

M I R E N J A I O

*Up-tight*¹ Methodology

The following is a description of
two videos by Iñaki Garmendia
with explanatory notes.

IZARRA [14']

A car by night on a road. The car halts with its occupants, four young people, inside and outside. These same young people inside a building that looks like an abandoned schoolhouse. In classrooms and corridors, with tables and chairs stacked up in the corners, the four in the dark: in a circle with their eyes closed and their hands linked, standing facing forwards as if frozen, curled up on the ground. One of them with traces of something that might be blood on his hands. A young man looks at another dancing on the mini-display of a video camera, and then repeats the dance. Again, the four in a dark corridor, facing forward, lit by an erratic light.

This is a rough synopsis of *Izarra*². The fourteen minutes of the video contain no linked series of actions building a narrative thread but instead a number of situations heaped on top of each other, generating a tension that is never fully resolved (things are going to happen and things have happened, but little happens). In opposition to the notion of action as the driving force of cinematographic narration, the camera always seeks out the fringes: ghostly, abandoned places, blurred rehearsals and preparations, saturated atmospheres of waiting, traces of what has been done or what is yet to do, obscure rituals of adolescent groups, intrusion and furtive prowling³.

The camera is not a passive instrument recording the action. Its insistent presence creates unease and tension in its objects. These objects, the actors, always in a stationary position, as if the film had got stuck at a particular frame, are forced to maintain an interplay with an intrusive camera using what might be termed an *up-tight*³ methodology. This results in a series of discontinuities in the course of the action—moments in which hardly anything is happening apart from the camera moving between the bodies of the actors⁴—which are dilated in time and become an expressive condensation. The result is a gallery of vibrating, individual and collective portraits, which the camera draws out of the darkness.



Red Light/Straight Edge 2005

RED LIGHT/STRAIGHT EDGE⁵ (20' 17")

Two characters, a girl and a boy, alternate on the screen. In the dark, lit by a red light, they sing *a capella* versions of *Red Light*⁶ and *Straight Edge* as the camera frames them in a series of close-ups.

Red Light / Straight Edge is another “black portrait” video using an *up-tight* methodology, but whereas in *Izarra* the portrait was created through an elusion/illusion or interruption of the action, here it is the result of a saturation of action, based on song. The camera continues to impose a dominant relationship⁷. However, the hand-to-hand struggle is now between the actors and the songs they are performing, and on which they impose their own phrasing, melody, modulations and rhythm.

The singer’s body thus becomes an instrument, serving the song. At times, the voice is carried away by the sensual but controlled rhythm of the melodies (“Come into this room /

Come into this gloom); at others, it breaks down and the singing comes close to being a shout or a moan, and the discipline imposed becomes difficult to follow (“But I’ve got better things to do/Than sit around and smoke dope/.../I’ve got the straight edge”). The performer’s submission to the text⁸ generates tension. In *Izarra*, this was created out of the potential of something that might happen but does not. In *Red Light / Straight Edge*, it is resolved as violence, unleashed maintained and unresolved (when one shot follows another and this is followed by a third...). The nakedness with which the main elements of the video are presented helps condense the *pathos* created: face, voice and song are all presented without an anecdotic background landscape, a devoted audience or a musical accompaniment to sustain them.

On the screen the different shots come one after another (some failed, others interrupted, no two alike). These are both rehearsals and performances⁹, with the camera as the only audience¹⁰. Occasionally, the discontinuous succession

of shots in which the body fights on relentlessly with the song or, to put it another way, the text, is arbitrarily interrupted with written texts containing information (“Josetxo does Straight Edge”, “Nobody”)¹¹.

The video is based on structural elements organised in the form of a binome: two very different songs¹², two singers, a man and a woman, who approach interpretation in very different ways, two video projections facing each other in their installation for the exhibition hall. A series of arbitrarily-introduced (but necessary) distortions and dissonances break the appearance of a symmetrical structure (the alternation of songs and performers does not follow any regular pattern, the voice of one of the singers plays over the image of the other singer performing the same song...). There is, however, one reason which explains why, despite it all, *Red Light/Straight Edge* is not a film of antagonism or dichotomies. Its component elements are ultimately conditional on rhythm, the unifying principle that runs like an underground stream through all the images and all the sounds¹³. ◀

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 It was Barbara Rubin who had suggested the “Andy Warhol, Up-Tight” name and developed the concept of making people “up-tight” rather than relaxed by filming their responses with her movie camera” for the multimedia rock show “Andy Warhol, Up-Tight” (New York, 1966). In V. Bockris & G. Malanga: *up-tight. The Velvet Underground Story*, Omnibus Press, London, 1983.

1 *Izarra* is a town in the province of Alava which was home to a well-known school of the same name, now abandoned, for school drop-outs. It was here that the video was filmed. In Basque, “*izarra*” means “star”.

2 These references appear in one form or another throughout Iñaki Garmendia’s work. They are most clearly seen in *Kanala* (1999) and in the photograph in the catalogue of the workshop directed by Angel Bados and Txomin Badiola in Arteleku in 1997.

4 “The body (...) is no longer viewed in terms of its actions but of its posture”. Deleuze, speaking of the image and film actors after the Second World War. In G. Deleuze: *Conversaciones*, Pre-Textos, Valencia, 1999. p. 116.

5 *Red Light* is a song from *Kaleidoscope* (1980) by Siouxsie and the Banshees and *Straight Edge* is from the album of the same name by Minor Threat in 1981.



Red Light/Straight Edge 2005

- 6 In the choice of songs to be performed in this video there is a tribute to *Red Light*, the 1995 video by Itziar Okariz, one of the most important artists on the Basque scene. Garmendia and Okariz also share certain programming aspects, both arguing that the intuitive is a necessary part of their work process and both deriving an emotional charge from this position.
- 7 This *up-tight* method has also been used by Jon Mikel Euba in some of his videos (*Neska, La Noche*). However, his approaches are different: in the case of Euba, starting from a built situation, the device of the camera operates as a projection of the desire to control everything; in Garmendia's case, the camera seeks to record everything, even the things that lie outside its control.
- 8 The tacit submission by the actors to a hard and demanding discipline is reminiscent of the principles behind Artaud's theatre of cruelty.
- 9 Where a rehearsal is always an action and an action is always the rehearsal of a song in a chain of possible and never definitive versions. This is because as an artistic form developed over time, music—unlike the visual arts, cinema or literature—allows for the constant recreation of an already competed work. In other words, time-based art forms follow a logic whereby each new version is at once entirely new and always the same thing.
- 10 Garmendia also worked with the musical performance format in *Kolpez kolpe* in the Taipei Biennial 2002 and in *Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger* for Manifesta5 in 2004. Throughout much of the first of these videos, we see a Taiwanese punk-rock group preparing to perform versions of music from the *Radical Basque Rock* movement at the opening of the biennial (sound tests, review of the Chinese transcriptions of the songs in Basque, listening to the original versions on CD, waiting). It is not until the last few minutes that the actual concert begins (though, using the arguments set out above, the preparations could also be classed as performances). No audience is visible on the screen. Only at the end, a few spontaneous groupies come into the field of the camera, not to cheer the group, but to dance with their backs to them as they pose and wave at the camera. *Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger* shows a concert by the German group Terrorgruppe in Berlin. The camera is positioned behind the members of the group, giving intimate portraits of the audience in the front rows.

The three videos start from one of the basic pillars of the liturgy of the rock concert, the agreed transferral and feedback of energy between group and audience, and then go on to fracture this flow: in *Kolpez kolpe*, the energy is lost and delayed in the waiting and the preparations; in *Harder...*, the film centres on a specific feature of the syntax of the rock concert documentary, the shot of the audience seen from the stage, but it omits the counter-shot, the group as seen from the audience; in *Red Light / Straight Edge*, there is no audience to receive and return the electrical charge of the performances which are churned out one after another with no sense of continuity. The drive of the energy—violence, almost—to find a pole of transmission is left hanging in the air, unsatisfied.

- 11 Text, in the form of sound or image, plays a predominant part in the artist's work. In *Red Light / Straight Edge*, the sung text is the theme. As in *Kolpez kolpe*, the actors are performing a song in a language that is not their own. Only in the first one does the text appear as an impediment and a foreign element. In the video of a Taiwanese group performing songs from the *Radical Basque Rock* movement, their approximate and imperfect version can be seen as a valid form of translation which goes beyond the impossible, and at the same time unnecessary, total translation. In *Red Light / Straight Edge*, a similar narrative excuse is used to stage the song as the body's struggle to appropriate and interiorise a text.

Taken generally from song lyrics, the texts come in a range of forms with different interpretations: the explanatory and redundant text in black and white appearing in the middle of the action ("Josetxo does Straight Edge") does not fulfil any semantic function, but rather a graphic, rhythmical one; in *Kolpez kolpe*, the group leaf through some sheets of paper, whose contents are barely visible. These are the phonetic transcriptions of the songs.

Garmendia's thematic, sentimental universe is a post-punk one, hence the fragmentary texts that appear in his work. The reasons behind them are never the same (they are there for their phonetic value, their graphic power, their meaning, their capacity to dislocate the rhythm of the edit...). They are texts taken from a limbo of lost messages whose origin we do not need to know. Distributed in a random, scattered way, their meaning never manages to impose itself over the images beside them.

There is one work which symbolises the artist's need for these enigmatic messages: a photograph of a group of young people sitting on the ground after a concert in Berlin. All the faces are looking away from the camera. It is an image taken from a *Columbine* world. In the foreground, curled up, a dark-haired boy in a black T-shirt is turning his back to the spectator. His evasive profile and a white arm stand out against the dark background. The artist has put a phrase in red on the T-Shirt: "Orain bihotzak inoiz baino gehiago daude sutan" [*Now more than ever, hearts are on fire*].

- 12 The songs exemplify the two great irreconcilable lines of punk, two forms of subversion that seem to cancel one another out. On the one hand, there is the line represented by the sinister rock of Siouxsie & The Banshees and its particular attributes—femininity, private worlds that are not subject to the rules, erotic and hedonistic abandon, and epidermal masquerade—and on the other, the line led by the *straight edge* of the American *hard-core*, characterised by its masculinity, by the utopia of going back to a natural order, the control—Puritanical in its origins—over political movements and commitment (for an in-depth analysis from a gender perspective, see J. Press and S. Reynolds: *Sex Revolts, Serpent's Tail*, London, 1995). This polarisation (and its difficult resolution) can be seen at the heart of Iñaki Garmendia's work and also that of Asier Mendizabal, an artist with whom he shares references and working methods, and with whom he has collaborated on a number of occasions. Traceable from the historical avant-garde down to punk, through the *nouvelle vague*, this polarisation comes to symbolise the eternal struggle between *love and politics*, or how to reconcile the individual and the collective; what comes before and what comes afterwards; how, why and, finally, what to do.
- 13 Music in the artist's work operates not only as a referent, but as a structural aspect. Internal musical features such as rhythm or melodies, which in *Red Light / Straight Edge*, appear in syncopated fashion and as a *mantra* respectively, are integrated naturally in his work. Garmendia's work is also less evidently marked by other features which in principle are not strictly musical, such as the arrangement and order of the songs on a disc, the reasons for choosing one or another, etc.