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Julio Medem: Skin Against Stone

Julio Medem's appearance at the London Film Festival's presentation of 'Basque Ball. The Skin Against the Stone' was emotional. A week ago, the Spanish Ministry for Culture announced their intention of banning the film from national cinemas and Medem was made persona non grata at the embassy in London. Expecting a picket line outside the NFT, there was instead a mixed crowd eager to judge for themselves.

For those of us familiar with Medem's cinematic progression, the documentary, *Basque Ball*, comes as a surprise. Basqueness, we thought, was a theme he had been slowly excluding. His debut (the first film of the seasons tetralogy), 'Cows' was explicit about it, showing the people and their peculiar sports; 'The Red Squirrel' was partly filmed in San Sebastian; 'Tierra' refers to the Basque matriarchal mythology through Mari's character; whilst in 'Lovers of the Arctic Circle' and 2002's 'Sex and Lucia', Medem finally went global. By contrast, 'Basque Ball. The Skin Against the Stone' looks back into Medem's creative and human origins.

Before the screening, the director nervously warns us: "We should view this film as if we were a bird, a free bird flying over talking heads." The documentary is Medem's attempt to explain the Basque conflict. The only problem is that the two main sides – the Spanish government and ETA – decided not to participate, leaving the argument orphaned from the very beginning. 'Basque Ball. The Skin Against the Stone' is thus constructed with the colours of the spectrum of comfortable equidistance. Nationalists to philosophers, peace association representatives, lawyers, victims, musicians, socialists and sociologists have their say in small, dynamic, controversial contributions.

It is the writer Bernardo Atxaga who opens and closes the film from a long road whose end is difficult to discern. "If this conflict is resolved," says Atxaga, "all of us Basques will be walking about 20 centimetres off the floor because an enormous weight will be lifted from us". The widows and sons of three of ETA's victims, heavy with grief, recall the moments they will never forget and explain how they live with their losses. From outside a typical Basque house, sociologist Javier Elzo, makes his contribution. Within the frame, next to him, there's another man, bulky, unknown, his back to us. It is after seeing him many times that we get a sense of who he is; ETA has menaced Elzo so much that he has to live chained to his bodyguard. Xabier Arzallus, President of the PNV (Basque nationalists who also condemn violence) presents himself as the ogre everyone makes fun of. Eduardo Medina, 27, general secretary of the Basque Young Socialists, who lost a leg to a bomb in 2001, relates, bearing no grudge, how lucky he feels, even though he will never practice sports again.

Medem traces Basqueness through its culture, in particular, the films approaching terrorism from a fictional point of view. However, other films, like Taberna's 'Yoyes', Armendariz's 'Tasio' or Uribe's 'Dias Contados' were not given the same bludgeoning campaign received by Medem. He is accused of failing to make a point, of not being objective and of stirring things that should be left alone. To me, all of these criticisms miss their target. With great courage, Medem shows a bipolar inhumanity: terrorists with wife and children, politicians accused of state crimes, people afraid of other people, solidarity, parliamentarians sustaining difficult arguments. In one and half hours, we see everything: from the creation of ETA in the 70's to the Basque government's plan to organise a referendum (October 2003). The problem is bigger and more complex than we realised and Medem is responsible for pointing this out.

What is especially moving about the film and where it is most successful is in showing the beauty of the Basque country, his own. After Atxaga's last contribution, the bird, us, flies up and over the road of which we saw no end. In the same fashion, the camera soars from every single speaker, while music from Mikel Laboa, sung in Basque, accompanies this lyrical coda. Politics are forgotten while I marvel at the coasts (like Orio), mountains (like Urkiola), beaches (like Ciboure), cities (like Vitoria), buildings (like the Guggenheim Bilbao), valleys (like the Valle del Roncal), woods (like Oma).

This documentary is the work of a Basque intellectual living in Madrid. When he moved to the capital in 1996, Medem wrote two stories. One about love, one about hatred. The former materialised in 'Lovers of the Artic Circle'. The latter, 'Aitz, Journey to the Bottom of the Sea', was too much to take. But some part of it survived giving birth to 'Basque Ball. The Skin Against the Stone' and the fictional work 'Aitor. The Skin Against the Stone' (to be filmed in 2004), two films sharing the same shuddery surname. If you haven't made an acquaintance with this first-rate filmmaker then now is the time to do so.