

May 2023

We Can Only Say What a Basque Is Not

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Recommended Citation

Allmendinger, Blake (2023) "We Can Only Say What a Basque Is Not," *BOGA: Basque Studies Consortium Journal*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

<https://doi.org/10.18122/boga.10.1.2.boisestate>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/boga/vol10/iss1/2>

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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

¹Orson Welles, in Welles, dir. *Around the World with Orson Welles*. Episode 1. "Pays Basque" ("The Basque Country"). October 7, 1955. A Basque fan, he starts his documentary exploration with what a Basque is not.

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 jasotxea* or *Giza-abere probak* (lifting or dragging stones), *Ontxi eramatea* (churn-carrying), and *Antzar 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.³ 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]



³Alexandra Raij, et al., *The Basque Book: A Love Letter in Recipes from the Kitchen of Txikito* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2016), 7.

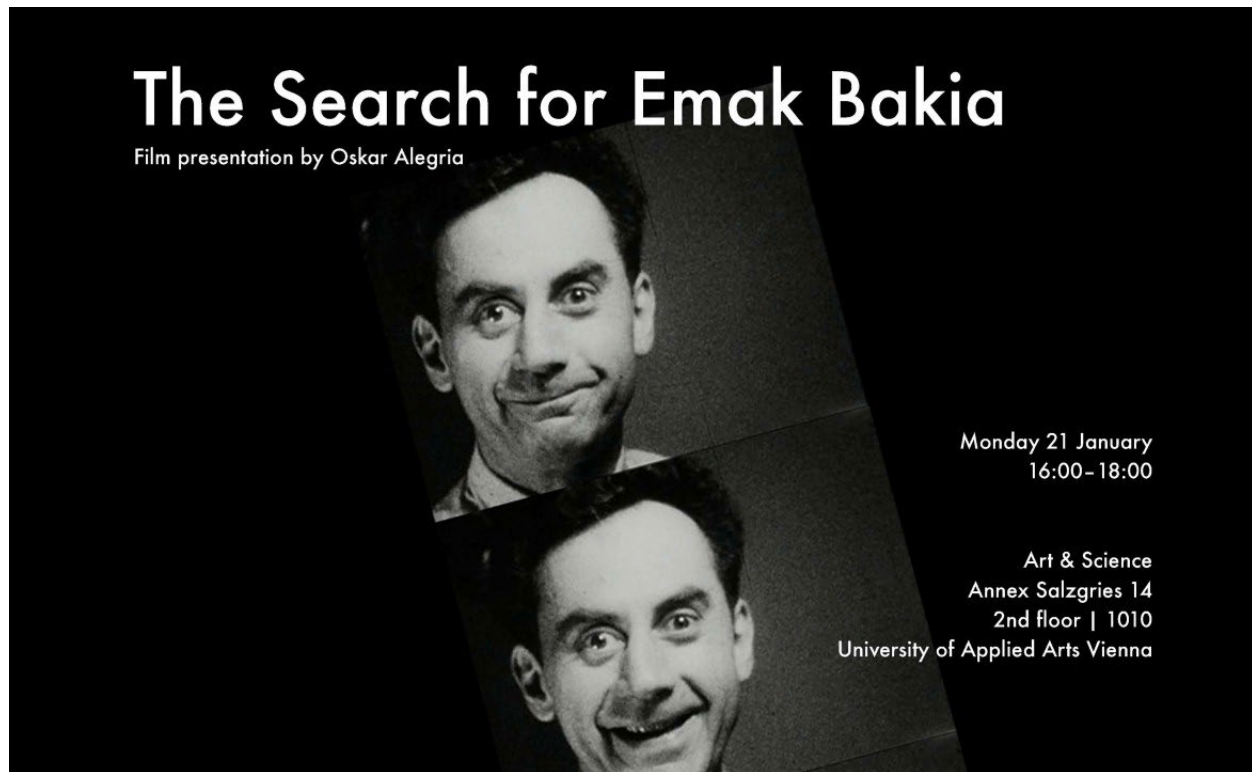


In the remainder of this essay, I consider two cinematic works that pose similar interpretative challenges for scholars in Basque Studies. The first one is the 1926 silent film by American artist Man Ray called *Emak Batia* (Leave Me Alone). The sixteen-minute *cinépoème*⁴ is *neither a poem nor a conventional 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 *irrational*, 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.⁵

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.

⁴Edward A. Aiken defines a *cinépoème* 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.

⁵See, for example, Kim Knowles, *A Cinematic Artist: The Films of Man Ray* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), 72; Tristan Tzara “Dada Manifesto 1918,” in Charles Harrison and Paul Woods, eds., *Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 256; David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2, 31-32; and David Pinder, “Surrealism/Surrealist Geographies,” in Rob Kitchen and Nigel Thrift, eds., *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* 1: (2009), 87-94.



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.

⁶As 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.

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

⁸Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (1966; New York: Anchor, 1990 rpt.), 7. Subsequent references to this edition appear parenthetically in the text.

Within a cinematic world de-void 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 *un*-comfortable.

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.

⁹See Ramona Fotiade, "Spectres of Dada: From Man Ray to Marker and Godard," in Klaus Beekman, ed., *Dada and Beyond* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2012), 91; and Martin Jay, "The Disenchantment of the Eye: Surrealism and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism," in *Visual Anthropology Review* 7:1 (Spring 1991), 15-38.

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.



The mysterious house Emak Bakia (photo Oskar Alegria)

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.)¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2020/01/22/essay-films-man-ray-mysterious-encounters-realities-and-dreams/>

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 *cinépoème* (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

¹¹ Interview with Oskar Alegria, “Speed Is the Death of Small Stories.” <https://rooftopfilms.com/blog/2014/06/speed-is-the-death-of-small-stories-meet-oskar-alegria-the-search-for-emak-bakia/>.

¹²Tristan Tzara “Dada Manifesto 1918,” in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 253.

¹³Jorge Oteiza, *Oteiza’s Selected Writings*, ed. Joseba Zulaika, trans. Frederick Fornoff (Reno: Center for Basque Studies Press, 2003), 118. See also, Elixabete Ansa Goiochecha, “From Pre-Columbian Masks to the Basque Cromlech: The Art of Unconcealment in the Work of Jorge Oteiza,” in Andrew Reynolds and Bonnie Roos, eds., *Behind the Masks of Modernism: Global and Transnational Perspectives* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016). Goiochecha writes about the origin of the masked figure in pre-Columbian art, tracing it through the works of Oteiza (99).

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 *cinépoème* 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!”¹⁴

¹⁴ “Speed is the Death of Small Stories’: Meet Oskar Alegria (The Search for *Emak Bakia*) <https://rooftopfilms.com/blog/2014/06/speed-is-the-death-of-small-stories-meet-oskar-alegria-the-search-for-emak-bakia/>

