

“AMATXO. ¿ZER NAI DEZU?” (MOTHER! WHAT DO YOU WANT?)

AIMAR ARRIOLA

A PARTIAL APPROACH TO “THAT OF EZKIOGA”

The following text, composed of three related modules of similar length, offers various approximations of the 1931 episode of the apparition of Mary at Ezkio-Itsaso (Ezkioga), Gipúzcoa. The structure of the text is deliberately segmented and unfinished, trying to make an attempt on the writing's pretension to contain everything. Each fragment constitutes a light approach to a particular aspect of the events and altogether these fragments become a failed attempt to reconstruct the story from the anecdote.

- I -

”What a great success – they said – if he had taken a picture of her!”¹.

A 1931 picture, signed by the photographer J. Juanes shows the young girl Ramona Olazábal kneeling in “ecstasy”, under the watchful eye of Manuel Irurita, Bishop of Barcelona. This picture, at that time widespread, is the document of an alleged apparition of the Virgin to the sixteen-year old girl, a modest servant who became a mass idol. This particular image reveals the important and widespread role of photography and in the development and popularization of photographic techniques in Spain, as well as its crucial participation in the construction of a collective imagery of apparitions.

During the 1930s, documentary photography became the photographers' favourite genre, the large scale circulation in the mass media being one of its main characteristics. J. Juanes picture was spread in diverse ways; it was first used in *El Nervión*, the Bilbao newspaper, to illustrate an article questioning the divine origin of the girl's stigmata². According to the article, the cuts in Ramonita's hands were made by a pickpocket nicknamed *el Viajante* (the Traveller), who was in Ezkioga, attracted by the possibility of theft that the crowds there offered³.

In that report, the girl was described as “very temperamental”⁴ and it was argued that her conviction of the authenticity of her stigmata was all in her mind. In spite of such attempts to question the girl's divine nature and cast doubts upon the Ezkioga events, Olazábal's image was actively circulated and even used commercially as a commemorative postcard.

Olazábal also appeared in other pictures by foreign photographers who went to Ezkioga to “document” the event⁵. After being carefully selected and manipulated, these pictures often imitated famous religious images of virgins and saints. These images and their widespread presence in the cultural media of the time, such as newspapers, magazines, posters and leaflets, show the fruitful relationship between photography, publicity techniques and the slippery field of ideology. They were also closely attuned to the popular feeling of opposition against the anticlerical process started with the coming of the Second Republic, which brought the separation between Church and State after the Primo de Rivera dictatorship⁶.

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“On the 13th, four thousand people gathered, and one boy from Villareal was favoured with a vision, declaring he had seen a very sad looking Virgin carrying two bunches of flowers. A rosary hung from her left arm and he noticed she was moving her lips”⁷.

The image of woman holds a central role in Catholic imagery. Its representation is linked to the construction of various types of myths. The founder of the first Basque political nationalism, Sabino Arana, shared the ambivalent approach to women that had been transmitted by Catholicism. On one hand, nature defined not only woman's biological inferiority but also her social role, that is, to guarantee the reproduction of the species. On the other hand, that was in fact the function that provided her a decisive role in the Basque national project. On the basis of a positive idea of maternity in which mother Mary (Andra Mari) symbolized the transmission of good, inherited from Catholic mythology, Arana made the Basque woman a cultural symbol and the representation of the motherland⁸.

The scholar Andrés Ortiz-Osés, in his anthropological and hermeneutical approach to the subject of Basque matriarchalism, offers a deconstructive interpretation of the "Great Basque Mother Mary" archetype⁹. He links the mythology around Andra Mari to the Basque agricultural and matriarchal culture and the ancient autochthonous goddess Mari, whose attributes can be identified with those of the Virgin Mary. This relationship would partly explain the various (and sometimes contradictory) accounts of the Virgin by the people who saw her in Ezkioga, ranging from a threatening woman in black holding a sword, to a beautiful figure holding baby Jesus in her arms, all of them related to the broad range of iconic representations of women.

In spite of the centrality of women to the Basque society of that period, the asymmetry in the relations between genders was still quite marked in the 1930s, as shown by the fact that only children, teenagers (like Ramona Olazábal) and men – never grown up women – were involved in most of the visions documented by the press. It wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s that women's visions gained more acknowledgment as the result of a slow and complex process involving the emergence of women in various spheres of public life¹⁰.

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"Benita Aguirre de Legazpia, of nine years of age, also saw the Virgin. This girl talked to the Virgin and maintains that Our Lady answered to her. She asked her if she wanted a chapel built in that spot and the Virgin replied that she did not"¹¹.

The accounts of people that saw her, as well as the newspaper reports and the pictures accompanying them, took an active role in adding the natural landscape –the symbol of the motherland – to the Ezkioga visions. Such accounts placed the Virgin indistinctly on the top of a hill, in the sky, on top of some brambles, and between or on top of trees. But the increase of reported visions and, therefore, the amount of visitors everyday, brought a consensus on the location: the slope of a hill with a few oak trees¹².

The location was partly established by the press through the publishing of images identifying it as the "spot of the apparition". Soon religious paraphernalia was added; a big wide bench to act as an altar, floral ornaments on trees and an oak turned into a cross, a dais for the clairvoyants and, finally, a commemorative chapel in 1932 to mark the anniversary of the first vision. It was demolished before the Civil War, when the bishopric condemned the visions. During the construction of the hermitage the photographers and amateurs switched their attention from the first elements – such as the oaks or the cross – to the new architecture. Thus, the various remaining pictures of the spot allow us to establish a genealogy of the transformation of that location from a natural *place* into a *space* of reception.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger¹³, formulated clearly the difference between *place* and *space*. According to him, place would be defined as the result of the process of signification of a space. That is, a place would be the product of the inclusion of various discourses of power in a space. In the same way, nowadays, the slope in Ezkioga established as the "place" of the apparitions should be interpreted as a space marked ideologically by the different forces of power that acted upon it.

- 1 José Rodríguez Ramos: *Yo sé lo que pasa en Ezkioga: notas de un reporter* [on line]. San Sebastian: Imp. Martín y Mena Ed., 1931. Available from the web: <http://atzoatzokoa.gipuzkoakultura.net/19--2/>
- 2 J. del Urumea: "Un paso más, casual, pero lleno de posibilidades, en busca de la verdad". *El Nervión* [Bilbao] (22nd October 1931) issue 13.247, cover.
- 3 According to the accounts of the time, thousands of people were gathered in Ezkioga every day. For instance, it is said that, on the 18th July 1931, there were more than fifty thousand.
- 4 Apparently, the girl had suffered many episodes of somnambulism in the past and lost her job as a servant in a household because of that. Moreover, she had "taken part in spiritualist experiments".
- 5 For a more exhaustive analysis of the presence of foreign reporters and their treatment of images, see: William A. Christian: "L'ceil de l'esprit". *Terrain* [Paris], issue 30 (March 1998). Available from the web: <http://terrain.revues.org/index3274.html#txt>
- 6 The relationship between photography and illustrated press and their political use in Spain was widely commented on by the curator Horacio Fernández in the exhibition *Fotografía pública: Photography in Print 1919-1939* (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Museo de Bellas Artes, Bilbao, 1999-2000) [Cat]
- 7 *Los videntes de Ezkioga: a la opinión pública creyente* [on line]. Pasajes: Artes Gráficas Pasajes Ed., 1931. Available from the web: <http://atzoatzokoa.gipuzkoakultura.net/c367f6/>
- 8 For further analysis of a genre perspective of the historic construction of the Basque nation, see: Milagros Amurrio Vélez: "Las mujeres en el proceso generizado de construcción de la nación vasca". *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea*, issue 28 (2006), pp. 119-134.
- 9 Andrés Ortiz-Osés, Franz-Karl Mayr: *El matriarcalismo Vasco*. Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto, 1988.
- 10 As suggested in: William A. Christian: "Six Hundred Years of Visionaries in Spain: Those Believed and Those Ignored". *Challenging Authority: The Historical Study of Contentious Politics*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- 11 *Los videntes de Ezkioga: a la opinión pública creyente*, op. cit. 7.
- 12 William A. Christian: *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. This work is the result of a detailed research and is an essential reference work in Julia Montilla's documentation for the project "Gogo-Arima Erradikalak".
- 13 Martin Heidegger: *Conferencia y artículos* (Lectures and Articles), Barcelona: Serbal, 1994.