

# Shame and Vindication in Juanma Carrillo's *Dishonored Bodies*<sup>1</sup>

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Juanma Carrillo is a polymath photographic and video artist and filmmaker who has been well known on the LGBT film festival circuit since the late 2000s and has especially close connections with the Lesgaicinemad festival in Madrid (with a homage section to him at the 2015 festival), Zinegoak in Bilbao (with a retrospective and round-table discussion in 2012) and with the Mostra FIRE!! in Barcelona, whose international image has been enhanced since 2011 by posters, teasers and spots by Carrillo and by his close involvement behind the scenes and at events. Carrillo's work is marked by the image of the vulnerable body (and the vulnerable heart), by narrative and visual disruption—especially in his videoart pieces—and by sophisticated musical soundtracks which, like the visuals, are rich with reference to film, dance, and queer cultures. In particular, despite and because of the precarious hold his pieces have on the ultimate identity of the subject or on the integrity of form, "Juanma Carrillo es sobre todo un director romántico" (Elputojacktwist) (Juanma Carrillo is above all a Romantic director).

His *Cannibals* (*Caníbales*, 2009), with its raw depiction of the dynamics of male cruising, is perhaps his most gay-identified work and the earliest release of four short narrative-driven fiction pieces brought together on DVD by TLA Releasing in 2015 (for the US, UK and Francophone markets) under the title *Dishonored Bodies*. The compilation's title is taken from one of five other pieces, more videoart than fiction film, that make up the DVD (listed in footnote 1). The eponymous videoart and performance piece *Dishonored Bodies* (*Cuerpos deshonrados*, 2010) has in common with *Cannibals* a disturbing sense of the particular voracity of eroticised looking and sexualised encounter. It opens the compilation (should the viewer opt for Play All) and works with a high-art aesthetic, in lavish colour, with markedly photogenic bodies in a heterosexual encounter; but *Cannibals*—at the end of the compilation (if watched right through)—works in an explicitly non-heteronormative context, in monochrome, with men only and with a mix of standard gay objects of desire (presented by the camera as more or less explicitly clichés or as hyperperformed) and older, inappropriately dressed and desperate, emphatically non-normatively gay men. The two pieces seem an odd pair with which to enclose the compilation; but they are, rather, a positively queer conjunction of bodies, sex, movement, feeling, affirmation and, above all, shame. Carrillo's work as

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<sup>1</sup> The DVD compilation comprises: *Dishonored Bodies* (2010, 11 min.); *Scaffolding* (2012, 14 min.); *Fuckbuddies* (2011, 6 min.); *Consequent // Consequence* (2010, 10 min.); *Wall* (2010, 5 min.); *Une sensation de vide* (2011, 6 min.); *1941, Darkness* (Extended Version) (2013, 13 min.); *Perfect Day* (2010, 19 min.); *Cannibals* (2009, 20 min.).

compiled here might be viewed as part of a vast and growing archive of cultural work (here in the filing sub-categories of "Spanish," "visual," and, perhaps, "minority") that by going in close to the effects and affects of shame and exclusion looks out to "new forms of community," as Halperin and Traub put it, to "radical transformations" and "the promise of an affirmative queer future" (5). These films and videoart pieces move in a context of two decades or more of thinking through the category of shame in relation to homosexuality, its representations and its politics (a discussion resumed by Halperin and Traub in their introduction to the collection of essays arising from the University of Michigan Gay Shame conference of March 2013).

*Cannibals'* tracking of a hot afternoon's cruising in Madrid's Casa de Campo moves from being a fierce vindication of sex between men as being almost literally natural (as rough and as vital as the scrubland and the trees) to making the male body in submission to sexual desire the locus of catastrophic emotional upheaval. One of the cruising men, being fucked on his knees by a muscular, open-shirted and inappropriately straight-acting man, is caught in the act by his wife, prompting a fugue away from the cruising grounds to a montage of images of heterosexual courtship, marriage, and parenthood (for a more detailed analysis see Perriam 108-09). The film terminates on a kind of carnival of shaming, re-evaluation and uncertainty: should this man, who is getting what he set out to get, be ashamed? is the viewer intended to pity the shame of his wife? is it the institutionalisation of heterosexual, procreative partnership that all should be ashamed of? The viewer does not know where to turn, and the camera has left the scene.

The piece *Dishonored Bodies*, though structured entirely around a heterosexual encounter, as mentioned, is far from being normative in the way it enhances both the strangeness of the erotic contact of bodies and, incrementally, the vulnerability of the otherwise presented as classically masculine body (balletic, statuesque, lean, and with stubbled chin). The piece, with soundtrack music (Ben Frost/Plastikman) superimposes different dancelike moves between the subjects filmed (Juan Caballero and Saida Benzal), different affective scenarios, and different tempi, combining the gymnastic, the sexual and the aggressive in the drama of the encounter; it builds a disturbing continuum from looks and carresses, through kisses and bites, to wounding and an only half-ironic reference to vampiric blood-letting. The blood welling surrealistically from the head of the male is at one stage presented, by cross-cutting to facial expression, as if it were the direct consequence of grief rather than of erotic aggression. Early visual references to angelic presence and spiritual wholeness in backlighting, body position, gesture and fabric textures, give way to defeat. The man collapses, covered in blood, horizontal under attrition from the woman, her voluptuous beauty and beautiful eyes now turned into terrible oppressions (in a way which is certainly and uncomfortably open to a reading of the piece as an unsuccessful reclamation of the topos of the *femme fatale*). The synopsis prepared for the piece's exhibition at Arte Audiovisual Contemporáneo MADATAC II (in 2010) and subsequently for RTVE's video library, *A la carta*, uses Roland Barthes's category of *annulation* from the *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* as follows: "Amar el amor; el sujeto llega a anular el objeto amado bajo el peso del amor mismo" (RTVE) (In love with love; the subject manages to annul the loved object under the volume of love itself). Similarly, presenting *Dishonored Bodies*, Wall (*Muro*, 2010) and *Consequent // Consequences* (*Consecuente -*

*Consecuencias*, 2010) for a Museo MUVIM (Valencia) exhibition in 2012, Carrillo emphasised that “la mayoría de los personajes que retrato son frágiles y están dañados” (the majority of the characters I portray are fragile and damaged), as a result of the abdication of self-determination in favour of love—love seen as often all consuming, and leading to extreme solitude (We Shoot Agency). Both these glosses inscribe the work into a post-Romantic and gender-non specific tradition of poetic thinking about desire in terms of love and loss of self, but the way in which the DVD compilation juxtaposes representations of the different configurations and performances of the body under the impulse, particularly, of queer desire enlivens the abstract-romantic with raw directness (in action and image) and the anti-normative (in emotional expression and in object choice) in an empowering amalgam.

The concept of the “dishonoured body,” the “cuerpo deshonrado” comes, of course, not topically from the misdirected passions of the dancefloors, bedrooms, streets and open spaces of modern Madrid but from Paul’s letter to the Romans, readable by traditional Spanish-speaking Catholics in Romans 1:24, in the Reina-Valera 1995 version, in terms of how men who lay with men “deshonraron entre sí sus propios cuerpos” (“dishonored their bodies with one another,” International Standard Version) or, more directly, in the Jehovah’s Witness Nuevo Mundo version, “Dios [...] los entregó a la inmundicia, para que sus cuerpos fueran deshonrados entre sí” (“God [...] gave them up to uncleanness, so that their bodies might be dishonored among them,” in the New World Translation 2003). The climax of the piece *Dishonored Bodies* also re-pictures Leviticus 20:13, again in the Reina-Valera 1995 version: “Si alguien se acuesta con otro hombre como se hace con una mujer, abominación hicieron; ambos han de ser muertos: sobre ellos caerá su sangre” (“If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads,” in the New International Version). As Sally Munt remarks, as part of her discussion of the cultural politics of shame, and of the relationship between shamed subjectivities and “reactive, new” selves, “we are reminded that shame is predicated on the yearning for reconnection, for love, and that those in the most chronic state of shame will be amongst the most deeply loving, because they will not relinquish hope of restitution” (100). So, although there is an oddity in Carrillo’s decision to entitle his one exclusively heterosexual piece in the compilation this way, when the twists and turns of shame, as studied by Munt, are taken into account, and its “revolving cycle of separation-attachment-disattachment” (24), it becomes clear that what the whole compilation does is to keep intruding on different moments of sexualised emotional approach and recoil, finding in certain configurations abjection and in others a shame to be worked through. In all of these moments and configurations there is passionate attachment.

A somewhat atavistic recourse to linking love, desire and violence is especially evident in *Une sensation de vide* (2011). This is a videoart project on dance, partying, touch and affective contact whose gentle rhythms of movement and light and a semi-ethereal musical soundtrack match the intense but easy shifts of the pairings and threesomes of the dance. Perhaps sparked by jealousy, a flash of anger breaks out suddenly between two men dancing, with a glass of drink flung at one; the disturbance spreads, the textures of the film become more urgent; one man falls to the dance

floor, bloodied, and the piece closes ambiguously in narrative terms, though clearly enough in terms of where it located the greatest capacity to damage and be damaged—that is, between men. Again, unjustly foundational Biblical anathemas are indirectly revisited bringing bloody retribution and dismay; but again, too, a celebration of emotional intensity and the edginess of exhilaration turns the viewer's look towards more liberatory prospects, ones in which bodies in movement have meaning, and desires have a confirmatory impulse. There is a philosophy of connection at work in these pieces played out in sound and image.

The dialogue-free, but lyrically complemented, *Perfect Day* (co-directed with Félix Fernández, 2010) is an abstract piece that is, as one gallery-goer early in its first phase of exhibition observed, “[un] planteamiento existencial que reflexiona sobre la soledad y la búsqueda del otro” (Portinari) (an existential enquiry that reflects on solitude and the search for the other): the three section subtitles also make this clear—‘Fenómenos’ (Phenomena), ‘La cosa en sí’ (The Thing in Itself), and ‘The One and the Only.’ A cover video for the Lou Reed classic glam-rock lovesong to addiction and sexual outsiderdom, it is an episodic drama of queer erotic adventure. One man (played by Fernández), mainly in one bedroom (though with moody excursions in woodland and street), works through a series of sexual encounters with different recognisable types of men (the bear, the younger man, the forward, the timid) and, on one occasion with a woman too (Guadalupe Lancho). As in *Caníbales*, raw physicality and intense proximity give the piece's meditative and existential textures a strong erotic edge; for every close sexual moment there are as many moments of quiet looking away from a partner, or looking alone into the distance. If not shame absolutely, then certainly extreme reticence and the perceived impossibility of satisfaction of desire—perhaps the wrongness of desire, figured as just the wrong choice of partner—pervade the drama.

In *Une sensation de vide* joy and contact turn towards violence and in *Perfect Day* the quest for love leads, in all but an exceptional and equivocal case, to turning away from it. More affirmatively, and despite the literalisation of the idea of a dead end that sits in its title and setting, *Wall* (Muro, 2010) turns the misery of shame and rejection into the satisfaction and rightness of shaming and a vindication of autonomy and of self-empowerment in a same-sex context. It is a cameo of one young man waiting for and meeting another by a wall near or on a building site. When the other man arrives, he is shifty, evasive, interested in a mobile phone call, and has made no effort to dress nicely (unlike the other, who has clearly up to now been his boyfriend). A miserably familiar scenario of unequal affections unfolds in a painful to-and-fro between approach, caress, embrace and recoil, brush-off and disengagement; this choreography has an accompanying dialogue which is unheard (and not needed) by the viewer, with, instead, the sound of demolition and building on audio. The unfaithful, inattentive and unreliable ex (as he is now suddenly declaring himself to be) scrawls “I don't love you any more” on the wall in chalk, but is countered in the closing seconds by the boyfriend's “coz you're a coward.” This action is suddenly transformed into the true end, the consequence, of the earlier wait. The arrival at this metaphorical wall turns from being an ending to being a beginning; and the dance of need and rejection comes to rest on a moment of fulfilment. Redemptive also, for the viewer, is the pleasure of the single-location, one-take, all-of-a-piece drama, with its neat contrasts (white ironed shirt against dilapidated wall; delight versus rejection)

and with its raw, pointed soundscape (see also Perriam 108). The potential sadness of a sordid, classic drama of feckless infidelity and abandonment is countered by the sharpness and brightness of the formal apparatus and the neatness of a plot with a twist.

As Munt puts it, in a discussion of narratives of grief, “in order to transcend shame, we have first to enter it and know its deleterious effects,” this being part of the dynamic of “psychic rotations of incorporation and introjection” (102) and the “volatility of shame” (103). *Consequent // Consequences*, which Carrillo in his Museo MUVIM (Valencia) gloss (above) considers to be part of a series of representations of fragility and damage, shows the director himself entering into the territory of if not shame directly, exposure and apprehension: in part-reversed chronology, Carrillo’s hair is shorn from him by a series of obviously close friends of both sexes. This touching portrait of the artist uses its surprising length (given what it restricts itself to) to make the scenario alternately disturbing, intimate, comforting, and, at one stage, conducive to the expression of minor grief (as the shorn, altered, autobiographical subject comes close to tears looking in the mirror).

In *Fuckbuddies* (2011), by contrast, Carrillo manages to explore dynamics of incorporation and introjection unexpectedly through comedy and parody. Two men largely unsuccessfully and uncomfortably try to give each other pleasure in a small parked car and in their amusingly banal conversation come out to each other as in relationships with women and worried about mortgages, commitment, the future. They are lightly ashamed of, and bewildered by, what they have done or failed to do in the car, outside, beyond, and in their ambitions. The film, which has had substantial dissemination, has in common with *Cannibals* a certain classic dramatic unity (a quest for connection in a limited space and timeframe) and a more accessible, popular style than any of the pieces in this compilation. This is ironic, in Carrillo’s view, having made a film that is not typical of his output far better known than the rest of his oeuvre (Meitín). It gently gets these men—in what is implied as a generally commonplace way—to go through the mildly shameful absurdity of their position (and positions) and come out more or less unscathed and, if not exactly Munt’s “reactive, new” selves (100), at least refreshed. In a way the film is a parody of deeper dramas of prohibition, restriction and denial around sexual desire.

Though powerful in using deliberately disruptive traits of Romantic melodrama and deploying the dark concerns and motifs of classic rebel film and art, Carrillo’s work is also liberating when working with quieter, subtler materials. *Scaffolding (Andamio, 2012)* uses the refurbishment of the roof or facade of a worn-out row of Madrid apartments to encapsulate a different form of bonding between two men living as neighbours. Over several summer months, and after a longer time than that without acknowledging each other on the stairwell, their relationship moves from being repressed (with one, David, taking a more flirtatious but still very circumspect lead), reluctant (on the part of his neighbour, Eduardo) and then platonically intense, ending with David being asked round. The liminal spaces of neighbouring balconies and temporary scaffolding along the shared façade register as a stage for emotional uncertainty and erotic ambiguity which then resolves into an acknowledged same-sex attraction. The scaffolding, a mainly empty street scene, and the quietly sporadic works outside all gather resonance as the two neighbours continue not to communicate.

The sounds of the breeze on the soundtrack, and the flapping nets cast over the scaffolding, gesture off to a distant seashore (which David explicitly evokes, to the bewilderment of his more staid and imaginatively timid neighbour). The reticence that comes in part from being closeted is given a neat correlative in the largely hidden space of the next-door apartment, and Eduardo's popping in and out to the balcony (at one stage, experimentally and rather mournfully in underwear only) while the repairing and retouching of the building, and the scaffolding with its offer of access, all stand in for the rapprochement of the two men. Both reticence and reparation are used to build a fine-grained picture of quiet same-sex romance, with a small, shy "r."

In this extended review of the DVD compilation, and of some of Carrillo's key works, I have wanted to draw attention to the ways in which he restores honour and integrity to the queer bodies he so passionately and shamelessly frames here in vindication of different ways of feeling and connecting.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In this short essay I have not attempted to discuss *1941: Darkness* (part of the 2013 Magmat 100x100=900 travelling exhibition of video artworks inspired each by one of the previous 100 years). As Ángel Román has observed, it is a striking and characteristic conjunction of filmmaking and videoart, reason and emotion. However, its historical and political focus on betrayal and commitment place it in different context to the ones with which I have been concerned here. Román is a useful guide in Spanish to the piece, and to Carrillo's work in general (via the link Juanma Carrillo).