

A Look at Film Training in Catalonia

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- *From the observation of the history of film teaching in Catalonia, we can get an idea of the cultural and industrial importance that the cinema has had for us. From the pioneering Committee of Cinema of the Republican Government of Catalonia, to the current university studies (a university school of cinema and prestigious faculties of audiovisual communication), through the initiatives of the Monterols cinema-club, the Aixelà school or the CIPLA; all of them have been attempts, some very precarious, in a Catalan intellectuality that always has considered the cinema as a first-rate cultural expression.*

Key words

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Education is a social barometer. Observing the level of development of education in a particular speciality within a society can give us an idea of the role the society wants to award it. However, we cannot trust first impressions based on observation, given that the implementation and growth of a particular type of education are influenced by economic and social conditioning factors. It is therefore necessary to be precise if we want an analysis of education to illuminate a specific part of our society. This would translate into looking back over time and trying to establish how things came to be the way they are in a specific field of education and why this occurred.

We can apply this reasoning to our field. Can we know the role film has played (and later, the audiovisual world in general) based on a historical reconstruction of film teaching initiatives? I think we can. What follows here is a proposal for interpreting our film teaching panorama on the basis of reconstructing how it was established.

I understand 'film teaching' to mean a type of further education that attempts to ascertain the bases of the art of filmmaking with complete rigour, whether from a purely theoretical perspective or aimed at training in future techniques. Academies have been around since the first decades of the 20th century but, when they were not fraudulent enterprises, they were weak companies without continuity and with a poor subsequent industrial projection. Here I want to talk about more ambitious initiatives.

The first thing that should be said is that Catalonia played a leading role in the film world from the start. It was not just that the film industry found it easy to take root and flourish here, but rather film quickly became a symbol of modernity and as such was defended from the start by the intellectual elite who considered it a phenomenon of great cultural value. In this, the most forward-thinking Catalan intellectuals were on a par with the new European schools of thought.

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These were obviously intellectuals opposed to the *Noucentista* trends who used the call of cultural phenomena like film and jazz to distinguish themselves from 19th-century staidness. But beyond this row at the time, film would maintain this importance in Catalonia in later years: not in vain did it become one of the most important, if not *the* most important, production centres in Spain.

It was the circles of film-buff intellectuals who first tried to link film and university. In honest correspondence with a view of film as a leading cultural asset, the magazine *Mirador*, one of the most important nuclei of rigorous thought and publishers of art and entertainment in the 1930s, through the figure of Guillem Díaz-Plaja, started up the first tertiary film course at the University of Barcelona, held from February to April 1932 and consisting of a series of conferences (such as “Film’s Position in Art Theory”) accompanied by film projections. As Díaz-Plaja explained to José María García Escudero, “the event had an explosive nature and there were people who believed the venerable rocks would crack.”

The university film course was the first to put on the table the need to unite tertiary education and film. Because of its capital importance within the industrial world, its social relevance and its proven influence on the cultural world, it was impossible to not make film a study element within the university world, both because of the links that could be established with other facets of the arts and philosophy and because of its own idiosyncrasies.

Díaz-Plaja and his colleagues at *Mirador* were the first to realise this, but they would not be the last: they were the precedent and reference point in subsequent decades of people who defended that film, because of the complexity of its multifaceted nature, needed a specific, systematic and rigorous form of study.

The story did not end here. The Generalitat of Catalonia began a brave proposal to organise film tools. Influenced by the intellectuals and their consideration of film, shared by relevant figures in the Department of Culture such as Josep Carner-Ribalta, on 15 April 1933 the Generalitat created the Film Committee, an organisation aimed at giving filmmaking a consideration of importance by the highest Catalan administration. The initiative included a film school, the first of its type on the Iberian Peninsula. This support by the Catalan autonomous government to film and its future deve-

lopment would never be repeated again, and aid from Catalan administrations, whether state, autonomous or municipal, would continue to be tangential and insufficient through to today.

I should here like to mention that the film school project was the framework of a now-classic pedagogical conflict. One of the endemic discussions present at any film teaching centre was developed, i.e., the pre-eminence of the theoretical study of film, defended by intellectuals who want to go deeper into its discursive and aesthetic values, versus people who want to make a film school a training ground in techniques to renew and improve the industrial fabric. The balance between the two facets is very hard to achieve, and it means that any film school must define its pedagogical priority from the start, something which will mark its study plan and infrastructural and economic requirements.

In any case, whatever the pedagogical approach to take was to be, it was clear to the heads of the film school that education had to necessarily have a profile and ambition of a university nature, and that film teaching was not something that could be left up to short courses.

Unfortunately, the outbreak of the Civil War paralysed the school project just months before it was due to begin in the 1936/37 school year. The resolution of the conflict would see the exile of the Catalan organs of self-government. With the start of the Francoist dictatorship and the instauration of a centralist type of thinking, which abolished the Generalitat, the possibility of organising initiatives like the Film Committee disappeared from the public sphere.

A new era began in which the specifically Catalan cultural dynamic was left up to the people, and included initiatives related with the study and practice of filmmaking. The road to follow throughout the whole of the dictatorship would be ‘possibilism’. The need to create a teaching centre for film theory and practice was still present in intellectual circles, but to make it a reality it would be necessary to use sometimes implausible frameworks and which often did not work well enough for the needs demanded by this type of education.

We should not forget that Catalans were far removed from the orbit of the official film teaching centre under the Francoist regime. This centre, first named Investigaciones y Experiencias Cinematográficas and later the Escuela Oficial de Cinematografía was not characterised by a high

presence of Catalan students. In fact, in the nearly 30 years it existed, only 14 Catalan students graduated from a total of 480. In Catalonia, the most important Spanish production centre in the 1950s, one could study at 'the school of apprenticeship', but that was not enough for the groups of film-buffs who felt that Catalonia needed its own centre of education, as they saw this as the only satisfactory way of renewing the industrial and cultural film fabric.

So Catalan education initiatives created during Francoism began with a link to centres, businesses and organisations of all types, far removed from the specific sphere of film. Where they could not depend on public support, private inventiveness arose, determined to make the longing for film teaching a reality.

Any ground could be used for fertilisation. It could be a centre of education linked to the Opus Dei, or the Col·legi Major Monterols, which started a film club that would become a centre where courses were offered by people such as Javier Coma, José Luis Guarner, José María Otero and Paco Pérez-Dolz. It could also involve a photography store which housed the leading film school of the whole of the Francoist period: the Aixelà School, whose teachers included Miquel Porter i Moix, Pere Portabella, Romà Gubern and Joan Francesc de Lasa. A further two initiatives were the CIPLA and EMAM, framed within the cracks of the education system of the time in two such surprising spheres as the Institut del Teatre and professional training courses in image and sound, one with the support of Hermann Bonnin and the other under Josep Serra Estruch.

It did not matter. The important thing was to carry out rigorous film teaching with a spirit of further education and combine theory and practice in so far as the basic infrastructure would allow. In fact, making use of pre-existing frameworks would be the Achilles heel of many of these centres. The same bases that facilitated the existence of the different teaching initiatives were at the same time the bind that hindered their growth. And, in the long term, as in the case of Aixelà, the educational needs (and ambitions) well exceeded the economic and infrastructural abilities of the centres.

The general situation, although very often bearing noteworthy fruit, was never anything less than precarious, even initiatives protected under institutional umbrellas. Protection was no guarantee of obtaining the desired budget and the

schools had to face up to changes in the political wind, something which nearly finished off the EMAM and which did put an end to the CIPLA, as well as, now that the democratic transition had begun, the Escola d'Estudis Artístics de l'Hospitalet, supervised by Ricard Salvat and which had been established with the aim of becoming the Catalan answer to Bauhaus.

With the arrival of democracy, the industrial, intellectual and teaching circles again put on the table the need to establish film teaching in further education. The new Generalitat, however, decided to prioritise the recovery of the Catalan language, which had been slighted by the Francoist regime, over the needs of a Catalan industry that would not necessarily produce works in Catalan. The failure of Madrid's EOC, which closed in 1976 with an extremely expensive structure of film teaching, was a warning and no doubt paralysed any type of tertiary-education project (which was only tangentially represented in certain branches of information science and the position of the head of film history), leaving the only theoretical and practical teaching in the hands of primary and secondary-educated professionals and up to incipient and underdeveloped film academies like the Centre d'Estudis Cinematogràfics de Catalunya (CECC), which has now happily completed its second decade of existence.

But some way out had to be found to what was becoming a pressing need. A mixed solution was then imposed: to join the efforts of public institutions and private interests. Internal studies carried out by the heads of the Film area at the Generalitat advised against creating a film school from scratch, as had been attempted in the time of the Republic.

The solution was to make use of a pre-existing pedagogical structure. The Calassanç Centre assumed this role for a decade, always with the idea of taking advantage of promoting itself to eventually become the longed-for Escola Superior de Cinematografia de Catalunya, linked to the University of Barcelona, something which was finally achieved, not without having to resolve multiple complications of an economic, academic, legislative and political nature.

The establishment of a board of trustees to run the Escac Foundation, made up of the University of Barcelona, the Escola Pia de Catalunya, the Institut Català de les Indústries Culturals, the SGAE, EGEDA, Terrassa City Council,

the Academia de las Artes y la Ciencias Cinematográficas de España, as well as sector companies (Filmmax, Luk Internacional, Image Film) made the definitive establishment of this training project possible.

Coinciding with the appearance of the Escac Foundation, the Pompeu Fabra University offered an officially approved degree in audiovisual communication, as did the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

The design of this university course came directly from the former degree in information sciences. With the new design, the aim was to move more towards the professional fields of all audiovisual sectors.

It is true that the new design augured noticeable prestige for audiovisual communication given that it also coincided with the liberalisation of the television supply and new regulations on telecommunications.

However, supply did not end with the Escac Foundation, which would go on to consolidate its position as a reference centre in training in film fields in Catalonia and with links to other officially approved centres around the world, or with the appearance of the new faculties which touched upon the film theme more tangentially (the Pompeu Fabra would shortly stand out in the training of new producers and in the documentary field of creation, with prestige beyond the borders), a road it seems the Ramon Llull University has also started to go down.

Other centres unrelated to a university or official degree mean the film training panorama can currently be considered to be normalised: there is a lot of supply and demand for training, and mostly quality training.

The Escac and the three abovementioned faculties are all contributing new talent and a new concept of techniques to the profession (some have already won national and international awards) which makes it possible to be optimistic about an incipient and renewed film industry and the consolidation of a broad audiovisual sector.