Landscapes of Crisis: Gender, Interiority, and Rurality in Recent Catalan Cinema

Paisatges de crisi: Gènere, interioritat i ruralitat en el cinema català actual

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Abstract

In recent years, cinema produced in the Spanish state has seen two parallel and interconnected tendencies: a boom in productions by women filmmakers and an increasing turn to the rural. This essay takes as its focus two recent films emblematic of these dual trends toward greater visibility for both rural environments and female filmmakers, both in Catalan: *Brava* (Roser Aguilar, 2017) and *Els encantats* (Elena Trapé, 2023). Each film features a female protagonist in crisis who retreats from the urban realm —specifically, the city of Barcelona— to a rural setting in the Catalonian countryside, initially cast in both films as an idealized space of refuge, recovery, and reinvention, but also a place where tensions around belonging and self come to the fore. The escape to the countryside offers the protagonists of these films complex and contradictory possibilities: an opportunity for self-discovery, but also for isolation and retreat into the self; a chance to connect intergenerationally with kin or forge bonds of intimacy, but also a site of communication failures, frustration, and strained relational structures. Focusing on both films' juxtaposition of urban versus rural space, as well as their nuanced representations of gender, subjectivity, and emotion —including their centering of female protagonists, who are often unlikeable, inscrutable, or contradictory, both to the spectator and to themselves— the essay demonstrates how rural space in these films emerges as both a privileged site of self-discovery and an imagined landscape reflective of the protagonists' own troubled subjectivity.

Keywords

Gender; Rural; Landscape; Subjectivity; Crisis; Catalan cinema; Women filmmakers

Resum

Durant els darrers anys, el cinema produït a l'Estat espanyol ha viscut dues tendències paral·leles i interconnectades: un auge de les produccions de dones cineastes i un gir cap a l'espai rural. Aquest assaig s'enfoca en dos films recents i en català que són emblemàtics d'aquestes dues tendències: *Brava* (Roser Aguilar, 2017) i *Els encantats* (Elena Trapé, 2023). Ambdues pel·lícules tenen com a protagonista una dona en crisi que es retira de l'àmbit urbà —concretament, de la ciutat de Barcelona— a un entorn rural català. El camp es presenta inicialment en ambdues pel·lícules com un espai idealitzat de refugi, recuperació i reinvenció, però també un lloc on les tensions al voltant de la pertinença i el jo passen a primer pla. L'escapada al camp ofereix a les protagonistes d'aquestes pel·lícules

possibilitats complexes i contradictòries: una oportunitat per a l'autodescobriment, però també per a l'aïllament i la retirada en el jo; una oportunitat de connectar intergeneracionalment amb els familiars o forjar vincles d'intimitat, però també un lloc de fracassos de comunicació, frustració i relacions tenses. Centrant-se en la juxtaposició de l'espai urbà i rural de les dues pel·lícules, així com en les seves representacions subtils de gènere, subjectivitat i emoció —inclosa la centralitat de dones protagonistes que sovint són inescrutables, poc agradables o contradictòries, tant per a l'espectador com per a elles mateixes— l'assaig demostra com l'espai rural d'aquestes pel·lícules emergeix com un lloc privilegiat d'autodescobriment i un paisatge imaginat que reflecteix els problemes de la subjectivitat de les mateixes protagonistes.

Mots clau

Gènere; Rural; Paisatge; Subjectivitat; Crisi; Cinema català; Dones cineastes

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

In recent years, cinema produced in the Spanish state has seen two parallel and interconnected tendencies: a boom in productions by women filmmakers, and an increasing turn to the rural.[1] A number of established and emerging directors have produced films anchored in rural settings, such as the critically acclaimed *Con el viento* (Meritxell Colell Aparicio, 2018), *Trinta lumes* (Diana Toucedo, 2018), *O que arde* (Oliver Laxe, 2019), *Alcarràs* (Carla Simón, 2022), *As bestas* (Rodrigo Sorogoyen, 2022), *Suro* (Mikel Gurrea, 2022), or *20,000 especies de abejas* (Estibaliz Urresola Solaguren, 2023) among others. Even this very partial selection demonstrates that many of these films are made by women, and many of them in languages other than Castilian (the list above includes offerings in Catalan, Galician, and Basque), evidencing a vibrant moment of increased linguistic plurality and gender equity in art cinema produced in the Spanish state.

To explore these dual trends toward greater visibility for both rural environments and female filmmakers, this essay takes as its focus two films, *Brava* (Roser Aguilar, 2017) and *Els encantats* (Elena Trapé, 2023), emblematic Catalan

[1] Despite its relatively recent emergence, the phenomenon of increased gender parity in Spanish (art) film, especially that made by younger generations of filmmakers (born since roughly 1975) is extensively documented, both in academic approaches and popular media, including interviews with the filmmakers themselves, many of whom rightfully resist being categorized predominantly or exclusively as "women" filmmakers, in a kind of separate class based on gender identity. See, for example, Ruiz-Poveda Vera (2021), Thomas (2025), Vilaró Moncasí (2021), Wheeler (2016), and Zecchi (2022), among others. The "rural turn" is discussed in greater detail below.

examples of a strand in this recent cinema which uses the movement from the city to the country as a backdrop for working out personal and collective crises of many kinds. Each film features a female protagonist in crisis who retreats from the urban realm —specifically, the city of Barcelona— to a rural setting in the Catalonian countryside, which both films frame as an idealized space of refuge, recovery, and reinvention, but also a place where tensions and conflicts with others (and more crucially, with the self) prove inescapable. The escape to the countryside offers the protagonists of these films complex and contradictory possibilities: an opportunity for self-discovery, but also for isolation and retreat into the self; a chance to connect intergenerationally with kin or forge bonds of intimacy, but also a site of communication failures, frustration, and strained relational structures.

Focusing on both films' juxtaposition of urban versus rural space, as well as their nuanced representations of gender, subjectivity, and emotion —including their centering of female protagonists who are often unlikeable, contradictory, or inscrutable, both to the spectator and to themselves— this essay demonstrates how rural space emerges in the films as a privileged site of imagined healing and self-discovery, captured by cinematography that emphasizes the lush tones and expansive landscapes of the Catalonian countryside. It then reads both films' insistence on the reflective and reflexive technologies of windows and mirrors via Lucy Bolton's feminist approach to cinema in an Irigarayan frame, showing how the rural sphere ultimately becomes a mirror for the protagonists' troubled interior lives rather than a simple escape from the challenges and traumas associated with the city. While *Brava* and *Els encantats* thus equate the journey to the country with an interior voyage to the core of self (a common trope in literature and cinema of the rural, including in the Catalan tradition), they also both subtly underscore the limitations of both the spatial and subjective journeys taken by their protagonists. In the two films, the rural sphere ultimately proves a space that is both easily idealized by privileged urban characters with the mobility to escape there, and one where voids and traumas must be worked through by the female protagonists, who are forced to confront their own inscrutability to themselves and thereby begin to overcome crisis.

2. Turning to the Rural

Renewed interest in the rural sphere in recent cultural production from the Spanish state includes not only the aforementioned list of films (among others) but also several best-selling or critically acclaimed novels —including, to name just a few, Pilar Adón's *La efímeras* (2015) and *De bestias y aves* (2022); Eva Baltasar's *Mamut* (2022); Jesús Carrasco's *Intemperie* (2013); Santiago Lorenzo's *Los asquerosos* (2018); Sara Mesa's *Un amor* (2020); Rafael Navarro de Castro's *La tierra desnuda* (2019); Ana Iris Simón's *Feria* (2020), and Irene Solà's *Canto jo i la muntanya balla* (2019)— fixing their gaze on the rural sphere (or, in the case of Solà's novel, quite literally *through* it, focalizing the narrative via non-human animals and elements of

landscape).[2] Numerous non-fiction and essay treatments focused on rural depopulation, customs, traditions, and returns have also emerged from younger generations in recent years.[3] This turn is well-documented in both academic criticism and the press, where women's connection to the current rural trend is frequently underscored, for example in a 2022 article in *El País* with the sub-headline "Una torrente de nuevos libros y películas, generalmente firmados por mujeres y aclamados por la crítica, supera las narrativas urbanas y explora el campo español y sus roces con la ciudad" (Avendaño 2022). Despite the headline's suggestion of novelty, however, many critics point out that this not precisely a *new* phenomenon, given that the rural was an important space of social realist critique under Francoism, and the initial democratic period saw authors such as Julio Llamazares inaugurate a kind of Neo-ruralism some time ago.

In the concrete case of cinema, depictions of idealistic or escapist city dwellers who flee to the romanticized rural sphere, while indeed not unique to cinema of the present century, have certainly become highly visible in the post-boom/crisis period following the watershed year of 2008.[4] Indeed, renewed interest on the part of younger generations (especially those born post-Francoism, who came of age during the 1990s and early 2000s, during the Spanish state's embrace of neoliberal, often implicitly urban, European modernity) suggests that post-2008 disenchantment with neoliberal capitalism may account for the rural sphere's emergence as an idealized space of possibility. Younger generations of filmmakers disenchanted by the spurious myths of neoliberalism as well as its attendant social isolation and the grueling pace of urban capitalist life have increasingly centered the rural and problematized the city/country binary in their films. Thanks in part to the ecological and anti-capitalist "turns" of the twenty-first century, recent offerings in both documentary and fiction cinema have provided a consistent reexamination and revaluation of the rural *vis-à-vis* the urban. This shift runs parallel to demographic changes which have seen young people increasingly electing to return to villages or rural areas, sometimes through financial schemes aimed at combatting rural depopulation, which was one of the key consequences of industrialization and *desarrollismo* in the Spanish state over the course of the mid-twentieth century

[2] On this trend in novels and essays see, among others, Mougoyanni Hennessy (2021), Ryan (2024), and Devitt (2024).

[3] These include Sergio del Molino's *La España vacía: Viaje por un país que nunca fue* (2016) and *Contra la España vacía* (2021), Paco Cerdà's *Los últimos: Voces de la Laponia española* (2017), María Sánchez's *Tierra de mujeres: Una mirada íntima y familiar al mundo rural* (2019), or Gabi Martínez's *Un cambio de verdad: Una vuelta al origen en tierra de pastores* (2020).

[4] A wealth of existing scholarship, especially following Juan Antonio Bardem Muñoz's 1995 essay "¿Por qué el cine español se olvida siempre del campo?" debates the evolving role of the rural sphere in cinema from the Spanish state: at times placed in opposition to the hegemonic space of the city, at others reduced to the conventions of particular subgenres which stress rural backwardness or violence but rarely represent rural spaces with nuance and complexity (Gómez Gómez 2010, 16). See, among others, the articles collected in a special issue of the *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* on rural cinema (vol. 25, 2021), edited by Jorge González del Pozo, as well as Crespo Guerrero and Quirosa García (2014), Faulkner (2006), Gómez Gómez and Poyato (2010), González Requena (1988), or Ryan (2024). For a critical view of problematic stereotyping of the rural in media and culture, offering an alternative paradigm of the "resituated rural," see Castelló (2023).

onward.[5] This contemporary resurgence of ruralism has been commented widely in the press as a way for younger generations to forge an alternative lifestyle, rejecting the trappings of capitalist success: a kind of return to the rural driven by the soaring cost of living in major cities and accelerated by the isolation of the pandemic.[6] These demographic movements are mirrored in the rural turn of this recent literature and cinema, where a majority of writers and directors with an imaginative investment are themselves urbanites, like many of the protagonists they depict, who turn to the rural out of personal or professional disillusionment with their urban lives or as part of a search for deeper meaning, fulfillment, or self-knowledge.[7]

The Catalan case is no exception, as several of the aforementioned titles testify. While also not an entirely new phenomenon, a striking number of recent novels and films centering the rural have emerged from Catalonia, a region whose urban/rural divide is often emphasized in its cultural production, both historically and in a contemporary frame.[8] In a recent article, Maria Dasca notes the "importance of spatiality in the configuration of contemporary [Catalan] culture" evidenced by "the emergence of a set of cultural artefacts centred on certain forms of non-urban space" (2023, 442). Dasca notes that "some of these works, created by a young generation of artists, connect with the social demands of environmentalism and feminism," though these are only "*new* insofar as their imagery offers an alternative vision to the two dominant currents in the tradition of representation of natural and rural places: the one based on the idealization of bucolic locations [...] and the other based on irreversibly lost ways of life" (2023, emphasis mine). These tropes are well-established, and as Ramon Girona and Margarida Casacuberta explore in detail in another of this issue's essays, there is a deep tradition in Catalan literature of casting the journey from the city to the countryside as one in search of self-knowledge. Along these lines, they especially stress the influence of authors such as Víctor Català/Caterina Alberti i Paradís, whose 1905 novel *Solitud* they describe as casting a long shadow over contemporary Catalan literary and cinematic production. Girona and Casacuberta also affirm that the rural sphere has taken on a particularly central position in recent Catalan-language cinema made by women filmmakers, whose works highlight rural returns with particular frequency. This essay's sustained focus on two exemplary films from this trend seeks to further account for the appeal, and complexity, of representing the rural as a backdrop for representations of female subjectivity in contemporary Catalan cinema.

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[5] This rural depopulation is the subject of the aforementioned non-fiction texts by del Molino and Cerdà, as well as several of Llamazares's novels. For some examples of contemporary schemes, see Sánchez Becerril (2021) or the web platform "Volver al Pueblo" (https://volveralpueblo.coceder.org/), hosted by the NGO COCEDER (Confederación de Centros de Desarrollo Rural).

[6] For representative examples, see García López (2023) or Conde (2023).

[7] In many instances —such as Mesa/Coixet's *Un amor*, Gurrea's *Suro*, or Sorogoyen's *As bestas*— the idealized or utopian rural realm ultimately proves a disappointing or even threatening space, demonstrating the lasting power of prejudices and hierarchies that continue to mark even supposedly celebratory representations of the rural.

[8] See the essays collected in Joan Ramon Resina and William R. Viestenz's volume *The New Ruralism: An Epistemology of Transformed Space* (2012), among others.

3. Situating Crisis

In both *Brava* and *Els encantats*, despite differences in genre, subject matter, and style, the rural provides an appealing escape for two surprisingly similar protagonists, who find themselves submerged in distinct but parallel crises. These crises (surviving sexual assault in one case and navigating separation and shared custody as a newly single mother in the other) are also firmly linked to the women's urban lives in Barcelona, although they are ultimately shown to reside more profoundly within the space of their interiority. Both crises, it should also be noted, are very much informed and inflected by the protagonists' gender positionality: while I do not wish to conflate the trauma of rape with the potentially more quotidian and commonplace challenges of navigating separation and shared custody, both crises emerge from female-identifying subjects' navigation of patriarchal structures and struggles. The films suggest that both the lasting effects of gender-based violence and the relentless onslaught of (often contradictory and impossible-to-meet) expectations of contemporary motherhood can have a crushing weight, or shatter a sense of self, albeit in different forms and intensities.

The first film, 2017's *Brava*, directed by Roser Aguilar and co-written by the filmmaker and Alejandro Hernández, stars Laia Marull as protagonist Janine, whose comfortable but superficial and unsatisfying middle-class life falls apart following a sexual assault she experiences one night in a Barcelona metro station. Riding the subway from her bank job to an evening Chinese language class —she hopes to be transferred to the Hong Kong office her employer is opening— Janine calls attention to two young men who are attempting to steal a fellow passenger's purse. They then follow her through a station and eventually rob and assault her, forcing her to perform oral sex at knifepoint and violently pushing and kicking her to the floor, then leaving to pursue a teenage girl they see walking by; as Janine struggles to get her bearings, she sees them drag the girl to the same fate, then frantically runs for her life up the escalator and out of the station. Initially she tells no one, returning to the flat she shares with her self-absorbed, standoffish partner Martí (Sergio Caballero) after cleaning herself up in the bathroom of her parents' vacant and for-sale former apartment in the same building. She then arrives late to a dinner party Martí is hosting at their flat to celebrate having landed an important design campaign for Volvo. Shaken but composed, Janine acts as if nothing has happened, explaining the contusions on her face as the result of a fall in the subway station. But she cannot long ignore the dual trauma of her own attack and the guilt of not having prevented another woman's. The following day, after nightmares and panic attacks —and several scenes of painful silence and distance in a relationship that clearly has little emotional or physical intimacy— she partially confesses to Martí, omitting the sexual violence but disclosing the robbery and assault. At his insistence, she files a police report, and begins to ask the officer on duty if anything else happened in the station that evening; he replies that there was a sexual assault and asks her if she has any information, which she quickly denies, likewise

pretending not to have seen the men who attacked her. After another night at home where she rebuffs Martí's first gesture of physical affection in the film, she escapes to the countryside to visit her father, who has relocated to the family's small home near the coast.[9] The bulk of the film follows Janine's extended stay with her father Manel (played by veteran actor Emilio Gutiérrez Caba), her tentative flirtations with his handsome and mysterious French sculptor neighbor Pierre (Bruno Todeschini), and increasing unraveling as she is gradually forced to confront several things she has resisted facing: her trauma, guilt, fear, and an existential emptiness at the very core of self. The "action" of the film thus largely takes place within the often inscrutable subjectivity of the protagonist, or what an anonymous post from elblogdelcineespañol.com linked on the filmmaker's website describes as:

> *el vacío personal de una mujer joven* que sufre y presencia una agresión brutal que la obliga a buscar recursos para recuperar cierto equilibrio interior. Plantea *la necesidad de re-encontrarnos con quien somos profundamente*... Entre la culpa por no declarar y la necesidad de sobrevivir al dolor, Janine entra en una espiral autodestructiva, hasta que toca fondo y estalla. Finalmente *se enfrenta a la realidad como única salida*, para tomar las riendas de su propia vida.
>
> (roseraguilar 2017, emphasis mine)

This description underscores the film's deep engagement with the representation of female subjectivity, framed as an encounter with the incomprehensible self; the italicized portions, especially, could be equally applied to *Brava* and to the second film under examination here, Elena Trapé's 2023 *Els encantats*.

This second film, co-written with Miguel Ibáñez Monroy, features another inscrutable character immersed in a profound crisis born out of more mundane and less violent circumstances. Here, we find protagonist Irene (played by current industry "it girl" Laia Costa, seen in leading roles in other films of urban flight and female crisis like Isabel Coixet's *Un amor* or Alauda Ruiz de Azúa's *Cinco lobitos*) navigating the emotional challenges of her recent separation and the shared custody of her four-year-old daughter, who is spending her first extended stay in the care of her father, Irene's former partner Guillem (Carlos di Ros). Like Janine, Irene lives a comfortable bourgeois existence: she has just moved to her own post-separation flat, an airy bohemian apartment with high ceilings and a small balcony, from the looks of it in Gràcia. Here too, class privilege is worth noting, as again a second home facilitates her escape to the country, in this instance the Catalan Pyrenees, where her mother's family has a house in the tiny mountain town of Antist, in the Vall Fosca region. Early in the film, overwhelmed by newfound solitude in her half-unpacked home (and seemingly unencumbered by work demands), Irene drives to

[9] Shot in Catalan, *Brava* was filmed between Barcelona, the Valencian community, and the Empordà region, but where exactly the father lives is not specified. The film's title suggests that it is likely the Costa Brava (though this also evidently refers to the protagonist's temperament, perhaps ironically, in that she is not, at least until the film's conclusion, particularly courageous). In both potential meanings, *Brava* is marked as resolutely feminine.

Antist for an indefinite stay, seeking solace in the rural town where she spent idyllic summers in her childhood and adolescence. Much like Aguilar's protagonist, Trapé's finds that the escape to the idealized rural sphere provides distance from the urban locus of personal crisis, but not from its emotional ramifications, which she must learn to face within herself.

Both films, then, situate crisis, violence, and interpersonal wounding in the urban sphere, and particularly the spaces of Barcelona. The films' focus on relatively privileged, middle-class Catalan professionals on the one hand casts the city as a space of professional and economic possibility, where Janine's bank job, or Irene's new apartment, suggest at least outward signs of stability and advancement. But the *ciutat comtal* proves an isolating and solitary place, as the few scenes each film features there suggest. Janine's job, despite its promises of professional and geographic mobility, appears to consist predominantly of denying customers predatory loans. Likewise, her relationship with Martí is marked by a coldness that is reflected in the washed-out cinematography of their domestic scenes, where we see the couple's life together marked by mis- or non-communication, and a sense that the two professionals are constantly missing one another, whether in the physical space of their apartment or in terms of opportunities for connection or togetherness. What we can sense of Irene's previous relationship with former partner Guillem seems to have been equally unfulfilling, and the decision to separate appears to have come from her, after failed attempts at connection. In both films, the urban characters struggle for contact and intimacy with others but appear profoundly alone, the spaces they occupy stressing the depersonalized and foreboding nature of city life —in the case of the metro, streets, and tunnels in *Brava*— or at the very least its isolation and emptiness, rendered quite literally in the space of Irene's half-unpacked apartment in *Els encantats*, where she grapples with loneliness, trying to connect with friends or her brother via texts and video calls but ultimately appearing overwhelmed by her new solitary life. *Brava* casts the city as more menacing than its counterpart does, but both stress the relational voids faced by urban protagonists who struggle (and often fail) to communicate with those around them.

4. Privileged Mobility and Rural Refuge

The films' plots each quickly re-situate their protagonists in rural areas where they seek respite from crisis. Both characters have access to such an escape route thanks to family homes, markers of privileged class positions that allow for easy mobility between city and country (and encompass the two opposing poles of Catalan rurality, *mar* and *muntanya*). In *Brava*, the protagonist's father's relocation from Barcelona to a coastal village seems to be a relatively recent development, following the death of his wife a couple of years prior. The house appears to have been in the family for some time, however. When Janine arrives without much warning, her father apologizes for its disordered state amid renovations he is

undertaking, and the fact that her room is not currently habitable. She instead sleeps in a corner that previously housed a piano her father has given away, because she visits so infrequently it was never being played. *Els encantats* features strikingly similar arrival dialogue between its protagonist and the paternal figure Agustí (Pep Cruz), the only year-round resident of the tiny village of Antist, himself a character based on an actual inhabitant of the real-life town, which is largely vacant.[10] Upon Irene's unannounced arrival, Agustí brings her firewood and tells her he has fixed several things but that she needs to come up to the house more often, as it isn't good for it to spend so much time shuttered. In such quotidian conversations, which Janine also undertakes with the townspeople and neighbors in *Brava*, both protagonists are marked as fundamentally *of the city*, even if in Irene's case her family has historical roots in town and she knows Agustí like a family member. In both cases, the protagonists are placed in sharp contrast to the local townspeople, with plot and dialogue stressing their infrequent visits to the country as an occasional escape from their urban lives.

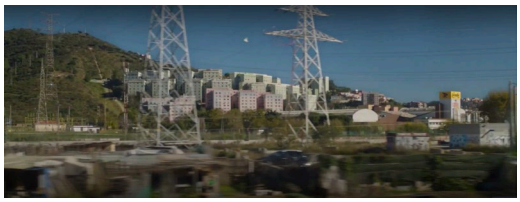
The protagonists are in this sense —despite their current states of crisis, pain, and trauma response— doubly privileged, both in terms of class position and, by extension, mobility. Both women have professional situations that at least allow them to disappear for several days at a time without severe economic consequences; such a filmic trajectory would be unthinkable for a domestic employee, factory worker, or supermarket clerk. The idealized rural sphere is also precisely idealizable by both Janine and Irene as an appealing escape route because they can drop in and out of life there, without having to deal with the complexities of rural life full time (instead experiencing it with the buffer of someone like Agustí bringing the firewood, chopping the grass, or fixing the leaks).

This mobility, and the idealization of the rural, is showcased in both films' cinematography by sequences that map the protagonists' arrivals to their respective rural refuges, stressing their sensorial perception of movement and landscape, and suggesting the promise of escape offered by distance from the city. In *Brava*, the sequence comes on the heels of two scenes that further alienate and isolate the protagonist from those around her in the city: the police interview about what happened in the metro station that night, and a subsequent moment where she confesses to Martí, in their shared bed before going to sleep (and after rebuffing his physical advances), that she has lied to the police and is afraid. He asks what she wants to do, and she remains silent, staring into the distance. We then cut from this static medium close up in muted gray tones of Janine lying in bed, turned away from Martí and gazing in despair (Figure 1) to a sharply contrasting sequence showing her

[10] This real-life eponymous analog for Agustí is discussed at length in an article on the film from *Condé Nast Traveler*. The real Agustí, according to Trapé, "insistía mucho en el matiz entre pueblo abandonado o deshabitado, porque aunque no viva gente durante el año, las casas son de alguien" (Crespo 2023). The article, published in a magazine associated with hyper-privileged travel, simultaneously details Trapé's filming process and serves as an invitation to, or fetishization of, rural tourism. In keeping with *Condé Nast* aesthetics, it features glossy marketing and hyperlinks to explicit travel content, aligning the fictional film with real-life practices of urban escapist fantasy and privileged consumption of rural space.

point of view from a Rodalies commuter train that spirits her away from the city (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 1 – Janine in the city: silence and distance. © Iberrota Films, Setmàgic Audiovisual, and TVOn

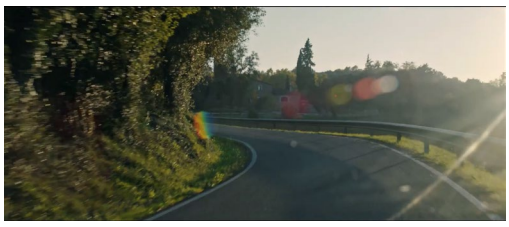


Figures 2 and 3 – movement and color mark the escape from the urban. © Iberrota Films, Setmàgic Audiovisual, and TVOn

Tense and mournful string music serves as a sound bridge, creating sequential continuity between the two scenes, implying that Janine leaves the next day; as we cut to the train view, the addition of a repetitive ascendant piano melody suggests a hopeful shift as the train car emerges from a tunnel in the city's northeast outskirts. The use of rapid movement and color —in bursts of foliage, the tunnel's brightly-hued graffiti and train cables, and pastel Singuerlín housing blocks of Santa Coloma de Gramenet visible in the distance— suggests a radical change from what has come before, and we cut to Janine, more composed if still pensive, gazing out the window (Figure 4). She closes her eyes for a moment, and then we cut back to the window perspective, now showing a verdant field in early spring, isolated farmhouses, and mountains in the distance (Figure 5), as the music draws to a hopeful, if ambiguous, close. Windows and mirrors will become a key motif in both films, where they alternately showcase a hopeful vision of an idealized exterior landscape and serve to underscore the characters' absorption in processes of introspection or psychic pain. Lucy Bolton, in her work adapting Luce Irigaray's thinking to feminist film studies, notes that the mirror, and by extension the film screen, has historically conformed to the patriarchal model of a space for the contemplation of female beauty, citing Irigaray's claim that "we look at ourselves in the mirror to *please someone*, rarely to interrogate the state of our own body or our spirit, rarely for ourselves and in search of our own becoming" (Irigaray cited in Bolton 2015, 38). These films' emphasis on their protagonists' gaze at or through reflective surfaces of windows and mirrors, as well as their highlighting of the women's inability to articulate their pain, precisely resists the patriarchal impulse to make oneself pleasing or presentable to which Irigaray alludes, stressing instead the characters' interrogation of their own physical and emotional states and their attempts (and frequent failures) at self-comprehension or giving an account of their suffering to others.


Figures 4 and 5 – the window and landscape as spaces of contemplation.
© Iberrota Films, Setmàgic Audiovisual, and TVOn

These reflective surfaces also juxtapose and connect the rural landscape with female interiority and the search for self-knowledge. We see this in the sequence following Janine's arrival to the train stop. Her father warmly greets her — "benvinguda al camp!"— his very salutation stressing the change in scenery to the rural milieu. The two then get into his car and another sequence of mobility, music, and even more idyllic vistas ensues. Father and daughter briefly exchange small talk, and as then he turns on an upbeat Brazilian tune, SaraoMusic's "Amor maior," which we hear in the tinny car stereo system as Manel glances a couple of times at his inscrutable daughter. Then the aural and visual perspectives shift: the volume of the diegetic music rises and the camera films from Janine's point of view through the windscreen, suggesting that we are, in a sense, sharing her subject position as she listens to the music and gazes at the pastoral landscapes in the glinting sunlight as her father navigates the curving country road (Figures 6 and 7). The soft flares of light, sunny cinematography and cheerful rhythms of the soundtrack give the sequence a completely different tone from the prior more somber urban scenes. The framing of the shots suggests, as if from within Janine's subjectivity, a sense of release and new beginning, casting the rural sphere as a *locus amoenus* for recovery and escape and placing it in stark contrast to the traumatic and foreboding landscapes of the city, where the protagonist had startled at the presence of strangers and shied away from using the metro.

Figures 6 and 7 – snapshots of subjectivity: the promise of renewal.
© Iberrota Films, Setmàgic Audiovisual, and TVOn

The opening credit sequence of *Els encantats*, which comes several minutes into the film —after the protagonist has struggled through her first custody handoff and found herself uncomfortably alone— sets a strikingly similar tone in its depiction of Irene's escape from Barcelona to Antist. Hers is a solitary automobile journey and the music is purely extradiegetic in nature, but the breathtaking visuals of the pastoral Catalan countryside and sense of possibility and change mirror

closely the representation of Janine's analogous voyage. The sequence begins with Irene, recently arrived home after attempting to fill her time without her daughter, looking overwhelmed and despondent in a medium-long shot in the entry vestibule of her new apartment. Seeming not to know how to situate or ground herself, she gazes sideways, implicitly at her daughter's vacant bedroom, then downward, where the film's title appears, superimposed over her body at chest height as the camera slowly pulls away, with non-diegetic synthesizer music in low tones slowly growing in intensity and speed before we cut to a shot of the motorway —in almost the exact same spot as the *Brava* sequence, the city's northeastern boundary near the Besòs river— as cars zip past the recognizable buildings of Torre Baró and Ciutat Meridiana. The use of another musical sound bridge, along with the same costume choice, suggests that Irene has left immediately, unable to tolerate her newfound solitude and heading, quite literally, for the hills: the mountain refuge of Antist where she spent her childhood summers. The main titles continue to appear and the increasingly energized synthesizer soundtrack slowly builds as we follow Irene to smaller country roads, a stop for groceries and a nostalgic ice cream. The music's energy builds, as does the beauty of the vistas (Figure 8), point of view shots of which are intercut with reverse shots through the windscreen of the protagonist driving, the verdant canopy of trees reflected in the glass and superimposed on her face (Figure 9). She smiles as she sees Antist on the hilltop and turns off the main road at the signpost for the village. Here, too, sound and image combine to convey a sense of hope and possibility for the protagonist, with movement to the idyllic rural sphere seeming to provide a much-needed escape.

Figures 8 and 9 – reflecting the rural: mobility and the idyll.
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5. Rural Realities: Mirroring the Self

These romanticized and idyllic mobile entries into the rural domain, however, belie the reality of what each protagonist will find there, mostly in her experience of self. At first, the change of scenery to the picturesque, slower-paced, isolated countryside offers possibilities for liberation from the oppressive or traumatic structures that marked their urban lives, as Janine gets breathing room from the memory of her attack and Irene puts distance between herself and her former partner, returning to a space that predates him, even if she associates it to some extent with time they spent there together (and is displeased to learn he's recently

visited with another woman). Once installed in their rural getaways, both women seek to reinvent or reimagine themselves: tentatively exploring new romantic relationships, reconnecting with familial figures or nostalgic spaces, and finding time for solitary contemplation, often in the natural world. But while the country's slower rhythms and lesser demands on time and attention initially offer space for the protagonists to be alone with their thoughts and feelings, this very space for contemplation also forces them to confront their difficult experiences and shifting senses of self, as there is, in a sense, nowhere else to turn.

Indeed, both protagonists appear to seek isolation but desperately long for connection, which they struggle to pursue through deeply challenged communication. *Brava*'s protagonist tells her father nothing of what has transpired in the metro, though she does eventually confess that she thinks things have ended between her and Martí, and slowly opens up to the attractive French sculptor Pierre who lives next door (and is himself a trauma refugee to the country: his previous high-octane job as an aeronautics engineer led him to a breaking point, and after violently attacking his young daughter in a moment of stress he was forced to reevaluate his life). But Janine's communication with both her father and Pierre is consistently limited by what appears to be her own inscrutability to herself, as a result of her recent trauma but also the deeper underlying unhappiness it has laid bare for her. She cannot account for why she has come to the coast, what she wants, or what has happened to her, even if it would ease her relational difficulties considerably. In a climactic scene toward the film's conclusion, on a romantic walk with Pierre in the woods, her inability to articulate her desires or repressed experiences leads to a series of misreadings by both characters and culminates in another scene of sexual violence, which begins as a tender and mutual encounter. Both members of the couple are unable to read the other or themselves, leading to a repetition of their respective traumas (his violence and her violation) in a surprise twist for a film that seemed to be moving toward a more predictable if farfetched romantic conclusion.

The opacity of the protagonist both to herself and to others, and the attendant failure to communicate desires or feelings, marks *Els encantats* as well. Its protagonist becomes defensive or puts her foot in her mouth in several conversations, cannot explain her sadness to her mother despite numerous phone calls, or invites a love interest from the city, Eric (Daniel Pérez Prada), to spend the weekend with her, only to reject him after an awkward and unsatisfying sexual encounter and his bout with an ill-timed stomach virus. While on the surface level she appears to cruelly push him away when he is most physically vulnerable, the film also suggests, via Costa's nuanced performance, the reasons for her seemingly irrational or incomprehensible actions: her slight rankling at his overbearing purchase of a map or suggestion of itineraries in a region she has known since childhood, or her disproportionate panic at seeing he has taken her daughter's quilt to keep warm while feverish, after she left him unattended for several hours. The film implies that her panic is induced more by separation from her child than by her

sick companion's appropriation of the child's bedclothes; but Irene is incapable of articulating this in the moment, perhaps even to herself, and it only becomes fully clear to the viewer following her cathartic breakdown at the film's conclusion.

In this regard, both films cast their protagonists as insider-outsiders: Catalan speakers with connections to the rural via their family members and homes, but who also appear not to entirely *belong* to the rural realm, with their status as city dwellers marked in their conversations with locals or references made to their infrequent visits, as well as other moments where they seem out of place. The spaces of houses in both films underscore the protagonists' privileged relationship of access without responsibility —with Janine's father's comment about giving away the piano since she never came to play it, or Agustí informing Irene that he has taken care of all her household repairs— casting them as tourists or occasional visitors in contrast to those who have made these rural places their homes.[11] The importance of the physical space of the house is especially highlighted in *Els encantats*, where the elegant exposed rafters, tasteful modern kitchen, and panoramic views suggest the economic privilege of its owners (presumably, Irene's family, though it is implied she and her former partner are responsible for its renovation).[12] Initially, the family home offers Irene some safety and refuge, although almost immediately she is overwhelmed by her solitude there, leading her to summon the ill-fated Eric.

The sequence of her arrival to the house emphasizes its status as a haven, framing the protagonist closely and protectively within its doorways and showing her haptic encounters with favorite objects. The camera slowly pans around the space as Irene makes herself at home, walks through the house, and opens windows. She stands in one window frame to contemplate the majestic landscape, which we then see in the reverse shot after she steps away from the window, leaving it open to show how the rural landscape itself, in a sense, enters the house with her—and implicitly, becomes the focus of her subjectivity (Figures 10 and 11).


Figures 10 and 11 – Irene and the landscape enter the house
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[11] On rural homeplaces, see Marr (2021). Another recent Catalan film that centers in much more violent fashion on the tension between privileged arriving urbanites and the embedded rural residents is Gurrea's *Suro* (2022).
[12] The house used for filming is owned by the family of a friend of the filmmaker's (Meseguer, 2023), likely from a bourgeois Barcelona family with ancestral roots in the village, like the film's fictional protagonist. *Els encantats* suggests that Irene's grandparents migrated from the village to Barcelona in search of better economic opportunities; *Brava*, on the other hand, leaves ambiguous if the country home stems from previous humble rural roots or is a more recent acquisition in her parents' lifetime.

The emphasis on windows has already been repeatedly established in the film's few minutes of runtime (less than twenty at this point), where from the very opening sequence —shot through a car window as Irene bids an emotional farewell to her young daughter— windows of cars, apartments, and houses have served simultaneously as reflective surfaces and portals to see what lies beyond, as was the case of the windscreen in Figure 9, where we saw both Irene driving and the canopy of lush foliage above her. The film stresses the connection between windows and mirrors throughout, taking particular advantage of the space of the car, both in static mirror or window framing shots and sequences of movement through landscape where car windows simultaneously act as reflective mirrors *and* transparent portals, as seen in the arrival scene. Several shots of Irene in the rearview mirror in a sequence leading up to her final catharsis, for example, disembody and frame her from several angles and always incompletely (Figure 12), suggesting the fractured nature of her current interiority: internally adrift as she struggles to make sense of multiple identity roles as newly separated from her partner, mother (temporarily) without her child, and urbanite in a rural space where she sought refuge but has been forced to confront her own interior turmoil. In these moments, the overlapping of windows and mirrors as reflective surfaces in turn suggests that, in the solitude of her sojourn, the rural landscape itself becomes a kind of mirror in which the protagonist is forced to confront her own psychic image and core self.

Figure 12 – reflecting the fractured self © Coming Soon Films, A Contracorriente Films, Encantats Films AIE

Brava, too, frequently makes use of mirrors, often to illuminate the protagonist's interior disorientation and distance from her own experience —both the trauma of her assault and her guilt at not having intervened or informed on her attackers, given that they went on to target another woman. In this film too, several scenes depict how mirrors force the protagonist to examine and reevaluate her sense of self, in the wake of a life-shattering experience after which she will never be the same. In one example, shortly after arriving at her father's house, still injured and in pain from her attack (and insistently wearing a kerchief to conceal a cut on her neck) Janine undresses before bed the first evening and lets slip an anguished groan. Catching a sideways glimpse of herself in the mirror, an enormous bruise taking up most of the side of her ribcage, Janine approaches to take a closer look, her face still contorted in pain as she looks down at her body Figure 13). The camera positioned behind her, we watch as her gaze then travels up to meet her own eyes,

and she pronounces aloud to herself, "que rara estàs. Y que lletja, per Déu." Her perception of her own strangeness and ugliness in this instant amounts to more than a simple aesthetic assessment, speaking more profoundly to her sense of alienation from herself in the aftermath of an experience she has yet to fully comprehend, let alone name, to herself or those around her. The inscrutability of the protagonist's experience and feelings to herself not only leads to her incomprehension or misreading by others, it also gestures toward the ways that the violence imbedded in patriarchal culture leads to such an illegibility of the self for female-identifying subjects.

Figure 13 – Examining the inscrutable self. © Iberrota Films, Setmàgic Audiovisual, and TVOn

Along these lines, it is illuminating to read the two films alongside Lucy Bolton's aforementioned adaptation of Luce Irigaray's work to cinema, in her book *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema and Thinking Women*. One of Irigaray's central lines of thinking in her paradigmatic *Speculum of the Other Woman* was to break with Lacanian (as well as Freudian) thinking on the child's passage through the mirror stage as the (mis)recognition of the whole, unified subject that is foundational to the construction of (male) subjectivity. Arguing precisely that this formulation was inadequate for female subject formation (a gesture that has since been both applauded for its antiphallic approach and critiqued for its biological essentialism), Irigaray's gendered critique of the Lacanian model argued that "women need a version of their own mirror so that they can become subjects and create their own space in the symbolic order" (Bolton 2015, 32). Given the mirror's well-established parallelism in film studies to the camera, critics such as Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane (with whom Bolton's work is very much in dialogue) have sought to adapt or critique the regimes of scopic mastery that tend to predominate in hegemonic male approaches to visuality. Bolton, in her analysis of both older films directed by men and more contemporary offerings by female filmmakers, analyzes complex and often enigmatic female characters going through personal journeys of transition or transformation, very much the case of the two explored in the present essay. Much like these protagonists, Bolton writes of those she studies that "the women themselves display little self-understanding. They are enigmas: to the men in the film, the audience, and themselves" (2015, 5). This inscrutability is a hallmark of both the films explored here. It is also a broader trend in recent cinematic productions by feminist filmmakers from the Spanish state and beyond, whose embrace of less easily legible (or likable) protagonists can

be read as a critique of the supposedly postfeminist contemporary context, where women are still expected to conform to covert patriarchal dictates such as taking on care work without complaint, being physically pleasing (to echo Irigaray's view of the mirror), agreeable and easygoing, and subordinating their own desires and needs to those of others.

In a particularly relevant analysis, Bolton synthesizes Irigaray's provocative proposal of a curved mirror (or speculum) as an alternative metaphor for investigating female interiority, rather than the flat glass mirror of Freud or Lacan. Bolton's succinct distillation of Irigaray explains that while the word *speculum* intentionally conjures gynecological instruments, "Irigaray, however, is not applying the idea in these literal, physical terms: it is not that women need to be penetrated vaginally in order to locate the source of their subjective identity. Irigaray's use of these provocative terms is deliberate and subversive, highlighting the challenges she is making to patriarchal definitions and connotations" (2015, 37). Bolton shows how a less rigid and phallic mirror metaphor, when extended to the filmmaker's camera, can allow film to be "conceived of as a means of 'getting inside' the subjectivities of women, revealing and examining interiority and consciousness" in innovative and nuanced (but not literal or penetrative) fashion (2015, *ibid*). In showing how the conventional mirror as metaphor is insufficient to reflect back a unified female subject in a culture where the "universal" or default subject position is still hegemonically male, the shortcomings of the mirror can instead gesture toward the complex contours of female interiority that cannot be represented cinematically: that is, according to Bolton, "the play with the mirror exposes and undercuts its reflective capacity, thereby moving beyond its inadequate representation and shifting the frame of reference from the superficial to the corporeal and psychological" (2015, 177). In these films, the protagonists' encounters with mirror objects offer moments of confrontation with the inscrutable self in a process of crisis and transformation. The mirror thus becomes a powerful means of representing the reflexive processes of fragmentation, alienation, and interrogation of the protagonists' own interior worlds as they struggle to comprehend their own motivations, shortcomings, and experiences of suffering, opaque both to the viewer and to themselves.

6. Cathartic Conclusions

It is my contention that these rural-set films, in their repetitive use of reflective surfaces (especially those that superimpose the images of the protagonists with the images of landscape) cast the rural sphere itself as a mirror for characters' interiority, forcing each woman to confront, acknowledge, and eventually articulate her previously unbearable or incomprehensible trauma, suffering, and loss. Both films feature cathartic endings where their protagonists —who have been theretofore incapable of naming, let alone processing, their pain— finally speak it aloud: in the case of *Brava*, in an emotional breakdown where Janine finally

explains to her father what has happened to her and her own incapacity to manage the experience, and in the case of *Els encantats*, in a lengthy emotional monologue over the phone to her ex, where Irene finally gives an account of her feelings of frustration and failure. In both cases, these breakdowns are instigated by an encounter in nature: in *Brava*, the aforementioned scene with Pierre in the woods, where Janine's inability to articulate her desires or experiences leads to a series of misreadings by both characters, with violent consequences; and in *Els encantats*, after the protagonist spends a solitary and reflective day in nature and awakes from a nap disoriented, finding the sun has set and she is alone and cold, in an intermedial tableau reminiscent of Andrew Wyeth's painting *Christina's World*, itself an illusion to the complex interior world of a female subject (Figures 14 and 15). Wyeth's emblematic portrait of Christina Olson, a disabled woman with few economic possibilities living in the rural New England town where the painter spent his summers (and in whose family home he set up a painting studio) is enigmatic, "steeped in nostalgia for a vanishing past" of North American rural life (Griffin 2010, 33) that we might read in parallel to the idealized representation of the depopulated village of Antist, whose disappearing inhabitants and ways of life are discussed throughout the film's diegesis. Like the filmic tableau, the painting situates the lone female figure in a rural landscape, slightly off-center, simultaneously drawing the viewer's gaze and denying neat framing and resolution, stressing the protagonist's vulnerability and solitude in her natural surroundings.

Figure 14 – Lost in landscape: Irene's World.© Coming Soon Films, A Contracorriente Films, Encantats Films AIE
Figure 15 – Christina's World (1948) by Andrew Wyeth

In this sense, and as a means of drawing this essay to a close, I would like to zoom back outward to the broader landscapes in which these protagonists' crises and transformations take place. On the one hand, it is vital to underscore the fact that it is the rural realm that enables catharsis to transform crisis into self-knowledge, stasis into forward motion, even if not in the ways the protagonists had perhaps anticipated when they set out for the country in the first place. While both have fled to the rural as an idealized haven, what they have found there supposes a much more challenging reality: one marked by difficult or impossible communication, solitude, and the inscrutability of the self. The films' respective conclusions suggest that the space of the rural, while easily romanticized as an escape —from capitalism, from crisis, or from conflict— is ultimately also an imagined space of projection, situated in the complex interior landscape of the self.

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