

# Ezkioga

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Ezkioga is a small town in Gipuzkoa, set in a mountainous landscape south of Azpeitia and very close to Zumarraga. This is the place where on 29 June 1931 Andrés and Antonia Bereciartúa, brother and sister aged seven and eleven respectively, reported having had a vision of the Virgin Mary on a hilltop beside a grove of oak trees. Other visions followed. As a result of a series of circumstances, these visions aroused a certain interest. On 7 July the first news reports of the event appeared in the press, and by the middle of the same month thousands of people were gathering at Ezkioga in the hope of witnessing miracles and visions. For three years, up until June 1934 when the Holy Office published a decree against the visions and the worship went on in secret, the Ezkioga phenomena continued to take place, followed more or less intensely by numerous individuals and groups of believers. The visions were never endorsed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they did count on the support of certain members of the clergy. In connection with the Ezkioga events, some authors have dwelt on the significance of the political moment in Spain, emphasising the threat that the proclamation of the Second Republic entailed for religion, the growth of anticlericalism and the close relationship between the Ezkioga visions and their evolution with respect to the model of *public apparitions* described in the events and the subsequent success of Lourdes.

The nature of the Ezkioga visions gradually changed and their manifestations, both oral and physical, evolved over time. These changes nurtured the hopes of visitors, reviving their invocatory power and making the phenomenon a spectacle. Some of the visionaries were converted into protagonists, concentrating the attention of the faithful, spectators and journalists, while a group of people of different conditions and professions would soon become genuine promoters and disseminators of the Ezkioga visions, and would continue as such over the following years. All these aspects have been studied in detail by William A. Christian Jr. and printed in his book *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ*.<sup>1</sup> This extensive volume, structured as a study with a sound anthropological base, assembles and analyses almost all the documentation and information on the subject, including a series of oral testimonies by people related to the events. Unusual for the period was the existence of abundant photographic material among the documentation that has

reached us. The photographs record above all the trances of the visionaries, the people in ecstasy, their faces, bodies and expressions, but they also capture the onlookers, the mass gatherings and the places or landscapes in which the apparitions materialised. All these images make the Ezkioga visions the first systematically and abundantly photographed event of this nature. Once again it is William A. Christian who has gathered most of the information relating to the chief photographers responsible for this body of work, their names, origin and beliefs, as well as the main features of the pictures.<sup>2</sup> We should begin by pointing out that the framework in which the photographs are set is not only highly specific and concrete but is, in addition, doubly articulated by the photographers' system of beliefs and the debate surrounding the nature of the photographed events. In order to define the status of the images it is important to remember that the Church never accepted the fact the Ezkioga visions had a supernatural origin. But it wasn't just the Church that regarded the apparitions with scepticism—their supposed supernatural or mystical nature was also called into question by sectors of society that were becoming increasingly secular, a non-denominational government and a line of study and research that in the nineteenth century and from the point of view of psychology began analysing the trances, ecstasies and emotional moods of the devout as clinical or pathological manifestations. Thus, the dividing line between those who believed in the sacred, supernatural or mystical quality of the visions and those who for various reasons didn't accept that quality or origin was sufficiently clear and sufficiently active to end up determining not only the role or purpose of the photographs but also their visual construction. Before studying this further, let's focus on the actual photographers as they appear in the documentation and the data furnished by William A. Christian. There must of course have been many photographers recording what was going on there, ranging from anonymous picture-takers (mere onlookers, believers or sceptics) to graphic reporters working for different media. In such cases and in the view of the photographs that have been published to date<sup>3</sup> we are obviously facing a task that is basically informative or evocative. The pictures contain no definite or specific form of visual construction beyond the strict role they were supposed to fulfil. And yet, and this is truly remarkable and significant, three photographers were constantly devoted to recording the visions, and their works clearly constitute a well-defined ensemble: José Martínez, from Santander, Joaquín Sicart, from Terrassa and French photographer Raymond de Rigné. All three were believers and not

only supporters of the visions and their supernatural nature but of the seers as well. Furthermore, they had all had previous contact with such phenomena. We could compare some of the pictures reproduced here in order to perceive the difference between the position of the photojournalist and the gaze of those photographers we could term ‘believers’, a point of view that places their documentary *intention* in a region that transcends the information and enters into the sphere of evidence, exaltation and commemoration. The records that appear on the left on pages 30 to 35 were made by one of the three photographers mentioned previously, while to the right we find some pictures taken by photographers such as J. A. Ducrot or Pascual Marín who worked for French or Basque media. Given that the cameras address similar subjects or aspects, the varying positions or conditions in the face of the events are clear. Where some photographers saw the unfolding of an event worthy of being captured on account of its informative interest, others shaped an interpretation of the situation. While some recorded the influx of visitors, the power of attraction of the visions, the mass arrival of cars to the area or the precise location where the news item took place, portraying the audience or the prominent figures spontaneously and naturally, those who were ‘believers’ did not record visitor influx but the devotion and spiritual communion provoked by the visions; for them, the place was not a geographical location, a mere landscape, but had been transformed into a sacred place revealing the symbols that accompanied and defined its transformation. The portraits of people or groups did not present anonymous characters but the true protagonists of the events, individual participants as well as organised and even internally hierarchical groups. The differences appeared even more clearly when it came to recording the actual visions—the trances, ecstasies or fainting fits—as evinced by the photographs of ‘faints’ taken by Sicart and Ducrot. The strong internal hierarchy that appeared in Sicart’s picture of the visionary, the devoutness and acceptance of the supernatural disappeared in Ducrot’s picture in order to broaden the elements of attention and interest. To a certain extent we could say that the ‘believers’ among the photographers formed a part of the event almost on an equal footing with the other participants: visionaries, devotees and photographers, the latter by then genuine ‘promoters’ of the phenomena.<sup>4</sup> Focusing on the pictures taken by the three above-mentioned photographers we note that there are two main themes: on the one hand, the actual visions and their physical, somatic and realistic expression (trances, ecstasies, entrancements, crucifixions, etc.); on the other, devotion understood as the

pilgrimages and religious activities of the faithful, believers or followers, and the dialogue between the visions and their recipients or beholders, who are in effect their target. In her bibliographical survey “Les apparitions et leur histoire”,<sup>5</sup> Marlène Albert Llorca describes the apparitions, especially after the events of Lourdes. From her reflections on their original and adopted nature, their need to grow and develop, we also learn how these conditions or circumstances affected the making of the images we are commenting on here. The public quality they gradually assumed seems to be essential: these are private revelations, the expressions and effects of which are public. In Ezkioga, this public quality actually turned them into apparitions programmed for certain dates and times. Seers tended to become mediators between the supernatural being and the community. Their ‘visions’ became increasingly realistic; they did not appear in spirit or in dreams but were beheld with the eyes of the body, while the body (as was already the case with Bernadette in Lourdes) became the essential ‘evidence’ of the reality of the apparitions. The seers revealed what they saw as they entered into ecstasy, allowing visitors to assure themselves that they were witnessing an apparition. In actual fact, this is precisely where the evidence of the reality of the apparitions lies, which somehow transforms the spectators into quasi-seers. William A. Christian describes how pilgrims travelled to Ezkioga to see the visions themselves or to witness a miracle, and yet a few months later they would travel to see the seers. Along these lines, what has been proven in recent studies is that the modernity of Lourdes lies more in the articulation of the pilgrimage than in the apparitions themselves.

As a result of the key role played by the bodies of the seers and their physical expressions, and the importance of the implicit request on behalf of the visitors to receive ever more precise evidence of the vision, the trances were increasingly spectacular. Consequently, the atmosphere gradually became more ritualised, charged with prayers and chants interrupted by the expressions of the seers. The religious and emotional saturation came to a climax that no doubt contributed to the spectacularisation of the phenomenon, the mobilisation of emotional resources, persuasion and the dramatic increase in the number of seers, as proven once again by William A. Christian in his study of Ezkioga. The spectacular and ritual quality acquired by the visions would be highlighted by the actions that tended to smooth the way for them, facilitating their spatial articulation. So, a raised platform was built that acted as a stage on which the seers stood and to which only their relatives or companions

were allowed access. The seers stood on the platform facing the place from where the apparitions materialised (a hill that sloped gently down towards the place where the platform stands), while the pilgrims, now transformed de facto and as a result of the spatial disposition into genuine spectators, stood opposite the platform, facing the seers and, strangely enough, with their backs to the place from where the apparitions emerged. The privileged position of the seer in the articulation of the phenomenon was thus radically reaffirmed and reinforced. It was precisely this centrality of the seers and the physical manifestations of their moods that were assumed by the photographers in their pictures. Photographs of bodies, but above all of faces and expressions, and photographs of the devotees, necessary interlocutors of the visions. An obviously cultural inspiration determined the production and circulation of these images, a sphere of religious acceptance of the supernatural nature of what was being photographed. In this way they appeared at once as evidence and as iconographical exaltation. As evidence, they revealed how the body and its expressions constituted the necessary certification bearing witness to the apparitions, as mentioned previously, in the tradition of photography as proof. As iconographical constructions, however, they followed another tradition, that of religious art, shared by photographers and devotees alike. This is a common language that has progressively taken shape and given form to a religious imaginary reproduced in multiple supports and present in multiple contexts: in painting, sculpture, churches. We have quite a precise visual idea of the form a vision should adopt, an ideal referent that the photographers no doubt quoted, intentionally or unintentionally, in their works. The testimonies of the period revealed quite matter-of-factly how certain expressions evoked those in the works by Murillo or Bernini; one witness admitted having seen the Virgin Mary's beauty reflected on the face of a seer, for such a smile as that of the seer could only belong to the Virgin Mary. Visual reminiscences, iconographical tradition (high and low) were combined here with the condition of evidence. The manifestations were proof insofar as they approached or actually conveyed a pre-existent code of religious expression and the photographs of the manifestations, in keeping with them, constituted the definitive proof. An unquestionable challenge now arose, which at the same time was the objective of the photographers who were also 'believers'—that of managing to capture *just that* expression. Nonetheless, a completely different iconographical reference already existed when the Ezkioga visions were produced, one that also established the expressions adopted by a person

in ecstasy or in trance. Both its origins and intentions differ—I am thinking of the tests carried out by Duchenne de Boulogne in his research of human physiognomy, of Charcot's works on hysteria and of Pierre Janet's study entitled *From Anguish to Ecstasy*. By means of different forms of stimulation, control or induction, they had proceeded to create or recreate and then photographically record different physical conditions and expressions, both facial and corporeal. Proving that the ecstasies or trances expressed a form of delirium, they emphasised the power of the unconscious and of suggestion, the possibilities of hypnosis. Like the Ezkioga photographers, they too needed the precise photographic shot that would freeze the expression at the right moment. As in Ezkioga, in La Salpêtrière—Charcot's hysteria clinic—too the theatricality of bodies was nurtured, and as in Ezkioga, these clinical images (especially those by Charcot) contained pictures that represented different approaches to art, theatre and painting. We could say that the relationship between the soul and physiognomy has similar needs, in photographic terms, as those of the relationship between the unconscious or illness and physiognomy. In both cases some form of dialogue is established with iconographical tradition. In Ezkioga this connection culminated in the production and commercialisation of postcards, many of which presented photomontages combining the faces of the Ezkioga visionaries and well-known images of the Virgin. The assimilation in these photomontages transcended religious union to establish an explicit pictorial or iconographical parallel. In fact, two of the photographers identified their pictures directly *in situ*, especially Joaquín Sicart, who opened an establishment that advertised “Rapid photography. Portraits of the Ezkioga seers. Portraits by the minute”. We shouldn't consider this advertisement as merely opportunistic or pragmatic, but even if that were also the case, it responded to collective requests that materialised around the visions, to the connection between these photographs, the collective imaginary and cultural tradition. To paraphrase Serge Tisseron's book *The Mystery of Camera Lucida*, these images were the visual equivalent to transfiguration, the projection in space and time of a religious imaginary.

The basic procedure for this, as we have in part pointed out, was the stylised reiteration of gestures and acts, of certain actions of the body, until managing to secure the expression, adjusting it to an order and a description: the order of the supernatural and the description of the visions. Freezing the expression in the moment of the trance was precisely what enabled these photographers to reduce the

supernatural to a visual discourse. In parallel with this, the reassignment of photography to the religious account of the apparitions meant that they could safely overcome the vague dividing line between evidence and appearance. This need to give cultural support to the supernatural coincided precisely with the last stages of a process we could describe as the medicalisation of the sacred or the mystical promoted by the aforementioned authors – Charcot, Janet, etc. Father Laburu, a well-educated Jesuit who was also a fine orator, forcefully rejected the supernatural nature of the Ezkioga visions and he himself used photographs and even films to prove his point: after filming the visionaries he projected his films in slow motion and compared them with film recordings made in mental asylums. The conclusion his audience reached was obvious: the photographs he had taken were simply those that hadn't managed to 'freeze the expression', presenting side-glances and colloquial expressions, exactly the opposite of those taken by the photographers who were believers. While we are used to photography toying with evidence, we are now clearly aware of the importance of reiterated stylisation and of securing the model's expression. Father Laburu claimed that to resort to "somatic corporeal phenomena" to establish the supernatural origin of the visions revealed ignorance of the essence of the phenomena. In favour or against the supernatural, the 'somatisation' of the phenomenon seems to have been inevitable on both sides. Returning to the task of our three photographers, we notice that a continuous feature of their pictures is a certain obsession with quotes, for they returned time and again to the bodies and faces trying to capture an imaginary, the physical support of the illusion of a supernatural presence. Speaking as we are of faces, we could also situate and read these images in the field of photographic portraiture and think about the diversion they imply in relation to certain of the genre's conventions: likeness, the gaze and identification with the other. What happens to the likeness we are offered by a person's portrait when we are dealing with the transformation of the expression so it can reflect another identity, another presence? For these photographers the portrait was or should have been a portrait of that other presence; the portrait would be effective when it were able to offer us not the visionary but the object of the vision. These portraits present a combination and a duality that cannot avoid the presence of the real physical person although they should elude it, or at least wait for a foreign identity to appear in them. Here, to a certain extent, photography's psychological perceptiveness stood on an equal footing with its objectivity and its indexical quality. The fragment of reality that the

photograph represented was perhaps the link that enabled a ghostly presence to appear in it in a matter-of-fact manner. This presence, that kept its distance, was reified and materialised in the characters' dreamy, far-away look. The gaze—the essence of portraits, of dialogue with others and of recognition—was absent here, it was not returned, and maybe explains why it enthralled and hoped to represent the inert beatitude of the mystic. As Georges Bataille pointed out in *Eroticism*, “The object of contemplation becomes equal to *nothing* (Christians would say equal to God), and at the same time equal to the contemplating subject.” In order to fulfil their expectations these paradoxical portraits must force and perhaps even invert the conventions of the genre.

## NOTES

1. Christian Jr., William A. *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
2. Christian Jr., William A. “The Mind’s Eye. Basque Visionaries in Trance.” Translated into French by Catherine Rouslin and published in *Terrain*, No. 30, 1998, pp. 5–22. (Electronic reference: [http:// terrain.revues.org/index3274.html](http://terrain.revues.org/index3274.html)).
3. The Ezkioga images consulted before the publication of the material compiled in this volume appeared basically in the two works by William A. Christian Jr. quoted in notes 1 and 2.
4. The ‘promoters’ of the Ezkioga visions have been studied in depth in chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the previously quoted book by William A. Christian Jr., *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ*.
5. Albert Llorca, Marlène. “Les apparitions et leur histoire.” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, No. 116, 2001, pp. 53–66. (Electronic reference: <http://assr.revues.org/index539.html>).