

# Ten Years of L'Alternativa, the Barcelona Independent Film Festival: the Aesthetics of Resistance

**Fran Benavente**

## **Opening**

A colossal struggle surging from the depths of the grey stone. This is the representation of the dramatic battle that shows the resolution of the confrontation between the gods and the titans who rose against their divine power in the frieze of Pergamum. According to the characters in the novel by Peter Weiss<sup>1</sup>, the materialisation of the mythic battle depicts the secular struggle of the resisters and the disadvantaged against the kings who attempt to keep control over their territory.

The world of cinema, like the world of art, also has its hierarchies. On one level are the people who control stories and leisure from the increasingly unreal Olympic mount of Hollywood and on another are the titans of *auteur cinema*, who, from their comfy position, are able to make films in harmony and balance without the gruesome material, violence and upheavals that really matter in films.

The Barcelona Independent Film Festival, also known as L'Alternativa, aims to showcase the rebels and the defeated, along with the images that inhabit the fissures in the most immediate reality. The Festival celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in November. By simply surviving, and by making a stand for alternative cinema, it has managed to attract an ever-growing audience, to the point that it has become the main film festival in town, indispensable in Catalonia and significant in Spain. The most recent Festival attracted over 30,000 people, featured 340 films and included the participation of 120 filmmakers.

The horizon was not so clear nor the prospects so good 10 years ago. As the name suggests, the Festival was established as a platform for alternative cinema. It aimed to shine a light on the films that had inhabited the underground movement, including experimental films, the most radical research works and the avant-garde of abstraction within contemporary art.

The Festival was established by the *Fàbrica de Cinema Alternatiu* (Alternative Film Factory), a young and particularly active group of people committed to cinema because they not only love film but also its moral, social and political implications. These young people, with a militant vocation in an untitled culture, were able to change a modest viewing platform on the margins of commercial channels into a true meeting point by and for researchers into the most innovative trends in the audiovisual industry.

Support from institutions such the Barcelona Centre for Contemporary Culture (CCCB), which provided spaces, infrastructures and materials, through to the Society of Authors and Editors (SGAE), the company AISGE (Artistes Intèrprets Societat de Gestió), Barcelona City Council and the Generalitat of Catalonia, ensured the Festival an ongoing and spectacular growth and generated a complete change of perspectives or repositioning. The third Festival, in 1996, was a precursor of what was going to happen. The CCCB was consolidated as the central space, with other spaces, including the Maldà Cinema, the French Institute, the Apolo Cinema, the FNAC del Triangle store, the SGAE and the Catalan Institute of Latin American Cooperation (ICCI), later progressively joining to form a network that included a good part of the cultural heart of the city. More importantly, the changes provided a window of opportunities in the selection and search for new perspectives that went beyond what was usually known as underground cinema.

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In 1997, a year after these decisive changes were made, the name was changed to include the term 'the Barcelona Independent Film Festival'. The name change announced a transformation in the event. The former selection by La Fàbrica became an official, competitive section structured around four categories: short films, animation, documentaries and feature films. There was also a proliferation of parallel sections, one of the Festival's strongest points. An exhibition of alternative films became the most important festival in town. An increasingly solid and better-defined structure was imposed onto the organisational miracle of the early days - a design which, with a number of variations, has now survived for 10 years.

### Supporting Low Budget Cinema

A recent article by Jean-Louis Comolli in *Cahiers du Cinéma*<sup>2</sup> reopened the debate about the definition of a film model on the margins of the impositions of the industrial system. In Comolli's view, the major enemies of free cinema are money, television and show business, which turn it into a consumer good rather than a tool for discovering the world. Comolli's alternative proposal was based on low-budget films, calling for productions that involved little money, small teams and a desire to return to reality. He also insisted on rejecting the policy of entertainment and escapism imposed by television and leisure organisations.

This aesthetic programme, very much in keeping with the concept of 'third cinema' recovered by Vincent Dieutre, formed a good framework for the aims of L'Alternativa, as it opted for alternative productions with low budgets and a high degree of commitment to reality and focused on events, environments and discussions on the margins of the markedly informative agenda on television, giving a voice and face to people excluded from the concerns of the consumer society. Where television imposes a flow of events and oblivion is systematic, alternative film, such as that advocated by L'Alternativa, proposes a critical change in framework, a return to the real material under the reflexive prism and a recovery of memory. In short, it poses a precise establishment of time and a lingering gaze to tackle the diffuse temporariness and critical dissipation that has become widespread in the age of audiovisual production.

### The Laboratory

Finding another gaze involves risk, expressive innovation and research into audiovisual languages. This is only possible with laboratories, i.e., research spaces isolated from economic conditioning factors and institutionalised discourses.

In the cinema, laboratories are found in the fields of short films, documentaries and animation. They have thus been the areas the Festival concentrates on, even above and beyond the regular selection of feature films.

Short films are unfortunately considered by most of the young people who hope to work as directors as a way of making money in the film industry. The result of this lack of ambition is to treat the format as a showcase for technical ability or narrative know-how, without any discourse or gaze to sustain it. L'Alternativa chose the opposite route, with the only *raison d'être* of the short as a strong, justifiable format and not a propaedeutic subsidiary of feature-length works. Short films are the minimum unit common to most alternative filmmakers' work – we have seen how the underground concept was part of the initial spirit of the Festival – and are also the ideal format for starting off as a filmmaker. The compression the format demands makes it necessary to exercise ideas, secure maximum expressiveness with a minimum of elements and dispense with the detours that feature films include. In this sense, one of the most interesting peculiarities of L'Alternativa was the extraordinary attention paid to works arising from film schools, generally short films. The Festival has been an incredible thermometer of the future of filmmaking and audiovisual works, getting them onto the screen and establishing a special section for the works of these potential filmmakers. This is a laboratory in its truest sense: a place to make mistakes, to test out and experiment with film elements.

Furthermore, if we add the constant presence of seminars, round-tables and diverse training courses in different aspects of filmmaking, which are an ongoing complement of a proteiform and ambitious festival, we find a proposal of didactic vocation for developing not just filmmakers but also intelligent audiences.

As well, while it is common in classic cinema to become a film director by rising through the professional ranks, from the levels of editing, producing or scriptwriting, modern

filmmaking establishes the short film as a test bank, a research place for a personal voice. It was thus considered essential to have a section entitled “The Unknown of the Known”, which includes short works from European and Spanish filmmakers. The early short films of Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Roman Polanski, Julio Medem, Juanma Bajo Ulloa, Gracia Querejeta, Daniel Calparsoro and many others have been shown at the Festival, allowing us to see how their early forays into the medium sowed the seeds of what would later become a very particular viewpoint. In other cases, the short format represented a moment of pause, a recreational and libertarian window onto cinema without prejudices, e.g., in the brief incursions of Aki Kaurismäki.

In the field of documentaries, particularly ones produced in recent years, the instability of material filmed from centres of privileged interest made it necessary to have a constant invention of form. The confrontation with reality called for research into film writing. The health of independent film includes the vitality of the documentary and the continual discovery of the new film devices it proposes, as well as the increasingly pronounced contamination of the borders between documentaries and fiction.

In this fertile landscape of the creative documentary, L'Alternativa has been a good showcase for the most innovative and interesting film experiments of recent times. It has included radical devices for reconsidering history through work about pre-existing images, archives or unearthed material, to produce a discourse where editing and its operations on the image activate a rewriting from which information emerges on what is likely to happen under the dominant appearance. This is the case of the work of the Hungarian filmmaker Peter Forgacs, who has many films to his name but who is practically unheard of and who shows how history can be considered through film. A documentary can also be an extreme experience in subjectivity, in the exploration of one's own body through a self-portrait, letter or filmed confession. In this case, the 'I' is the personal memory bank, the object and subject of the investigation, such as in the remarkable films of Stephen Dwoskin. A documentary can also be an instrument for observing a world in decline, the action of time and how film is the priority instrument for capturing it. Such is the case, for example, of Pablo Garcia's first work, *Fuente Álamo, la*

*caricia del tiempo*, (Alamo Fountain, The Caress of Time), which was shown at the Festival long before its discreet general release. A documentary can also be an extremely important political tool, an oblique view of reality from the position of a resister, such as the viewpoints taken in the latter stages of Francoism by Joaquim Jordà, Pere Portabella and Basilio Martín Patino; or a form of continual commitment and revival of historical memory, such as in the case of filmmakers like Llorenç Soler and Javier Corcuera, whose works have been featured in the interesting section entitled “Synergies of History”.

With regard to animation, the leading figure could be said to be Canada's Norman McLaren, a creative genius at intersecting animation with music and contemporary art, territories often employed in the most interesting experiments in this field. His work was recognised in a retrospective in 2002, a just tribute to the articulator of an entire abstract universe, who explores the road of the many audacities that contemporary animation proposes in the purely formal sphere that connects very directly with the main seams of alternative cinema, the main sector in which the Festival began.

However, as L'Alternativa demonstrates each year, animation is not just a space for investigating the format peculiar to abstraction but opens the door to an infinity of techniques, from traditional animation through to painting on stills, plasticine models and the use of new, synthetic image technologies. It also proposes many possible discourses: from narrative concentration in the style of a short story to the creation of imaginary universes or nightmares (e.g., the outstanding work of the Quay brothers), from humour, e.g., Nick Park and the Aardman studies, to the ironic commentary of Juan Padrón and the Cuban animators.

## The Margins

Intellectual transgression as a programme, the desire to experiment and the choice of the most radical options to guard against asphyxia in creation have forced the Festival to seek its space on the margins of official film centrality. This search for new sensibilities with regard to reality and a critical commitment to the environment are reflected in the option of discovering new audiovisual frontiers both with

regard to geography and aesthetics. the dominant ideological discourse, i.e., the ethnocentric view of the world. In line with new multicultural ideas, but also with a remarkable intuition of what would really happen in cinema, L'Alternativa sought different cultural codes, different models, i.e., different points of view, in foreign films.

The most recent Festival included excellent examples in three areas: firstly, the general view of young Iranian cinema made it possible to see how the ongoing rediscovery of the world in the films of Abbas Kiarostami, Moshen Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi has continuity with the new generations, who have a view on the margin of institutional codes that seeks a new film experience. Secondly, retrospectives of the works of Mario Handler and Manane Rodríguez brought us closer to the reality of South America in its social facets and historical reflection. Handler uses documentaries to explore spaces of marginality, poverty and social indifference, and particularly to explore faces, i.e., passionate bodies that he provides with words and images of what is private. Rodríguez uses fiction to reclaim the fundamental tasks of memory, analysis and exorcism, the denunciation of a history marked by dictatorial terror.

Finally, the official feature-films section also paid special attention to little-known film industries, such as the ones of Eastern Europe, which at one point were the emerging centre of European filmmaking and which now, after years of uncertainty, show signs of a revival. Two young Hungarian filmmakers were the protagonists of the most recent Festival. György Pálfi, who won the award for best feature film, presented *Hukkle* (2002), a look at the pace of a rural world that unearths a bitter violence hidden under the apparently quotidian life. The film changes from an avant-garde experimentation based on the pace of the images, with metric editing and a music soundtrack, into a genre film in a free structure that inverts the traditional subordination of form to plot. In presenting *Rengeteg* (The Forest) in 2003, Benedek Fliegauf showed himself to be a filmmaker committed to contemporaneity, sketching a fragmentary portrait of an urban population trapped in a tedium life, an existential crisis and a lack of prospects.

In previous years, the Festival showcased new voices in Polish cinema (an essential witness to the reconstruction of a society after Communism) and the Baltic Republics, with well-known names that included Lithuania's Sharunas

Bartas. It also anticipated *nouvelle vague* in Argentinean cinema in the shape of a very interesting film called *Sábado* (Saturday), by Juan Villegas. Finally, it showed a great interest in filmmakers from the Maghreb, providing a window onto a culture and a number of societies that are as close to us as they are unknown.

One of the bases of independent cinema has to be to establish itself as a tool for learning more about others, about things that are radically different. This is film not so much as an instrument for integration as a place of extreme confrontation with different views on the world.

In terms of aesthetics, L'Alternativa has also supported research into areas about new forms that have become progressively more central to the creative redefinition of the hybrid region in which film is located within the audiovisual sphere. Experimentation on the margins of orthodoxy, the expression of risk and the overlapping of film with other arts are aesthetic fields where the Festival has sought contributions.

Up until now I have looked at filmmaking as something that rewrites pre-existing images, as a fundamental device that rebalances subjects in the postmodern world (e.g., filmed diaries, self-portraits or film essays) and that focuses on time drifts and body politics. I would now like to add the consideration of the fragmentary or unfinished work that forms a key part of modern cinema and is symptomatic of the struggle for free creation in the face of conditioning factors imposed by industry. One of the best examples of this can be found in Nicholas Ray's latest work, *We Can't Go Home Again*, shown at the Festival in 1996. However, the question could also focus on a phenomenon that is very important to the creative economy of cinema, i.e., the arrival of new digital technologies. In this sense, the year 2000, with the change of the Millennium, marked a turning point for the Festival. As well as the traditional 35mm and particularly 16mm formats, the usual currency in independent cinema, it included the digital video format. A statement in the festival catalogue that took the form of a manifesto said that celluloid is expensive and that small digital cameras allow a high degree of autonomy, are accessible to practically everybody and, together with the domestic programs of the event, are a simple and low-cost tool for putting film within the reach of all users. This is the rediscovery of truly independent cinema, which cuts economic conditioning

factors to a minimum. It shows how films made with meagre resources can stimulate the most innovative and avant-garde creations. In the face of the numbers machine as a platform for the special effects that adorn blockbusters, L'Alternativa puts up new technologies as a tool of autonomous creation. And, of course, where there is autonomy of means there is also freedom of thought and expression. Outside of the mechanisms of the industry and entertainment, filmmakers can put themselves in an alternative position, an ethical position that is clearly a political option, i.e., the policy of margins developed over the 10 years of the existence of the Independent Film Festival of Barcelona. This is seen best in the most open, promiscuous and heterogeneous section in the history of the Festival, the section called "Free Screen", and in the most recent section, "Pantalla Hall", an open space for filmmakers without censorship or restrictions, programmed continually and located at the entrance to the CCCB auditorium. It is an extraordinary experiment that goes a long way towards covering the most essential elements involved in the spirit of the Festival.

## Shadowy Zones

When a group becomes aware that it is going through a crisis, when it acknowledges a time of unease with respect to its own identity, it enters into a state of decentering which forces it to undertake a repositioning that is only possible by inhabiting shadowy zones, a non-man's land far removed from historiography and official discourses.

In this sense, Catalan cinema is a group in permanent crisis. It is a cinema without identity or definition that permanently seeks bases for determining its national character, navigating indistinctly between criteria of social portrayal, linguistic prerogatives and imaginary structures.

One of the core sections of L'Alternativa addresses this issue head-on. Since its establishment in 1997, the "Forgotten" section has sought a reconsideration of the bases of a possible Catalan cinema with the recovery of works by filmmakers banished from regular film history and condemned to oblivion who are indispensable to understanding what Catalan cinema is and could have been, because of their contemporaneity and way of

portraying an era or society, in an ongoing discussion with the political and cultural structures of their times.

Today we understand that the undervalued work of Julio Coll and Francisco Pérez Dolz, for example, is not only the most serious attempt to make genre cinema within the Catalan and Spanish frameworks but also a precise portrait of environments and urban geographies, with their human types. Today we consider the proposal of the Barcelona School as a remarkable aesthetic programme, where for the first time in Catalonia form was proposed as a mechanism of transgression or resistance ("Seeing as we can't do Victor Hugo, we will do Mallarmé", in the well-known phrase of Joaquim Jordà). In the same way, we should locate the singular contributions of non-mainstream but nonetheless essential artists who have made disperse or fragmentary works, such as Josep Maria Font, Ramon Masats, Vicenç Lluç and Cecília Bartolomé. We should begin, as the section did, with a fundamental milestone, the remarkable 1948 film *Vida en ombres* (Life in Shadows) by Llorenç Llobet Gràcia, an incredible piece of filmmaking which includes, in line with the imaginary source of its time, the impossible articulation of a classic story about the tragic wounds of war. This film, always devastatingly contemporary, points to the filmic device as a mechanism for producing and reproducing ghosts, a spectral deposit at a time when meaning was cut short. The film articulates *desire and film* with *desire of film* in a self-reflexive framework that is extremely unusual, not just within Catalan filmmaking but in Spanish cinema as well, and signposted a path that nobody wanted to follow. Its author, forgotten like the other filmmakers in this section, took refuge in the amorous intimacy of amateur filmmaking and eventually ended up impoverished and unrecognised.

The works of Josep Maria Font, Ramon Masats, Vicenç Lluç and Cecília Bartolomé are marked by an interest in documentaries, a field they all trained in or had some relationship with. Furthermore, they are bound by a certain transversal vocation between film and other disciplines, and particularly by a will to open Catalan filmmaking up to modernity and show new ways forward in film writing. Their works constitute an exceptional social portrait tackled from a personal point of view.

Josep Maria Font made the 1963 film *Vida de família* (Family Life), the most faithful portrait of the Catalan upper-

middle classes in the decade of the 60s and a merciless representation of a closed world based solely on economic interests and the symptoms of its decomposition. The director filmed the existential cry, the anxiety about life of a number of characters trapped in the contradictions of their social environment, where wounds from the past returned to make any attempt at reconciliation in the present impossible. A real film sense of the architectural relationship between characters and spaces, the elliptic writing and narrative void likens Font's extraordinary film experiment to the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, a filmmaker who had impressed him greatly during his time in Rome, but who was also condemned to incomprehension and oblivion.

Ramon Masats is a leading photographer in Spain but his equally interesting film work is as unknown as it is valuable. Documentaries paved the way to his only feature film, *Topical Spanish* (1970), a hybrid and free work which opened Catalan filmmaking up to aesthetics and the pop spirit, using an ironic viewpoint between satire and criticism about the reality of a country (Spain) apparently in the process of transformation but really trapped in the most ancestral elements of its past. Going against conventions and norms, it was unlike any trend and could not be categorised and hence failed to find a place in the narrow film panorama of the day. Masats later went on to try his hand at television, which was in its infancy at the time, but eventually returned to photography, where his incorruptible view had been born and would continue to act.

The Valencian Vicenç Lluç was another shrewd observer of Catalan society at the end of the 1960s. This can be seen in the 1969 work *El certificado* (The Certificate), a film that adopted the form of farce and the style of new filmmakers to observe from a critical distance the false appearances of modernisation in the society he was portraying. However, Lluç's most extraordinary contribution was to tackle the idea of filming the signature works of Catalan literature. His adaptation of *Laia* (1970) should have been a key moment in national filmmaking, but despite receiving the blessing of Salvador Espriu, it was mishandled, re-edited and mutilated. His next project, an adaptation of *Mort de dama* (Death of a Lady) ran up against numerous obstacles and was abandoned. Catalan cinema thus indefinitely postponed the debate about the relationship with its literary tradition, a point still to be resolved today.

Finally, Alicante's Cecília Bartolomé, the last person to have their works shown in the now defunct section, is particularly interesting for her testimonial films. Rather than opting for politically correct fiction, she presented a pressing and necessary documentary about Spain during the Transition in the diptych *Después de* (After) (1981).

## Cinema and Thought

What does it mean to have an idea in cinema? One possible response is to consider a film as a block of thought concentrated in a certain period of time. The time it takes to create a film is the time of thought on the part of the filmmaker, while the editing, i.e., the writing of time, organises the images in the direction of meaning.

A type of filmmaking that questions the world and thought through the use of images was the currency of L'Alternativa when it came to recovering the work of a number of filmmakers who are essential to modern cinematography, whether through the employment of special retrospectives or in sections such as the abovementioned "The Unknown of the Known". In other words, films about ideas that attract a different type of viewer, one who is able to put his memory to use in re-reading the signs of the century, i.e., "for each eye to negotiate by itself," as Jean-Luc Godard said.

The history of a discourse can be traced in its images. The filmmakers of the new German cinema, invited to participate in the most recent Festivals, have built their programme of film renewal on protesting the oblivion of the fundamental historical fact in the genesis of the new German nation, i.e., the responsibility of its people with regard to the Holocaust. The strongly politicised denunciation of the basic lie of the Federal Republic, built on the silence of participation in the horror of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a capitalist system imposed by the United States which renounced all cultural inheritance, was the driving force for key names in German filmmaking, including Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Marguerethe Von Trotta. The implications of this silence, which fed an entire social construction that was asphyxiating and concealed underground violence, was reviewed by these directors from a critical perspective that combined the outburst of the denunciation and the passion of disoriented and subjected bodies with the reflex

mechanisms belonging to the dialectic process of history. Again, marginal figures, trapped in an opaque and hypocritical network, took the lead. The rebuttal of a servile and ordinary attitude and the spirit of revolt also spurred on many directors in this new cinema. This idea is taken to the extreme in the documentaries and fictional films of Werner Herzog, in the search for the absolute and the option of irrational mystery in the face of capitalist dehumanisation.

An extremely broad look at memory and history can be found in the full work of Chris Marker, the star of the last Festival. His films are built as a topography of memory organised in a series of different zones that the viewer has to walk through and which relate different registers of the history of humanity, the history of images and personal history, or autobiography. The question guiding the discourse is about the function played by the image and the objective seems to be revivification, i.e., providing a new ethic and new knowledge at a time when the hypertrophy of images is leading to the disappearance of facts.

Marker's works are the works of a sniper, built on solitude and intimate writing. This dimension, which combines an approach to reality as filmed material with the poetic 'I', is fundamental in the work of two of the great filmmakers of *post-nouvelle vague* who are barely known in our country and who were recovered by L'Alternativa: Philippe Garrel and Jean Eustache.

Both men make films of an irregular, multiform and radically different production. Both advocate extremes: the limits of foolishness in the case of Garrel and suicide in the case of Eustache. Their works raise the burning questions of modern film: the confrontation of the camera with aimless bodies that carry the fatigue of history and the impossibility of adapting to the social environment; the revealing of the truth within the fissures of reality; the divide between visual and sound framing.

In order to make this type of cinema it is obviously necessary to have producers willing to assume the risk involved with the adventure of free creation. To that end, L'Alternativa has been keen to acknowledge people such as Marin Karmitz and Elías Querejeta, the producers of some of the best films in European cinema. We also have to remember the actors, the raw material that carries the passions and ideas of the filmmakers and who are fundamental figures in the body-to-body dialogue established in contemporary cinema.

## Closing

Independence, in the sense of opting for a different film model, curiosity for new audiovisual forms, the exploration of margins and non-official discourses, the recovery of forgotten figures, the consideration of film as a tool for thought and knowledge about the world, a didactic vocation and demand for an open and intelligent public. This has been the balance sheet of the ten years of L'Alternativa, the Barcelona Independent Film Festival. Now it is time to ensure it is upheld, its success is consolidated and the commitment involved with it is renewed. Now it is time to continue to support the aesthetics of resistance.

## Notes

1. WEISS, P. *La estética de la resistencia (The Aesthetics of Resistance)*. Hondarribia: Hiru, 1999.
2. COMOLLI, J. "Pour un cinéma pauvre". In: *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Paris: Editions de l'Etoile, October 2003, no. 583, pp. 78-80.