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We Can Only Say What a Basque Is Not

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Cover Page Footnote
I would like to thank filmmaker Oskar Alegria for allowing me to access his film, *The Search for Emak Bakia* (2012). When I began this project, I was unable to locate a copy in the United States, with or without subtitles. I contacted Mr. Alegria in the Basque Country, and he kindly made it possible for me to view the film. I would never have been able to write this essay without his help.
We Can Only Say What a Basque Is Not¹

Blake Allmendinger

Being Basque is often self-defined by the ability to speak Euskara. Yet many Basques no longer speak the language fluently, due in large part in Spain to Francisco Franco’s attempts to banish Euskara during his dictatorship, which lasted from 1939 until Franco’s death in 1975. To this day, Basques have not fully recovered from this linguistic persecution because of a skipped generation or two of speakers, though Euskara has made significant gains.²


²Today in the Basque Country, there are about 750,000 Basque speakers, or about a quarter of the people who live in the Basque region, with about 90% of the Basque speakers on the southern or Spanish side, and the remainder on the northern or French side.
Setting aside the language as an identity marker, it may be easier to define what Basques are not than to identify what makes them unique. *Euskal herria* is not a nation, though its residents often refer to it as “the Basque Country.” It is not a kingdom or an empire or a principality or a nation-state, but an autonomous region in central Europe. *Euskara* is not part of the Indo-European language community. The Basques are not Spanish or French, although the seven provinces of the Basque Country are located in these neighboring nations. A significant percentage of Basques have Rh negative blood, which means their red blood cells do not have a certain protein other people possess. In addition, Basques are known for being contrarian, independent, emotionally un-demonstrative, and socially aloof from other groups of people.

These characteristics are a source of pride because they stress what makes Basques unique. For example, the following activities are considered sports in the Basque Country, though not throughout the rest of the world: *Sega jokoa* (grass-cutting), *Trontza* (wood-sawing), *Harri jasotxeoa* or *Giza-abere probak* (lifting or dragging stones), *Ontxi eramatea* (churn-carrying), and *Antxar jokoa* (the goose game).

Other aspects of Basque culture are also associated with the word not or roughly equivalent synonyms, such as empty, zero, absence, subtraction, and negative. In *pelota*, when the handball misses the wall it gives the other player an advantage. The space which is not part of the wall is called the void (*huts*), a word that also means empty or zero. Today Basques are known for their Michelin-starred restaurants. But their food is not complicated. It has even been praised as “a cuisine of subtraction” (author’s emphasis), based on its few components and simple method of presentation. Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida might also be considered a minimalist artist. His 1977 stone installation, *Haizearen orrazia XV* (“The Comb of the Wind 15”), utilizes negative space to achieve its effects. [Pictured]

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In the remainder of this essay, I consider two cinematic works that pose similar interpretative challenges for scholars in Basque Studies. The first one is the 1926 silent film by American artist Man Ray called *Emak Batia* (Leave Me Alone). The sixteen-minute *cinépoéme* is neither a poem nor a conventional film, but a product of the Dada movement. Like surrealism and the avant-garde, this early twentieth-century movement did not rely on logic, reason, or traditional aesthetics for inspiration. Instead, it incorporated elements of the *non*-sensical, the *un-*natural, the *ir-*rational, the sub-conscious, the dream-like (*not* real), and the absurd (*in-*appropriate). Dada artists denied the existence of “ultimate Truth.” Their films had *no* narratives, often *no* characters, and *no* relationship to traditional filmmaking.

The second example is *La casa Emak Bakia* (The Search for Emak Bakia, 2012), a documentary directed by Oskar Alegria. In the course of the film, Alegria tries to learn why Ray chose this phrase in *Euskara* as the title of his enigmatic work of art. Although he learns many things, *none* of them shed light on this mystery. While some viewers may feel frustrated by this ultimately meaning-less quest, others may decide that Alegria’s *un-*orthodox approach to his subject is a unique and thoughtful way of considering what it means to be Basque.

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4Edward A. Aiken defines a *cinépoéme* as “a whole that remains a fragment,” in “Emak Bakia Reconsidered,” in *Art Journal* 43:3 (Fall 1983), 240. One might also describe Ravel’s unfinished “The Seven Are One” in similar terms.

Man Ray claimed he liked the title *Emak Bakia* because it sounded “prettily.”\(^6\) It is also possible he chose the phrase because it sounded like non-sense—because *Euskara* was a language almost nobody knew.\(^7\) In “Against Interpretation” (1966), Susan Sontag argues that the job of critics is *not* to explain what a work of art means.\(^8\) Ray abides by this credo, presenting a random series of images—like the random number 15, which suggests that fourteen versions of *Haizearen orrazia* preceded the sculpture made by Chillada. (They did *not*.) Ray’s images are sometimes abstract (geometric shapes, blurry objects rotating simultaneously in clockwise and counter-clockwise directions). Others are representational (a flock of sheep, a woman driving a car, a sunbather’s naked leg on a beach). The name of French aviator Marcel Doret appears on a moving screen inside the viewer’s screen, dimly (*not* clearly) advertised in flickering lights. Suddenly, with *no* explanation, the name *dis-*appears. The only other time words appear is near the end of the film when a title card offers the possibility that Ray’s project has “meaning.” The sentence fragment announces: “The reason for this extravagance.” But the reason is *never* made clear.

\(^6\)As quoted in Knowles, 10. At the same time, however, Dada practitioners “developed a form of ‘phonetic’ poetry in which made-up words [like Dada] jostled rudimentary linguistic fragments [like *Emak Bakia*].” See Hopkins, 6.

\(^7\)Oskar Alegria, dir. *The Search for Emak Bakia (La casa Emak Bakia)*. 2012.

Within a cinematic world devoid of narrative meaning, *Emak Bakia* creates its own visual vocabulary. The film plays with notions of ambiguity, disconnection, dismemberment, misrepresentation, and the semantic gap— or void— between the sign and the signified. A stationary image that resembles the scroll on a violin begins to move like a seahorse. A succession of women exits a vehicle, each one wearing a pair of high heels, their bodies cut off at the knees. A man puts on lipstick to transform himself into the thing he is not. The word *thing* is more appropriate than the word *person* because Ray’s individuals never develop into characters. They are visual objects or dis-membered body parts, like the pairs of eyes associated with similar images of non-human beings: a camera lens, a car’s headlights, a motorist’s goggles.9 In the film’s most striking moment, the viewer gazes into a woman’s eyes, which open, revealing another pair of eyes. The viewer realizes the original eyes were not real but merely painted on the woman’s eyelids. As the actress stares back at the audience with a blank hypnotic stare, the viewer becomes increasingly uncomfortable.

Another pair of legs depicts a woman dancing the Charleston. She repeats the same steps over and over, performing a sequence of movements that has no beginning or end. Ray’s contemporary, Gertrude Stein, once wrote “a rose is a rose is a rose,” transforming the term, which signifies a specific flower, into a meaningless word. The non-sensical phrase might also imply that things are what they are, suggesting that no interpretation is necessary, much like the enigmatic Basque pronouncement “Izena duen guzia omen da” (“That which has a name exists”). Instead of satisfying the need for an explanation, this flat, seemingly self-evident statement raises a series of unanswerable questions. Which came first? The thing or its name? Which is the sign and which is the signified? How can a word embody its material counterpart? The answers to these questions remain a mystery, like the title of Ray’s film.

The film’s refusal to yield to the viewer’s scrutiny inspired Spanish Basque filmmaker Oskar Alegria to make *La casa Emak Bakia*. Alegria has never stated in interviews whether the documentary was originally intended as a genuine effort to solve the mysteries at the heart of Ray’s film: the source of its title, its meaning (if any), and the identities of the people who appear on screen. Perhaps the filmmaker planned from the outset to make a meta-documentary about a journey to discover the truth, one that eventually becomes derailed by a series of random happenings which finally reveals the absurdity of Alegria’s endeavor.

Hearing a rumor that the title for Ray’s film was inspired by an epitaph on a tombstone in Biarritz, Alegria visits a cemetery containing 9368 graves. (The exact number of plots in the graveyard suggests that this detail will become relevant later. But like everything else related to the Basques, it does not.) Unable to discover the truth, Alegria hears a second rumor indicating that Emak Bakia was supposedly the name of the house in which one of Ray’s friends lived while visiting France. The director investigates the files in the local records office, whose archives date back to 1526 (another meaningless number), again with no success. Alegria continues his quest, but soon becomes distracted by a plastic glove blowing down a street and by a clown at the circus, who leads him to another clown’s grave, where the filmmaker finds a letter from Taiwan and a CD recorded by a singer in Minnesota.

By now, the viewer realizes that none of these clues are really clues. They are merely absurdities encountered by Alegria during his journey (perhaps an incorrect term for his non-teleological wanderings). During the course of the film, the director learns that pigs have nightmares. He also meets a 90-year-old Romanian princess and former ping-pong champion, and watches 17 models pretend to sleep while auditioning for a TV commercial. (Alegria shares the useless information that six of the models are Sagittarians, that four of them hate peas, that one is Egyptian, that two like white horses, and that five consider Spanish mystery writer Tonino Benacquista their favorite author). Alegria identifies the man wearing lipstick as female impersonator and Dada performer Jacques Riguat, whose nihilistic ambition was to commit suicide on his thirtieth birthday by shooting a single bullet into the exact center of his forehead with the help of a ruler. (He succeeded.)

Alegria once explained in an interview that he traveled on foot throughout much of the Basque region of coastal France because “[it] is only by feet...you are able to discover the treasures that are hidden in the corners and ditches beside the path.”¹¹ Alegria follows the glove until it stops to flirt with a napkin. Then a breeze blows the glove onto the property of a house called Haieza (The Wind). At one point, the actual wind jostles the filmmaker’s camera. Alegria remembers that Ray once claimed the freest he ever felt as an artist was when he threw his camera in the air, an example of “accidental cinema” in a film about “chance.” After stumbling (without intent) on a house called Aire-leku (The Air’s Place), Alegria imagines that “if the name disappeared the wind would vanish,” reminding us, “That which has a name exists.” But if the Basque language dies, as linguists have predicted it eventually may, does that mean the things named by the language will also disappear into nothingness? In his “Dada Manifesto” (1918), Tristan Tzara proclaims: “Dada Means Nothing [author’s emphasis].... [T]he tail of a holy cow [means] Dada. The cube and the mother in a certain district of Italy are called: Dada. A hobby horse, a nurse both in Russian and Rumanian: Dada.”¹²

To say that Dada means nothing is to imply that it also means everything. But something exists between these oppositional terms—like the hyphen that appears on the introductory title card (Emak-Bakia) and then disappears on the next one. Basques have attempted to locate that something for almost one hundred years, since the premiere of Ray’s cinépoéme (a compound noun suggesting the creation of a hybrid art form that is neither a conventional film nor a traditional poem). In The Search for Emak Bakia, Alegria finds a picture of a clown and the name “Richard Hermann” engraved on a tombstone. Later, he discovers that Hermann is still alive and that he is now an elderly man, having long ago retired from his job in a circus. The tombstone appears to memorialize a deceased person who lies in the grave, although it actually symbolizes the death of language itself. The name means something. But does it refer to the clown wearing face paint or to the man whom the director later encounters? The man does not know, simply confirming, “I’m alive.”

Once seeing an un-identified person wearing a mask, the Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza declared, “An aesthetic creation exists only...when the mask is invented.”¹³ For Oteiza, a

mask was something, both *nothing* and everything, a *blank* canvas and a work of art. For his contemporary, Eduardo Chillida, the holes in *Haizearen orrazia XV* serve a similar function. They are *neither* empty of purpose nor examples of art, but rather *not yet* occupied spaces, awaiting the wind that later passes through the stone, creating audible sound—something which is *neither* semantic nor visual.

A definition of “something” is hard to put into words. In *Obabakoak* (1989), Bernardo Atxaga’s main narrator spends the novel searching for the perfect word “to finish the book” (280). He *never* finds it. Nevertheless, he continues the journey, moving from story to story. Separating each story is a page break symbolizing a textual boundary, while within each story is “a void scattered with islands, with memories. A sea of nothingness broken up by a few islands, that was how I remembered the past.” (83) As words accrue, the islands expand, recalling the man who remembers only nine words after electro-shock therapy. Each word transforms into a story, thus filling the void (83-129).

As Txara writes in his manifesto: “I do not explain because I hate common sense.” Like explanations, he believes that “criticism” or interpretation is “useless” (253), an opinion with which Sontag would have agreed. Words and concepts and terms signify *nothing* and everything. Thus, although Txara hates explanations, he uses words in his manifesto to explain the purpose of the surrealist movement.

Today, the *void* is a growing, world-wide phenomenon; *not* a synonym for the existential condition, but a promise of potential fulfillment. As national borders become less important for some, and as global migration becomes more common, people are beginning to explore their identities, redefining what it means to be human. *Nowhere* is that debate more crucial than in the Autonomous Basque Community, which has been in a state of transition for the last several decades, searching for ways to preserve the past while welcoming change. Basques may either reinvent themselves or echo the words of Man Ray.

When a critic at the Paris premiere of his *cinépoéme* complained that his experimental project *wasn’t* a film because it *didn’t* tell “a real story,” the filmmaker replied, “*Emak Bakia*, so leave me alone!”

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