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FILM

Out of time

Antonio Gaudí shocks silently, gradually. By Alvin Lu

THE ROXIE has unearthed a new print of Hiroshi Teshigahara's shocking 1985 film *Antonio Gaudí*. It's that rare, rare film that unreels its shock gradually, doing so over a span of 72 minutes. It's also that rare film that uses the medium to explore space rather than manipulate time, if one thinks of film as moving along these two axes. And though *Gaudí*, ostensibly a documentary, follows the career of the turn-of-the-century medievalist architect and Catalan nationalist in more or less the expected chronology, few films foreground the spatial over the temporal so purely as this one.

Gaudí is not a portrayal of a career but of works. It limits itself to filming only Gaudí's baroque, politically metaphorical, often bizarre art, suggesting that this should suffice as biography. It also limits itself to a minimalist narration of silent, efficient subtitles—the epigraphic “After this work, Gaudí's style changes,” for example—and a soundtrack that rarely ventures beyond Toru Takemitsu's relentlessly haunting score. This documentary of architecture, rather than of an architect, also serves as a musical showcase for Takemitsu, the soundtrack genius best known for his scores to *Kwaidan* and *Ran* and a longtime collaborator with Teshigahara.

In montage — slow walks through winding corridors, pans across ceilings, distorted point-of-view shots, tracking shots of undulating mosaic-tiled benches — we see Gaudí's buildings whole and in parts. Film technique, both cutting up the buildings and totalizing them, is particularly effective when applied to Gaudí's famous Casa Battló. The building combines columns and a facade that resemble bones and a scale-tiled roof that gives it the unmistakable appearance of a dragon, a

creature that figures thematically in Gaudí's oeuvre. The film never tells you that the building design is overloaded symbolism for Catalan nationalism.

We do see humans populating Gaudí's works (including the expansive Güell Park), but when they do appear it's often to haunt them, as in the shot in which a girl in a white dress unexpectedly roller-skates from behind a column as Takemitsu's score veers from his trademark cavernous, percussive drones to classical string-and-flute arrangements.

The most moving sequence is the portrayal of Gaudí's never-finished lifework, his monumental Temple of Expiation Sagrada Familia, an insanely ambitious attempt to recall the great medieval Gothic cathedrals. After panning across the moonlike Montserrat holy grounds, the film cuts to a panoramic shot of Barcelona and zooms in on the eight distinctive spires of the temple, sticking out of the city like giant fingers. It cuts to four spires reflected in the water before moving through the front gate and its beyond-baroque, knotted, meticulously detailed sculptured walls.

The film includes footage of the temple that Teshigahara shot in 1959, some five years before he made his reputation as director of *Woman in the Dunes*, an adaptation of Kobo Abe's existentialist science fiction novel. Teshigahara went on to film more of Abe's strange novels, works that always seemed more about exploring settings than constructing plots. Here, Teshigahara and Takemitsu have built a masterpiece out of the works of a kindred artist. In doing so, they answer imperatives that were once the obligation of artists, to enlighten and purify the soul and to take it out of time. ■

'Antonio Gaudí.' Through Thurs/30. Wed/29: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 p.m.; Thurs/30: 6, 8, 10 p.m., Roxie Cinema, 3117 16th St., S.F. (415) 863-1087.



Homage to Catalonia: Antonio Gaudí movingly explores Gaudí's never-finished Temple of Expiation Sagrada Familia.