

The Dance of Violence

Joan Fontcuberta

The place

The *Plaça Sant Jaume* (Saint James Square) is the heart of Barcelona, a symbolic arena where crowds congregate for political struggles or sporting victories. Situated on opposite sides of the square are the headquarters of the main local political authorities, the *Generalitat* (the Catalan Autonomous Government) and the City Council.

The context

With the fall of General Primo de Rivera's dictatorship in 1930, and the flight of King Alfonso XIII into exile, a new democratic regime, the Second Republic, was established in Spain. The country existed in a climate of constant political tension, as power alternated between leftwing and rightwing parties; yet, in spite of this, important political and social progress was achieved. Early in 1936, a general election for the Congress of Deputies was called for February 16 and 23. Socialists, communists, as well as Republicans in Catalonia and Madrid, having agreed to put aside their differences and work together under the name Popular Front, succeeded in winning the election against the rightist coalition, the National Front. The new authorities set about implementing strong progressivist policies, thereby upsetting traditional powers such as landowners, the Church, the nobility, and the army. Among these policies was a Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia. On July 17, barely five months after the election, reactionary forces provoked a military coup d'état, igniting a civil war that ultimately led to the defeat of the Spanish Republic by General Franco and his fascist allies in 1939.

The photograph

With a Leica bought in instalments two years earlier, the 25-year-old photojournalist Agustí Centelles set out to document the historical elections of 1936. The photographs he took were published in the international press. On February 16, he focused his camera on the voting queues and on a variety of urban scenes that portrayed the people's expectations from the election. The next day, when provisional results for the first round of voting were announced, supporters of the rival coalitions reacted with street demonstrations of celebration—or of protest—both frequently ending in riot and disorder.

Probably the most outstanding image made that day depicts a street demonstrator about to be beaten by three *Guardias de Asalto* (Assault Guards). The contact sheet shows the entire event unfolding: the demonstrator surrounded by policemen, being threatened by them, and, finally, running away. The sequence's best shot successfully captured the tragic choreography of repression.

The present

Despite the overwhelming presence of tourist shops and fast-food restaurants, the spot hasn't changed much since the photograph was taken. Today, as Catalonians renew their claim for sovereignty, the square is once again witnessing demonstrations. Centelles' picture is a reminder of this history, and a prompt for reimagining its hopes and fears. Scrutinizing the stars has always been a way to interrogate the future. It occurred to me, therefore, that the best image to put into dialogue with Centelles' photograph would be a celestial map of Barcelona on that dramatic night: the dance of violence mirrored in the dance of planets.



