

Neoliberal Frictions: Intimacy and Inconvenience in the Films of Neus Ballús

Friccions neoliberals: intimitat i incomoditat a les pel·lícules de Neus Ballús

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Abstract

This essay examines questions related to inconvenience in the workplace in Neus Ballús's three feature-length films (*La plaga*, 2013; *El viatge de la Marta (Staff Only)*, 2019; *Sis dies corrents*, 2021). Here I argue that irritation and conflict, or what I refer to as neoliberal frictions, in professional contexts lead, somewhat paradoxically, to the forging of intimate relations between characters of disparate identitarian backgrounds. In an era defined by spiraling precarity and the ongoing socio-economic constriction of the middle and lower classes, Ballús's films provide affective and aesthetic templates for envisaging collective responses to neoliberal logic. Through formal experimentation, Ballús opens up new spaces for ideological critique, deploying 'the buddy movie' as a hybrid filmic form that can unlock novel forms of solidarity in and beyond the Spanish State.

Keywords

Neoliberalism; Inconvenience; Intimacy; *La plaga*; *El viatge de la Marta (Staff Only)*; *Sis dies corrents*; Neus Ballús; Catalan Cinema; Creative Documentary

Resum

Aquest assaig examina qüestions relacionades amb la incomoditat a l'àmbit laboral en els tres llargmetratges de Neus Ballús (*La plaga*, 2013; *El viatge de la Marta (Staff Only)*, 2019; *Sis dies corrents*, 2021). Aquí argumento que la irritació i el conflicte, o el que anomeno friccions neoliberals, en contextos professionals condueixen, de manera una mica paradoxal, a l'establiment de relacions íntimes entre personatges d'origens identitaris dispersos. En una època marcada per la precarietat en espiral i la constricció socioeconòmica contínua de les classes mitjanes i baixes, les pel·lícules de Ballús proporcionen plantilles afectives i estètiques per plantejar respostes col·lectives a la lògica neoliberal. A través de l'experimentació formal, Ballús obre nous espais per a la crítica ideològica, desplegant 'the buddy movie' com una forma fílmica híbrida que pot desbloquejar noves formes de solidaritat dins i més enllà de l'Estat espanyol.

Mots clau

Neoliberalisme; Incomoditat; Intimitat; *La plaga*; *El viatge de la Marta (Staff Only)*; *Sis dies corrents*; Neus Ballús; Cinema català; Documental de creació

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1. Introduction

Irritation structures the experience of everyday life under neoliberal capitalism today. As the global population continues to expand at a breakneck pace, having already doubled between 1960 and 2000,¹ over-proximity and the depletion of resources in contemporary societies have generated a seemingly limitless font of resentments. Cunning politicians fan the flames of these antipathies, polarizing voters to the extent that dialogue, let alone debate, appears impossible in such a divisive landscape. Ideologues on both sides of the aisle either insinuate or blatantly claim that migrant populations are to blame, scapegoating refugees and/or itinerant workers without papers or state benefits, even as shifts in taxation siphon assets from public coffers. Discrimination based on political affiliation is on the rise, as is the sense that identity politics are only capable of further atomizing society given their need for a common enemy. It is no wonder that “Karen” has recently become a meme phenomenon in the United States as well as shorthand in Anglophone contexts for conjuring —at the risk of misogyny— images of entitlement, a propensity to complain, and self-interested privilege. Pop culture and mainstream media fan the flames of egotism in the present, promoting glossy technologies of the self while capitalizing on fantasies of sovereignty, or the delusion that we move through the world as fully autonomous beings. We do not, however, exist within the social order as self-governing subjects, as anyone with attachments to family, work, friends, politics, and love can attest. We are always already imbricated by others within the social order, brushing up against friends, lovers, colleagues, relatives, and others on a daily basis—alternating between some mix of joy, tolerance, and/or resentment as we bear these encounters. There is no “I” in team, as we are often reminded, and this feeling of being in relation to others within a larger societal framework is often lost to what Lauren Berlant describes as the individual’s “fantasy of jurisdiction” (2022, 3).² But what if self-determination might be better understood as nothing more than an illusory power over an external

¹ While the International Monetary Fund acknowledges that the population growth rate has slowed down to some extent, having ballooned from 3 billion in 1960 to 6 billion in 2000, projections estimate some 9 billion global inhabitants by 2037 (Bloom 2020).

² Berlant describes this fantasy as a kind of delusion in which “autonomy [stands in] as evidence of freedom” (2022, 3).

reality that is, in truth, entirely unruly? After all, how can we exercise control of ourselves when we live in an era beset by perpetual crisis?

Thinking through the consequences of the scarcity complex permeating neoliberal cultures throughout the West, this essay looks at three feature-length films by Catalan director Neus Ballús (*La plaga*, 2013; *El viatge de la Marta (Staff Only)*, 2019; *Sis dies corrents*, 2021). I argue that Ballús's films recast irritation, almost paradoxically, as a tool for forging intimacies within an uneven and exploitative socioeconomic terrain. Viewed as resource for building solidarity and not as "the negative sandpaper of sociality" (Berlant 2022, 8), inconvenience recalibrates sentimental landscapes for characters from a range of backgrounds in Ballús's films. It compels these characters to wrestle with mixed feelings related to both affective and spatial coexistence while querying relative levels of privilege in the Global North. Instead of crafting narratives centered on independence and/or isolation, Ballús's features contend with the challenges of being *in relation* to others in the social order. They balance concerns related to both intimacy and detachment amongst family, friends, spouses, and colleagues. Inopportune or infelicitous moments in which characters collide emotionally or spatially provide structure to Ballús's sinuous style. Her films implicitly contest neoliberal conceptions of local, national, and global society by focusing on labor, community, and relational structures between a diverse range of (non-)actors, the vast majority of whom live in or near the Catalan metropole. They reject individualism in favor of collective-minded visions of the world, screening images of non-sovereign relationality in which characters rely upon one another—often uncomfortably—to navigate a social order contingent upon relationships with others.³ Ballús's filmic universe is, thus, committed to shifting negative perspectives about how and why humanity's fate is inextricably tied to larger systems of interdependence. Her features loosen the negativity so often ascribed to being in the world with others, refashioning inconvenience as an experiential fissure that gestures distinct configurations of communitarian solidarity.

These alternative modes of relationality dismiss individualism, competition, and zero-sum strategies as part of a "moral-political project" that negates "the very idea of the social" (Brown 2019a, 13). They reject neoliberal capitalism's exploitative structures, which Nancy Fraser has described as a cannibalistic "tangle of dysfunction and domination" (2022, xv). Rather, they give shape to the expression of how to bear the weight of the world *collectively* without collapsing under its pressures. Suffering becomes a communal experience in *La plaga* (2013), as migrant workers such as Rose (a Filipino nurse) and Iurie (a Moldovan farmhand) help shoulder some of the burdens facing locals like Raúl (a farm owner managing the titular insect plague) and Maria (an aging woman forced to move into a nursing home). Ballús's first feature juxtaposes scenes of collegial bonding (Raül/Iurie; Rose/Maria), envisaging sites of "radical intimacy" that center on "connection, care

³ As Berlant states, "'Non-sovereign relationality' assumes that there is no sovereignty outside of relationships, and that we are always in a loosely woven state of becoming" (qtd. by Markbreiter 2019).

and community as sites of struggle” (Rosa 2023, 4).⁴ In *El viatge de la Marta* (2019), wealth disparity in the Global South and asymmetrical social relations between fictional protagonists from Spain and Senegal come to light due to adolescent acting out and family discord. While conventional in its (melo)dramatic design, the film distances itself from *cine social* to tease out what Ballús describes as the “vínculo afectivo” between fictional protagonists (qtd. by B. Martínez 2019b) *Sis dies corrents* marks Ballús’s return to the creative documentary format, gauging (in)hospitable attitudes toward foreigners in the Catalan metropole. Somewhere between buddy movie and offbeat episodic comedy-documentary,⁵ *Sis dies corrents* (2021) fixes its gaze on a team of plumber-electricians forced to work together while attending to the needs of an oddball assortment of clients. In each of these features, characters from the Global North and South grapple with the complexities and/or neocolonial particularities shaping multicultural and multilingual workplace environments. The inconveniences tracked within Ballús’s first three films conjure visions of non-sovereign relationality in the world today, reminding viewers that disturbance and disruption are an inherent part of being in the world *with others* and that subjectivity is formed not through isolation but through encounters —however irritating they may be.

Like contemporaries trained within Barcelona’s well-established film circuit, Ballús adopted a collaborative ethos from the outset of her career, having received a Máster en Documental de Creación (MDC) from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Founded in 1998 by Jordi Balló and colleagues from the UPF, the MDC —buoyed by regional institutions, national broadcasting companies, and a range of directors and producers— has achieved immense success in its first twenty-five years of operation. Landmark films such as *En construcció* (José Luis Guerín, 2001), *El cielo gira* (Mercedes Álvarez, 2005), and *La leyenda del tiempo* (Isaki Lacuesta, 2006) have been fêted at awards galas and film festivals across the globe. Produced within the context of the UPF, these features undercut triumphalist narratives linked to late capitalism in and beyond the Spanish State. They also, in Balló’s words, provide a space for formal experimentation in which “las caligrafías filmicas más innovadoras” can be traced while blurring the lines between fiction and documentary (2010, 105). Blending political critique and aesthetic innovation, twenty-first-century filmmakers educated at the UPF and in similar programs have generated a creative hub responsible for the birth of “a new Catalan avant-garde” (Vidal 2014, 375).⁶ This new vanguard has been characterized as a “cinema transgenèric, migrant i poliglòssic” with minimalist underpinnings (Martí-Olivella 2014, 115), which disrupts narrative technologies that render spectators passive

⁴ Reflecting its initial usage in the English language (1641), intimacy is understood here as “close familiarity” and not considered euphemistic for sexual intercourse (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

⁵ See Jason Mark Scott for more on the buddy movie’s parasitic tendency to attach itself to genre films (such as Westerns, war sagas, and crime films) as well as its ability to touch on “the emotional process by which [the protagonists] come to respect, understand and care for one another” (2008).

⁶ The resurrection of radical filmic production and distribution in Barcelona, in many ways, evinces the historical impact of the *Escola de Barcelona* (in which Jordà participated) and its insistence on “dialogue, collaboration, and mixed media” (Nadal 2010, 466).

consumers. It has also stimulated “spaces of resistance,” as Enrique Fibla-Gutiérrez claims, fomenting a vibrant ecosystem for artists and audiences alike in which empathy and collaboration figure as defining characteristics of both the production process and the films themselves (2019, 28). Accordingly, a new generation of artists, whether supported broadly by the Institut Català de les Empreses Culturals (ICEC) or more locally in programs run by the UPF, the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and the Escola Superior de Cinema i Audiovisual de Catalunya (ESCAC), has reconfigured the formal contours of Iberian cinema over the last three decades. Much more than “the result of some laboratory-like experiment in cultural politics” (Balló and Jiménez-Morales 2022, 180), however, their films sketch emergent visions of an interconnected global society in which collective solidarities are required to combat the cruelties of neoliberal capitalism.

2. Collective Entanglements in *La plaga*

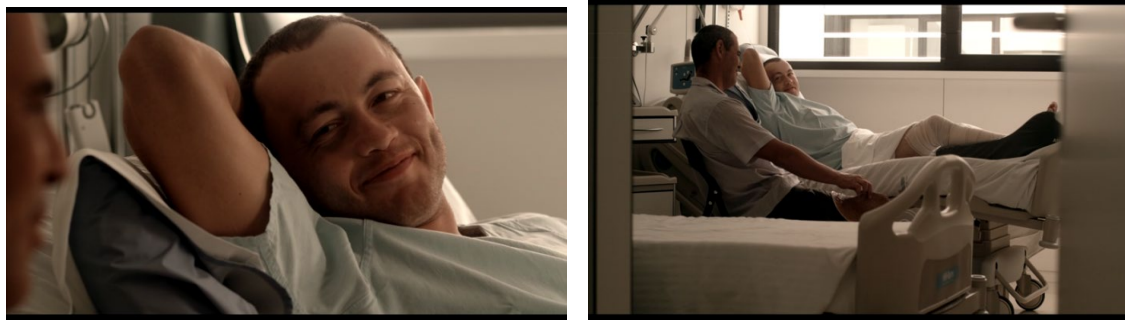
Critical readings of *La plaga* have interrogated the spatial politics of its setting (Gallecs), its “multicultural and multilingual context” (Balló and Jiménez Morales 2022, 179), the anguish afflicting its cast, and the film’s formal porosity. Reviewers have lauded Ballús’s aptitude for drawing out the “fricciones entre ficción y documental” (Sánchez 2013), referring both to her training at the UPF and the influence of mentor and collaborator Joaquim Jordà. Scholars have also drawn attention to *La plaga*’s efforts to cultivate “reparative relations” and “communities of support” (Fibla-Gutiérrez 2019, 34; Gozalo-Salellas 2022, 308), but they tend to do so by focusing on collective modes of documentary or non-fiction film production in Barcelona. What has not yet been analyzed, however, is how these frictions extend beyond collaborative experimentation and into the realm of physical and/or affective contact between *La plaga*’s non-actors. Such intimacies are essential for understanding what motivated Ballús to dedicate years of communication and rehearsal time to non-actors and the production team before filming began in July 2011. Indeed, in promotional interviews following the film’s release in September 2013, Ballús discussed the need to create “un nivel de intimidad” on set, underscoring the sense of physical “proximidad” between both its subjects and the crew (qtd. by Miró and Samit 2013). More urgently, she expressed her vision of non-sovereignty in the neoliberal West today, stating that we are all “inmersos en un sistema [socio-económico] que no entendemos, que nos viene determinado por el exterior” (qtd. by Miró and Samit 2013). This sense of confusion and powerlessness, for Ballús, has produced anxieties regarding “un tipo de mundo que se está terminando” due to neoliberal hegemony as well for those losing their ability to “resistir” in today’s political landscape (qtd. by Miró and Samit 2013). Much like the non-actors facing some form of looming peril in *La plaga*, the audience is forced to grapple with the inherent fragility of human and non-human forms of life on Earth. Far from imposing a catastrophist gaze, however, Ballús reminds viewers of the

work required to inhabit the world cooperatively as well as what it takes to replenish our supply of collective energies at a time of socio-economic constriction.

To activate the audience's empathy, Ballús relies on a high volume of close-up shots, drawing viewers ever closer to the bodies of fragile subjects. Production strategies dovetail with the ethics of cooperative filmmaking for the director, and the focus on “los primeros planos” and “los rostros” is owed in large part to the fact that the crew felt “cercanos y legitimados para hacerlo” (qtd. by Miró and Samit 2013). Ballús pushes audiences closer and closer to her subjects through tight framing, aiming for a sense of physical and affective immediacy. Indeed, the film opens with a series of close-ups of two characters (Iurie and a sparring partner) —taken with a handheld camera— rolling around on a sweat-soaked gymnasium floor, as they struggle to defeat one other in practice. Ballús closes *La plaga* with images of Rose at Maria's bedside in a local hospital, adjusting the sheets to ensure her comfort, as Maria struggles to breathe into an oxygen mask. In these final seconds of screen time, Rose paces impatiently in the room until Maria extends her hand, leading Rose to sit by her side and make eye contact as Maria gasps what may be her last breaths. Framed initially in a medium shot with a handheld camera —whose unsteady handling mirrors Maria's physical state— the two exchange knowing glances without saying a word. The camera then zooms in, capturing the pair in a close-up while registering the pained expressions on their faces (Figures 1 and 2). At first glance, the tactical bookending of these touch-centered scenes may seem like mere coincidence. Nevertheless, Ballús positions them strategically within the larger structure of the film, later using Iurie's wrestling injury as pretext for his own hospitalization, which sends Raül racing to his bedside toward the film's end. In contrast to the final sequence with Rose and Maria, however, the two men are positioned within a medium shot initially before a close-up reveals their deep camaraderie (Figures 3 and 4).



Figures 1 and 2 – Medium and close-up shots of Rose and Maria in the hospital as the latter nears death.
© El Kinògraf



Figures 3 and 4 – Close-up and medium shots of Iurie and Raül in the hospital following his wrestling injury.
© El Kinògraf

The sequence between Iurie and Raül has been analyzed elsewhere by Jaume Martí-Olivella, who identifies “formes diverses de *male bonding*” in *La plaga* (2017, 144). One might argue that the film is premised on a more universal vision of attachment, nonetheless, or what Sophie K. Rosa calls “polyvalent intimacy” that resists “hierarchy, formalisation and state sanction” (2023, 167). After all, the juxtaposition of these scenes —featuring foreign-born residents (Iurie; Rose) and Catalan speaking citizens (Raül; Maria)— draws attention to distinct types of vulnerability in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008. Iurie’s concerns regarding his residency status early in the film, for instance, may allude to the Partido Popular-led government’s stripping of health care benefits for adult migrants in 2012 (Royal Decree Law 16/2012).⁷ Maria’s infirmity, on the other hand, appears all the graver due to the absence of friends and family —and their emotional support— both at the *residència* and in the hospital. Her centrality within *La plaga* does more than indicate a fracture between present and past temporalities, however, it reflects the sense of solitude facing older adults at the end of their lives. Each of these hospital scenes underscores the fragility of the human body while forming empathic connections between unlikely pairings of migrant/native non-actors. These physical and affective juxtapositions transpire inside and outside of the workplace (nursing home/hospital and farm/hospital). As a result, Ballús provides a template for care-based relations beyond the market, drawing viewers’ attention to the symbolic import of a site (the hospital) marked by pain, isolation, recovery, or death. It is, of course, at least mildly surprising that Rose —in her free time— opts to visit Maria in the hospital after repeated clashes with her in the *residència*. Whereas Iurie and Raül inhabit taciturn male prototypes from classic Westerns, amiably co-existing on the farm despite the ravages of the insect infestation, Rose and Maria alternate between scenes of conflict and affection. The two face off more than once over the course of the film, and while audiences can intuit an underlying warmth between them, both women are frustrated by one another’s efforts to impose their will on the other. They repeatedly

⁷ A new Royal Decree Law (July 2018) reinstating access to Spain’s national healthcare system was passed following Mariano Rajoy’s resignation as the leader of the Partido Popular in June 2018. Nevertheless, as some critics have acknowledged, the 2018 law “required undocumented residents coming from EU member countries to obtain documentation of exportability of healthcare [which...] was nearly impossible to fulfil” (Hsia and Gil-González 2021, 6).

quarrel over whether or not Maria must bathe, and the older woman screams at Rose, insulting her in Catalan.

Maria's obstinance enacts a symbolic function within the film, as she refuses to remain confined to the nursing home even though her respiratory problems require continued medical treatment. At one point she escapes, making the treacherous walk home, which now sits between sprouting highways in Gallecs, only to realize that she can no longer care for herself without assistance. As others have argued, Maria evinces "the memory of [a] rural area menaced by the expansion of neighbouring industrial estates and highways" (Fibla-Gutiérrez 2019, 37), though her anti-social behavior in the *residència* makes it seem as if she belongs to a bygone era. All the same, Maria's repeated objections to her treatment in the *residència* attest to her will to exert her own sovereignty even as her body continues to fail her. At first glance, Maria's frequent bickering with Rose suggests an unpleasant, if not hostile, working relationship, though it might better be understood as a way of coping with fragility in highly proximate conditions (undressing; bathing; feeding; administering medicine). Rose tolerates these disruptions to her daily responsibilities but is clearly affected by them, attempting to remain detached from Maria despite being painfully aware of her suffering. Rose maintains what she calls "l'aspecte personal" with Maria even though she knows it will leave her grief-stricken after her passing. Inconvenient as these feelings may be, Rose cannot help but turn up for Maria even if caring exceeds the bounds of their professional relationship. Rose goes so far as ignoring the advice she parcels out to a younger colleague,⁸ giving and receiving the "afecte" needed to forge an intimacy capable of transcending the workplace (Figures 5 and 6). Instructing her co-worker to limit her emotional investment to work alone in one of the film's many shot/reverse-shot sequences, Rose insists "Nosaltres no hi podem fer res. És la nostra feina." The tears streaming down her face belie Rose's commitment to detachment, however, as well as the sense that caring for older adults can be done without even the most fleeting sense of affinity. There are, of course, indications of Rose's geographical and emotional displacement as a resident in Gallecs, some 11,000 kilometers away from home, though her doggedly stern façade conceals what, at the core, is desire for intimacy.



⁸ Spoken in Ilocano, the following translation in Catalan is provided in the film's subtitles: "No els agafis tant d'afecte. Perquè, si et donen el seu afecte, la que patiràs seràs tu. [...] És la nostra feina. Deixa de banda l'aspecte personal."

Figures 5 and 6 – Shot and reverse shot of Rose dispensing advice to her younger colleague. © El Kinògraf

In the end, *La plaga* posits a deft rumination on collective forms of care in a neoliberal era shaped by an ever-cascading sense of individualism. It also relies upon filmic contrasts between seemingly incongruous pairings in and beyond the workplace (Iurie/Raül and Rose/Maria), thinking through forms of solidarity at a time of increased social atomization. Even when underwritten by irritation or discord, these scenes of encounter draw us closer to the experiential frictions of her non-actors, capturing the challenges of tolerating and supporting one another in overpopulated and/or overbearing atmospheres. After all, as Berlant writes, “to know and be known requires experiencing and exerting pressure to be acknowledged and taken in,” underscoring the “disturbance of attention and boundaries” entailed by intimacy (2022, 7). Annoyance, thus, may be the first step in a longer process of affection-building, assuming subjects can move beyond the initial disruption and into a deeper field of copresence. Drawn with a kind of geometrical precision, the positioning of migrant and native non-actors in Ballús’s film interrogates what it means to imagine and then develop forms of reciprocal intimacy for those of different identitarian backgrounds. Deliberately positioning migrant non-actors in supportive—but not secondary—roles to undermine xenophobic hierarchies, *La plaga* shows how inconvenience works both ways. At a time when intolerance for migration has reached a fever pitch within the Spanish State, the feature asks spectators to acknowledge the needs, hopes, and dreams of *others*—in both senses of the word—to raze extant structures of privilege and/or entitlement. Indeed, both Iurie and Rose indicate that they are exhausted, uncertain about the prospect of obtaining papers for permanent residency or their ability to tolerate difficult working conditions, respectively. Speaking with fellow migrants, Iurie is told to remain steadfast by his roommate (Andrei) and Rose is instructed to continue bearing the pressures of an irksome workplace because life is easier in Spain than it is in the Philippines.⁹ But life is far from easy in Gallecs, as the film makes painfully evident, and these characters’ (in)capacity for shouldering what may prove unbearable is one of the film’s most urgent questions.¹⁰

Even though an enervated social imaginary is their only common link, all of the non-actors find solace, if only momentarily, through physical and affective entanglements. Indeed, Ballús’s film manages the neat trick of showing how workplace frictions lead to the affective recognition of others within the social order, reorienting the perceptual field of its characters through a loosening of boundaries. This relaxation of these boundaries, some nebulous form of personal space, prompts the film’s non-actors to fold individual suffering into collective bonding. Underscoring the absence of sovereignty in the neoliberal West today, *La plaga* exposes the reality that “todos nosotros [...] formamos parte de ese sistema

⁹ Spoken in Moldovan and Ilocano respectively, the Catalan-language subtitles read as follows: “Has d’aguantar [...] Has de resistir” and “Aguanta una mica. [...] Tu, aguanta. Aquí, la vida és fàcil.”

¹⁰ Berlant defines the unbearable as “an intensely felt pressure that threatens a person’s or a community’s capacity to proceed, a proclamation indicating a loss of faith that one or a community can go on” (2022, 201 n.5).

que no podemos controlar” (Ballús, qtd. by Miró and Samit 2013). Further, it demonstrates that what may seem irritating at first glance —i.e. disruptions to our personal space— may eventually produce a longing for communal bonds that offer care and support, particularly in times of hardship. Accessing new realms of intimacy, as Paul Jackson has argued, constitutes “a form of commoning” that is “often arduous” because it is often “built upon common suffering” (2017). Increasingly pervasive in the wake of the 2008 Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, the filmic expression of scarcity and loss in Spain has often been countered by new visions of community that look beyond the place of the individual in an era of unrelenting self-absorption. *La plaga*, like several features produced over the last decade and a half, strives to look beyond the enveloping sense of suffering that defines the historical present. Drafting a new rubric of care and affection within a community of the dispossessed, Ballús —along with Pau Subirós, Isaki Lacuesta, and Isa Campo, who aided in the editing of the screenplay— crafts a filmic sensorium imbued with intimacy and mutual forms of caretaking that interrogates the financial and emotional hardships of the twenty-first century. Even as neoliberal subjects continue looking out for themselves, psychically flogged by the hard-knock realities of competition, individualism, and so-called meritocratic systems, *La plaga* reminds spectators that we can all benefit from a connection to larger structures of co-dependence and reciprocal care.

3. Affective and Financial Collisions in *El viatge de la Marta (Staff Only)*

At first glance, Ballús’s follow-up to *La plaga* appears to conform to the most hackneyed tropes of coming-of-age narratives, centering on familial miscommunication and the residual effects of divorce on its seventeen-year-old protagonist. The eponymous lead acts out, she lies and steals for personal gain, she experiments sexually, she squabbles with her younger sibling (Bruno) and her father (Manel), and, ultimately, learns a bitter lesson about how finance mediates adult intimacies. Set in the Global South with its gaze partially directed at the effects its protagonist has on local employees at a Senegalese resort, however, *El viatge de la Marta (Staff Only)* aims to turn the screw on a genre known for probing the development of its main character. Indeed, while Ballús’s film might be characterized as a fictional narrative about Marta’s “emergence” in the social order (Bakhtin 1981, 20),¹¹ its interests are more expansive. They extend beyond an individual’s inner life and her “*process of becoming*” (Bakhtin 1981, 19, emphasis in the original), pushing spectators to reflect upon the embeddedness of socio-economic and racialized asymmetries in the Global South. The feature alludes to the dark side of consumerism, the tourist gaze, and the commodification of cultural forms, as its European characters delight in the made-to-order exoticisms of Senegalese society. The rite-of-passage that ensues, therefore, gets redirected at

¹¹ Bakhtin draws a stark contrast between the “static, immutable nature” of characters in Greek romance and their “emergence or development” in the *Bildungsroman* (1981, 12).

viewers —presumably European— to unveil what the director characterizes as “jerarquías [...] no escritas” underpinning geopolitical disparities (qtd. by Hormigo López 2019). Akin to what Ann Laura Stoler has elsewhere described as the practice of “identifying imperial fields of force,” *El viatge de la Marta* sets its sights on a postcolonial context that is often ignored in Western cinema (2016, 15). It touches on the ongoing legacy of imperial cartographies by re-envisioning adolescent ‘development’ narratively as nothing more than the generational reiteration of white privilege. Accordingly, Ballús’s film explores the social and sexual frictions that occur between Marta and two employees at the resort, broaching a politically situated act of recognition regarding ‘ugly’ tourism in the Global South.¹² Even as it reverts to an unsettling parallel between father and daughter, the focus on Marta’s development is supplanted, if only partially, by the inconveniences she triggers for two of the Senegalese characters.

Reviewers from Spain have described *El viatge de la Marta (Staff Only)* in contradictory terms, identifying the lingering presence of Ballús’s “mirada documental” (B. Martínez 2019a), the film’s “registros naturalistas” (Ocaña 2019), its *costumbrista* inflections (Medina 2019), and its status as “cine experiencial” (L. Martínez 2019). Clashing opinions are far from surprising given Ballús’s aim to construct “una trama narrativamente compleja” in her fictional debut (Ballús, qtd. by Hormigo López 2019). Nevertheless, most critics highlight narrative formulae corresponding to conventional coming-of-age (melo)dramas and the centrality of a self-possessed teenager who believes she has all the answers. They also draw attention to Marta’s loss of innocence and the “colisión reconciliadora” that transpires with her father in the film’s final sequence after ninety minutes of petulant scowling in his direction (Ocaña 2019). Concentrating on the fraught relationship between Marta and Manel, many reviewers pick apart the nuances of familial dysfunction, interrogating the dynamic between an apparently absentee, yet overprotective father and a rebellious teenage daughter on the cusp of adulthood. More intrepid readings pick up on *El viatge de la Marta*’s representation of ethnic difference, emphasizing Manel’s racist response to Marta’s budding flirtation with the camera operator (Khouma) who works at the resort. Marta’s crossing of “the ‘staff only’ threshold into the real world” resonates, as Jan Lumholdt contends, precisely because it marks her refusal to yield to Manel’s insistence on white solidarity (2019). Nevertheless, the same reviewer fails to mention that the penultimate sequence finds the two locked in a heartfelt embrace with Marta seeking her father’s forgiveness. It is noteworthy, in any case, that several critics have rejected the suggestion of Western bias in the film, arguing that Ballús avoids mistaking her own “good intentions for an intimate understanding of an experience that is not hers to claim” (Kiang 2019). Their claims that *El viatge de la Marta* self-consciously deconstructs tropes associated with white-savior narratives are easy

¹² For Jamaica Kincaid, a Western tourist in the Global South is “an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that” who turns “their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure” (2014, 200).

enough to sustain given the critique of Western tourism and Ballús's overt, if partial, experimentation with the film's gaze. Nonetheless, not one of these reviewers acknowledges the fact that the feature's focus on family drama and Marta's individual development undercuts the subjectivity of the Senegalese characters as well as the audience's understanding of the enduring nature of neocoloniality in the Global South.

Ballús has spoken in multiple interviews about her experiences as a tourist in Senegal, where she first travelled as a twenty-three-year-old production assistant. Referring to resort culture specifically, one of the central questions she poses in *El viatge de la Marta* is "how can anyone be a decent tourist —barricaded in such a golden cage, with no access to the outside world?" (Ballús, qtd. by Hurtes 2018). In many ways, the film juxtaposes what the director witnessed first-hand in Senegalese villages where "it was difficult for people to receive basic necessities or attain access to health care services" with the lavish amenities available in tourist complexes (Ballús, qtd. by Hurtes 2018). Deconstructing the image of the Western tourist, Ballús's film exposes what she claims are the "cosas moralmente cuestionables cuando viajamos," aiming to stimulate awareness amongst her audience regarding "lo que estamos haciendo mal" (qtd. by B. Martínez 2019b). The feature espouses a contemptuous view of tourism, as Marta repeatedly expresses her distaste for resort culture as well as her father's career as the owner of a travel agency. Marta all too happily plays the part of the killjoy, calling her father an "idiota" for purchasing the resort-produced video of the family's safari trip. In another moment, she snaps at Manel, stating "no he vingut fins aquí per a passar-me el dia visitant hotels" after he suggests a visit to another resort complex. Conversing with Aissatou, one of the hotel's cleaners, Marta describes her father as "insupportable" in French, hoping that this is the last time she will have to travel with him. Her sense of superiority is, of course, pivotal to the comeuppance she faces in the film's climax, as she is compelled to recognize herself as a little more than an extension of her father and his white privilege. Despite her sincere efforts to bond with two of the Senegalese employees in French, presumably a second language for all involved,¹³ Marta's journey shifts from naïve cynicism to rude awakening over the course of the feature's eighty-minute running time.

While the symbolic mirroring projected onscreen —Marta as unwitting facsimile of her father— is the film's primary conceit, indirect allusions to neocoloniality and the (in)visibility of whiteness provide opportunity for further critical reflection. Indeed, just as Marta realizes that she is merely one more "ugly tourist" staying at the resort, Ballús manages to turn the focus toward her Western spectators (Kincaid 2014, 199). Hoping that they will recognize their own exploitative presence when traveling in poverty-stricken contexts, the director points to what she perceives as the "sharp inequalities" pervading the Global South

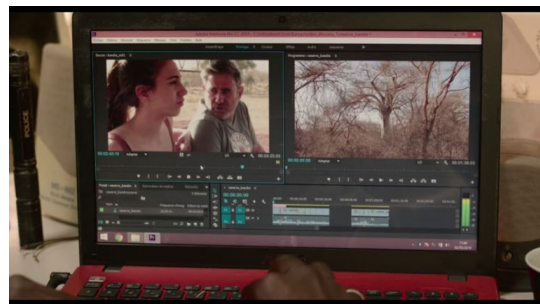
¹³ Senegal's "official" language is still French despite having gained its independence from France in 1960. Nevertheless, Wolof has been the *lingua franca* for decades, as "at least 90% of the population" uses it as their "first or other language" (McLaughlin 2022, 47).

(qtd. by Hurtes 2018). Nevertheless, while the screenplay interrogates the Western tourist gaze, it also relies on what Toni Morrison has elsewhere characterized, citing Herman Melville, as “the power of blackness” to formulate its critique (1993, 37).¹⁴ Deploying black subjects as “surrogate selves” to query “historical, moral, metaphysical, and social fears, problems and dichotomies” (1993, 37), the film ultimately remains trapped within a closed loop of whiteness. Senegalese characters like Khouma and Aissatou occupy secondary roles, aiding Marta’s personal evolution, with relatively minimal development of their own as they hold up a mirror to reveal her “ugly” behavior. Indeed, Marta’s efforts to woo Khouma, by replacing his handheld camera after taking money from her father’s hotel room, backfire when Aissatou is blamed and dismissed in short order. Even though Marta later confesses to the resort director (Mr. Gassama) to save Aissatou’s job, the damage has been done, leaving the protagonist in tears just as the hotel staff brings out a cake to celebrate her eighteenth birthday. In the end, whiteness is drawn in its most disturbing form, conjuring the realization that it relies upon its imagined subordinate—in this case the Senegalese ‘Other’—to map out its own dimensions. Despite Marta’s earnest efforts to integrate herself socially and sexually with characters like Aissatou and Khouma, whiteness remains front and center. Further, the mere assumption that the default audience is white, along with the film’s overtly didactic structure, limits the potential of an “oppositional gaze” or the ability of black subjects to “look back [at white subjects], and at one another, naming what [they] see” (hooks 1992, 116). Even for Western viewers who have the same tear-inducing reaction as Marta in the film’s conclusion, recognition, let alone understanding, of neocolonial global schemes may prove elusive.

At the same time, *El viatge de la Marta* strives to probe the limits of its own gaze while prompting a disquieting realization from its projected audience about “ugly tourism” in the Global South. Co-writers Ballús and Subirós introduce an important, if underdeveloped, secondary layer, focusing on Khouma’s experiences as he shoots and edits footage of the hotel guests. Selling the bespoke visuals he crafts for tourists at the resort, Khouma appeals to the guests’ consumerist tendencies by promising special effects to make the videos just as memorable as their Senegalese adventures. In an all-too-brief sequence, Khouma shows Marta how he edits the footage in his makeshift office at the resort, drawing an overtly critical link between the tourists’ behavior and their resemblance to the animals they see on safari (Figures 7 and 8). In a key sequence filmed with the handheld camera that Marta purchases for Khouma (with her father’s money), the two frolic in a village outside the resort walls, interacting with locals and strolling along the streets on their way to his home. In one instance, Marta pointedly asks Khouma, “¿Qu’est-ce que tu fais?” as he aims the camera in her direction before responding, “Moi, je te regarde. C’est tout.” (Figures 9 and 10). These sequences allow Ballús to

¹⁴ For Morrison, the transference of “internal conflicts” onto black bodies was crucial to the representation of the socio-political project underpinning Young America (1993, 38).

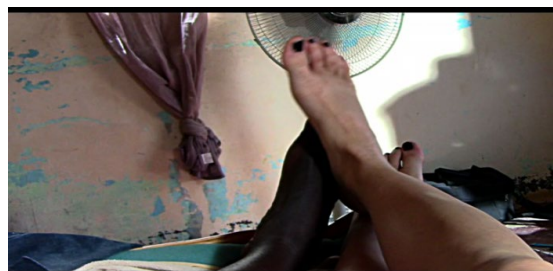
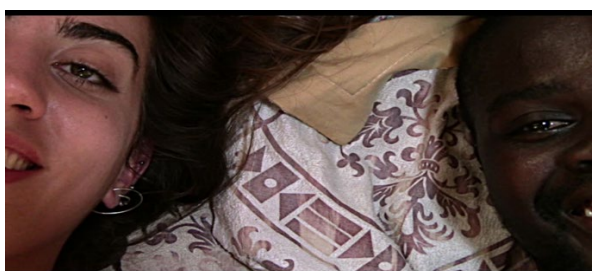
ponder the extremities of her filmic gaze by placing the camera and/or the editing software in Khouma's hands, albeit for less than eight minutes (or just under 10%) of the film's entire running time. Presented as something along the lines of a home video, the postcoital sequence between Marta and Khouma is captured with the same handheld camera, tracing the contours of their naked bodies. Both characters take turns wielding it, and in one moment, the frame splits them in half as they lie side by side in bed (Figures 11 and 12). Khouma states "La moitié pour moi, la moitié pour toi," hinting at some form of intimate reciprocity that can only exist outside the confines of the resort. There is no scope, however, for such intimacy within the walls of the all-inclusive resort, as inclusivity here merely refers to the amenities on offer for the Western guests who can afford them.



Figures 7 and 8 – Khouma creating personalized footage of the tourists from the safari.
© El Kinògraf and Ikiru Films



Figures 9 and 10 – Khouma films Marta outside the confines of the tourist resort. © El Kinògraf and Ikiru Films



Figures 11 and 12 – Khouma and Marta in postcoital bliss, wielding the handheld camera that Marta purchased with her father's money. © El Kinògraf and Ikiru Films

Much like other European films set in postcolonial contexts —such as *Vers le sud* (Laurent Cantet, 2005), *White Material* (Claire Denis, 2009), and *Paradise: Love* (Ulrich Seidl, 2012)— *El viatge de la Marta* alludes to the commodification of bodies and resources in the Global South. It also tugs at its audience's heartstrings, aiming to stimulate an emotional response potent enough to force tourists from the Global North to question their own values. Marta, as the mouthpiece for Ballús's critique,

openly expresses the film's thesis less than thirty minutes in when she states: "No puc entendre les activitats que fan els turistes." Acutely aware of her own Eurocentric perspective, Ballús has spoken openly about the need to "establecer un marco de honestidad" in the film (qtd. by B. Martínez 2019b). Her film manages to push the envelope by asking its projected audience to evaluate its own involvement in larger systems of exploitation and expropriation, but it cannot invoke what hooks describes as an "oppositional gaze" (1992, 116). As a result, it expresses a guilt-ridden conscience about how, in the director's own words, "Relationships are always some form of exchange, guided by personal interests" (qtd. by Hurtes 2018). The unidirectionality of the film's critique, in many ways, is reflected in the film's eventual return to the narrative formulae associated with the coming-of-age genre. Placing the focus on the protagonist's emotional and psychological development, *El viatge de la Marta* settles on "self-interpretation, self-experience, and self-understanding" (Fox 2017, 11). In the process, the film loses sight of how *other* selves—those living in the Global South—are inevitably caught in the undertow of neocolonial schemes benefitting those born in the Global North.

4. Comedic Frictions in *Sis dies corrents*

In her third feature, Ballús returns to her roots both geographically and formally, capturing the day-to-day experiences of three *lampistes* working along the margins of Barcelona. Structured as an offbeat comedy-documentary, *Sis dies corrents* replicates the guided improvisation from *La plaga* with non-actors who clash over the course of an atypical work week. The film centers on Moha (Mohammed Mellali) who is undergoing a one-week probationary period to replace the retiring Pep (Pep Sarrà) at Losilla Servei, a small plumbing and electrical repair outfit. From the opening sequence onward, Ballús frames the action from Moha's perspective, tracking his ups-and-downs as he seeks a permanent contract at Losilla Servei. It becomes evident that Moha has found it difficult to gain lasting employment, as his migrant housemates state that his colleagues will not accept him despite his fastidious grooming routine or his devotion to Catalan language classes. Referring to Moha as "moreno català," one of them asks, "Per què t'han d'acceptar a tu si no van acceptar els d'abans?"¹⁵ Moha's ability to withstand indignities—both at work and at home—becomes the running theme of the film, as his forbearance is tested time and time again. In many ways, Valero (Valero Escolar) steals the show as the irascible bigot who openly reviles Moha, mocking his accent in both Castilian and Catalan—even though he demonstrates little faculty for the latter himself. Valero's hangdog energy and self-loathing spill out onto everyone in his vicinity, breaking up the earnest quality of the prototypical 'good immigrant' at the core of Ballús's film. The cringeworthy confrontations between the two, as Pep looks on disapprovingly, take center stage over the eighty-five-minute running time as the three visit an

¹⁵ Moha and his cousins (Youssef and Hamid) speak Berber to one another in the film. Moha's two voiceovers in his native language bookend Ballús's production to emphasize the centrality of his perspective.

eclectic series of clients. Valero repeatedly projects his own prejudices onto the company's customers, stating that he does not believe they will welcome a foreigner into their homes. They all prove otherwise, however, engaging Moha on matters as diverse as dietary advice, portrait photography, his desire to marry and have children, and psychotherapy. Clients of all ages and socio-economic categories, in fact, respond favorably to Moha, which only seems to further incense Valero as he lumbers around their homes scowling in the background.

Attentive to the fragility of human connection, *Sis dies corrents* compels audiences to (re)consider how relationships often end up trapped within a closed circuit, limited to parochial conceptions of language, ethnicity, and/or national origins. It queries the need to move beyond what Ballús considers “los entornos homogéneos,” revealing how difference “es la que te empuja al aprendizaje y a la curiosidad” (qtd. by Llanos Martínez 2021). Cultural heterogeneity, thus, is envisioned as an opportunity for growth and personal evolution rather than as a source of partisan conflict. Analogous to the frictions explored in both *La plaga*, tensions between citizens and migrant subjects simmer and eventually boil over in workplace settings in *Sis dies corrents*. Pushing her non-actors out of their comfort zones, Ballús trained them to “reaccionar a situaciones inesperadas” during a rehearsal period of two years during which the only rule was “todo lo que hagáis, está bien” (Ballús, qtd. by Llanos Martínez 2021). Real-life *lampistes* in Barcelona, Moha, Valero, and Pep were cast following more than one thousand interviews with employees from the Gremi d'Instal·ladors de Barcelona. Following weekly rehearsals with the cast, Ballús, Montse Ganges, and Ana Sanz-Magallón would sit down and draft excerpts of the screenplay.¹⁶ Denying them advance information regarding the shooting calendar, however, the director compelled her non-actors to react organically to a range of improvised scenarios. With the help of a plumbing consultant, she also assigned them impromptu repairs to complete in each of the production sites. As a result, *Sis dies corrents* captures how Moha, Pep, and Valero adapt—in real time—to external forces over which they have no control. Their reactions, thus, demonstrate the infelicities that crop up in the workplace when one is forced to deal with aggravation. More tellingly, they reveal how sovereignty functions as a defense mechanism or a “confused, reactive, often not-quite-thought view” of one's own supremacy (Berlant 2022, 3).

Critical reactions to *Sis dies corrents* have been positive, though some claim that Ballús has abandoned the documentary mode while expanding her formal repertoire. The director's purported “deserción de lo documental” may be overstated (Rodríguez Marchante 2021), however, as several reviewers acknowledge, the fluidity or the “inclasificable” nature of the film (Fernández-Santos 2021). Others argue that the feature taps into generic formulae associated with social realism by focusing on the personal and professional struggles of working-class characters. While most of these critics fail to reference the didactic

¹⁶ Ganges and Sanz-Magallón are listed in the film's credits under the pseudonym Margarita Melgar.

foundations of social realism, they praise its “mirada transversal sobre la sociedad catalana” (Sánchez 2021). Moreover, these critics credit Ballús for avoiding the morose tenor of “referentes clásicos del género, los Loach o Dardenne” by veering closer to comedy than drama (Montoya 2021). Defined instead by its innovative “frescura y humildad en la mirada (Fernández-Santos 2021), *Sis dies corrents* manages to test out several (non-)narrative forms while underscoring tensions that transpire in and beyond the workplace. Collapsing the boundary between documentary and narrative filmmaking as she did in *La plaga*, Ballús goes one step further in her third feature by seeking out, in her own words, “mucho humor, mucho absurdo y mucha ternura” in professional interactions of the three *lampistes* (qtd. by Llanos Martínez 2021). As a result, she manages to dissociate *cine social* from its sullen foundations, moving into new formal territory with what one critic calls a “crookedly charming” film (Kiang 2021). Most reviewers concur that Ballús has fashioned an exemplar of “cine sensible y humanista” that stands out in an era of widespread cynicism (Batlle 2021). Nevertheless, some have interrogated the naïveté of the film’s premise, claiming that it posits a facile critique of intolerance while positing Moha as the archetypal ‘good immigrant’ and Valero as the Castilian-speaking ‘baddie’. Offering a more nuanced analysis, Sergi Sánchez describes *Sis dies corrents* as a “comedia de costumbres” while pitching itself as “una ‘buddy movie’ de caracteres irreconciliables” (2021). Like others, Sánchez finds the articulation of the film’s thesis to be somewhat simplistic, even as it manages to dissolve the frontier between fiction and documentary.

Ballús’s efforts to embed a sunnier, more comedic tone in *Sis dies corrents* are grounded, at least partially, in her conception of a filmic *costumbrismo*-cum-realism. “L’humor del film,” she claims, “és molt realista més de xoc o de contrast que no pas de gag” (qtd. by Armadàs 2022). Accordingly, the feature is premised less on side-splitting punchlines and more on the awkward encounters between laborers of different cultural and/or linguistic upbringings. Recalling an aesthetic category that first emerged in Spain in the 1830s and 1840s, these *costumbrista* inflections “ofrece un espejo fiel en que mirar nuestras inclinaciones, nuestros placeres y también nuestras virtudes” (Montesinos 1960, 47). Just as *costumbrista* writers like Ramón Mesonero Romanos and Mariano José de Larra registered a series of socio-economic transformations in the early nineteenth-century, Ballús provides an archive of contemporary experience along the outskirts of the Catalan metropole. She also provides a taxonomy of blue-collar *tipos* while emphasizing — unlike Mesonero Romanos and Larra— her status as a female subject from a working-class background.¹⁷ Striving to offer a vision “sense filtres de la vida quotidiana” (qtd. by Ardévol Mallol 2022), Ballús’s positioning of Pep, Valero, and Moha at the heart of her feature stages, what she calls, “un *reality* para el cine” or a new mode of “dejar entrar la realidad en el cine” (qtd. by Mayor Ortega 2021).

¹⁷ As Michael Iarocci has written, “the *costumbrista* narrator in many ways replicated the ideal citizen — the man of property— predicated by liberal ideology” (2005, 387). Ballús, on the contrary, has stated that she comes from a “familia de trabajadores” like the three non-actors in her third feature (qtd. by Martín 2022).

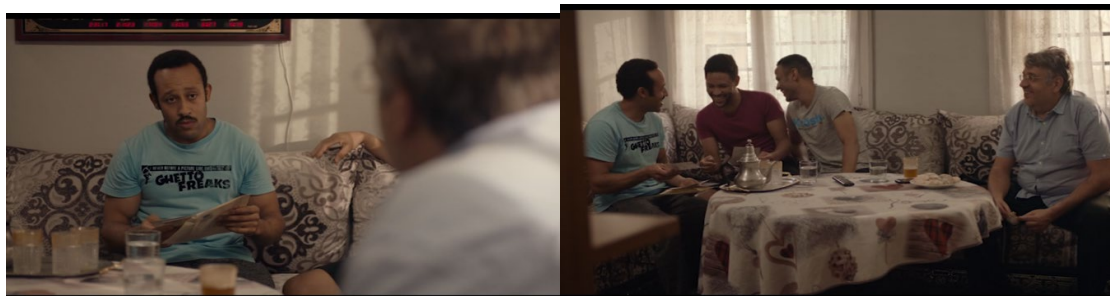
Stylistically, René-Marc Bini's effervescent score, buoyed by Jean-Paul Sire's bandoneon and Gérard Meloux's bouzouki, keeps the pace moving as the film segues between episodes. Anna Molins's crisp cinematography avoids distraction even when positioning the camera to capture the non-actors' experience of peering out at Barcelona's skyline while situated in clients' homes. Exterior and interior shots, and the filmic gazes they catalyze, conjure ambivalent affects as non-actors ponder how others live, what struggles they face, or what happiness means for them. Set within a range of private domestic spaces, the feature unlocks what Ballús describes as "un univers privat," balancing "situacions potencialment molt còmiques i alhora reveladores sobre el comportament humà" (qtd. by Ardévol Mallol 2022). The fusion of culturally progressive *costumbrismo* and light-hearted, creative documentary in *Sis dies corrents* not so subtly hints at the need to amend local customs just as the *lampistes* complete their repair work in strangers' homes.

Comedy in the film hinges on moments of vulnerability in which Moha, Pep, and Valero lose their cool, collapsing under the pressure of social frictions at home or in the workplace. Evoking what Berlant has elsewhere characterized as "humorless comedy" (2017, 307), these moments arise when Ballús's leads wrestle with a deep-seated recalcitrance within themselves or when dealing with another. Humorlessness in *Sis dies corrents*, thus, is triggered when one of the three men expresses an "insistence that *their* version of a situation should rule the relational dynamic" (Berlant 2017, 308, emphasis in the original). Valero becomes the centerpiece of humorlessness, wedging himself between colleagues and clients to thwart Moha's prospects. Indeed, he stands in as the embodiment of relational rigidity, making things awkward for everyone within his vicinity. Like any great "humorless" protagonist, he alternates between vexation and perplexity, looking around as if others have conspired to make his life worse than it already is. He sneers at Moha and his fitter, more attractive frame, creating excuses for why his younger colleague should be fired. Toward the end of the film, Valero explains that he and Moha are not "compatibles" because the latter lacks the nerve to confront him about their workplace hostility. Fittingly staged in the office of a psychotherapist (Alfredo) for whom Losilla Servei is installing outdoor cameras, this confrontation-cum-impromptu therapy session takes place when Alfredo notices that something "bastante denso, bastante pesado" has transpired between the two. Moha —after some prompting— defends himself by stating that he gets along with everyone else in his life and that Valero has behaved poorly since the moment they first met. While patently false, the desperation with which he Moha himself ends up proving endearing to Valero. Valero explains that he is always "un cabrón" to *everyone* he meets, shouting that Moha's ethnicity and country of origin have nothing to do with his intolerance (Figures 13 and 14). The audience knows better, however, as we have witnessed Valero making casually racist remarks about Moha both in front of clients and in private. All the same, the pile-up of similarly "humorless" episodes in the film leave us wondering what, if anything, is *funny* about Ballús's film.



Figures 13 and 14 – Moha and Valero take part in an impromptu therapy session, arguing with one another in Alfredo's office. © El Kinògraf and Distinto Films

What makes *Sis dies corrents* a comedy, or some chimerical fusion of filmic genres, is the way in which Ballús captures the affective malfunctions of her non-actors in improvised situations that feel authentic (or authentically awkward) for viewers. Pep shifts from gentle elder statesman to raging at the ineptitude of the next generation of *lampistes*. Moha strives for something analogous to perfection at work, determined to assimilate within Catalan society even if it means clashing with his Moroccan cousins at home. Valero faces his comeuppance in the final sequence when paying Moha a surprise visit after an argument between the two prompts Moha to quit before the end of his probationary period. Here Valero becomes the butt of the joke as Youssef and Hamid mock everything from his clothing to his physique before Moha enters the room and demands “una mica de respecte” for their guest. Valero then hands Moha an envelope containing the shirtless photos that one of their clients (Judith) took while they were on a job at her apartment-studio. The film’s most climactic moment pivots, tellingly, on Moha’s response while examining the contents of the envelope, some of which feature him in embarrassing poses. Just as Moha cracks a smile, his cousins begin to giggle before calling him “el Van Damme sense músculs.” Valero laughs along without understanding what Youssef and Hamid are saying and the four share a moment of collective amusement at Moha’s expense. Crucially, Moha lets the others in on the joke, finding humor in what might otherwise be perceived as a kind of humiliating confrontation. His acceptance of their teasing incites a kind of screwball solidarity that resonates precisely because he does not dig in his heels and demand sobriety. Creating space for the others to snicker at him, Moha facilitates a kind of mutual intimacy by embracing “nonsovereign relationality” or the irritations that arise inevitably from the frictions caused by familiarity (Berlant 2022, x). In the end, the bond he forges with Valero evinces what it feels like to transcend the social and affective frictions of an era defined by an inability (or a lack of desire) to relate to others (Figures 15 and 16). It also provides a template for transcending conflict through comedy — humorless though it may be— while imagining new structures of relational intimacy in and beyond the workplace.



Figures 15 and 16 – Moha and his cousins react to Valero's delivery. © El Kinògraf and Distinto Films

5. Conclusion: Intimacy and Inconvenience in the Neoliberal Present

Contemporary visions of sovereignty —our perceived ability to shape and control our own destiny— dissolve as we encounter people or forces that fail to conform to our expectations. These clashes disabuse us of the delusion that we are positioned at the center of the universe, exerting pressures that invoke myriad hierarchies, rules, or red tape, requiring our energies to manage or endure moments of (ostensible) submission to others. The aggravations caused by these experiences pile up, generating a sense of inconvenience that, to a large degree, has become the dominant affect of the twenty-first century. At the same time, to imagine sovereignty as the default setting for one's engagement with the world presumes a level of privilege that exposes neoliberalism's "fetish of freedom without society" (Brown 2019b, 46). It is difficult, after all, to envisage subjects from marginalized backgrounds and/or persecuted categories who consider themselves self-governing agents within societies that repeatedly remind them of their supposed inferiority or perceived absence of merit. Abuse and discrimination are potent reminders that one of the etymological roots of "entitlement" involves the endowment of a title (*titulus*) to a confer possession or privilege. Those who have never felt fully or even partly autonomous in an inhospitable lifeworld do so without enjoying the privilege of being inconvenienced while being bounced around like a pinball in a machine operated by someone else. Steeped in liberalism's conception of selfhood and alongside the history of the colonial state, sovereignty under neoliberalism has (d)evolved into little more than a vindication of privilege and entitlement. Far from protecting the advantaged, however, fantasies of sovereignty always give way, sooner or later, to the abrasions of coexistence, bursting the bubble of self-sufficiency promoted by a neoliberal agenda that calls upon subjects to deploy an entrepreneurial mindset within a competitive system. But what happens when the system short-circuits, revealing that neoliberal rhetoric centering on individual freedom and personal responsibility is more invested in the redistribution of wealth to an increasingly small minority?

Confronting irritation and inconvenience in and beyond the Spanish State, Neus Ballús's films posit intimacy as an emancipatory force for resisting the individualist logic underpinning neoliberal capitalism today. They interrogate the socio-cultural and economic foundations of privilege and entitlement in the Global

North, imagining new forms of solidarity that extend beyond national identity, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, and class division. Indeed, *La plaga*, *El viatge de la Marta (Staff Only)*, and *Sis dies corrents* put forward new visions for affective cohabitation at a time of widespread malaise, particularly in the aftermath of the Global Recession of 2008. As cinematic heuristics, they undermine delusions of sovereignty in the present, or the distorted sense that we hold power over ourselves and others not to mention larger forces linked to causality. They underscore the polyvalent connections that exist within nation-states and across the borders that divide them,¹⁸ showing how feelings of inconvenience are little more than reminders that we are not, after all, self-governing and self-determining beings within the larger global order. All of Ballús's features, devised as hybrid buddy movies, signpost the dangers of narcissism at a time when neoliberalism magnifies widespread social disintegration, generating increased solitude, despair, and ongoing financial insecurity. Moving beyond these forms of entrenched negativity, Ballús explores practices of collective care to conceive of a future built upon forms of communitarian solidarity and affection. While *El viatge de la Marta* unwittingly evokes the rhetoric of self-improvement, thereby replicating neoliberal logic, her first and third films reveal how professional frictions may function as an affective tool for crafting new modes of intimacy. Envisioning the need for stronger affective bonds—both at home and at work—Ballús conjures emergent visions of mutual entwinement as the only way of evading nihilism and dejection in a world undone by enduring crisis.

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¹⁸ The Catalan subtitles for Moha's voiceover at the end of *Sis dies corrents* read as follows: "Però estem connectats a la mateixa xarxa. D'aigua, llum, gas, telèfon... I el nostre edifici està connectat a altres edificis, i la nostra ciutat, a altres ciutats. I els continents també estan connectats. Tot i així, continuem estant sols."

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