

**CARLOS
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“Should we do this again?”, asks Philippe Eustachon, the actor who represents the titular *Man Who Did All Things Forbidden*, at the end of the short interview with which the film begins. In this momentary disorientation that reveals the *mise-en-scène* there is a humorous challenge to the seriousness of the rules the audience immediately frames in the familiarity of the talk show – the silence was too long, its imperfection producing something funny. In the context of an exploration of the avant-garde such as this, the tensions between what is humorous and what is not lie at the centre of its identity, inasmuch the avant-garde relates to tradition and society through negativity in all its forms, from mockery to destruction. How that identity comes to express itself, however, is the question raised by the figure of the taboo-breaking man; the Inuit story that inspired the film’s name tells of Artuk, a man who renounces social norms (“lies”, he calls them) after laying his wife to eternal rest¹, a man for whom death becomes *intimate* and comes to revel in its all-encompassing negativity. He stops believing in the limits between life and death, around which certain conventions were to be observed if one was to remain within the harmony of society, and is

^{1]} Knud Rasmussen, *The People of the Polar North: A Record*. London, K. Paul, Trench & Trübner, 1908, p. 133.

punished by elemental forces for his transgressions, rending him into an unrecognisable mound of flesh. The story does not end there, however, because his son is *also* punished for his father’s rebellion, scarring his mind for the rest of his existence. If the avant-garde is expressively torn between life and death, it creates, like Artuk, a conflict that does not end with its demise, a history of violence that traces a path along the political as its very fringe.

This fringe provides a fluid backdrop of political elements that mix with all sorts of radical implications, and it is the setting from which the research undertaken for the film develops. Interested by Roberto Bolaño’s *Distant Star*, a novella about a fascist poet who moves in leftist circles in the immediacy of the 1973 coup d’état in Chile, Carlos Amoraless investigated literary figures of the time and their differing experiences and relations to the dictatorship, producing a research corpus that revolves around the question of what kind of ethics the avant-garde pushes in its break with the past. In other words, what sorts of *constitutional* effects (which is to say direct effects on society) does the praxis of the vanguard produce in its quest? On one hand, we have the titular *Man* that seems to set the direction of the small group the film follows, dressed like a washed-up dandy whose aristocratic superiority of the mind (brimming with

transgression) bears the burden of the transcendental, of breaking away from both society and nature. On the other, we have another man, a woodcutter who never speaks and whose dedication to work means a futile attempt at cutting *all* trees down; he does not want to break away, but to grasp totality in the here and now, something that makes him strangely distant and unattached. With them are two women, dressed in white, who perform as playful others, as the possibility of play and daydream. One of them is killed by the *Man* at the start, a foundational moment of love and murder that is ritualized before the roaring sea, a corpse that haunts the group both as it becomes tighter at the funeral and as it dissolves when the *Man* sets out to murder the other woman. The ways in which they deal with the past are captivating for their political implications: they posit a return to a state of nature in which the landscapes block the camera's vision of where they go, repressing the rationality of certainty in favour of wide, Romantic views that feel utterly incomplete – they cannot contain the characters, and they are forever escaping from our vision. It is not so much a benign state of nature but a sublime one, full of death and a life driven half-mad, with the *Man* becoming wild with the passion of murder and the woodcutter being haunted by the bestial return of the woman first killed. Their relation has a Gothic vitality that fills history with myth, that brings

about a politics beyond the political by demolishing their social relations and their corresponding representations (as worker, as leader, as woman...).

Such a move is the result of what Eustachon describes in the initial interview as Ideological Cubism, an avant-garde founded by Amorales, in which *all* political positions become folded into a set of contradictory elements from which necessarily derive anarchic practical questions, questions that the actor simply doesn't "know how [they] work." It is precisely this confusion, this inaccessibility, that mystifies the vitality of the vanguardist transgression, and it mimics the historical avant-garde's dual nature regarding the question of revolution. If Bolaño's novella develops from this tension and re-deploys the allure that Sorelian violence (in turning the 'general strike' into a myth, adapted by fascism and perverted in its mass actions) exerted on seemingly opposite movements, Amorales' film turns it into the basis of a story in which "the last flicker of heroism in the decadent ages"² constitutes a perhaps irresolvable contradiction: a life filled with death. After all, fascism pretended to *transcend* the political, and it is at this point that the radical

2] Charles Baudelaire, P.E. Charvet (ed.), *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art & Artists*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 422





implications in the marginal political field mapped by the avant-garde flourish, coming together to destroy the old in a love of life that often dangerously also is a love of death: “¡Viva la intensidad!” (“hurrah for intensity!”), the woman first murdered tells the woodcutter as she caresses him, having returned at night as a bestial figure to haunt him.

This vitalist negation is also reflected in the music – Amorales told each actor to play a musical instrument (later to play themselves as such) and then proceeded to view the narrative as an aural one. Being mostly percussions, found sounds, strings, and winds, the various instruments are nonetheless played in a very percussive manner, entering another avant-garde line of thought in which the traditionally musical is negated, or at the very least displaced, by rhythmical constructions. The winds, for example, which mostly belong to the *Man*, sound like horns, like the force of a gust that shatters trees. The only moment in which there is conventional music is when the two men and the remaining woman reach a sort of lumber camp, where they *play* pine-cones by scratching them, and a short Mexican folk piece illustrates a very brief sequence in which the group enacts a game of pine-cone throwing. This is, of course, the closest to a utopia that the whole story comes, when the three living and the one dead truly become harmonious, their

sociality dissolved in play as fragile balance. As their inexorable path towards a dark state of nature ensues, the musicality breaks down again, often in funny, surreal manners. The performances themselves are full of humour, configuring a sort of chamber music born of improvisation that binds the group together in fairly incompatible ways: before being killed, the first woman tells the *Man* that she’s cold, and his response is “the wood is for selling”, looking pensively towards an unseen horizon while ridiculously perched on a fallen tree. The dissonance, the disconnected imperfection, like the silence after the interview that leads Eustachon to ask if they should do the ‘scene’ once again, is the ground from which the film’s humour arises, and the strange sounds born of the actors’ interactions constantly underscore the seriousness of the subject matter.

In conclusion, *The Man Who Did All Things Forbidden* provides an assertive stimulation for the discussion of the concept and the history of the avant-garde, a discussion that should be taken up again as one that was not settled by the theories of the historical vanguard and which keeps feeding into many aspects of contemporary art.

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