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ANTONIO GAUDÍ

For the first half-hour of the 72-minute *Antonio Gaudí*, we're told almost nothing about the visionary architect's life. We see shots of Barcelona, the buildings that Gaudí and other Art Nouveau architects designed at the turn of the century, the works of Miró and Picasso, whom he influenced, the Romanesque churches and frescoes that influenced him — and all with no narration, except for the occasional identifying subtitle. Then, finally, we're ushered inside a former stable room designed by Gaudí and now converted into a library devoted to his work. A man sits at a desk. A title tells us his name and that he's a professor. Cut to a shot of the professor at a table with a group of associates, probably students. The professor speaks. Now, we think, we're going to get the story of Gaudí's life, his creative struggles, his spiritual concerns. The professor speaks for about 15 seconds, in Spanish, and we wait for the subtitles. And the camera cuts away! To yet more footage of the residences, religious buildings, and vast public parks that Gaudí designed.

Antonio Gaudí marks the return to filmmaking of Hiroshi Teshigahara, the Japanese director best known for *Woman in the Dunes* (1964). Although this new work is a documentary, Teshigahara hasn't made a conventional narrative biography. Instead, he gives us a tone poem, apparently in hopes of presenting a view of Gaudí uncorrupted by "interpretation." To an extent, the strategy works. Teshigahara has a feel for the erotic, mystical-organic contours of Gaudí's design. Angled stone columns, scalloped balustrades, oblong windows and doors, chimneys that stare like hooded, gape-mouthed figures — Gaudí's biomorphic forms seem to defy their medium; they're like dripped clay. This is architecture as free and spontaneous in effect as painting and sculpture. Looking at it, you're awestruck not only by the imagery but by the physical obstacles that had to be overcome in order to get it built. It's as though Miró's dreamlike abstractions had been translated into something as practical as a building.

Although Gaudí's tile-encrusted crucifixes and orificelike portals can be seen as Art Nouveau ornamental excess, the film, with its evocative score arranged by the brilliant contemporary composer Toru Takemitsu, makes a strong case for him not as gross sensualist but as a religious ascetic. As *Antonio Gaudí* progresses, the artist's edifices begin to seem as severe as they are extravagant. And one of the movie's few biographical notes informs us that once, after 20 days of fasting, Gaudí had to be forced to leave his bed and eat.

Facts like this make you yearn for more. What difficulties did Gaudí encounter in executing his radical plans? Were there failures, materials that collapsed when he tried to bring his imagination to life, unforeseen compromises that had to be made? A wealthy patron commissioned much of his work, but how was that work received by turn-of-the-century Barcelona? How was he esteemed by his colleagues?

In the last 20 minutes, the film begins to develop a narrative. We see plans, still photographs, and an interview (finally!) with one of Gaudí's collaborators, in the construction of Barcelona's Templo de la Sagrada Familia (Temple of the Holy Family). Work on this monumental cathedral began in 1882, when Gaudí was 31, and has continued to this day. Since Teshigahara violates the purity of his conception by relating an anecdote anyway, you may be even more exasperated that he didn't modify his approach from the start. One could argue that his intention was merely to provoke interest in Gaudí's work. Certainly biographical information is available from other sources. But hasn't the director got it backwards? The film medium doesn't have architecture's ability to transform space. Teshigahara tries to give us what we can get only from a trip to Barcelona — he wants the camera to convey the experience of Gaudí's architecture undiluted, and in the end that's something it can't do. *At the Coolidge Corner, through Thursday, November 5.*

— Jon Garelick