

# Filming the Margins: Citizenship and Visuality in Catalonia

ANTONIO MONEGAL  
*Universitat Pompeu Fabra*

## Abstract

Documentary films produced in Catalonia that represent multicultural and multilingual environments can function as tools of critical intervention, raising awareness, rescuing from oblivion and empowering communities by making visible the everyday circumstances, interactions and conflicts of anonymous citizens. The three examples selected for discussion, Óscar Perez's *El sastre* (2007), Eva Vila's *Bajari* (2013) and Claudio Zulian's *A través del Carmel* (2009), illustrate different forms of marginality in the social makeup of Barcelona by focusing on a Pakistani tailor who runs a little shop in the downtown district of the Raval, which has a large immigrant population, on the transmission of the musical legacy of the gypsy community as a form of preserving identity, and on the cultural heterogeneity of the working-class neighbourhood of Carmel criss-crossed by the camera in a single continuous take. The documentaries address the complexity of the cultural makeup of contemporary societies by portraying the inflections of difference along axes such as language, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, and musical idioms. The films reveal the heterogeneity often hidden under generalizing notions and hegemonic identities. The typical debate about Catalan versus Spanish is replaced by a more nuanced landscape in which the other languages of Catalonia are represented.

## Keywords

Documentary film; Multilingualism; Cultural difference; Marginality; Political relevance of the arts; Social impact; Barcelona

# Filming the Margins: Citizenship and Visuality in Catalonia

ANTONIO MONEGAL

*Universitat Pompeu Fabra*

I write in the presence of all the world's languages [...] But to write in the presence of all the world's languages does not mean to know all the world's languages. It means that in the present context of multiple literatures and of the relation of poetics with the chaos world, I can no longer write in a monolingual manner.

Édouard Glissant (1999, 119)

I would like to start by invoking, at a time of necessary and growing dialogue between different cultures and increasing awareness of the importance of conceiving identity as multiple and fluid, these words of Édouard Glissant, who showed us that our common condition is multilingualism. This essay discusses films that document the negotiation between cultural and linguistic identities in Catalonia. When people talk about languages in Catalonia, they tend to concentrate on the issue of bilingualism, the relation or tension between Catalan and Spanish, but we need to acknowledge that the linguistic map nowadays is far more complex. There are several films produced in recent years that address this cultural and linguistic diversity by becoming multilingual products themselves and thematising the negotiation of cultural difference. These topics and concerns (immigration, marginalization, ethnic identities, etc.) may sound anything but new when discussed in other European contexts. However, we should take into account that twenty years ago Catalonia, and Spain, were not as diverse as they are now and many of these issues have only recently started to be addressed.

I will focus this analysis on three films: Óscar Pérez's *El sastre* (2007), Eva Vila's *Bajarí* (2013) and Claudio Zulian's *A través del Carmel* (2009), but there are several other examples that display this linguistic diversity, helping to normalize the changes in the society's make-up. There are some interesting cases that straddle the border between documentary and fiction, several of them produced by the Master's programme in Creative Documentary directed by Jordi

Balló at Universitat Pompeu Fabra. These films thematise the negotiation of cultural difference by becoming multilingual products themselves. Another pertinent example could be *La plaga* (2013), directed by Neus Ballús, where the characters speak Catalan, Spanish, Rumanian and Ilocano. In *Pau i el seu germà* (2001), directed by Marc Recha, the characters move between Catalan and French. There are two films from 2016 about foster families, a fictionalized account about a Saharawi young man living in Catalonia who needs a kidney transplant, *La millor opció* by the same director of *El sastre*, Óscar Pérez, and the other one about a Ukrainian boy from a poor and conflictive background who spends the summers with a well-to-do Catalan family, *Sasha*, directed by Félix Colomer. The contrasts between the biological families and the foster ones are also linguistic, between Berber or Ukrainian versus Catalan and Spanish. There is also a film, *Gitanos catalans!* (2011), directed by Xavier Gaja and Sicus Carbonell, that deals with some of the topics in *Bajarí* from a more conventional perspective, focusing on the integration of gypsies throughout Catalonia. This trend of what we might call linguistic naturalism probably started with Guerin's *En construcció* (2001), a topic addressed in this collection by Jordi Balló.

The background question of the discussion in this essay is to what extent culture – and in particular film – can be a tool of political intervention, what function it serves and what impact it can have. In a sense, it is a way of asking how culture, and the arts, can be made socially relevant. I do not intend to reach absolute conclusions, nor assess the political effectiveness of artistic practices in sociological terms. Rather, my goal is to examine the critical drive inscribed in particular projects and how political discourse is determined by the requirements and program applied in the development of the work, that is, how politics is governed by poetics.

The choice of film as the analytical focus of this research is threefold: first, documentary film is a powerful instrument of social analysis, as anthropologists have known since Robert Flaherty's work in the 1920s; second, audio-visual representation requires calculated choices about how and in what languages people speak, which are determined by varying commitments to realism; and third, film provides a “window to the world” that has the potential to influence social perceptions and rally audiences.

Jacques Rancière reopened the discussion on political action in the artistic field and provides the theoretical background against which to verify the political claims of artistic practices, observing that:

The proliferation of voices denouncing the crisis of art or its fatal capture by discourse, the pervasiveness of the spectacle or

the death of the image, suffice to indicate that a battle fought yesterday over the promises of emancipation and the illusions and disillusion of history continues today on aesthetic terrain.

(2006, 3)

Rancière's position resonates with Marina Garcés's influential work, *Un mundo común*, in which she argues:

Que las obras artísticas traten de temas políticos no implica que ese arte trate honestamente con lo real. La honestidad con lo real es la virtud que define la fuerza material de un arte implicado en su tiempo. La honestidad con lo real no se define por sus temas, por sus procesos ni por sus lugares, sino por la fuerza de su implicación y por sus anhelos.

(2013, 68)

Topics concerned with reality, collective processes and the use of public space are elements Garcés identifies as signalling art's repolitization of life. However, she sets an ethical requirement that is much more difficult to judge, and to fulfil, that of honesty toward the real. This virtue is not predicated on the traditional notion of commitment, as in the committed artist or intellectual, but on involvement and desire: not on the allegiance to an ideology but on an actual being in the world, sharing a common experience. Garcés points to documentalism and activism as the two dynamics that define the present context and the projects selected in this essay can certainly be seen to share both traits – albeit to differing degrees. The focus on techniques of mechanical reproduction, that is, on photography and film, is directly linked to this attention to the real, to the collective and to the public. Indeed, as Rancière notes, the representation of the collective subject is intimately connected with photography and film achieving artistic status:

In order for the mechanical arts to be able to confer visibility on the masses, or rather on anonymous individuals, they first need to be recognized as arts. That is to say that they first need to be, put into practice and recognized as something other than techniques of reproduction or transmission. It is thus the same principle that confers visibility on absolutely anyone and allows for photography and film to become arts.

(2006, 32)

The examples discussed allow us to discern this shared destiny between the representation of the anonymous collective subject and

the arts of mechanical reproduction, and how the alliance can work for critical purposes.

Out of the many possible examples for a discussion of multilingualism in film, if we consider that the conflict between Catalan and Spanish identities is at the centre of current debates, the three films that I have selected illustrate different ways of being at the margins of contemporary Catalan society, and different approaches to what we can understand as “languages” in the context of this research, extending the notion to musical idioms (which of course I expect to be open to debate). The first case is *El sastre*, a 30-minute documentary directed and produced by Óscar Pérez in 2007, about a Pakistani tailor who runs a very small mending and alterations shop in the Raval neighbourhood of Barcelona. The second one is *Bajará*, a feature-length documentary directed by Eva Vila in 2013. *Bajará* is the name of Barcelona in *Caló*, the language of the Spanish gypsies, and the film explores the culture of flamenco and its transmission among Catalan gypsies. It focusses on a 5-year-old boy, Juanito Manzano, who wants to become a dancer and Karime Amaya, an already-accomplished professional dancer, who travels from Mexico to perform in Barcelona and encounters her roots as the grand-niece of Carmen Amaya, one of the greatest flamenco dancers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *El sastre* deals with exchanges between immigrants and locals, while in *Bajará* the dialogue is between two distinct gypsy musical idioms, *flamenco* and *rumba*. The third margin I am exploring physically overlooks the other two, as it has Barcelona at its feet: the documentary *A través del Carmel*, directed by Claudio Zulian, tours a steep neighbourhood on the side of a mountain. I have chosen this film for its innovative formal interaction between image and voice, the use of linguistic code switching to signal social difference, the visual mapping of social space, and its political objectives and activism, satisfying the conditions for art’s re-politization of life set by Garcés.

### *El sastre*

The Raval, on the west side of the Ramblas, is the most multicultural district in Barcelona, with large North-African, Pakistani and Filipino communities, in addition to many other immigrant groups.<sup>1</sup> For example, there are more than 25 languages spoken by the children in a public school in the area.<sup>2</sup> There was an attempt at

---

<sup>1</sup> According to a 2019 report by the NGO Linguapax, *Diversitat lingüística i cultural: un patrimoni comú de valor inestimable*, there are people of more than 174 different nationalities residing in Barcelona, and more than 300 languages are spoken in the city (<http://www.linguapax.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Informe-2019.pdf>, 13).

<sup>2</sup> According to Plataforma per la Llengua (<https://www.plataforma-llengua.cat/que-fem/articles-opinio/1725/el-raval-tambe-parla-tagalog>).

gentrification which started after the Barcelona Olympics and which was reflected in José Luis Guerín's landmark documentary *En construcción*. However, the process was partially derailed by two unforeseen developments: non-European immigration and mass tourism, two parallel waves that had a substantial impact on this downtown area, characterized as it is by picturesque, narrow streets and low-income run-down housing as well as a traditional association with prostitution and crime. The change in demographics interrupted the flow of middle-class residents and the crammed quarters of the Raval have thus become a laboratory of urban multicultural coexistence. So, in a sense, the Raval positions the margin in the centre of the city.

Óscar Pérez reflects this circumstance by literally focusing his camera on a small detail, on a minor anecdote of the neighbourhood's life. Mohamed's tailoring business is tiny, 8 square meters packed with clothes and piles of plastic bags containing the finished orders, without any organized system to keep track of them. He shares the space with his Indian assistant, Singh, whom he pays very little because the latter has no legal papers. The filmmaker has placed his camera at the entrance facing the store, right next to where the clients interact with Mohamed, and most of the film consists of this single static shot.

We watch as Mohamed argues with local clients in his limited Spanish about poorly done work, misplaced orders and other misunderstandings. He is assertive, stubborn, intransigent, and despotic with his assistant. Moreover, at the end of each of these exchanges Mohamed addresses the man behind the camera to have the last word, in a gesture of self-justification. This constant awareness of the presence of the camera, and the rapport and complicity Mohamed tries to establish is a defining trait of the film. Pérez never appears or speaks on camera, but he is repeatedly referred to. Mohamed speaks with Singh in Urdu and, knowing Pérez does not understand them, they make ironical comments about the "man with the camera" and the possible success of the film. Of course, Pérez had these conversations translated and subtitled and the audience can listen in.

The film follows this unstable criss-crossing of languages, with Spanish as the fragile *lingua franca* that is native to only a fraction of the characters. An example of this is the conversation with a Moroccan client who is trying to communicate in Spanish with Singh, who does not understand the language. The constant threat of miscommunication is not just an issue of language but of power. The Pakistani boss and the Indian employee air their disagreement, which ends with the latter being fired. The immigrant exploits the immigrant and, despite his marginal status and the precariousness of

his business, Mohamed asserts his self-importance and authority by wielding his capacity to hire and to offer promises of legal contracts.

The enclosed space of the tailor's shop becomes a microcosm of the multicultural city, a junction of exchange and conflict. The circulation of languages represents less a tool of communication than a symptom of the negotiation of social roles and power relations. Mohamed argues with his local clients, who repeatedly threaten with not bringing him any more business and ruining his reputation. But he unwaveringly insists they are all wrong. He is reluctant to pay Singh's low wages and fires him when the latter claims he is too sick to work. However, the main reason behind Mohamed's disgruntlement is that Singh has asked the cameraman to take him to hospital, despite the fact that Mohamed wanted to be driven elsewhere and, as the boss, he claims that his own needs are of higher importance.

This less-than-flattering portrayal of the immigrant, devoid of any tone of political correctness, is the result of trying to grasp the complexity of relations within the neighbourhood from the inside, and of Mohamed's position within it, in his double role as both subaltern newcomer and business owner and employer. We witness his struggle to defend his dignity and self-perceived professionalism against the claims of incompetence. At the same time, for him, the unsatisfied clients or employees are crazy, thieves or liars. The shop is thus the centre of a grid of tensions that expands beyond the enclosed space.

The camera's mediation underscores the connection between what we see and what we do not see, the beyond, the outside. The filmmaker is the outsider, despite being the native. He does not belong in the neighbourhood. His mediation extends beyond the actual filming. As the dialogues reveal, he runs errands for the characters. The native mediator is Mohamed's invisible assistant. He is in a somewhat uncomfortable position, forced to witness the conflicts that play out in the shop and asked to take sides. For Mohamed, the camera is an instrument to tell his side of the story, a source of empowerment in an alien context where he feels misunderstood and isolated. Within the diminutive space we perceive people separated by huge cultural distances, struggling, sometimes violently, to find, among a repertoire of languages, a precarious channel of communication.

### *Bajari*

*Bajari* tells a different story about the internal margins of society. For centuries, racism in Spain was aimed mostly at gypsies, *gitanos*, as the main ethnic minority in the Peninsula. They were the ancestral

Other, the object of myth, stereotypes and prejudice. At the same time, the most recognizable form of expression of their culture, *flamenco*, has usually been associated with Spanish identity, as a central element of Andalusian folklore. In Catalonia, the issue is more complex. There have always been well-established gypsy communities in certain neighbourhoods, such as Carrer de la Cera in the Raval, La Mina in Sant Adrià and Sant Roc in Badalona. There are two main groups: the gypsies with roots in the Gràcia neighbourhood and the town of Mataró, who often speak Catalan, and those in Sant Adrià and Badalona, who speak Spanish.

There are also two musical idioms represented in the *gitano* community in Catalonia: *flamenco*, with definite Andalusian origins, and Catalan *rumba*, a fusion form created by a small group of gypsy musicians in Barcelona in the 1950s, with a background in *rumba flamenca* and strong influences from Caribbean music. Both idioms have long-lasting roots among the local gypsy community. Paradoxically, since the late 1970s, the drive to strengthen cultural signs associated with Catalan identity relegated *flamenco* to a nearly invisible position, hidden away as an inferior and alien tourist attraction, while *rumba* was respected and flourished because of its Catalan credentials. The film's goal is to reclaim *flamenco* as a local cultural expression, representative of a community whose presence in the city predates the current debates surrounding multiculturalism.

Sant Roc in Badalona is where Franco's government relocated the gypsy colony from the Somorrostro shanty town, now the site of the Olympic Harbour and Barcelona's most fashionable beaches. Somorrostro was the location for Francisco Rovira Beleta's 1963 film, *Los Tarantos*, an adaptation of the Romeo and Juliet story transformed into the rivalry between two gypsy families and starring the great dancer, Carmen Amaya. *Bajari* opens precisely with a screening of *Los Tarantos*, with Carmen Amaya dancing, in front of Juanito Manzano and his family.

One of the main points *Bajari* raises is that music is an essential component of cultural identity, and that gypsies do not learn *flamenco* at conservatoires or dance schools, rather that it is transmitted within the family, from generation to generation. Thus, Juanito's story echoes Karime's, who comes from a long dynasty of *bailaoras*. She was born and raised in Mexico because the Amayas left Spain during the Civil War and her grandparents, who had toured the Americas with Carmen, decided to settle there. In the film, Karime is invited by a group of local *rumba* musicians to perform with them during the city festivities. The documentary was shot during the rehearsals for that show and it highlights the dialogue and collaboration between gypsy musicians of distinct backgrounds, the *rumberos* and the



*flamencos*, with the latter insisting on their improvisational style and lack of formal training, which the film links to the transmission of cultural identity along family lineages.

The premiere of *Bajari* at the Film Archive was an exceptional event because the audience included a significant representation of gypsy families from different neighbourhoods in Barcelona. A few months later, Karime Amaya was invited to dance at the institutional celebration of the National Day of Catalonia, on 11 September. She was not the first *flamenco* artist to participate, though some of these previous artistes had been jeered by the audience as intruders in the Catalan ceremonial show, despite their having been born in Catalonia. Karime, on the other hand, represented an expatriate saga of Catalan origin. Her identification is cultural, albeit one with a historically marginal expression; that of the autochthonous gypsy culture. *Bajari*, together with *Los Tarantos*, the photographs of Jacques Leonard, a Frenchman who married Rosario, a cousin of Carmen Amaya, the paintings of Isidre Nonell and the literature of Juli Vallmitjana, attest to the Catalan roots of these gypsy communities. However, what distinguishes them is an identity, a culture and a language of their own. Nevertheless, it is not enough to read the presence of Karime at a celebration of Catalan identity as a symptom of the inclusiveness of Catalan culture or as a recognition of her belonging to a shared heritage. A culture is a complex mixture, with aspects that belong to it since its origin and others added throughout centuries. This applies to both communities in question, particularly in this time of cultural homogenization through consumption. The example of *Bajari* may thus be an invitation to think about what cultural identity is, how it is constructed and transmitted.

If identity does not exist unless it is articulated as difference – I need an “other” in order to know who I am – perhaps Karime was at that celebration of Catalan identity not simply because she belongs there, but because, at the same time, she is that “other.” For centuries, gypsies have been the quintessential other, the object of prejudice and discrimination, a role that has been obscured by the arrival of the likes of Mohamed, the tailor. The issue of what Catalans call the *nouvinguts*, the “newly-arrived,” has replaced that of the “previously-arrived.” However, this otherness is also a virtue, it is founded on a people’s capacity to remain faithful to itself, to transmit its identity as a legacy from parents to children, to resist assimilation in the face of adversity and marginalization. Proving that one can be Catalan without ceasing to be *gitano*. *Bajari* speaks about this process, and not just about *flamenco* – about how a culture is cemented in the preservation of collective memory, of a repertoire of customs, of practices, of values.

Without attempting to idealize any people, in the story of what moves a community there is a lesson about what it means to have a culture of one's own. Pasolini insisted that we must look at the margins a society to search for its ancestral traits and truths forgotten amid contemporary noise (2009, 31). We should consider ourselves in relation to the other to know who we are because this other also mirrors us and is part of our identity. Perhaps in this way we will learn to acknowledge the centrality of margins (particularly when gypsies, immigrants and Catalans are all peripheral).

Whereas *El sastre* deals with exchanges between immigrants and locals, switching between Spanish and Urdu, in *Bajarí* the dialogue is between two distinct musical idioms, *flamenco* and *rumba*. Flamenco is shared with gypsies in Andalusia, so its language is Spanish, while *rumba* is a product of Catalan-speaking gypsy communities. The linguistic complexity is underscored by the fact that most *payos* (non-gypsies) do not even know that *Bajarí* is the name of Barcelona in *Caló*. Catalan gypsies, a traditionally discriminated minority, represent an internal unrecognized margin, while the recent waves of immigrants inhabiting the Raval neighbourhood place the margin in the centre of the city. The circulation of languages becomes part of the negotiation of difference within a multicultural space, and film both records this negotiation and activates the spectator's involvement therein.

### *A través del Carmel*

For those who are not familiar with the topography of Barcelona, a brief introduction is in order. El Carmel is a working-class neighbourhood on the side of one of the hills that sticks out of the northern area of the city. It is known for its steep streets and its cluttered urban grid. It is one of the ever-present locations in Juan Marsé's novels and it is one of the neighbourhoods that best reflects the history of post-Civil War immigration from rural Spain into Barcelona. Much of the area developed out of a shantytown on the mountain, where in the 1950s and 1960s newly-arrived families built at night, so as to escape police intervention, and the resulting precarious lodgings often remained their home for years. Shacks and other forms of self-construction were the norm on land that was then mostly rural and grew sporadically into a populous urban neighbourhood. Now, it houses other newly-arrived immigrant communities, but it still maintains its traditional social configuration and the proud memory of its humble origins. In El Carmel the sense of belonging and neighbourhood cohesion were so strong that when the shacks were demolished people were unwilling to be transferred elsewhere and had to be re-accommodated in the area. The

neighbourhood can be read as the site of a history of immigration. As one of the neighbours says, we are all immigrants, and then came the other immigrants.

All of these elements simply provide context for our discussion. The point is that the successive migratory waves are represented in the film visually and orally, in a polyphony of languages and accents. The film is a challenging formal experiment. It is filmed in a single continuous sequence shot. The camera traces a tortuous path through the neighbourhood, starting after 4 pm at the bottom of the hill and progressively ascending to reach the top before sunset. This uninterrupted take goes in and out of apartments, stores, the library, the church, the civic centre, the local clinic, a mental health centre, one for treating addictions, the market, the neighbours' association, the market, a parking garage, visiting or accompanying a long list of residents. We hear them speak about their lives, experiences and memories, but the image does not show them speaking. The noises of the street are recorded live, but all the speeches are heard as voiceover, as image and sound are dissociated. We cross a person's path, follow them for a while or enter their residence or place of work and we hear comments that are not being uttered at that moment, so sometimes we are not even sure who is speaking. The visual sequence is continuous, but the soundtrack is meticulously edited. The effect is a puzzle or collage of voices that accompanies the image and comments on it, but at the same time functions as an independent register, via the flowing caption of the moving image. The voices can be cut in mid-sentence, fade, overlap, for a fragmented choral impression. Zulian explains that he wanted each participant to share responsibility for how the film was made and to decide how and where they wanted to be represented. The variety of approaches led to a very fragmented film, in that sense, the sequence shot was a strategy to unify its discourse and connect the lives of these people who, although part the same neighbourhood, do not necessarily have much else in common. The visual result is spectacular, but I want to highlight the contribution of the soundtrack as a tool for social analysis. The film is a concert of movement, space, noises and voices flowing like a collective stream of conscience, displayed in a temporal succession marked by the fading daylight. The voices tell their stories, but they also speak different languages that tell a different story. Most of the participants speak Spanish or Catalan, with one instance of a Pakistani man speaking nearly unintelligible English. The number of languages in the film is limited, because people are speaking for the film, not among themselves, but their origins are plenty: Andalucía, Ecuador, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Bulgaria, Pakistan and so on. Therefore, the majority of the residents speak Spanish, but different kinds of Spanish: their accents

distinguish them and speak volumes about their place in the community.

In this respect, the film works as a sociolinguistic laboratory and shows the spaces and languages that stratify the community. Languages are much more than a tool of communication, they are the material of world views, and an expression of cultural difference. In *A través del Carmel*, languages are indicators of origin, cultural background, social class, age and education. The first marker is of course who speaks Catalan and who speaks Spanish. The first native speaker of Catalan we see is the doctor who runs the addiction-recovery clinic. Catalan is spoken by other doctors, mental health professionals, social workers, a librarian and two coordinators of the cultural centre, among others. The implication is that many of these professionals and service providers may not live in the neighbourhood, only work there. It is an indication of status and education, and not just place of birth.

A few of the activists in the neighbourhood association and a college student who lives with his family speak Catalan, while elderly and long-time residents speak mostly Spanish or a popular form of non-native Catalan with Spanish inflexions, betraying their immigrant background even if some may have been born there. Among a group of teenagers who compare life in Barcelona with their native Latin American countries and talk about their plans for the future, the one who explains that she must study hard to become a physiotherapist does so in Catalan. On the other hand, when the camera passes to the public school, we hear younger school-age children speaking fluent Catalan, despite the fact that their families come from Cuba or Bulgaria (one of them explains she learnt Catalan in two months), demonstrating the success of the immersion educational system as a tool of social integration.

The second marker of distinction is the way in which people speak Spanish. The different modalities and accents tell part of the story that defines the individual. Because of the film's construction, each personal narrative is fragmentary, incomplete, but the verbal delivery of their testimony provides clues that are often missing in the explicit wording and that would be missed in a written transcription. If everybody spoke the same way, a narrative would be needed to position them, but their way of speaking nuances their individual stories. The variations of accent in the group of young Latin American immigrants helps to place them, but also distinguishes them from a young woman who misses her village in Ciudad Real and from the young man born in El Carmel who talks about learning to control his violent impulses, settling down with his new girlfriend and starting his new job as a garbage collector. The testimony of an old woman who arrived as a child and grew up in a

shack and the one by a communist militant active in neighbourhood struggles who later held a political position in the district are both delivered in Spanish, but their enunciation is moulded by their background and biography.

The map of the languages present in Barcelona is not exhaustively engaged, because the goal is to address the audience and tell a story, not just to represent what or how people speak. Interestingly, we are told the Chinese have taken over much of the commerce in the neighbourhood, but we do not hear from them. Nonetheless, we are provided with enough information to read this map of criss-crossing identities. Concepts of diversity or hybridity are often deployed to describe patterns of cultural exchanges that result in composite identities or environments. However, more than finding the right label, the challenge is how to describe and understand complexity, how people actually perform their identities and interact with others. *A través del Carmel* provides us with a useful map of cultural complexity. The physical configuration of the neighbourhood, with its labyrinth of convoluted streets and extreme ups and downs, stands for the complex social composition and interactions. The physical metaphor counts for its effectiveness and meaningfulness on the added layer of the linguistic code-switching of the soundtrack.

The displacements of the camera across the urban landscape are confusing and the spectator gets easily disoriented. Even though the general direction is up the mountain, it is not always clear because occasionally the path is diverted by having to exit buildings or change street. The voiceover is also not easily married to the image. Such a disconnect between audio and video allows for the two parallel mappings to overlap only partially, in a Brechtian sort of distancing, keeping the spectator engaged in the interpretive challenge.

A sound map is a more delicate and sophisticated tool than a spatial one. Many years ago, as part of another initiative led by Bradley Epps (Monegal, 2005), I found in Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1987) a fitting metaphor to describe the complex landscape of relations in which Catalans, and Spaniards, are inscribed, using the temporal and discursive parameters of song as a way of defining cultural space. I was fascinated by the Aboriginal belief in the land being both sung into existence and mapped by songs. While I have no idea how accurate Chatwin's depiction of Aboriginal wisdom is, it nevertheless offers us a different approach to the concept of mapping and the translation between space and sound. Boaventura de Sousa Santos provides another thought-provoking analogy in the article "Law: A Map of Misreading. Toward a Postmodern Conception of

Law,” where he discusses the interpretive effects of scale and symbolization in maps:

A given phenomenon can only be represented on a given scale. To change the scale implies change of the phenomenon. Each scale reveals a phenomenon and distorts or hides others. As in nuclear physics, the scale creates the phenomenon.

(1987, 346)

Indeed, since the mechanisms are interdependent, the change in scale also affects the kinds of signs to be used in symbolization.

The film takes us down to close-up scale, to the street level, in order to focus on the individual citizens, the institutions, the locations and the activities that constitute the neighbourhood. At that scale, notions of nationhood, statehood or even language are not nuanced enough to determine identity. The historical packaging together of nation and language (and literature) traditionally used in models of identity construction comes into question in our complex contemporary societies. It is still operational, but not sufficiently explanatory. We need a scale that provides more detail.

Of course, the one alternative to the category of nation is culture. We are all aware that the concept is very difficult to define. As Raymond Williams pointed out, “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (1988, 87). But it is nonetheless a necessary concept, maybe because of its very elusiveness. The cultural adscription of the people portrayed in the film manifests itself in a variety of factors, far more fluid and difficult to pinpoint than the strict categories of nationality, citizenship, legal residential status, id card, place of birth or native language. It is, among other things, a matter of differential traits, unstable because they change according to environmental interactions and very specific because of the individual variations. As in the double articulation of the linguistic code, it is difference that makes meaning and that difference is to a large extent performed as self-image, self-representation, self-expression.

In terms of the politics of the film, Zulian’s premise was that, in a city rich in iconic representations, popular neighbourhoods lack an image. According to the director, there is no image of El Carmel, and the film’s goal was to offer one. The paradox is that the unnoticed Carmel sits right next to Gaudi’s Parc Güell, one of the most visited tourist attractions in the city. As a consequence of their invisibility, the residents of these neighbourhoods also lack a voice. Though El Carmel has a strong legacy of activism, its historical struggles to achieve recognition became even more imperative when in 2005 a subway tunnel under construction collapsed, forcing the temporary

relocation of more than 1,000 residents and the demolition of several affected buildings. The story was in the news momentarily, once again underscoring the frailty and precariousness of this material environment.

The film was made one year later and the decision to give local residents co-responsibility in composing their self-representation becomes part of a strategy of empowerment. The neighbours thus attain an image and a voice in a single process by making the film. When the film was completed, Zulian's production company distributed copies, reproduction equipment and TV monitors to individuals, businesses and institutions that had collaborated so that they could screen it when and where they wanted: in bars, stores, associations, or from the windows of their homes. This way, the film became a site-specific video installation before being publicly released through TV and festivals and being awarded the City of Barcelona Audiovisual Prize.

What we have observed is an urban phenomenon, but to the extent that nowadays Catalonia is an aggregate of urban arrangements, many of the dynamics that the film identifies in this particular neighbourhood in Barcelona can be extrapolated to other communities in Catalonia. In that sense, documentary film proves itself to be an effective instrument of social analysis, underscoring Balló's notion that "[e]l cinema ha demostrat una capacitat extraordinària per fixar els imaginaris de les ciutats. [...] El cinema ens crea la satisfacció de conèixer més enllà de les aparences, proporciona el plaer d'informar-nos del pols ocult que batega en la ciutat" (1995, 94).

In *El sastre*, the camera barely changes position. In *A través del Carmel*, it does not stay still, it moves constantly in all directions. This movement does not only effect continuity, revealing what people have in common. It also elicits successive, unstoppable discontinuities, articulating differences and balancing them against the national community. As Homi Bhabha has stated (1994, 34), the organizing principle of cultural identity is not diversity, but difference. Indeed, the film focuses on some subtle factors of difference and, without commenting on them or giving an explicitly political message, invites the audience to reach its own conclusions.

### *Mapping the cultural landscape*

Rancière offers a useful perspective from which to consider the political capacity of the visual arts:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-

evident facts that structure the relationship between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or the scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of places. She composes her own poem with the element of the poem before her.

(2011, 13)

Accordingly, a film's social impact depends on its capacity to engage both the represented subjects and the spectators in a project of collective responsibility and awareness. The documentaries I have discussed address the complexity of the cultural makeup of contemporary societies by portraying the inflections of difference along axes such as language, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, and even traditions such as musical idioms. These factors rule interactions within the community and account for both bonds and frictions. By zooming-in to street level and that of everyday experience, the films reveal the heterogeneity that a wider focus hides under generalizing notions and hegemonic identities. The typical debate about the Catalan and Spanish dichotomy is replaced by a more nuanced landscape in which the other languages of Catalonia are represented.

The three films examined here undertake a social role as critical interventions to the extent that they elicit an active exchange with the audience to trigger the kind of action Rancière describes: existing as a process of observation, selection, comparison and interpretation that calls for the modification of views and perceptions. Raising awareness becomes a way of empowering the communities depicted by establishing the status of their members as citizens. The film provides a platform for the enunciation of difference through image, language, and music. As such, making visible the loci of marginality functions as a tool to give voice to those inhabiting these spaces.

The strategies and topics of the three films differ. The activist intent is clearer in *A través del Carmel*, with the ambitious goal of encompassing the neighbourhood as a whole, with its grievances, demands and achievements. *El sastre* shows the cultural diversity of a different neighbourhood by focusing on the micro scale, the minimal location where friction and miscommunication occur. *Bajari* can be read as a vindication and a celebration of the culture of a marginalized group by stressing the role of family, memory and musical tradition in the construction of collective identity. All three cases summon up spaces of cultural interaction that are usually



ignored in large-scale mapping and account for the complexity of the landscape. As a result, they acknowledge the polyphony of voices and languages from a variety of backgrounds underscoring the right of their speakers to be recognised as citizens.

### Works Cited

- Balló, Jordi. 1995. "La ciutat del cinema." In *Retrat de Barcelona*, edited by Albert García Espuche and Teresa Navas, Vol. 2, 94-104. Barcelona: CCCB.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Chatwin, Bruce. 1987. *The Songlines*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Garcés, Marina. 2013. *Un mundo común*. Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra.
- Glissant, Édouard. 1999. *Introduction to a Poetics of the Diverse*. Translated by Pierre Joris. *boundary 2* 26, no. 1: 119-21.
- Monegal, Antonio. 2005. "A Landscape of Relations: Peninsular Multiculturalism and the Avatars of Comparative Literature." In *Spain Beyond Spain*, edited by Bradley Epps and Luis Fernández-Cifuentes, 231-49. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. 2009. *Escritos corsarios*. Translated by Juan Vivanco Gefaell. Madrid: Ediciones del Oriente y del Mediterráneo.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2006. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London & New York: Continuum.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2011. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London & New York: Verso.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 1987. "Law: A Map of Misreading. Toward a Postmodern Conception of Law." *Journal of Law and Society*, 14, no. 3: 341-64.
- Williams, Raymond. 1988. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana Press.