

# **The Real and the Spoken: How the Use of Languages in Catalan Documentary Films Contributed to the Construction of a Sense of Reality**

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## **Abstract**

The consolidation of Catalan documentary cinema in the 21st century international sphere owes much to an existing context of creative freedom, less dependent on market laws or short-term policies. This freedom, often emerging out of university initiatives, has attracted young filmmakers wishing to explore the borders between documentary and fiction. The present article examines a number of their works, focusing on the use of multilingualism as a way to underscore the commitment of these documentaries to the reality they seek to represent. We argue that multilingualism as a phenomenon does not imply an obstacle to the presence of Catalan, as is evidenced by the partly autobiographical fictions produced by directors who use Catalan as a vehicular language to represent intimate experiences. Rather, multilingualism is becoming a style in itself and a way of ensuring that the Castilian language is not simply imposed for commercial reasons, a factor which has seriously affected the world of conventional fiction.

## **Keywords**

Catalan cinema; Film schools; Documentary movies; Female directors; Multilingualism; Realism

# **The Real and the Spoken: How the Use of Languages in Catalan Documentary Films Contributed to the Construction of a Sense of Reality**

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## **Standardising A Not So-Standard Reality**

One of the longest and most fundamental sequences of the documentary *En construcció* (2001), by José Luis Guerín, reveals something of its distinctive and ground-breaking significance. In the scene, the workers who are constructing new buildings in Barcelona's multicultural Raval neighbourhood uncover a burial site, scattered with human bones, that has archaeological value. The sequence brings together neighbours and passers-by in a sort of spontaneous assembly. In this non-stop sequence, the comments from all these witnesses combine to form a continuous dialogue as they speculate about the remains. The collage of intertwined impressions shows how different languages emerge naturally and coherently in a flawless mixture of Catalan, Spanish, Moroccan Arabic, Panjabi and Catalan Sign Language. The result is a plethora of voices and reactions, an ode to multiculturalism that expresses how Barcelona reveals itself as a pluralistic city, a metonymy for an entire world. At the same time, as Joan Ramon Resina (2008) noted in one of the first academic texts about the film, the sequence underscores the prevalence of the Spanish language as a means of communication between the new immigrants and the native population. The linguistic diversity of the sequence not only epitomises the relevance of language for Catalan documentaries, but also for the documentary genre itself.

Successful attempts at employing Catalan as an unmarked language in film have taken several paths. The process of linguistic standardisation of the Catalan language resumed in the early 1980s, following the so-called Transition to democracy in Spain. It was a period of significant sociolinguistic shifts: after nearly forty years of suppression and of different legal obstacles that prohibited or

severely limited the public use of the languages, Catalan speakers were in a position to readopt their own common language beyond the private sphere. Among the different policies enacted, the creation of the *Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals* including the public Catalan television, TV3 in 1983 played a key role as a catalyst for the common use of Catalan in civil society (Gifreu 2011, 76). The *Corporació* challenged Spanish monolingualism in the mass media in Spain's Catalan-speaking areas and residually in the French part of Catalonia and helped to normalise the use of Catalan across different levels in society. Although regional languages had been officially recognised by the 1978 Constitution, until 1983 the mass media were totally dominated by Spanish, with the exception of a few programmes in Catalan on *TVE Catalunya* (Various Authors 2009). Audio-visual productions in Catalan or those dubbed into the language set the standard for new linguistic practices and played a dual role in the representation of reality. On the one hand, they tried to reconstruct extant forms of Catalan usage in the private domain, while forcibly imposing its presence in the public sphere in an attempt to reflect the linguistic diversity of the moment. On the other hand, these productions put in place a programme that aimed to "improve" Catalan speech and its usage in all areas of social life. Taken together, these approaches contributed to the creation of the so-called "espai català de comunicació" (Gifreu 2011, 78), to describe the group of media that used Catalan at the start of the Transition.

The impact of the Catalan language on the small screen is clear. Its use on television, particularly on the channel TV3, helped viewers to identify a standard variety of the language and a more accurate rendering of certain vernacular expressions. Moreover, the sustained presence of Catalan progressively gave voice to a variety of accents and registers not to mention interferences from Castilian across a range of programmes, from current affairs to fiction. The support provided to production in Catalan in all its diversity as a practice of multilingualism itself was undeniable. In recent decades, the agreement between the public Catalan television and the association of producers to promote the creation of new TV films between 2002 and 2005 was particularly significant (Poch, Jiménez-Morales 2005).

In the case of cinema, the presence of the Catalan language was still far from being *normalised* and from fulfilling the expectations of certain audiences. Despite several institutional policies which supported a number of films being dubbed into Catalan, Castilian remained the dominant language. In documentary, and consequently in films that seek to create a sense of reality, the creative freedom and the recognition of this freedom by various public funding bodies, has enabled the expression of an authentic plurilingual landscape, especially because these films are not subject to market pressures. In

this context, several films assume a critical role in demonstrating the way in which (multi)linguistic verisimilitude is realised. From the aforementioned *En construcció* to Carla Simón's Oscar-nominated *Estiu 1993* (2017) completely spoken in Catalan, it is clear that different methodologies connected with documentary cinema and realist fiction lead to a representation of the spoken language as something normal, if not indeed normalised. In both cases, language is deployed in a natural way, as the only possible form of communication, without any distortion or unconventional adaptation, that relies on the spontaneity of speakers.

### **An Academic Boost and the Blossoming of Documentary Cinema**

If *En construcció* is emblematic amongst Catalan creative documentaries, one that has been strongly influential because – and not in spite – of its personal style, then *Estiu 1993*, produced 15 years later, represents the zenith of autobiographical fiction in an emergent movement of films directed by young female filmmakers. These films, which focus on reflections of reality, have been highly valued by critics and film festivals alike. In a survey conducted by the film magazine *Caimán: Cuadernos de Cine* for its centenary issue (Herdero, 2016), 350 specialists were asked about the most relevant Spanish films ever made. The specialists included critics, academics, journalists, film industry managers and festival directors. The result was a list of 10 films per decade. The decade of 2000–2010 coincides with the re-emergence of documentary cinema in Catalonia, which dissolves the conventional borders between documentary and fiction and has been regarded internationally as an innovative contribution to the cinematic portrayal of reality. In fact, all the Catalan films selected since 2000 in some way belong to this mixed genre, namely: Guerín's *En construcció* (2001), *Honor de cavalleria* (Serra 2006), *De nens* (Jordà 2003), *En la ciutat de Sylvia* (Guerín 2007), *El cielo gira* (Álvarez 2005) and *La leyenda del tiempo* (Lacuesta 2006). Since 2010, the presence of Catalan documentary and fiction films has been highly valued by reviewers, with films such as *Aita* (de Orbe 2010), *Història de la meva mort* (Serra 2013) and *La academia de las musas* (Guerín 2015) standing out. Following the 2016 survey, other critical evaluations considered *Estiu 1993* to be amongst the three best Spanish films of the 2010–2020 decade.

The new-found recognition, by critics and academicians alike, of Catalan realist cinema can be linked to the boost in training in the field of documentary cinema provided by a number of public universities. In 1993, a university programme in Audio-visual Communication that offers instruction in film and media studies was launched in Catalonia. The programme has had an important impact

on the audio-visual industry in the country and has played a key role in enriching representations of not just of Catalan reality but also of what might be called the Catalan imaginary. The Escola Superior de Cinema i Audiovisuals (ESCAC), the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF) have all launched specialised programmes. In effect, everything changed after 1999, as the UAB and UPF entered the industry by creating Master's programmes designed to foment the production of documentary film in Catalonia (Viveros and Català 2010; Balló 2010). In the framework of the Master's degree in Creative Documentary at UPF-Barcelona School of Management famed filmmaker Joaquim Jordà played a particularly important role (Castanon-Akrami 2011; Comella 2014; Fibla-Gutiérrez 2019). Jordà initiated several creative strategies in his own films as well as in the productions created as part of the Creative Documentary course (Quintana 2014, 14). It is worth remembering that Jordà is one of the most notable members of the *Escola de Barcelona* – a movement inspired, at least in part, by the *Nouvelle Vague* (Epps 2012) – which implies a particular vision of film production and its relationship with culture, politics and territory.

By way of example, *Mones com la Becky* (1999), by Jordà in collaboration with Núria Villazán, tells the story of a community of psychiatric patients preparing a theatrical performance on the subject of therapy. The film focuses on the biography of António Egas Moniz, the Portuguese psychiatrist who developed and advocated lobotomy as a way to treat schizophrenia. Egas played an important role in the later acceptance of mental health issues and their treatment. Four languages are spoken in *Mones com la Becky*: Portuguese, Catalan, Spanish and English. Although the film was to be located in Portugal, the production was primarily shot in Catalonia. The location, along with the fact that most of the participants were Catalan, might suggest that the default language used in the film would be Catalan. However, two important sequences subvert this expectation. In the first, the main characters are invited to describe on camera invented incidents that they might have experienced themselves. Instead of the requested fictional events, they begin to recount genuine experiences from their own lives. It is of note that their narration is in Spanish, despite the fact that the film has otherwise established that their native language is Catalan. The fictional element, then, is not the story itself, but rather the language used to tell it, with the result that the use of Spanish, the language of the State, confers a certain sense of fabrication on what is being said. In contrast, at the end of the film, the participants use Catalan extensively in a public assembly held in the psychiatric facility. Jordà himself explains that the difference stems from the fact

that the characters, who are members of a generation for which cinema had *always* been in Spanish, feel and understand the general experience of being recorded as if it were a fiction. When they forget the presence of cameras, the linguistic “over-acting” disappears. Jordà employs these tensions masterfully in his films to varying critical, theatrical, cinematic and educational effects (Guerra 2014). The behaviour performed, observed and recorded in *Mones com la Becky* exemplifies how the experience of language has itself been codified.

Jordà’s influence is also visible in Guerín’s decision to shoot *En construcció*n, unlike his previous ventures, in Catalonia – a decision that has helped to make *En construcció*n, which received multiple awards and enjoyed relative commercial success, a virtually inescapable reference for other productions that explore the relationship between documentary and fiction. As already intimated, Guerín’s most famous work radically poses the question of territory and identity as is suggested by the title, both are “*under construction*” and, in the process, the Catalan imaginary acquires new expressive possibilities. To cite only one example, Isaki Lacuesta, a pupil of both Jordà and Guerín, directed his first film, *Cravan versus Cravan* (2002), which begins in Paris, with French as a dominant language. However, halfway through the film, the poet and boxer Arthur Cravan moves to Catalonia, a move that elicits a powerful scene in which several Catalan poets exchange their opinions about Cravan’s Dadaist legacy. The Catalan language here emerges, diegetically, as the language of the protagonist’s new social reality.

These works encouraged documentary filmmakers to shoot in various locations without being conditioned by linguistic policies and politics but, instead, by simply using language as a natural aspect of their stories. Examples of this more “natural” approach include Lacuesta’s subsequent work, *La leyenda del tiempo* (2006), Mercedes Álvarez’s *El cielo gira* (2005), Carles Bosch’s *Balseros* (2002), Ricardo Íscar’s *Tierra negra* (2005), Pablo García’s *Fuente Álamo, la caricia del tiempo* (2001) and Andrés Duque’s *Oleg y las raras artes* (2016), to name but a few. These directors offered broader perspectives that differed significantly from those that had come before. None of these works is considered to have evolved *outside* of Catalan cinema; rather, they are all seen as an integrated new form of production and storytelling *within* Catalonia.

The idea of filming in any number of ambient languages with a critical point of view in one’s own territory can be seen in the work of young filmmakers who continue to be influenced by Guerín and Jordà (Moreno-Caballud 2014; Cobo-Duran, Liberia Vayá 2021). In particular, a number of these filmmakers have been inspired to create

visual narratives in marginal contexts, a generation that includes: Ariadna Pujol with *Aguaviva* (2006), Marc Recha with *Dies d'agost* (2006), Carla Subirana with *Nedar* (2008), Adán Aliaga with *La casa de mi abuela* (2005), Lupe Pérez with *Diario Argentino* (2006), José González Morandi and Paco Toledo with *Can Tunis* (2006), Eva Vila with *B-side* (2008), and more radically, Xavier Artigas and Xapo Ortega with *Ciutat morta* (2014).

### Memory as a film location

In the aforementioned *Nedar*, Carla Subirana plunges beneath the waters of remembrance as she tries to understand the mechanisms associated with memory loss as a consequence of certain illnesses, but also as a result of the conscious or unconscious desire to forget. In this intimate work, in which Subirana has a conversation with Jordà several months before the latter's death, the director explores the story behind her grandfather's execution by Francoist troops. She also sounds out the silence surrounding the event amongst her relatives, an effort that is dramatically exacerbated by the rapid advance of her grandmother's Alzheimers and the onset of the disease in her mother. Recovering memories becomes a crucial theme (Feenstra and Sánchez-Biosca 2014), especially when the Catalan language appears on screen, since the stories here in question are related to personal, profound feelings and the characters express themselves in their own language, presumably without any coding, pre-conception or constraining plot condition. At the same time, productions that revolve around the recovery of historical memory often include Catalan as a controversial issue because of its virtual prohibition under Franco. In the previously cited sequence from *Nedar*, Subirana asks Jordà about robberies under Franco in order to understand her grandfather's actions as an alleged member of an anarchist organisation. Jordà explains that the people who participated in such organisations acted for political and social reasons and implicitly accepted the risk of execution. The conversation between the two flows perfectly in Catalan until the sequence is suddenly interrupted to give way to another sequence: an enacted, cinematic scene in which Subirana imagines a *film noir*-like identity parade. In the *mise-en-scène*, a voice-over reads the police statement narrating the events related to one of her grandfather's alleged robberies. The sequence is in Spanish and, as such, contrasts with Jordà and Subirana's conversation. The use of the voice-over language reproduces the text used in the press at the time, but Subirana deliberately stresses the implications in this particular mixture of genres: the stylish crime drama, to account for a time

when Spanish was *the* language of a repressive State apparatus, and the documentary domain of thought and evocation.

*Bucarest, la memòria perduda* (2008), is another work that delves into the subject of memory loss through the exploration of the author's past experiences as well as those of his ancestors. Its director, Albert Solé, is the son of one of the so-called "Seven Fathers" of the Spanish Constitution, Jordi Solé Tura. The filmmaker was born in Romania, where his family was sent into exile following the installation of the dictatorship. In the documentary, Solé, the director, embarks on a sort of introspective second exile, a memory exile, which leads him to recall the particularities of an anomalous biography abroad. In his singular journey into the recollection of personal episodes, some crucial experiences emerge, most of them related to circumstantial events conditioned by political and historical context: the Spanish dictatorship observed from a distance, the effects of the Cold War on communist countries and the transition to democracy in Spain. As with *Nedar*, the recovery of historical memory, which has become a central subject in Spanish cinema (Feenstra and Sánchez-Biosca 2014), is strongly conditioned by the real-life damage to personal memories due to ageing and illness. Jordi Solé Tura was also affected by Alzheimer's. The imperative to recall memories compels the director to explore the past, his own past, before there are no remaining witnesses to tell the story. In the film's first sequence, Albert Solé recounts how he grew up thinking that he was French, then Hungarian and finally Romanian, in spite of his strong Catalan background. His indeterminate nationality and continuous search for an identity overlap with the use of the language in the documentary. Along with his personal account, several sources complement the director's point of view, most notably archive images from the media as well as witness statements and readings of official documents, mostly in Spanish, although Catalan, French and English also appear, primarily spoken by friends or close acquaintances. The presence of different languages signals the multilingual experience of exile but also throws into relief, by contrast, the intimate language of communication between Solé and his father. In a sequence in which the director explains how as a child he went every Thursday afternoon to visit his father in jail, Solé reads a news item referring to his father's imprisonment. Solé Tura's surprised reaction has dramatic implications, since he is unable to remember such a poignant detail. The paradox, so to speak, is that Solé Tura appears to have used Spanish and Catalan in equal measure to communicate with his son, Albert, in particular situations. The bilingual cast of their communication marks, indeed, the reading of a letter addressed

by Solé Tura, from jail, to his son in Spanish, in keeping with the political repression of the Catalan language at that time.

In similar terms, *Bicicleta, cullera, poma* (2010) expresses the confluence of the personal and the universal with the loss of the memory of a person who serves as a perfect embodiment of a country's political history. The film, directed by Carles Bosch, follows the life of Pasqual Maragall after he announced publicly that he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Maragall, who was the Mayor of Barcelona from 1982 to 1997, a period that included the 1992 Olympic Games, and the President of the Catalan Government from 2003 to 2006, agreed to be recorded while living with the disease. Catalan is the dominant language in the film, but the documentary acquires an international dimension when it takes on three other parallel stories from Hyderabad (India), Rotterdam (Netherlands) and Rochester (United States), with the implication that no matter how relevant or influential one might have been in history, anyone can be affected by Alzheimer's. The point is consistent with Maragall's desire to study the disease on a large scale through his own Alzheimer's research foundation. The evolution of the illness and its treatment across the four storylines provides a broad, common, global dimension to the issue. Obviously, Maragall's situation as a statesman confers additional value on the film and pushes at the limits between the private and the public in matters of health. The documentary also explores how the media, as well as Maragall's friends and acquaintances, have reacted to his illness. The film, nevertheless, goes beyond what is explored in *Nedar* or in *Bucarest, la memòria perduda*. The longstanding assumption that, in Catalonia, the language of intimacy was Catalan while the language of social, political and historical events and their representation was Spanish is disrupted in a sequence in *Bicicleta, cullera, poma*. In it, Maragall is shown writing his memoirs in his summer house, an act that entails gathering together personal memories and historical facts and that also functions as a reflection on how the brain works. The somewhat surprising factor here is that Maragall writes in English. The viewing audience may wonder why he is writing in a language which is neither his mother tongue nor the language of the Spanish State in which, as a Catalan politician, he lived and worked. In the end, Maragall justifies the use of English by saying that he began to write something for a foreign doctor and that he simply continued in that language. The scene shows how the rational process of thinking about memory leads, in this case, to the use of another language to stress difference and how English has become an overdetermined language as a *lingua franca*.

The films discussed in this section underscore that when reality engages and explores the dimension of the imaginary, the

unconscious or the past, it takes unpredictable paths that give voice to various notions about the language of intimacy, the representation of the intangible, the weight of history (and counterhistory), the dialogue with personalities and/or institutions and the challenges involved in conveying a certain non-identification with one's own discourse.

### A polyphonic reality

The case of *La plaga* (2013) by Neus Ballús – fostered by the UPF's Master's in Creative Documentary – adds yet another layer to the subject under discussion and helps to explain how the representation of reality can draw on language in more spontaneous ways. *La plaga* allows its characters to express themselves with mutual intelligibility in a multicultural and multilingual context. The film is constructed under the concept of universality through the depiction of a meeting place of different migrations (Quintana 2014, 21). These intersecting migrations take place in a rural space on the outskirts of Barcelona, where several languages are spoken together: Catalan, Spanish with different varieties and dialects such as Argentinian, Russian, Moldovan and Ilocano. *La plaga* had a significant impact and was shortlisted for a Gaudí award for Best Catalan Fiction Film. At the same ceremony, it won the awards for best screenplay, best direction and best editing. One of its particularities is that the film mobilises a choral story in which the main characters are not actors but perform their parts after a long working process with the filmmaker. What Ballús manages to extract from such an approach is a sense of authenticity that is never lost in the devised plots in which the characters appear to find a natural way of expressing themselves. The story flows in a multilingual arena that provides a space for Catalan, which is spoken by the family who owns the farm that is affected by the plague and, above all, by Maria, an elderly and humble woman who also speaks in Catalan to the Philippin carer of the health residence. In its deliberate use of multilingualism, the film has similarities with *La substància* (2016), by Lluís Galter, which was also produced in the context of the UPF programme and which also grapples with notions of reality and representation, original and copy, authenticity and stereotypes. *La substància* centres on the construction of a small town resembling Cadaquès, on the Costa Brava, in a small spot on the Southern coast of China, in Xiamen. The film generates a mirror image not only between Cadaquès and the Chinese village called Kadakaisi, but also between the Catalan and the Chinese languages.

Along with *La plaga* and *La substància*, the film *Lo que tú dices que soy* (2007) – directed by Virginia García del Pino and produced as

part of the Master's degree course in Creative Documentary at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona also provides a fluent polyphony of language through a range of perspectives. Here, different accents are present and the combination between Catalan and Spanish becomes a natural option. The three films *La plaga*, *La substància* and *Lo que tú dices que soy* can thus be understood as exercises in relatively successful multilingual productions that are not the result of some laboratory-like experiment in cultural politics, but that are instead solely inspired by the commitment to a sense of reality.

In the aforementioned *Ciutat morta*, Xavier Artigas and Xapo Ortega take as their starting point the suicide of a student called Patricia Heras in order to elucidate “case 4F,” an incident related to police corruption and the fabrication of evidence in Barcelona. The film narrates the story of a group of squatters who allegedly caused a policeman to become tetraplegic on the night of 4 February 2006, during a party in an occupied old building belonging to the Barcelona City Council. It is designed as a “documentary within a documentary,” and begins by presenting a scene in which the police change the evidence in order to frame the young squatters for a crime that they did not commit. The voices of the witnesses and the young people are combined with images from media sources that covered the events. Most of the witnesses – some of whom are from a range of Latin American countries – express themselves indiscriminately in Catalan or Spanish. The images relating to the extracts of the court hearings are, however, always in Spanish, a fact that underscores, once again, that the language of the legal domain, and by extension the Administration, is still Spanish. The same linguistic imbalance is at play in Jordà's *De nens* (2003), a documentary about the well-known “Raval Case,” which centred on an alleged paedophile network constructed to cover up a supposed real-estate scam in the Raval district of Barcelona – the same in which Guerín's *En construcción* is set. As in *Ciutat morta*, in *De nens*, the main language of the Courts is Spanish, although the judges, prosecutors, the main accused and some of the witnesses have marked Catalan accents.

### Unstigmatized Languages in Art House Cinema

The case of Albert Serra epitomises the importance of working with non-professional actors, as is the cases with many of the aforementioned directors. For Serra, the language of filmmaking belongs entirely to Catalan, the language of the company of actors and the technical crew who carry with themselves – and thus bring to their movies – their own aesthetic and linguistic territory, beyond or beside geographical parameters or literary origins. The main

criterion for Serra appears to be the desire to obtain the most organic form of expression from the characters, no matter how “unbelievable” it may be for the story. Serra’s films *Honor de cavalleria*, *El cant dels ocells* (2008), *El Senyor ha fet en mi meravelles* (2011) and *Historia de la meva mort*, amongst others, demonstrate that this unlikely approach radiates a sense of reality not because of its coherence with the plot, but because of its consistency with the acting and, by extension, with human nature. Accordingly, in *Honor de cavalleria*, Don Quixote is played by a Catalan actor and speaks Catalan, despite the fact that strict fidelity to the *literary* reference would have the film set in La Mancha and spoken in Spanish. Serra adopts a multilingual approach in *Liberté* (2019), with the presence of French, German and Italian to tell a story of licentiousness in Europe. This film went on to win the Special Jury Prize of the section “Un Certain Regard,” at the Cannes Film Festival.

In a round table at the University of Princeton that included Antonio Monegal, Ricardo Piglia, Andrea di Tella and Sergio Wolf, the vitality of documentary films and of realistic fictions in Catalonia was taken to be self-evident (Monegal 2007). The participants did not hesitate to link Serra’s cinema to the creative documentary movement. Nevertheless, they discerned a marked distance between certain films of this “tradition” and Serra’s strategies and ambitions. Olivier Père, who discovered Albert Serra when he was in charge of the Festival de Cannes’ Director’s Fortnight, described him as part of a new generation of directors who still makes possible the passion for contemporary cinema and the film modernity (Père 2011). With respect to Serra, the director’s apparent indifference to the audience is a critical part of his discourse as an artist and a key element in his emblematic filming style.

### **The Blossoming of the Female Perspective**

Most of the examples considered in this article refer to the different genres of documentary and fiction filmmaking that use non-professional actors in realistic situations. The influence of the documentary as an expression and representation of reality has, as already noted, a significant presence in purely fictional productions. The transposition of documentary mechanisms to fiction is clearly represented by several female directors.

Indeed, a number of films directed by women leave an arguably deeper personal footprint as a sign of authorship and the search for a self-assertive voice of their own, a tendency that has important implications for the previously discussed expression of authenticity. One of the first films that illustrates this tendency is *Tres dies amb la família* (2009), directed by Mar Coll, a former student of ESCAC who

narrates a semi-autobiographical story about a girl who travels back home for the funeral of a relative and experiences all the complex and hypocritical behaviours within a bourgeois family. Coll's recourse to Catalan functions as an expressive means for intensifying the portrait of a family, a move that is also on display, but in Spanish, in *Lo mejor de mí* (2007), by Roser Aguilar, a film of simple feelings and few, if any, embellishments. To a certain extent these two films can be understood as providing the foundations for a number of subsequent works directed by young female filmmakers and fostered by academic institutions. The most notable films in this direction are *Les amigues de l'Àgata* (2016), a co-direction between Laia Alabart, Alba Cros, Laura Rius and Marta Verheyen, with Catalan as the only language and the Málaga Festival award-winner *Júlia ist* (2017), by Elena Marín. In the latter film located in Barcelona and Berlin, the spontaneous style of filming and acting leads to a natural use of Catalan combined with German, as the common form of communication for a generation that was born and educated in Catalan. As such, the language accords with the requirements of the plot even as it remains, inevitably, also an aesthetic choice.

Likewise shot in Berlin, *Les distàncies* (2018), by Elena Trapé, explores the human relationships within a group of old friends who, once outside Catalonia, discover that everything is not as it used to be. *Les distàncies*, which was produced by the ESCAC and named Best Film at the Gaudí Awards in 2019, was conceived from the start as a totally multilingual (Catalan-Spanish-German-English) production. According to its director, the goal was to show how bilingualism and, in particular moving between Catalan and Spanish, is a natural part of her daily context. For this reason, she explains, the conversations have not been translated, although the film was also dubbed into Spanish. This dubbed copy was to allow for the film to be shown in those towns where no original-language screenings typically take place. Trapé described the experience of dubbing as “painful and terrible” (Especial Festival de Málaga 2018). *Les distàncies* is a rarely explicit example of the way in which autobiographical fiction, authorial intent, and the vindication of multilingualism come face-to-face with the imposition – although partial in this context of market pressures in favour of the Spanish language. In this particular case, such imposition has the potential to influence the overall impact of a film and be detrimental to its critical reception.

The recent generation of female-driven cinema, which has gained visibility in several countries, often showcases stories of social justice, equality and fairness but also often brings to the fore questions of linguistic diversity. As Agnès Varda noted some years ago, when women eventually had the opportunity to be directors, the rules of the game had already been established from a male point of

view (*Lucarne ovale* 1978). Consequently, the representation of, and by, women was particularly fraught. These films directed by women can thus be understood as comprising new opportunities for a cinema that reinvents previous plots and modes of expression and that reassesses and rethinks established patterns of representation, especially of bodies (Merino 2019). A pertinent example of such reassessment and reinvention is the movement *Dones visuals*, created in 2017, which aims to redress the historic gender imbalance in the film industry. The activities promoted by this group (production, training, funding, incubation, etc), encourage films that deal with experiential reality. Importantly, in all of these films, language plays a critical part in the representation, and construction of the gender, sexuality and the body.

Of all the films that engage questions of gender, the previously noted *Estiu 1993*, by Carla Simón, is especially notable as it draws on the autobiographical experience of the author, whose parents died of AIDS when she was a little girl. Shot entirely in Catalan, *Estiu 1993* presents its characters and its locations in an organic way that appreciates the values of authenticity and truth. A work of autobiographical fiction, *Estiu 1993* was awarded a Gaudí for best film, a Goya for best direction and was selected by the *Academia de las Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográficas de España* as its candidate for the Oscars in 2018. The film's recognition by critics and audiences alike, thus acts as an indirect sign of support for the use of Catalan in contemporary cinema. That these and other films directed by women have tended to take the form of confessions and personal stories, in which expressions of intimacy and honesty loom large and in which language assumes more natural form of expression, also merits critical consideration.

In sum, Catalan documentary cinema has evolved differently according to such diverse factors as historical context, academic training and influence, the thematic particularities of politics and culture, the vagaries of personal voice, the interplay of age, race, gender, sexuality and so on, and the degree of professional and non-professional acting involved. At the very least, the documentary films produced over the last twenty years suggest that the concern for depicting reality has fostered more natural deployments of the multilingual landscape of Catalonia. Different strategies, deliberate and/or unexpected, have compensated, in part, for previous shortcomings in the representation of linguistic plurality. Above all, the desire to represent a spontaneous reality, free from the dictates of funding or audience ratings, has facilitated the growth of the industry and encouraged a more natural perception of the multilingual phenomenon. In so doing, these and other filmmakers succeed in making the Catalan language into a proper and unique

form of cinematic creativity (Camps 2018, 30). The current situation clearly owes some of its good results to university training initiatives. However, in the future, cinema may look for new ways to capture an increasingly complex multicultural and multilingual reality. Whatever the case, the current situation indicates that the movements related to the documentary genre, *cinéma du réel*, and/or autobiographical fiction are deeply engaged in an ongoing search for authenticity in ways that open a space for the Catalan language and that allow it to be present in a number of films, part and parcel of a tacit agreement between the filmmakers and the world, or worlds, they wish to portray.

### Filmography

(Languages ordered alphabetically)

- Aguaviva*. 2006. Ariadna Pujol. Catalan, Spanish.
- Aita* [Father]. 2010. José María de Orbe. Basque, Spanish.
- B-side*. 2008. Eva Vila. Catalan, English, Spanish.
- Balseros*. 2002. Carles Bosch and Josep Maria Domènech. English, Spanish.
- Bicicleta, cullera, poma*. 2010. Carles Bosch. Catalan, English, Dutch, Kannada, Spanish, Telugu.
- Bucarest, la memòria perduda*. 2008. Albert Solé. Catalan, English, French, Spanish.
- Can Tunis*. 2006. José González Morandi and Paco Toledo. Spanish.
- Ciutat morta*. 2014. Xavier Artigas and Xapo Ortega. Catalan, Spanish.
- Cravan versus Cravan*. 2002. Isaki Lacuesta. Catalan, English, French, Spanish.
- De nens*. 2003. Joaquim Jordà. Catalan, Spanish.
- Diario Argentino*. 2006. Lupe Pérez. Spanish.
- Dies d'agost*. 2006. Marc Recha. Catalan.
- En construcció*. 2001. José Luis Guerín. Catalan, Catalan Sign Language, Moroccan Arabic, Panjabi, Spanish.
- El cant dels ocells*. Albert Serra. Catalan, Hebrew.
- El cielo gira*. 2005. Mercedes Álvarez. Moroccan Arabic, Spanish.
- El Senyor ha fet en mi meravelles*. 2011. Albert Serra. Catalan.
- En la ciudad de Sylvia*. 2007. José Luis Guerín. French, Spanish.
- Estiu 1993*. 2017. Carla Simón. Catalan.
- Fuente Álamo: la caricia del tiempo*. 2001. Pablo García. Spanish.
- Història de la meva mort*. 2013. Albert Serra. Catalan.
- Honor de cavalleria*. 2006. Albert Serra. Catalan.
- Júlia ist*. 2017. Elena Martín. Catalan, English, German, Spanish.
- La academia de las musas*. 2015. José Luis Guerín. Catalan, Italian, Spanish.
- La casa de mi abuela*. 2005. Adán Aliaga. Catalan, Spanish.
- La leyenda del tiempo*. 2006. Isaki Lacuesta. Japanese, Spanish.
- La plaga*. 2013. Neus Ballús. Catalan, Ilocano, Moldavian, Russian, Spanish.
- La substància*. 2016. Lluís Galter. Catalan, Chinese, Spanish.
- Les amigues de l'Àgata*. 2016. Laia Alabart, Alba Cros, Laura Rius and Marta Verhejen. Catalan.
- Les distàncies*. 2018. Elena Trapé. Catalan, English, German, Spanish.

- Liberté*. 2019. Albert Serra. French, German, Italian.  
*Lo mejor de mí*. 2007. Roser Aguilar. Spanish.  
*Lo que tú dices que soy*. 2007. Virginia García del Pino. Catalan, Spanish.  
*Mones com la Becky*. 1999. Joaquim Jordà and Núria Villazán. Catalan, English, Portuguese, Spanish.  
*Nedar*. 2008. Carla Subirana. Catalan, Spanish.  
*Oleg y las raras artes*. 2016. Andrés Duque. Russian.  
*Tierra negra*. 2005. Ricardo Íscar. Spanish.

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