

Film
Studies

Short Film Studies

Volume 1 Number 2



ENRIC BOU
Brown University

Overcoming darkness: *Alumbramiento*'s journey towards illumination

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the important role that light plays throughout the film. The title itself, and the film's plot, stress the fact that everything is told in reverse, with oxymoronic elements playing a significant role. This is also the case with a celebrated poem by Vicente Aleixandre, 'Ven siempre ven', among other works, in which the title's imperative sentence is negated by what follows.

KEYWORDS

short film
Spanish film
death
oxymoron
alumbramiento
symbolist poetical
language

Eduardo Chapero-Jackson's powerful short film *Alumbramiento* (2007) depicts a process of illumination, one that in the end overcomes darkness. In the title itself and in the unfolding of the plot we follow a progression towards light. This is a film that does not leave the viewer untouched. In my view, what is most remarkable is that both the title itself and the film's plot stress the fact that everything is told in reverse, from darkness into light (the title) and back to darkness at the film's ending, with oxymoronic elements playing a significant role.

This is also the case in other artworks and texts. In a celebrated poem by Vicente Aleixandre, '*Ven, siempre ven*' ('Come, Always Come', the title's imperative sentence is negated by what follows. In the first line we encounter a negation of the title's urgency. 'Come, always come' is followed by 'No

te acerques' ('Do not come close'). This oxymoronic assemblage negates the title, but at the same time starts a powerful series of metaphors based on negation in which the voice expresses fear of becoming a star depending on the sun's light. In this poem of particular eroticism, Aleixandre's voice longs for love or death, feeling a cosmic attraction for the loved one, which is presented in radical terms: love creates destruction (Daydi-Tolson 1981: 13; Murphy 2001: 254). Other similar examples would include Jeff Wall's compelling photograph *Invisible Man*, in which we see a lonely black man who rigs 1396 light bulbs sitting in a basement. This photo is meant to illustrate a scene from Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* to make the point that black men are invisible in American society. The disparity between strong light and invisibility stresses the contradiction in black men's situation in society. Similarly, in John Heartfield's shocking 1933 photomontage *Durch Licht zur Nacht/Through Light To Night* we see a photo of Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945, with a pile of books and the German Reichstag burning in the background. In this case, the sentence we read contradicts what we see in the combined photographs. In Magritte's *Empire of Light*, a dark, nocturnal street scene is set against a pastel-blue sky spotted with clouds. Sunlight, ordinarily the source of clarity, here causes the confusion and unease traditionally associated with darkness. In all these examples, as in *Alumbramiento*, there is a stark contradiction between what the 'light' in the title or the picture announces and what it really signifies, leaving the viewer/reader wondering about its actual meaning, thus starting a process of enlightenment.

Aleixandre described his poetry as a 'longing for the light'. Something similar could be said about *Alumbramiento*, and particularly of its use of oxymoronic elements. The film has a circular structure; it begins and ends in darkness. After the title word (*Alumbramiento/Lightborne*), Shot 1 surprises us with total darkness. In Shot 115 the camera travels back through the doorway, leaving the viewer with a clear vision of what has been attained. We overcome a situation of total perplexity and we are relieved of the previous tension and anxiety. This search or longing for light affects the characters and the director's approach to the plot. We can note an exploration of the hidden passions and driving forces that operate beneath the surface of consciousness at the moment of death. The film starts and ends in a darkened room and what we see in-between is a transition towards light. This is stressed particularly by Shots 2 and 14 by the guiding street lights, which interact with the silent couple in the darkness of the car, the night and their lack of affection. Right in the middle of the film, the passage of time and evocations of death are punctuated by very dark still shots of a clock, a dead butterfly, old pictures and toys (montage sequence, Shots 60–64), with Shot 65 marking a new awakening and a total mood change which leads to a resolution.

The circular structure stresses the contrast between darkness and light, at the physical level and at a metaphorical one. The director has stated that 'The old crystal doors were very important for me, creating that effect of light and darkness' (Raskin 2009: 65). In the final travelling shot, which echoes Shot 14, we are taken back into darkness. Through the entire film darkness as death has been overcome by illumination, intelligence and rationality. The film also offers other striking contrasts: between rationality or clinical approaches to death as practised by the son, who happens to be a clueless doctor, versus a humane approach as represented by the daughter-in-law's masterful way of helping her mother-in-law to die. There

is also a major transformation: fear and revulsion provoked by death become in the end acceptance and harmony. By the end of the film we are taken back to where it all started: silence and darkness. What has changed is that the initial shot's darkness may be now what the dead person is seeing. After completing a full circle we are left in a similar situation to the one presented by Aleixandre's poem or Jeff Wall's photograph, John Heartfield's photo-montage or Magritte's painting.

Chapero-Jackson has stated that he wanted to fool the viewer and instead of preparing for the arrival of a new life – what the word '*alumbramiento*' implies in Spanish – he chose to focus on the 'unfolding of the closure of an old life' (Raskin 2009: 59). He wanted to create a link from one pole to the other, like the omega of the alpha. Other questions raised by the film include 'how one person sums up the courage and humanity to guide another, who is dying in fear, to a peaceful acceptance of death' (Raskin 2009: 59). In the process of doing so the daughter-in-law aids a person at the crucial moment of facing death, 'carrying her from darkness to light' (Raskin 2009: 59). This comment by the author stresses what is indisputably the most striking feature of the film: the linking together of the beginning and end of a life through a word that in Spanish means to give birth. In short, this is a film that points to one of existence's most poignant metaphysical questions, a question without clear answers that every human being has to face at one point or another. The answer suggested by this film can be summarized in this way: to be calm and accept your destiny. It points to this answer through structural and rhetorical devices.

What makes this raising of old questions more poignant is the fact that the film-maker reaches his conclusion through ambivalence, playing with the contrast between light and darkness, and the fact that this ambivalence is stressed by the film's structure. The film is constructed around a duality. As keenly perceived by Daniel Alegi, the director extended the cinematic contrast of light and darkness to all areas of content: 'The film's apparently static locations and forms function as a delicate visual and aural layer, with particular magic in the use of duality, ambiguity and repetition' (Alegi 2009: 89). Light plays an important role throughout the film. From the opening credits, the film exhibits an atmosphere of darkness, punctuated by a recurring source of light that could be linked metaphorically to a heartbeat or a cardiogram of some kind (Kakiou Halskov 2009: 75).

From initial darkness we follow a path towards light, only to fall back into darkness when we reach the final shot. Kakiou Halskov has characterized *Alumbramiento*'s cinematic strategy as point-zero film-making, 'understood as an aesthetic reduction of dramatic, visual and verbal information' (Kakiou Halskov 2009: 74). Thus Chapero-Jackson illustrates the unspeakable nature of death and physical illness (Kakiou Halskov 2009: 78). Through its superb series of visual and conceptual oppositions, that is, through the use of an oxymoron, the film allows the main character (and viewer) to overcome darkness. It gets her (and us) ready for the final darkness: death. What we see at the beginning of the film is an awakening, the initial process to emerge from darkness. With its radical suppression of action and dialogue, and with the use of oxymoron in particular, *Alumbramiento* stresses symbolist poetical language, and presents us with the ultimate question. In the film, an invitation (*alumbramiento*) is followed by a negation (total darkness), which in the end produces a positive statement. Visually and emotionally we are now taken into the dead woman's eyes: all is dark. We are dead. And we can perceive

this through an oxymoron's characteristic fatal attraction between concepts, a figure of speech involving a paradoxical combination of apparently contradictory terms.

REFERENCES

- Alegi, D. (2009), 'Alumbramiento: the story unpredictable', *P.O.V. – A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 27, pp. 85–89.
- Chapero-Jackson, E. (2007), *Alumbramiento/Lightborne*, Madrid: Prosopopeya Producciones.
- Chen Sham, J. (2000), 'Hágase tu presencia o el simbolismo mítico-religioso de la súplica a la amada: "Ven, siempre ven" de Vicente Aleixandre', *Estudios Humanísticos. Filología*, 22, pp. 229–42.
- Daydi-Tolson, S. (ed.) (1981), *Vicente Aleixandre: A Critical Appraisal*, Ipsilanti: Bilingual Press.
- Doubinsky, S. (2009), 'In the shadow of light', *P.O.V. – A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 27, pp. 80–84.
- Ellison, R. (1952), *Invisible Man*, New York: Vintage Books.
- Heartfield, J. (1933), *Durch Licht zur Nacht/Through Light to Night*, [Photographic collage], Akademie der Kunst, Berlin.
- Kakiou Halskov, A. (2009), 'Visualizing the unspeakable', *P.O.V. – A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 27, pp. 73–79.
- Magritte, R. (1953–54), *Empire of Light*, [Oil on canvas], The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.
- Murphy, D. (2001), *Vicente Aleixandre's Stream of Lyric Consciousness*, Lewisburg, PA and London: Bucknell University Press.
- Raskin, R. (2009), 'An interview with Eduardo-Chapero Jackson on *Alumbramiento*', *P.O.V. – A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 27, pp. 59–65.
- Wall, J. (1999–2000), *After 'Invisible Man' By Ralph Ellison, The Prologue*, [Transparency in lightbox], Emmanuel Hoffmann Foundation, permanent loan to Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.

SUGGESTED CITATION

- Bou, E. (2011), 'Overcoming darkness: *Alumbramiento's* journey towards illumination', *Short Film Studies* 1: 2, pp. 215–218, doi: 10.1386/sfs.1.2.215_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Enric Bou is Professor and Chair of Hispanic Studies at Brown University. His teaching and research interests cover a broad range of twentieth-century Spanish Peninsular and Catalan literature but particularly involving poetry, autobiography, urban life and literature, and Spanish film.

E-mail: enric@brown.edu

Short Film Studies

Volume 1 Number 2

Editor's Introduction

ALUMBRAMIENTO/LIGHTBORNE,
Eduardo Chaperó-Jackson (Spain, 2007)

Articles

Articles

SUNDAY, John Lawlor (Ireland, 1988)

Articles

DERAILMENT/AVSPORING,
Unni Straume (Norway/France, 1993)

Index

ISSN 2042-7824



intellect | www.intellectbooks.com