the religious"; if the essence of religion is to endow the universe with sense, "the mystical is practically the opposite: it is the



Laboratorio PLAT, 1975–1982. View of Val del Omar's cell-sleeping quarters.
 © Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga
 © Raúl Lorenzo Cano, photographer

shadow of any world view, the permanence of chaos, of liberty and origin... the mystical is the very force of chaos, that which enables man to be astounded without limits or to feel unbounded desire”.

If the young Val del Omar of the Pedagogic Missions was a “lay missionary”, the later Val del Omar, the one of the PLAT laboratory, was undoubtedly a “lay mystic”. This apparent oxymoron is explained for us by the great Galician poet and essayist, José Ángel Valente: “In his descent on language (in Val del Omar’s case, audio-visual language) mystical experience demolishes language to take it to an extreme of maximum tension, to the point at which silence and word contemplate each other from the opposite sides of a vacuum which is at the same time both unsilenceable and unsayable”.

In the impossible life of the later Val del Omar—in his tiny cell where he slept alongside the “garden of machines” in the PLAT—, in his impossible, unfinished audio-visual work, he borders on experiences which have no name but which nonetheless, in truth, exist. Val del Omar expresses this clearly in a handwritten document which covers his whole life, from the young lay missionary to the never-elderly, lay mystic:

KEY IDEA [the underlining is Val del Omar’s]

When I was 20 years of age, terrified of the idea of death, behind me I heard someone shout: Rejoice if you walk along the pathway seeking God! And what was God? The Creator of the Universe...? ... my handhold to keep myself from dying... ?

I spent over half a century imploring him, (like St. John of the Cross) “to reveal His presence to me, even if His beauty should kill me”. (I wanted to be a flame and not rock)

I dreamt, that I was following His trail among the small print, but a blinding flash between Wholeness and Nothingness, which left me paralysed, made me feel Him from so open... Hidden.

I sensed a silent God Eternal, transparent time, bereft of matter or shape, colourless, with neither taste nor boundary. From so close, impalpable. From so absolute, invisible. And it was my eyes that had stopped me from seeing his face.

Only after traversing the years did I feel his existence. Indeed, only by traversing 40 years in one second, in generic anxiety, did I feel, in the vacuum and at the pinnacle, His transparency and His smile at the same time.

My God is the solid firmament, the mute state of all the tremors which make the Universe dance.

My God is Time

Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga
 Co-Founder, along with María José Val del Omar, of the
 Archivo Val del Omar

ACARIÑO (THE CARESS) OF THE DARK SHADOW...

Acariño of the dark shadow, the essence of Galicia
A house made of old clay
A sign appears (a sign with a pulsating shadow).
All about the negatives of an artists' association
It begins with books about the waters...

Previous introduction:

This cinegraphic work was created in 1961, culminating a basic Tryptich on Spain.

Aguaespejo granadino (The water mirror of Granada), *Fuego en Castilla* (Fire in Castile) and this *Acariño Galaico* (Galician Caress) offered the water, fire, and earth of three Spanish regions, Andalusia, Castile and Galicia.

But this *Acariño* had to wait over 20 years for the magical inspiration that would lead to its mounting as a piece that had blossomed from poetic essence. This poetic essence was the result of 3 years (33–35) of constant contact with the people of the region, through Pedagogical Missions in those corners of the earth, accompanied by Rafael Dieste, Sánchez Barbudo, Lugrís and Luís Cernuda and after having made 4 documentary films depicting *Santiago*, *Finisterre*, *Museo del Pueblo* (The Museum of the People) and *Guiñol Gallego* (Galician Puppet Theatre).

The current film depicts the years that have past, slowing down the motion and using modern coordination.

It is not a medium-length film, more or less documentary in nature.

Once again, the author has felt the need for sincerity—to be himself—, although such crystallization has led him away from the standard equilibrium.

Acariño is the persistent caress of the dark shadow so deeply felt by Rosalía.

I dedicate it to the these Galicians: Rafael Dieste, Arturo Baltar, Enrique Massó and García Sabel.

If I had to define my purpose, I would say that I was illuminated by the magic of the dark Shadow of Rosalía.

Acariño is an audiovisual without words – an invocation.

The continuity of the exhibition of *Acariño* goes like this:

We were made of the clay
And the fire of life
We are being sapped of
Laughter and tears.

The first Galician film I found in 1925 was *La Virgen de cristal* (The Glass Virgin), made with tender, loving care by the Piñeiro brothers.

An invocation to the water that makes fruits blossom.



Illustration for the credits of *Aguaespejo granadino*, 1953–1955
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CGAC

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MINISTERIO DE EDUCACIÓN, CULTURA Y DEPORTE



Obra Social "la Caixa"

José Val del Omar

Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga