

The Production of Telefilms in Catalonia: A Provisional Balance

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- *The Catalan audiovisual industry began a process of change as a result of the 2002-2005 agreement between Televisió de Catalunya and the PAC and BA producers' associations to promote TV movie production. The result translated not only in a new and more expansive policy on audiovisual production that features a higher degree of participation and responsibility but also in substantial modifications to the characteristics of the products themselves. The new telefilms that have emerged were the fruit of a more diversified market and were supported by different financial and creative sources, providing a degree of originality and variety that has not gone unnoticed by Catalan audiences. In this article, we want to briefly analyse how the changes in production policies have conditioned the final result of some of these TV movies.*

On 12 June 2002, Televisió de Catalunya, Productors Audiovisuals de Catalunya (PAC) and Barcelona Audiovisual (BA) signed an agreement announcing TVC's wish to reach, in the medium term, a minimum annual production of 36 co-produced telefilms. The signing of the agreement took advantage of the matters that had been agreed upon in article 5 of Act 22/99 of 7 July on Television Without Frontiers. Under the law, television stations that

broadcast films in a film or television format had to invest 5% of the previous year's profit on funding inhouse productions, whether feature-length or short films, or European made-for-TV movies. This was the context in which the agreement was made to promote the audiovisual network through the telefilm genre.

The agreement, which also involved the production of documentaries and animated series, earmarked 43.5 million euros for the total number of productions from 2002 to 2005, with the commitment to cover, as we said before, the coproduction of 36 telefilms per year. The agreement freed public television from having to invest 100% of the capital and, in diversifying funding and production sources, also diversified the number of products and, indirectly, their very nature. There had previously been another agreement, signed in 1999, between FORTA (the Federation of Autonomous Radio and Television Associations) and FAPAE (the Federation of Spanish Audiovisual Producers Associations) aimed at promoting audiovisual production. Of the 1.5 billion pesetas that the agreement earmarked to this task, a third went directly on the production of telefilms. Apart from government aid, initiatives such as screenwriting competitions were established, with an economic endowment that resolved some production expenses. Projects were chosen directly by FORTA after an annual tender and in the end, eight were fully produced. This meant the autonomous television stations carried the full weight of telefilm production.

The signing of the 2002 agreement relegated the participation of Televisió de Catalunya to that of coproducer (instead of sole producer as it had been until then) for the first time, with an investment of around 25% of the total budget for the product. At the same time, it established the collaboration of the Catalan Institute for Cultural Industries (ICIC) as a second source of funding, adding an amount of

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10 to 20% to the budget on the basis of a series of elements that determined the Catalan identity of the production (whether the language used in the storyline was Catalan, whether the narrative referred to Catalan customs and cultural traditions, etc.). In line with the extent of these elements, the ICIC contributed an amount somewhere between the figures mentioned above. Finally, it was to be Televisió de Catalunya and the ICIC that determined the productions entitled to subsidies.

The production company in charge of each telefilm was thus covered for 35% to 45% of the total funding of the product, a percentage to which it could add the contribution of loans from the Catalan Finance Institute and subsidies from the Generalitat. However, it still had to seek a huge amount of funding from the broadcast rights of the autonomous and/or foreign stations, or by forming coproductions with domestic or international producers. This also meant that more companies took part and the amounts that each contributed were more diversely shared. We can thus talk about the diversification of the industrial fabric, production system and resulting content.

The attempt at making products profitable received a major boost nearly one year after the signing of the agreement, on 7 May 2003, when Televisió de Catalunya launched the programme *Estrenes de TV3*, the first season of which would air as a weekly programme until 17 September that same year. This package of telefilms was devoted exclusively to Catalan productions made on the basis of the signing of the agreement. The first season included 18 telefilms, of which two were two-episode serials and three were rebroadcasts of telefilms the station had shown previously. The good performance of the first season meant that a second one began on 8 January 2004 and, on 30 May the same year, a third. With these broadcasts, *Estrenes de TV3* made Televisió de Catalunya the leading station in Spain in terms of the number of stable programming hours given to telefilms and also made it the station that gave telefilms the most slots in primetime.

In the years before this, Televisió de Catalunya had already been the TV station with the most telefilm production in the whole of Spain. TVC began to commission telefilms in 1993 and, together with the Department of Culture at the Generalitat, approved two projects that same year, one of which led to the first Catalan telefilm *Quin curs*

el meu tercer! by Ignasi P. Ferré, based on the novel of the same name by Oriol Vergés. From then on, Televisió de Catalunya increased production exponentially: two films in 1994, three in 1995, three more in 1997, five in 1998, six in 1999, five in 2000 and 19 in 2001. These figures exceeded the production of telefilms on the Spanish stations, which preferred to support the production of series and soaps, with bigger investments and, in most cases, higher ratings. In that sense, it seems that Spain is different from a number of European models, like the French and German ones, where telefilm production dominates over TV series and which feature a projection and dissemination that on many occasions ensures good public reception.

Between when the agreement was signed and the end of 2004, it is calculated that the number of telefilms coproduced by Televisió de Catalunya was 69, spread among approximately 30 production companies and at an average cost of around 700,000 euros each. However, the exact figures are still awaiting the finalisation of the productions, as many are still in the financing, shooting or postproduction phase and are therefore hard to calculate. On the other hand, there is absolutely no doubt that the creation of the programme *Estrenes de TV3* achieved its principal purpose of winning customer loyalty, given the increased renown of the products. The enthusiastic response was noted from the first season, with ratings of close to an average of 18.3%, just over 400,000 viewers, even despite the abovementioned rebroadcasts and the programming change it underwent when, after initially going to air straight after the *Telenotícies Nit* nightly news bulletin, it was moved to after *Catalunya des del mar*, a production with considerable but far less regular audience viewing figures than the nightly news. The following two seasons also underwent slight modifications, although they maintained audience figures very similar to the first season.

Telefilm Directors

One of the aspects that *Estrenes de TV3* has most clearly shown is that the diversification of production, arising from the budgetary participation of different producers, obviously impacted different aspects and that, as a result, the telefilms that emerged after the agreement had a number of peculiarities that until then had not existed. These include the background of the directors. The production of these

telefils involved filmmakers with different experiences and professional backgrounds, which could be classified into three groups depending on their professional curriculum: a group of veteran filmmakers, with a long history behind them; a set of directors with some experience in the audiovisual sphere; and finally, a group of new filmmakers within the film and television worlds who to all intents and purposes broke into the field with their first works.

The first group included well-known names such as Giorgio Capitani (*La memòria i el perdó*), Joséé Dayan (*Els pares terribles*), Jordi Frades (*Cota roja*), Bruno Gantillon, Jesús Garay, Romà Guardiet, Joaquim Oristrell and Rosa Verges. The second group was comprised of filmmakers with considerable professional experience, including Enric Banqué, Jesús Font, Paco Ciurana, Orestes Lara, Sílvia Quer and the duo of Teresa Pelegrí and Dominic Harari. Finally, the group of new directors (the smallest group), included Javier Arazola, Rafael Calvo Grobas, Miguel Ángel Carrasco Peña and Román Parrado.

Far from leading to a fall in the quality of the final product, the inclusion of new filmmakers to the list of directors of the package of telefilms meant the introduction of different forms of writing, with very particular styles and with a freshness that was very positive for the growth of the audiovisual industry. Diversification did not, however, stop some directors from repeating their experiences and within the package favoured by the signing of the agreement, particular directors made more than one product.

On the other hand, the most obvious sign that many telefilms are coproductions with other countries is the fact that there are a considerable number of foreign filmmakers. Of the total number of directors, nine, or 15%, came from abroad. This is one of the natural consequences of the signing of the agreement. When Televisió de Catalunya was fully responsible for film costs, all the filmmakers were Catalan. The need to find funding to cover the entire budget led to the participation of foreign capital and thus the imposition of directors (and also a large part of the crew) from the country the funds came from. The intervention of these foreigners led to the application of different production systems and the appearance of new viewpoints and styles when it came to putting images to stories. The percentage of female filmmakers in this group of telefilms has been low to date, making up only 19.6% of the total number. There were

two actresses who moved into directing after having acted in other telefilms: Silvia Munt, who had already worked on different projects where she showed an obvious interest in the issue of immigration, and Mireia Ros, who had also previously worked behind the cameras, both as a director and producer, and who in this set of telefilms again exercised these two tasks.

Lydia Zimmerman is another example, although her contact with the world of acting was not as extensive and involved secondary roles. Women often directed telefilms that featured female protagonists, including Lydia Zimmerman (again), with *La dona de gel*; Sílvia Quer, with *Sara*; the co-direction by Teresa de Pelegrí of *Atrapa-la*; and Judith Colell's first telefilm after her longstanding experience in films, with *Fragments*.

Overall, the realisation of these telefilms was undertaken by an eclectic set of names from different backgrounds and with very different training and experiences. This improved the wealth of film authorship, and led to a more marked variety in styles and forms. The diversification of the sources of financing and production without a doubt led to a loss in product standardisation: the films went beyond the guidelines of a single interlocutor to venture into very particular expressions that gained in originality and interest the further they differed from the models that television has accustomed us to.

Scripts

With regard to where the scripts came from, in nearly 80% of cases they were purpose-written for the telefilm, while the remaining 20% were divided between adaptations and stories based on real events. Film adaptations from novels included *Camps de maduixes*, *Carles, príncep de Viana*, *Els pares terribles*, *El zoo d'en Pitus*, *Joc de dames*, *L'impostor* and *Perfecta pell*. Only one was based on a work of theatre - *Germanes de sang*, written by Cristina Fernández Cubas. The original titles of the works were usually respected, except for *Perfecta pell*, where it may have been too inaccurate to use a literal translation of *La piel prestada*.

Some of the telefilms were based on the works of different illustrious names, such as Jean Cocteau in the case of *Els pares terribles*, of which two television versions had already been made in France – the one in 1980 by Yves-André Hubert and the 2000 version by Jean-Claude Briarly. Also in

the field of adaptations, we could mention very famous works of children's literature, like *El Zoo d'en Pitus*, the third most-read children's book in Catalonia. Other works were screenwritten by authors like Luis Marías (*Mònica*), Jaume Cabré (*Sara* and *Nines Russes*) and Rosa Regàs (*Delta*). It is very positive for the health and quality of telefilms that renowned writers work on the scripts and do not treat the telefilm as an inferior genre. Unprejudiced action on the part of well-known authors and reservation-free adaptations to the television format is a notable support for telefilms and on numerous occasions made the public more eager to see them.

Another way of generating storylines for the production of telefilms is to closely follow recent news events, even if explicit references are not made. Works such as *Costa da morte*, based on the shipwreck of the *Prestige* on the Galician coast, indicate this link with current affairs. However, the fact that the story did not focus essentially on the catastrophe, which was a circumstantial plotline, ended up diverting the telefilm's to issues not related to or focused on the event.

Costa da morte was not the only work with a clear reference to a news story: *Mònica* was based on the sexual assault of a female worker in Ponferrada (popularly known as the Nevanka Case); *Jugar a matar* was based on a news story about some killers who used role games to justify their crimes; *La vida aquí* related to the abandonment of rural areas and immigration; *La farmacèutica d'Olot* to the kidnapping of Maria Àngels Feliu; and *Sara* was based on a story of domestic violence. These subjects, closely related to recent events, were well received by the public and got good ratings. This led to the realisation of 'instant movies', telefilms made in the wake of major news stories with a quick turnaround so they can be aired while the events are still topical. One example was Jesús Font's *El trànsfuga*, where the story was based on the events that took place in the National Assembly in Madrid following the autonomous elections of May 2003, when two members of the Socialist Party voluntarily withdrew to stop their own party from winning the presidency.

With regards subjects and genres, the predominant genre is drama, followed by thrillers and comedies. However, unlike countries such as the US, where the majority of telefilms are dramas, here there are not a great many more

dramas than other types of telefilms. Within the drama field there are many storylines about social problems that make it possible to show daily situations of differing complexity and stories based on the conflicts involved with them. Some of these situations have been immigration (in *Maresme* and *Les filles de Mohamed*); domestic violence (in *Sara*); social dysfunctions like the abuse of power (in *Mònica*); and the difficulty of the reintegration of prisoners (in *L'escala de diamants*) or gamblers (in *Joc de mentides*). Aside from these social dramas, there were others with a historical component that was very unusual in telefilm productions. One example was the miniseries *Carles, príncep de Viana*. It would seem that the miniseries is the best format for working in this genre: the only other miniseries in this season of telefilms, *La Mari*, was the only one that dared to tackle the genre of the historical biography, although it was not set as far in the past as *Carles, príncep de Viana*.

Another fertile genre within this season of telefilms was action films. They included thrillers and detective stories that in many cases emulated US commercial cinema. Examples included *Art Heist* and *Face of Terror*, both by Bryan Mathew Goeres and both coproductions with the US. Some films fell halfway between the action genre, with the main plot involving a police investigation, and comedy. One of the most famous examples was Josée Dayan's *Els pares terribles*.

Of all the productions, there was a considerable number of comedies, four of which could be considered romantic comedies, a genre that had until then not been often used in Catalan telefilms. Others could be called 'drama comedies'. Mixed formulas began to be common in many of the films, and it was often hard to classify them on very strict terms. However, we could say that 45% of the telefilms were dramas, 25% thrillers, 21% comedies, 6% a combination of thriller and comedy and, finally, 3% other genres. The results therefore showed a range of subjects and storylines and a degree of diversity in the way of approaching them. This diversification favoured, as we said before, the hybridisation of genres so that some stories were made by mixing models and experimenting freely with a mixture of tone and events in the storylines. This established a less rigid panorama for television fiction productions, where it had often been hard to get away from very established models that make it easy to explain the stories quickly and

effectively but, generally, without a wealth of nuances. The new telefilms were subject to looser codes and adapted (even though still timidly) some film formulas to the small screen.

Production

One of the first conclusions about the production of these telefilms was the obvious diversification of the sector, with the participation of around 30 producers in the projects all up and the participation of other collaborating firms. Most of the productions, however, involved three production companies: ICC, Ovideo TV and In Vitro Films. Following close behind came Oberon. The number of productions was distributed as follows: companies that produced a single telefilm included Bailando con todos, Zeppelins Integrals, Factotum Barcelona, Rodar & Rodar, Fair Play Productions, Mallerich Films and Els Films de l'Orient; companies that produced two included Drimtim Entertainments, Fausto Producciones, Octubre and Massa d'Or; and companies that produced three included Castelao Productions, Diagonal Televisió, La Productora and PCM. The previously mentioned companies made more than three: Oberon Cinematogràfica made four, Ovideo and In Vitro Films made six each and ICC made seven. There were also coproductions between Catalan firms that were not so fruitful. Probably the most famous was the alliance between Bausan Films and Alea TV to make eight projects, of which only three eventually went ahead. The rest are still in the project or financing phase.

Foreign Production Sources

The funding of telefilms with foreign budgets was articulated mainly through aid from the Media Project for international coproduction at the European level. The fact that a telefilm involves the participation of two or more countries guarantees more markets, as well as the possibility of receiving subsidies from different States. At the same time, collaboration with countries that get more support from their governments, such as France or Germany, with twice Spain's budget, helps achieve a more realistic production process that better meets the product's needs. This obviously transfers to the film's budget and productivity results. If a producer can get \$US3 million in the US to make a telefilm, a figure unthinkable here, it is not surprising that

approximately 80% of telefilms broadcast in Spain are American.

The countries that have made the most coproductions with Catalonia are France, Italy and the US. France has made two; Italy, one (leaving aside Italy's collaboration in the miniseries *La memòria i el perdó* and *Cuidado con esos tres*) and the US, which has also made two. ARTE-France, or rather PATHÉ-ARTE, the French branch of the Franco-German television station, has participated in the most coproductions of Catalan telefilms. Aside from ARTE, other French producers have also been involved, such as Studio International, Faria Film and Télé Image. In terms of Italy, the RAI has participated in two productions. Publispei, Palomar, Solaris Cinematografica and Compagnia Cinematografica Leone have also provided Italian capital and crews on diverse projects. In fact, most of the crews (directors and technical teams) came from the countries the money came from (*Cuidado con esos tres*, *El millor negoci del món* and *El secret de "La Belle de Mai"*). Paradoxically, Germany, with the world's second-most-important television market with close to 300 telefilms per year and more than 150 miniseries over the past eight years, has only participated in the coproduction of David Carreras's *Quito*, which opened at the last Sitges Film Festival.

Foreign participation appears to be growing as projects advance. There is no doubt that these collaborations support a considerable part of the funding and expand the possibilities of the storylines and subjects being dealt with. The advantages are therefore considerable. However, the Catalan industry's immersion in international coproductions is still very timid and involves certain reservations. The main brake on it is the predominance of very local storylines, which ensure the identification of the public and its interest but stops the films from being exported beyond a particular sphere or from involving external components. The other brake is the absence of a solid network of coproductions, together with a lack of involvement by the Catalan industry in the European audiovisual market. The obstacles a production company often has to overcome to win the foreign coproduction of a project are particularly important in determining why many companies opt for simple production options, despite the loss of resources and the closing of some windows of distribution.

Audience

In terms of ratings, the results have varied, but in general the telefilms have been well accepted by the public. The ratings for *Estrenes de TV3* ranged from 12.1% to 31.5%. This put the average viewing figures for the different seasons at around 19.7%, a figure slightly higher than the average for the transmission of the telefilms shown before the programme was made, which stood at around 18.4%. *La Mari*, by Jesús Garay, which won a 31.1% share for its first episode, and 31.5% for the second, was the most-watched telefilm and as such has successfully been aired again on various occasions, most recently on the night of Christmas Day 2004. The average number of viewers was 414,000, a figure very similar to the one TVC achieved with the programme *La pel·lícula de TV3*. The interest in Catalan productions, according to these figures, is comparable to that which foreign films, mainly US ones, had garnered until then. This is a symptom of the good health of the production of Catalan telefilms and the good output that has been achieved since the agreement.

The telefilms made after the 2002 agreement have attracted a young audience. The subjects dealt with in many of the storylines, as well as their treatment, attracted young people to this area of Catalan production. Part of the attraction was also the presence of actors who were well known for their theatre work or work on other films or TV series. In terms of gender, there were more women amongst regular telefilm viewers, as generally occurs with fiction products.

Now that the agreement is coming to an end, it would be a good idea to set out some ideas for the future, which, in our opinion and purely by way of speculation, could help improve the situation with respect to previous years:

1. Firstly, Televisió de Catalunya and the ICIC should devote more funds, given the lack of producers and difficulties in getting subsidies and funding. External production shapes the business sector and promotes private investment and is still facing numerous obstacles because the industry is not as strong as it appears. Until such time as the sector gains renown, it needs more support to guarantee more flexible production.
2. Bearing in mind the good performance of *Estrenes de TV3*, it is necessary to establish, as solidly as possible, a fixed weekly slot for telefilms, with better continuity and fewer interruptions. And, of course, more widespread promotional work would boost audience loyalty.
3. The definitive growth of the audiovisual sector requires improving exhibition and distribution work in order to give expression to all the sectors of the industry. The creation of a DVD collection, for example, coproduced with a Catalan distribution company, could fill this shortfall and extend the life of the products made.
4. It would be a good idea to establish agreements with the European markets with the most solid telefilm industries, especially the ones already mentioned, i.e., France and Germany, in order to create more fluid dynamics of coproduction and product exchanges. The need to weave a network of participation at the European level is necessary in the current production system that has to look abroad to win entity. It is therefore worth boosting this to generate more organised agreements.
5. Looking to foreign countries should also involve following models with a greater production volume and more investment participation by television stations and governments. Again, France, with more than 100 telefilms per year, provides a good example that could be imported here.
6. Making the most of the synergy between film and television, it would be a very good idea to forge agreements so that a minority of Catalan telefilms could be shown in cinemas in line with the awards they obtain in festivals or bearing other qualitative parameters in mind. This happens regularly in other countries, and famous works like Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* or Mike Newell's *Four Weddings and a Funeral* are examples of films that moved to the cinema following their success as telefilms. Here, Rosa Vergés's *Tic Tac* is the only example of this type of action.
7. It would also be a good idea to raise the demands of telefilm screenwriting so that shoots begin when the best version is guaranteed. The rate at which productions are made does not ensure in some cases that the shoot coincides with the fully revised script and this impacts the results. It would be a good idea to work with better timetables to obtain better quality products.
8. The definitive growth of the sector and, in particular, the telefilm genre, needs the parallel development of training courses that help create professionals able to

make these products and to do so with resources and quality. At the same time, it is important that, from the different platforms, we can analyse and reflect on this genre in order to generate mechanisms that make it possible to improve it. The creation of the Zoom telefilm festival in Igualada is a step in this direction.

9. As a last resort, it would be good to ensure that the funding that producers have to provide in cases where coproduction is not very viable, could find public subsidy mechanisms, so that the producer has the option or whether to become the co-owner of the film. There could be two production models: one where the producer makes the investment and keeps the rights, and one where the producer does not make an investment but optimises the resources. This would enrich the models of capital management.
10. Finally, there would have to be a commitment to obtain a high qualitative input, independently of the system employed.

The definitive balance, regardless of these improvement proposals, must be made once the agreement is up. For now, it is clear that the signing of the agreement has helped invigorate the sector, review the forms of production and the products themselves and has achieved very positive results. For the agreement to be consolidated, it would no doubt require a capitalisation of audiovisual companies, together with a mobilisation of resources and a chance for new talents to exercise their work and move ahead. In a framework in which the Catalan film industry is still not very professional, the production of telefilms, the support of productions and the improvement initiatives for funding and filmmaking systems could be a salutary lesson for the renewal of the sector.

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