

Straight on to the Left. Avant-Garde in a Different Key

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Are we on a paved road to progress? Do we believe in progress, still? Do we run after a chimera? Do progress and change amount to the same thing? Can we go back, must we look back, if we want to achieve something new? Over more than a century the slogan of progress has been the rhetoric guide for political and social movements, for industrial and economic developments. To the common man of today the term seems a bit exhausted. And yet, the manufacturers of automobiles, the standard advertisements of technical innovations or the road-side posters to the airports of some former socialist states still try to make us believe that the wheel into the future is turning forward, faster, and with less effort.

The spokesmen of progression in art history - instead of writing over the watermark ›progress‹ - had a more flexible hand in defining the notions of change. When they contemplated on departures from accomplished positions and attitudes, the comprehensive label of ›avant-garde‹ - once it had been coined - came silently to their convenience; it sounded better, like a self-confident declaration: here are the forerunners, pavers of new ways, the cohorte of trail-blazing innovators. The various avant-gardes of the past one hundred-odd years were headlined, rather than by the single denominator of ›progress‹, by individual names - such as modernist, impressionist, symbolist, realist, surrealist, expressionist, futurist, constructivist, cubist, abstractionist, abstract expressionist, minimalist, processionalist, actionist, conceptionalist, post-modernist. All these qualifications implied - in one way or the other - a specific rejection or overhaul of preceding movements and of tradition in general. Invisibly, they paid their own reverence to an idea of progress.

In his new film *Avenida Progreso*, which actually is his twenty minutes' début as a filmmaker, Mauricio Guillén offers a number of clues regarding the artist's relation to the problems of progress, to the concept of ›avant-garde‹, and to the question of how in the early stages of his career as a fish monger in art he might ›throw his own herings on the market‹. Before tackling with the wider implications openly announced by the title of the film, it may be useful to take a quick glance at the means by which the author approaches his destination point: a real street in Mexico City by the name Avenida Progreso.

Reduced to its bone-structure, the film is a sequence of outdoor movements, a long travelling passage, framed by two shorter, more or less motionless indoor scenes at the beginning and at the end. Both indoor scenes unroll at a single location: a university classroom in which a professor for philosophy and aesthetics holds his final exams. The first indoor scene shows a blackboard, - mimicry of a monochrome painting? - onto which the teacher's hand chalks up a Balzacian proposition: ›Anything that aims at an effect is bad taste‹. In the last indoor scene, the professor wipes the proposition out - until nothing remains but the monochrome black of the board. Acoustically, both framing scenes are preceded by the sharp ring of a school bell, which in turn is preceded in the first scene by a muddle of classmates' break noises.

Once Balzac's aphorism is on the wall (and before the outdoor travelling, the ›road movie‹ sets in), the camera captures a few classroom situations: two students, one female, one male, sitting at their respective desks - apparently the last candidates in the room - and the teacher behind his podium. Both students are differently involved in their examination questions: the girl struggling with a typical quiz question; the young man sliding idly his pen through his fingers over an empty sheet of paper. Subsequently, both candidates are discharged in a different manner - the girl exits with a teacher's remark about her lovely shoes, while the young man, requested to hand in his papers, is snubbed by the professor's remark that knowledge will not fall from the stars, if one has not acquired it the year before.

The dismissal of the candidates is replicated, when the professor - after packing up the examination papers into his briefcase - is about to catch a taxi outside the campus, right where the two students are now smoking a joint: The girl takes a condescending look at the teacher's shoes; and the young man blows hash smoke into the professor's face. His contempt - for teacher and apparently the whole educational system - is amplified later on in the film, when we find out that he has enriched his empty exam paper with a 5000 peso note as a bribe, wrapped in a handwritten message saying: ›The more you explain the less I learn.‹

The outdoor encounter of teacher and students is not the first exterior sequence. Leaving the staircase of the school building, the professor turns left on the street, passes from right to left the grandiose murals by David Alfaro Siqueiros, entitled: ›El pueblo à la universidad, y la

universidad al pueblo», and proceeds leftward along a half-empty parking lot, where he stops a taxi passing by in leftward direction. The long taxi ride through the city that follows is also dominated by a movement from right to left, interrupted only by some back-, front-, side- and mirror-shots that structure the conversation and silent interactions between driver and passenger, between common man and frustrated intellectual.

This unidirectional movement leftward can be seen in two ways: in a political sense (see below) and in a dialectical sense - as a pictorial counterpart to the direction of reading a scripted text, where the eyes - at least in the Western way of writing (in Arabic books, for instance, it is the reverse) - move over the page from left to right, while turning the page is from right to left. The dominant movement of Guillén's film, in other words, stands in formal opposition to our habits of reading and writing. This antithetic stance reaches its contrapuntal peak in a part of the taxi ride where the leftward movement strokes over a string of street names: all of them names of well known writers such as Hegel, Schiller, Sophocles, Descartes, Dante, E. Kant, Victor Hugo, Michelet, Goethe, Tolstoi, Lord Byron, Aristoteles, Edgar Allen Poe, Carlos Dickens, Juan de la Fontaine, and ending with Gutenberg, the inventor of the movable type and father of the printed book. (Ironically, this name is misprinted as Gutemberg). The string of authors' names seen in the film from right to left, i.e. read against the grain, is not fictional, for each name designates a real street in the Polanco quarter of Mexico City.

This serial stringing together of names alludes to and inverts another artist's work: Lothar Baumgarten's *Accès aux Quais - Tableaux Parisiens* of 1986. In this piece Baumgarten had drawn on a long wall of the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris the Métro stations of Line No 9 - in the graphic design of the subway map. However, he replaced some of the station names - especially those that had an imperial, a colonial or martial ring about them - by those of Indian tribes (MicMac, Tarahumara, Tupac Amaru), of ethnographic writers (Jean de Léry, Georg Forster, Alfred Métraux, Pierre Clastres), or artists in foreign environments (Frans Post, Charles-Alexandre Lesueur). With these foisted replacements the real Métro Line became a fictitious one, an alternative system of signifiers, thwarting the name-giving intentions of the Great Nation builders.

The leftward travelling of the taxi in Guillén's film is modified in the last section of the journey. While the main direction in this less classy part of town is straight forward, the passenger requests the driver four times in succession to turn left at an intersection. The names of the streets given by the teacher as directional guides to the taxi man (once again real street names of Mexico City) sound like symptoms: ›Turn left on Stalin... make a left turn at the next crossing... make a left turn on Trotsky... when you reach Carlos Marx turn left again‹. At the last command the driver objects: ›If you want to reach Avenida Progreso, you have to turn right on Carlos Marx. I may not be a philosopher, but these streets I know like the palm of my hand.‹ It would be hard, not to give these statements a political twist, even if their meaning remains obscure.

The confusion is increased, irrespective of the big names in the socialist lineage, by the simple fact that three successive turns to the left would bring the traveller back to where he started; a fourth turn to the left would bring him exactly into the same direction he took, before he started his several left turns; and a final right turn, as suggested by the driver, would make him go back in the direction from where he came. It is a situation like that in Beckett's *Molloy*, where the crippled hero has entered a forest and tries, by applying all sorts of common sense and geometrical calculation, to get out of it again - to no avail. So where do you get, if you turn left all the time? And if you turn once to your right at Karl Marx, you may end on the Avenue of Progress, which is, as the film shows, full of rubbish. Progress is Rubbish - finis.

The problem with leftist politics in contemporary Mexico is that the voices one hears on the official platforms do not correspond in any way with what one may read in the classical analytical texts of Marx and other social thinkers. One such public voice comes over the radio during the taxi ride to Avenida Progreso; it is the croaking babble of Elba Esther Gordillo, leader of the National Education Workers' Union; in her speech, delivered in the Presidential Palace on the occasion of Teacher's Day (the day of the film's calendrical dating), she stumbles over a single word - ›epidemiological‹ - which she fails to pronounce in a series of slapstick attempts; this radio sound suffices to get a picture of her intellectual disposition. Stupidity, corruptibility and megalomania – the Holy Trinity of Mexican politics – finds its expression also in the cultural domain, as exemplified in a museum building, which the film

refers to without showing it: the brand new Museo Soumaya, a Geary imitate, built by the son-in-law of Mexico's richest tycoon and maecenas, Carlos Slim. Looking out of the window with disgust, the aesthetics professor calls it a ›twisted honeycomb without honey and without bees‹.

As here, with an indirect statement about a monstrous monument of contemporary architecture contrasting to the previously depicted mural of Siqueiros, Guillén in the course of his film sends out a number of aesthetic messages, unobtrusively and casually. One such indirect statement concerns his preferences in literature - it is the list of writers whose street signs he has strung together. In regard to music his taste can be deduced from the composers he has chosen to furnish his moving pictures with tunes: Arnold Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht 1st and 5th movement* and Florian Hecker's *logica_S_4'* – both pieces by composers in different times in search for new sound experiences – one revolutionary in the harmonic idiom, the other experimental in the atomized composition of noises. And the visual arts? In regard to film the author's aesthetic position is manifested in the way he has made it.

At first sight one may say that *Avenida Progreso* is a highly conventional piece of work, retrospective even, and distinctly anti-trendy. The film is programmatically old-fashioned. Several facts speak in favour of this qualification. First of all, a decisive move away from the digital and back to celluloid: The film was shot with a classical 16mm film camera (Arri SR2) on black & white negative film with a subtle tone scale (Kodak Eastman Double-X 7222). Secondly, the film displays a symmetrical construction of its parts, as indicated before: a stationary first part (the classroom); an ambulant middle section (the journey); and a stationary end (the original classroom). Thirdly, the narration is straight and unilinear - no flashbacks, no offtracks, no side stories woven into the plot. Fourth, the individual takes are relatively long - no snip snap editing, no inflatory multiplication of pictures by quick shots; the author trusts the dramatic self evidence of the pictures which the camera has collected calmly. And fifth, all material objects used and seen in the film are old or outdated: the writing tools of the students, their car, the teacher's briefcase, his walkman and his tapes, the cash machine that does not spit money, the taxi he rides and the radio in it - no laptop, no iPhone, no iTunes, no contemporary cashpoint or Automated Teller Machine, no eco-friendly

Opel Zafira. It must have been difficult to assemble all these shopworn tools, even though the film was not shot in a country of hyper-fast replacement of commodities.

If one puts all this together, one must conclude that the film was made not simply as a statement against technological gadgets, but deliberately as a more general aesthetic counter, as an anti-avant-garde manifesto. This *à rebours* can be perceived even down to the typography of the initial and final credits, which are set in an old style typeface, brittle and less easy to read than a designer's sans-serif. This gestural antiquatedness Guillén shares proudly with Marcel Broodthaers, whom he declares one of his masters. Indeed Broodthaers and his cinematographic oeuvre can be seen as a smiling precursor to *Avenida Progreso*. Moreover, both artists share a predilection for graphic excavations, particularly for letters of the alphabet, turned into images. This stance of previousness has its own dynamic: you cannot be overtaken by others - by those self-styled forerunners - for you are already there. So, is there progress in art, after all? Probably not, but succession, thank heavens.