

# One Way / Dead End / No Stopping Any Time: Mauricio Guillén's *Avenida Progreso*

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In a 1977 article published on the front page of the French newspaper *Le Monde*, the poet and playwright Jean Genet, who had by then abandoned “literature” for many years, made an overtly political intervention. But as a matter of fact, its deepest political impact may not have been what seemed its immediate point, polemical though it was, and probably even harder to hear now than it was at the time. Genet’s intervention was more deeply political because it was that of a poet. The article dealt with a certain distinction that Genet claimed should be made, but was too often forgotten. Not by chance of course. A distinction within the language: the distinction between violence and brutality.

But it is not an easy distinction (or is it?). Genet had to explain. And so he did a few years later in an interview about an entirely different context. Again, the context is not particularly relevant here; but the explanation is. To clarify the distinction, Genet took examples:

If I’m brutal, just like that, on a whim or for fun, I can be brutal, but then it leads to nothing. But if I’m violent, for example when a man or a woman is raising a child, when they teach him “*A, B, C, D,*” the child whines, the child gets bored and the mother insists, “*A, B,*” she’s inflicting violence, she’s teaching him when he’d rather be playing. But it’s a good violence. The irritated mother can smack him at any moment, then she’s brutal<sup>1</sup>.

The distinction may be uneasy to grasp, and the difference easy to cross. But it is nevertheless crucial, as a direct inscription of politics in the language. All life is violent, said Genet, but there is a certain point, a very clear moment, when this violence turns into something else: brutality. Of course, the central point of Genet’s argument was to demonstrate that there could be such a thing as “good violence”, which was not the case with brutality. And when he has to explain what “good violence” can be, he takes a luminous example: education. Teaching the language. A poet’s problem. Education is by nature a violent situation, a relation between one who says he knows and one who has

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Genet, *The Declared Enemy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 245-246. For a good analysis of this question, see Hadrien Laroche, *Le Dernier Genet*, Paris, Seuil, 1997.

to admit he does not. A relation that implies using force and repetition, constraints and authority. But, says Genet, this is a good violence.

Mauricio Guillén's *Avenida Progreso* is not a film about Jean Genet of course (or is it?), but these questions are involved.

*Avenida Progreso* could be presented as commemorating something that was probably barely an event. Rather an interesting coincidence, or what Ezra Pound, another poet, may have called a "luminous detail": a small fact, hardly noticed, but revealing of a wide historical nexus. No date appears literally in the film, but it is very precisely dated. Everything happens on May 15, 2011. This was the year's "Teachers' Day" in Mexico; the day before, the richest man in the world had opened a new museum in his native city Mexico, the Soumaya Museum, presenting his own personal collection. This is in fact not even a coincidence, rather a constellation, drawn on the black sky of history by Mauricio Guillén. In a way, the film is both a commentary of the millionaire's gesture, and a comment on the state of Mexican culture it can reveal.

*Avenida Progreso*. Progress Avenue. It's hard to remember a time when such a title could have been heard without any irony. The name of a real street in Mexico City, it articulates geography with history in a double, paradoxical way: a history oriented toward an old dreamed future. Utopian hopes are here inscribed as the memory of a future coming from a distant past. An almost forgotten, but strangely familiar past. A future perfect from which the present may have disappeared.

The form of the film itself seems to come from the very same past. The lushness of the 16 mm black and white cinematography, the graininess and thickness of the silver salts combined with the transparency of the celluloid, the materiality of film giving to light this tactile, sensual dimension, also appear today on the screen as an almost forgotten, but strangely familiar experience. They point to a time when form as such could be perceived as the embodiment of a utopian force. The constant precision of the framing, the clear-cut frontality and the singular weight of the off-camera space are inscriptions, traces, remains, or ruins of this long tradition, and as such still retain something of their old aesthetic and political powers.

These formal traits have another consequence: they show Mexico as it has rarely been seen before. The black and white invalidates the usual, touristic representation of Mexico as a bright, colourful city, all drowned in the wonderful, sensual sun of Technicolor western movies. To the European eyes of what Noel Burch called "the

distant observer," *Avenida Progreso* makes Mexico City look much closer to a European town than we would have thought possible. In fact, this road-movie that takes us all through the Central American town, from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México to, as the teacher asks the taxi driver "the end of Avenida Progreso," shows us almost nothing of the place. A film about Mexico City, its streets and its history, it deliberately and conspicuously leaves all of it off-camera, showing only the rare, essential signs that will build the context—particularly street name signs. When the brand new museum is described by the main character, asking the taxi driver what that strange recently-built construction may be, no shot will let us see this gigantic "twisted honeycomb, without honey and without bees". The building itself is left to our imagination, but the cryptic and rather strange descriptions that we hear won't suggest any flattering image of the edifice, nor maybe any coherent one. *Avenida Progreso* crosses the new museum out of the Mexico City maps it had barely entered.

The cab ride across town constitutes the majority of the film, but the town remains largely invisible. We are locked in that strange space: a car. Outside, but inside, both open and closed. The camera keeps its attention for the main character, the professor: his face, his neck, his eyes, his hair, his body locked up in his suit, his gravity or his disgust. The rare things we can see of the exterior are the traffic through the windscreen, acting as a frame within the frame; and when sounds from the world come in through the radio, the professor shuts himself up by putting on his earphones and playing some music. Only thanks to music becomes the professor physically able to look out through the window frames and watch the streets outside. Total openness to the world is unbearable in the present state of things: we need some degree of closure. The car is the locus of that mode of existence.

Another frame creates an essential obstacle between the professor and the spectator's gaze(s) toward the outside: the rear-view mirror. This complex network of frames and windows, oriented in different directions, as well as the importance of the character's neck reminds us of another film based on a long travel through a city in a car: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's 1972 *Geschichtsunterricht (History Lessons)*. Long shots on necks are quite rare in film history; representing a character who won't let himself be seen by a close attention to a precise part of his body, they give pride a political value through its potential eroticization.

The rear-view mirror is a crucial, pivotal element in the construction of *Avenida Progreso*. The editing is entirely organized around this concrete artefact, characteristic of the car considered as a visual apparatus. The exchanges of gazes between the teacher-passenger and the driver happen only through the mediation of this small mirror, creating a peculiar situation where the eyeline drawn in the profilmic space is literally broken, and where the cinematic space gets folded, as it were, on the axis objectified by the rear-view mirror. Mauricio Guillén accentuates the tension, if not the violence, of this situation by the use of subjective shots, organizing the camera positions so that when a character gazes at the other, he in fact looks through the mirror straight in the camera lens. So the mirror becomes a hinge in the construction and the editing of the scene. This complex disposition gives the spectator a singular position in the exchange: right in the middle, relentlessly implied and summoned to take a stance by each character, and at the same time at an angle, bearing witness to this sort of class struggle placing itself on the level of culture and education, and coming to a surprising end.

But the position of the witness I invoke here might suggest a sort of impartiality in the filmic treatment of each opponent. This is not the case. This cab ride is the moment when the spectator gets closer to the protagonist, not to say the hero, of the film: this white-haired professor of philosophy and aesthetics. We follow him through the town, to a destination only he knows. We share his money troubles, his humiliations, his disgust for ruling stupidity, his love for Schönberg's music. We may not share all his positions, nor understand all he says, but we are with him. On the other hand, we never even see the driver's face. He is constantly kept off the screen; all we can see of him are his two eyes floating above the traffic, framed by the rear-view mirror within the windscreen, glancing at us from time to time. So the film is in a certain way biased, granting a radical privilege to the main character. But in fact, a very interesting inversion occurs. The position of the driver in the film is absolutely central: he is always the one who provokes the dialogue, who asks questions, the professor remaining apparently more inclined to silence. He didn't choose the destination, but he is the one who actually drives (as Gil Scott-Heron sang quite some time ago, "The revolution *will* put you in the driver's seat"), the professor finally admitting that he can't. The driver's persistent absence from the shots and in contrast the importance of the subjective shots taken from his point of view make him the real (secret) positive force at the heart of the film. The global configuration allows his figure to become crucial for the film while

remaining anonymous. He has no face, no discernable individuality; he had no education; he had, as the teacher suggests, not much flour to offer to the mills of distinction. The invisible driver is almost no-one, could be anyone, the people. The rear-view mirror revealing only his eyes becomes a mask, like the balaclava worn by the last mythical revolutionary figure, the Mexican *subcomandante Marcos*. In fact, the taxi driver's part could have been played by Marcos without any changes having to be made to structure of the film.

But describing *Avenida Progreso* as a simple struggle between the ruling/teaching class and the progressive uneducated but enlightened working class would be betraying the film. It would also be forgetting Genet's lesson.

The film begins with an entirely black screen: a board, on which the teacher writes a sentence with a piece of chalk—a translation from Balzac's 1830 *Treatise on Elegant Living*. The film will end with the same frame, the hand erasing this time the sentence, making *Avenida Progreso* appear as a lecture on a certain theme (elegance?), or a classroom exercise. The spectator, here, becomes a student, the subject of the experiment, as in Brecht's *Lehrstücke*, which were meant to be acted as the study of a particular problem, and not represented in front of an audience.

The theme here, almost in the musical sense, is elegance, but the problem is education. Two students are left in the empty room: they must now hand in the year's final examination. The woman gives in and walks out with a polite word, while the man shows more irritation, and complies only when the teacher makes a hard remark. After having left the classroom, the professor meets the two students again in the University parking lot, where they don't hide anymore their contempt for the teacher. The young man goes as far as throwing cigarette smoke at his face. The teacher receives this smoke isolated in a close shot, looking straight into the camera before turning his eyes away. Again, this organization of the gaze creates an important ambiguity: is this a subjective shot taken from the young man's point of view? Still, the smoke doesn't look like coming from the camera itself, but at a certain angle. Is the teacher then simply looking at us, spectators, silently asking us to bear witness to the brutality inflicted to him?

The first scene in the classroom—its quality of black and white, the old fashioned teacher, the board and the platform, a certain close-up of the teacher's hands on his desk—is strongly reminiscent of another of Huillet and Straub's films, *En rachâchant*

(1982), after the Marguerite Duras 1971 tale for children entitled *Ah! Ernesto*. The story begins as a simple, though complicated, situation:

Ernesto has gone to school for the first time. When he comes home, he goes straight to his mother and says to her: "I'm never going back to that place!"

His mother stops peeling the potato in her hand. She looks at him. "Why?" she asks.

"Because!" says Ernesto. "Because at school they teach me things that I don't know!"<sup>2</sup>

Ernesto refuses the teaching situation as such, he simply won't be taught. How will he learn then? Anyway. "En rachâchant," a verb which does not exist in the French language, but suggests the natural repetition of life itself as a basic educational principle.

In the Duras story, and in the Straubs' film, Ernesto embodies a revolt against the seclusion, the dogmas, the intellectual smallness imposed by a conservative education. And the adults, teacher and parents, finally admit that after all, this education is not *that* necessary. But it could be argued that the story lacks the political lucidity implied by Genet's distinction, which Ernesto precisely won't make. For the boy, there is no such thing as good violence: all teaching is brutality, it "leads to nothing".

It could also be argued that Ernesto is the historical winner of that struggle. In the present state of culture, his subversive force has gone to pieces: Ernestos are everywhere, alive and kicking, a new ruling class. *Avenida Progreso* can be read as the history of that victory.

The two students here are Ernestos. They react to education as though it were nothing but a form of humiliation, a meaningless brutality. But in fact, the real (political) question here is: where is violence, and where brutality?

The teacher's part could have been played by Theodor W. Adorno without any changes having to be made to the film: the culture that this professor of aesthetics wants to transmit to his students is a "high" culture—Balzac, Schönberg. Adorno knew something about elegance and the politics of taste, as all his writing—his philosophy and his literary style—are here to testify. Adorno believed that "high" culture and art could have a tremendous liberating power, allowing a glimpse at forms of existence and beauty whose radical difference from capitalist modes of being was in itself a revolutionary force. He believed Schönberg could really save the world. The practical definition of elegance by Balzac inscribed by the teacher on the board as the opening

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<sup>2</sup> Marguerite Duras, *Ah! Ernesto*, Paris, Harlin Quist/Ruy Vidal, 1971.

theme of *Avenida Progreso* somewhat echoes these questions: “Everything that aims at an effect is bad taste”. Aiming at an effect is a capitalist stance, a capitalist aesthetic system, in which an investment has to be made profitable. But on the other hand, the very idea of “bad taste” is perceived today as a brutality: every taste has to be considered good, and as a corollary: taste cannot and must not be educated. And if all modernist art is based on the idea that spectatorship implies curiosity, tolerance, patience, and a certain amount of intellectual work, then perhaps all modernist art has to be thrown away. This would be the exact task of the *Kulturindustrie*.

But in *Avenida Progreso*, the problem is more complicated. The professor’s culture is not only a “high” culture, it is also a European one: Balzac, Schönberg, Beau Brummell. I said earlier that nothing is shown to us of Mexico during the cab ride through the city, but there is an exception: all we see of it are an important number of street name signs, as seen from the car. These street names resonate with the film title, that appears as a sign in the last shot; and all these signs draw other obsessive frames within the frame. As usual, they bear the names of the Great Men of History: all of them here are European—Byron, Dante, La Fontaine, Aristoteles, Hegel, Michelet... Passing by in travelling shots that cannot but be perceived as subjective shots from the point of view of the teacher, the signs represent a nostalgic memory of a time when his culture was felt as important and meaningful in society at large. But the absence of Mexican names also bears witness to something else: the colonization of Mexican culture by Old Europe. Even the Great Men of the history of political liberation that appear on the signs named in the film are European: Marx, Trotski. As a contrast, the radio speech by Elba Esther Gordillo, president of the Mexican Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, in honour of the Teachers’ Day appears as a caricature of demagogy and stupidity. The brutality exhibited by the two young students is oriented against a “high” culture that is doubly foreign to them, and if the professor is perceived (or perceives himself) as being outside of their prosaic, capitalist world, he is in fact not outside of the global circulation of cultural domination.

All these problems directly involve politics, education, and of course the cinema. *Avenida Progreso* embodies their intricacy in its form through a script that builds a complicated circulation. As in Mizoguchi films, political domination can be understood by observing the flow of money. At the beginning of the cab ride, the professor asks the driver to stop by an ATM. We learn there that the professor has no money, not enough

for the ride; the driver doesn't know it, but he seems to feel something's wrong. A few moments later, back in the car, the professor takes a look at the students' exams: the young boy has given in a blank paper, bearing only the sentence: "The more you explain the less I understand", with a 5000 pesos note. At the end of the ride, the professor hesitates to use this money, the only money he has, to pay the driver. But the driver decides that the ride was free, as a gift to the professor for the Teachers' Day.

Right from the beginning of the film, the professor is defined by his symbolic superiority. He is the one who knows, who owns knowledge. This is of course the basis of his relation to the students, but the driver also immediately recognizes him as a professor, and his attempts at communicating with him are entirely oriented by what the driver feels like a clear difference in position—"Do you think that if I had gone to University I would not be a taxi driver today?" he asks. The professor's material poorness is meaningful on several levels. First, it is of course revealing of the lack of consideration for education and/or aesthetics and thought in general in contemporary societies, a quantifiable implication of what the professor is faced with. But second, it also completely reverses the power relations in the film: the professor appears as a dominant figure, but he is in fact the dominated one, at the young student's mercy. The professor does not get sufficient wages for his work in education, but the ignorant student has money, and is willing to exchange it for his lack of learning. This bribe is of course a way for Mauricio Guillén to criticize a tendency to use corruption as a universal tool; but it also confronts a theory of elegant living to tangible humiliation and necessity. Again, the taxi driver represents here a positive force: aware or not of the professor's difficulties, he opposes the student's bribe with the gift, and solves the professor's dilemma, perhaps through a last humiliation. Thus, the driver becomes not only financially, but also morally superior to the professor who couldn't admit to him his lack of money. The inversion is finally complete: throughout the film, the driver had talked to the professor with respect and admiration; in the end, he leaves the academic with the worse possible insult: "Ignorant!"

As in Mizoguchi films, politics embodies itself in everyday life as moral problems. Is corruption the ultimate "bad taste", the unforgivable way stupidity and ignorance have found to succeed in our dark times, pure brutality? Or is it a violent but somehow fair response to the brutality of other forms of power—cultural colonization for instance, or the professor's contempt for his students as it would appear through his



lack of interest for teaching itself, for pedagogy, for making his knowledge accessible to the younger people? The spectator's limited familiarity with the characters and the individual situations leaves her with the impossibility to decide for sure, to resolve the problem in a satisfying, comforting way. We have to deal with the complexity of the problem as such. Ending with the Balzac sentence erased from the black board makes it clear that presenting the spectator with a problem was precisely the aim of *Avenida Progreso*. This problem may be quite difficult, perhaps insoluble; but trying to solve only easy problems can be considered particularly bad taste.

Though there might be, or might have been, a solution. It appears not at the end of the film, but close to the beginning. After the professor has left the classroom, and before he meets his students again for the confrontation, we follow him a little while, walking alone through an empty University campus. At a certain moment, we see him, in a splendid shot, passing slowly underneath a gigantic mosaic wall, whose relief is emphasized by the bright sunlight. It shows, in a dynamic perspective, several characters stretching out their arms in front of them, all looking in the same direction, holding students' tools: pads, pencils, a compass and a model. One seems to smile, but the others look serious: this is hard work. A violent situation. But still, those stretched arms are infinitely welcoming, and they show something quite extraordinary: desire. Something here is reminiscent of Augustine's *libido sciendi*, the deep, almost physical desire for knowledge. Looking at them, very close, another character, obviously the teacher, is stretching his arms too, but in both directions, probably indicating a line to follow or exemplifying some enigmatic problem in space, but also somehow giving the impression he embraces the other characters. Behind his shoulder, as though walking on his arm, a crowd is shown demonstrating. A violent, political situation.

This work is the only monument of Mexico City shown in *Avenida Progreso*. The map of the city drawn by the film, filled with street names, has "forgotten" the new museum, but it replaces this brand new "gift" to the Mexican people by an older one, still there, and more important. It was constructed from 1952 to 1956 on a building of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México by a Mexican artist, David Siqueiros. This name does not appear on any street sign. The work is entitled "El pueblo a la Universidad y la Universidad al pueblo". The people to the University and the University to the people. It probably is hard to remember a time when such a title could have been heard without irony. Or cynicism. Or sadness. Even though, from another point of view,

this is exactly what happened. A historical victory. Or is it? The slow, tired walk of the professor, in *Avenida Progreso*, his dignified bended body crushed down under the enormous mosaic tells that story. Siqueiro's workers then appear somewhat like another *Angelus Novus*, the Angel of History that Walter Benjamin saw in Paul Klee's work, flying backwards towards the future, his eyes turned to the past.

The utopian force in the Mexican artist's mosaic points to a past future. *Avenida Progreso*, showing it in a black and white film today, digs up new future possibilities in this almost forgotten but strangely familiar past. If there is violence in the film, tension and rage, humiliation and death, it stems from this very act. Digging up is difficult, especially in the geologically charged soil of history: it requires and produces violence. And we will have to decide whether our bodies and our intellects, our eyes and ears, can cope with that violence without confounding it with a brutality.