

Mercè Vilaret: Approximation to her Visual Writing

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■ *This article is the result of research that focused on analysing the narrative structure and visual style of the documentaries of television filmmaker Mercè Vilaret. Studying her work involved reviewing the history of television in Catalonia, learning about the internal workings of the television medium, remembering historical episodes stored in my memory and viewing her iconic programmes that have become part of the collective imagination of various generations. It particularly allowed me to discover the importance of the work carried out by filmmakers, especially in the early years of television.*

Introduction

In general terms, the research work was an attempt to demonstrate that television filmmakers have a decisive role in the final result of the work they put their name to that is comparable to the influence a film director has on his or her film. Although television formats can be developed under a closed structure according to genre, the filmmaker always has the option of leaving his or her stamp through the use of viewpoint and the formal style of the work. Some genres allow more freedom in planning, such as fiction, while others are more limited in their approach, such as news reports. In the case of Mercè Vilaret, most of the dramatic and

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documentary programmes she directed allow us to catch a glimpse of her personal writing style and the issues that were foremost in her mind.

In order to define the two concepts, it seemed to me to be necessary to indistinctly mix the most characteristic features of her work with the visual resources she most commonly employed. From the sum of these two different but complementary aspects we can get the most accurate outline of her profile as a director. The information for developing these two points came from two video sources: archive footage of interviews with her and posthumous videos in which her professional colleagues (filmmakers, actors, scriptwriters, etc.) comment on different details of her work methods, and by watching her television programmes, where I was able to discover the main features of her writing.

The Beginnings

The Miramar studios in Barcelona first broadcast in February 1959. The broadcasts were sporadic, always live and the programmes were often interrupted due to technical difficulties. Most of the people who worked on the different production teams came from fields as diverse as radio, the press, the theatre and show business in general. Drawing on experiences from their particular fields, they interpreted and experimented with the possibilities the new medium offered: the conjugation between technology and audiovisual language was, without any doubt, the main challenge for the new filmmakers.

In 1971, Mercè Vilaret was promoted from the category of assistant director to director, making her a pioneering woman in the profession in Catalonia together with Clara Ronay and putting her on a par with the Spanish filmmakers Josefina Molina and Pilar Miró. During the 30 years of her

professional life, always at TVE in Catalonia, she directed more than 200 works, covering a range of genres that included theatre, documentaries, musicals and reports.

In conjunction with her professional activity as a television filmmaker, Mercè Vilaret was also a professor with the Faculty of Journalism at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). Her inquiring nature led her to follow with interest and concern all the social and technological aspects that were evolving in relation to the television medium, and her anxiety to learn more and be able to teach the things she had learnt throughout her lengthy professional career saw her turn to university life, firstly as a student in the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts and later as a professor of the subject Television: Medium of Information, at the then Faculty of Journalism of the UAB. "Teaching is very good for me because it involves continually reflecting on my practical work. I do a lot of practical classes because I think one learns about television by making it - there is no other way"¹. However, Vilaret always put her career before any of the other activities she developed: "I am a filmmaker who teaches classes at university"².

Her teaching activity was directly related to another aspect that should be mentioned and which directly impacted the result of her work: her curiosity and keenness to experiment with a language that was just taking off on Spanish television. At the time (the early 1970s), television theatrical broadcasts were regular events that were very popular with the public. Making fictional works in studios allowed young filmmakers to experiment with language and seek new ways of narrating. The writer Josep M. Benet i Jornet, one of the most prolific authors of the time, summed it up as such: "Between approximately 1965 and 1970, there was an explosion in the number of theatrical pieces with a tremendous force and strength being made in the studios of TVE in Catalonia and she was one of the people leading the charge, together with the filmmakers Lluís M. Güell and Sergi Schaaff. We worked together very often and it led to a situation in which many Catalan authors could access television for the first time"³. The Miramar studios in Barcelona produced many memorable works that helped create a climate of optimism that made it possible to even outline a new language. The principle parameters of the visual style of the different filmmakers eventually came to be known as the Miramar School, the main exponents of which

were Antoni Chic, Esteve Duran, Sergi Schaaff, Lluís M. Güell and Mercè Vilaret. As Lluís M. Güell said, "The Miramar School was simply an attempt to provide a television language different to the one the Spanish State was providing at the time"⁴.

Space and People

As a consequence of the great amount of experimentation at the time, there was a series of differential features in Mercè Vilaret's language that were repeated indistinctly in dramatic and documentary works and which can be seen as the unique and personal characteristics of her visual style. Vilaret's take on programmes allowed her to directly relate to a wide range of narrative resources with two clear and differentiated concepts: space and people. Her obsession with showing the geography of a space whilst respecting its dimensions led to her notable use of moving cameras. She used panoramic views, dolly shots and crane shots mainly with a descriptive function to show the locations where the stories were developed and this, together with the protagonism she gave to the people, actors or personalities interviewed, was summarised in a fixed idea for contextualising people in their daily sphere, whether fictional or real.

Contextualisation was one of the most frequently recurring ideas in the majority of her works. For example, in the documentary *Nadal a La Maternitat* (1984), although some of the details indicate very clearly that the action is taking place in a hospital, either her camera would redound to the places where the action occurred, or the places would be shown in a very explicit fashion through camera movements, etc. There was thus a desire for clarity and transparency when it came to showing all the elements that referred to the geography where the stories were played out. In the documentary *La Mina, un barri entre fronteres* (1989), the landscape was filmed from a helicopter with the aim of showing the immensity of the area and the housing blocks in the neighbourhood. In general, Mercè Vilaret's camerawork helped to greatly multiply spaces. The image covered all the areas in which the characters moved, conferring on them a degree of importance: she was particularly interested in the subject within the context, the character within a location.

This resource was also a constant factor in her drama

works. In *Revolta de bruixes* (1976), a crane shot shows the warehouse (in this case, a real space in the TVE Catalonia facilities) in which all the action is developed. The camera enters the set, even though there is no clear perception of a stage or of frontality. Its position occupies the space of the action and thus facilitates the concept of a type of fourth wall. At the same time, it allows for a greater involvement in the narration, in such a way that there is also a certain degree of voyeurism, and this effect is reinforced by the shots added from the warehouse shelves. The same occurs in *El Okapi* (1975), where the camera passes through the boundaries of theatrical frontality, roams across the sets and is set up in a privileged position from where it can spy on the characters. She is thus able to achieve, at any given moment, the concept of a panoptic view. In other words, from a focal point, in this case the garden, she portrays the different scenes taking place in concentric spaces, i.e., the corridors of the nursing home.

The dramatic work *El Tragaluz* (1982) also begins with a dolly shot that takes in all the spaces while the characters remain immobile. The tracking shot winds around, sometimes to find the frontality of the characters and then pulls back to give another perspective or to hide some spaces with the walls (she placed a lot of importance on the walls that separate spaces, such as the small separation of the rows of housing blocks in *La Mina, un barri entre fronteres*). The set is presented at the same time as the story.

Blocking

Of course, this type of mobile camera work calls for accurate blocking, and so many of her drama works incorporate an almost mathematical composition. For example, in *Revolta de bruixes* (1976), the blocking responds to a very studied design so that the position and movements of the characters seems to have been marked out with pens; profundity and composition are sought in boundaries based on a number of vanishing points that create the distribution of the actors and elements in the space. This composition is constructed by using either a linear arrangement (with the actors spread out at intervals on the screen according to their distance with respect to the lens) or a triangular arrangement (with the actors forming an open or closed triangle in relation to the

lens). There are variations on these distributions, but in general they are located within this tendency towards a clearly organised structure of people in space.

In most of her fictional work, Mercè Vilaret worked continually with boundaries to create depth in shot compositions, such as in *Fedra* (1980), where the stairs in the room play an important role and add a cell-like dimension that once again redounds to the contextualisation of the character, although in this case it involves an emotional rather than geographic framework. In other cases, she used mirrors to compose a shot: in *Revolta de bruixes* (1976), the use of a mirror was essential because of the location, i.e., a small toilet, where it was important to employ a mirror to resolve the sequence. The resource was thus basically pragmatic. On the other hand, in *Fedra* (1982), it was an inspirational element of the planning and a way to probe further into the main characters. We can find the same resource used in the documentary *La vellesa, entre records i oblits* (1991), where she employed a mirror to show the scene between the married couple José and Josefa, where the husband combs his wife's hair because she has gone blind. The in-depth composition that uses the mirror shows a crucifix in the middle of a painting. In other words, as well as close-ups that reveal particular details, Mercè Vilaret worked to employ the symbols already present in quotidian scenes and integrate them into the composition of the shot.

Although objects are integrated organically in the aesthetic of the frame, in most cases it was the actors who made up one of the boundaries of the image. For example, in *El Okapi* (1975), we can clearly see the creation of boundaries not just through elements of attrezzo but particularly through the actors. In this case, in which there are numerous heartfelt interventions by characters with a similar level of importance, a triangular device predominates for the actors with regard to space, creating a vanishing point in the centre of screen (her camera almost never drew an inverse triangle with the vanishing points on the sides). This production model would be repeated later, particularly in *Fedra* (1980), where it featured in the relationship between the three main characters (Fedra, Pedro and Hipólito).

Her control of blocking, both within overall scenes and the arrangement of set elements, allowed for fluid camera movements. Only occasionally did this optical mobility

translate into close-up shots and it was precisely because of its exceptionality in cases in which an important significance is added that the use of the other narrative resources became clearer. However, she did not use detailed shots often, even if a particular aspect was of significant importance at a particular moment.

In general, Mercè Vilaret preferred to show people's faces and reactions rather than the objects that provoked the reaction. Even when she sought detail she tried to combine the shot and expression of the actor at the same time, either in a close-up or with a panoramic movement. She was more interested in the reaction than the action itself. A detailed shot only acquired significance if it was related to the character's expression, if it provoked a reaction in the actor, i.e., if it helped contextualise the principle narration. These types of shots thus did not abound as independent units, but often formed part of a panoramic shot filming towards the actors, or featured another character in the background. At other times, they would form part of a block where for contiguity some appeared behind the others through the use of fades.

The Sequential Shot

Another aspect important to mention in the personal writing of Mercè Vilaret was her use of the sequential shot. She was more interested in creating a situation, designing the mis-en-scene, organising the distribution of the elements in the frame and particularly in working on the interpretation of the actors than in a fragmented type of planning. Filmmaker Xavier Manich worked as a camera operator on many of her drama works and remembers his early days: "She was very into researching the audiovisual field. We worked together on dramatic pieces and instead of cutting shots we invented a few things for television that had already been used in films, like sequential shots. We set up choreographies with the actors, in sequences that lasted two or three minutes. We would use a dolly to move around and change the focus from one actor to another, we would make a real dance between the camera and the actors"⁵. Mercè Vilaret's drama pieces reveal a search for extending the different registers the interpretation, actors and experimentation with production devices could offer, which allowed the continuity

of the sequential shot. Although her last drama, *Danny i Roberta* (1993), was recorded in a television studio, she did not use multicameras, so the one and only crane camera constantly followed the accurate blocking of the two protagonists. The result was sequential shots of differing lengths, which is why it is not surprising that filmmaker Sergi Schaaff said, "She carried the sequential shot through to the final consequences"⁶.

This non-fragmentary approach was closely related to her determination to respect reality, even if in the case of a drama it was a fictional reality. This promoted fluidity in the interpretation and particularly reinforced the overall perception gleaned from this interpretation and required a special effort to operate on the most interpretive aspects when it came to focusing the viewer's attention. Repeated use of sequential shots can also be interpreted as a non-interventionist approach or one of minimum interference with what is being explained and subsequently ends up translating into a defined and direct style. The filmmaker Josefina Molina sums it up nicely in this statement about Vilaret's work: "When I watched one of [her] programmes, even though I didn't know what she had done, I could identify with it because of the cleanness she gave to the messages, the cleanness with which she brought the viewer very clearly to her desired aim"⁷.

Her Work with Actors

To this experimentation with visual innovations (working the scene with the actors, searching for different camera positions, moving the camera and, in short, experimenting with shot dynamics) we have to add the initiative she took in working closely with the actors on their interpretation. As a director, Mercè Vilaret was said to have a special talent for getting an actor to bring out the features she thought the character should have. As the actress Anna M. Barbany said, "Actors felt very comfortable working with her because she knew how to bring out the best in us... Sometimes they would say 'how dare she say that to us?' but it would also give you a lot of security"⁸. The actress Marisa Paredes said, "She had a way of directing actors which was much fresher, much more spontaneous and also much more detailed ... she took the psychological circumstances and

creative work of the actor more into account and at the same time had a freshness and way of showing things that was quite different from the ordinary or more conventional methods, the slightly more orthodox ways that were being used in other places, including Madrid⁹.

In much of her fictional work, Mercè Vilaret would take the characters to the limit of their feelings and always tried to manifest their emotions in a very clear fashion (she worked a lot with actors' tears, breathing, etc.). She pushed the envelope with regard to complete containment with the purpose of providing more dramatic nuances in the acting. This resulted in the creation of hyper-aesthetic characters and, for example, in *Fedra* (1980), the characters whose interpretation features these coordinates (Fedra and Hipólito) contrast with the more contained ones (Pedro and the doctor).

Another aspect I would like to mention is the appearance of characters who spend a lot of time reflecting on their situation. For example, in *Revolta de bruixes* (1976), much of the interpretative force arises from looks. She sought a lot from the expressions in people's eyes. Sometimes all of a character's feelings could be explained in a look. In *El Tragaluz* (1982), the characters generally don't take a particular action but rather pass the time talking and reflecting on their circumstances.

Inactivity was often resolved by showing characters gazing off-screen, without indicating what they could see or were looking at. For example, in *Fedra* (1980), there is a continual allusion to off-screen through the gaze of the characters. In the character of Fedra, in particular, this lost look was employed as a personality trait that suggested her reflective nature. Fedra appears to continually scan the horizon for ways out of her distressing situation. Even many of the characters in Vilaret's dramas were shown to be inactive, i.e., they were not defined by their actions but by what they felt, thought and said. A large part of the interpretative effort was found in statements, not actions. Furthermore, the gesture was very contained, often pared down to a minimum and would only arise on particular occasions to help explain a concept, although it was done from the most pure abstraction. Vilaret sought an organic register that was quite close to realist interpretation, but the effort required to attain this naturalness was twofold, because it was not helped along by actions.

Her Philanthropic Spirit

She took her way of working with actors, of probing their interpretation and looking for the more organic and most intense registers to the people she interviewed in her documentary programmes and reports. These did not involve actors but people who did not have to represent anything beyond their own role. Most of Vilaret's works are covered from a particular viewpoint that attempts to inquire into the more humane part of the central characters in her works. Independently of the type of programme (a drama with actors or variety show, or programmes that focussed on other issues, such as philosophy, art or sport), she always sought out the people and their interests, their motivations. The writer Marta Pessarrodona stressed this facet of her nature: "Mercè Vilaret was able to make programmes about whatever and whoever, from difficult authors, institutions or even stones. She always explained things through people. Now that her work has come to an end, her humanist side appears to me to be absolute, and her gallery of stars included Salvador Espriu through to Joan Miró, Lluís Llach and Raimon. It covered singers, philosophers and thinkers."¹⁰ The musician Oriol Martorell also stressed her ability to work with people: "I would say that the topic she took up was a pretext for making contact with a person. She had an extraordinary humanity, she was never cold in that sense and she sought human contact. It is one of the things I will never forget, her great professionalism, the great humility she had and that everything she did contained"¹¹.

Her documentary programmes reflect with even more determination her obsession for contextualising people in their space. They particularly suggest the rigour with which she showed the reality she filmed. From the stylistic point of view, on many occasions her respect for reality translated into obtaining a shot that was not the most flattering. For example, the lack of frontality in the way she arranged people before the camera in most of her documentaries meant she did not seem to think it was important to the realisation. Sometimes, when more than two people were being asked something at the same time, they did not appear in the most favourable position for the camera or were even shown side-on. Many of Vilaret's fictional works also featured this element, where again she did not eschew productions that did not favour the camera. For example, in

El Okapi (1975), the actors are placed in positions clearly unfavourable to the camera, either to show a close-up movement, which could later favour the shot, or because there was a particular formal or content-based intention behind the decision. We can therefore presume that these types of situations were motivated either by a desire to not intervene or to find other positions that did not correspond with the conventional ones of an interview.

On the whole, her interviews featured closed shots of people, cutting the distance established between the viewer and the people onscreen. This closeness helped make the interview more moving and contrasts with other, more distancing, elements (zooms, panoramic shots that focus the viewer's attention, etc.). In this framework, there is a clear appeal to the viewer that recalls one of the main principles of the "Brechtian distance", characterised by an attempt to establish a direct relationship between the representation and the viewer with the purpose of getting the viewer emotionally and cognitively involved and revealing aspects of daily life of a social interest. There is a clear attempt to remind viewers that this situation could happen to anybody, even to them, and also of underlying that the people going through this situation are just like the viewer. This is reinforced by the fact that throughout her documentaries there is no interest in delimiting people by profession or origin, but rather an attempt to escape "labels" and focus on more humane aspects. In this sense, it is important to particularly mention the documentary *La Mina, un barri entre fronteres* (1989), where the people interviewed attempt to retain their dignity despite their situation, and are presented as "regular" folk (as "regular" as the viewer himself) who are simply unluckier than others.

The choice of unimportant but common stories brings the narration closer to viewers and invites them to position themselves in relation to the reality concerned. This reveals a certain harmony with the principles of Brechtian playwriting, in the sense of trying to develop in the viewer a critical attitude in relation to the drama and the actions of the characters. Another very clear connection with Brecht's approach comes from the proposal that an actor's acting style can be converted into a learning process distinguished by "imitation and criticism", where social factors have to determine the philosophy and the viewer has to take part. In general, a problem is raised but no solution given, a

question "formulated" but no answer provided. Brecht's works would always implicitly end with a "find your own way out" aimed at the viewer. In this sense, there appears to be an analogy with the endings of Vilaret's documentaries. Most conclude with a sentence that seeks an exit without determining what it is. For example, in *Les altres condemnats* (1990), the phrase uttered by the last person to appear onscreen is repeated on top of the frozen image of their face: "I would get up and run; I would go".

Epilogue

Mercè Vilaret's main interest and, in the final analysis, the driving force behind her television work was a constant concern for reporting the social problems closest to her. The city of Barcelona, where she lived, the situation of people with meagre economic resources, the difficult circumstances of the marginalised and the loneliness of the elderly, were persistent images in her documentaries. For her, television was not so much a tool for developing a way of expressing herself as a window onto the world. Television was the perfect medium for explaining the problems that most interested her, the ones that had more to do with people's quotidian reality and that reflected the problems of the city. It is no wonder that the City Council awarded her the Ciutat de Barcelona prize in 1978.

Her working class background, together with her concern for reporting the reality around her, meant that on one hand she knew exactly what she wanted to say and, on the other, she was enthusiastic about the different types of language she could apply with the camera. To that end, in addition to the experiments she did at TVE, she frequently travelled to festivals and congresses with the purpose of discovering works from abroad. On one of these trips she saw the documentary Ken Loach made for the BBC, *Cathy Come Home* (1966), which had a big impact on her. She found a model to follow in the mixture of fiction and reality that Loach revealed in his docudrama. Her concern led her to experiment and to "find new narrative forms. There is one type of programme I would particularly like to do, which is the drama documentary, something that has never been done here and which is very common on English television"¹².

In fact, many of her documentaries touch on the same topics as Loach's work, although not dramatised. In *Cathy Come Home*, the characters lose their financial stability and practically become nomads in search of somewhere to set up home temporarily. At the end, having reached breaking point and selling all their belongings, they decide to separate. The subsequent loss is shown in the parting of the children from their mother. In the documentary *Sense llar* (1990), there is not the same level of drama, but there is the feeling of a provisional nature transformed into a daily assumption.

A firm defender of the model of public television, particularly as established by the BBC, she spent part of every year in London, where she had a house under let. She was interested in experiencing first-hand the debate generated around the BBC and its programmes. Her constant contact with English reality and its television provided her with many ideas, "such as the need for objectivity, rigorous treatment and, in particular, continual stimuli, because you can see they are making a type of television much more in step with their times and society than we are doing with ours"¹³.

A hard worker, rigorous in procedures, austere in style and respectful with the reality she wanted to explain, Vilaret always considered herself lucky to be able to work in what she most enjoyed. People who knew her well say she was intelligent, generous, observant and intuitive and had a lucid and critical sense of humour. Gifted with a unique sensitivity, she was able to get on extremely well with her crews and became, as well as a filmmaker, the catalyst of group energies.

Sadly, Mercè Vilaret died suddenly on the morning of 21 October 1993 on her way to work at the Televisión Española studios in Sant Cugat. Just the day before, she had finished editing her final television drama, *Danny i Roberta*.

Notes

1. In *Terenci a la fresca* (1985), min. 14.15.
2. In *Retrat de dona* (1982), min. 23.30.
3. In *Mercè Vilaret. Retalls de temps* (1994), min. 10.30.
4. In *Mercè Vilaret. Retalls de temps* (1994), min. 25.08.
5. In *Mercè Vilaret. Retalls de temps* (1994), min. 29.15.
6. In *Retrat de dona* (1982), min 13.17.
7. In *Mercè Vilaret. Retalls de temps* (1994), min. 06.32
8. In *Retrat de dona* (1982), min 16.53.
9. In *Mercè Vilaret. Retalls de temps.* (1994) min. 29.46
10. In *Mercè Vilaret. Retalls de temps* (1994), min. 23.15.
11. In *Mercè Vilaret. Retalls de temps* (1994), min. 6.07.
12. In *Retrat de dona* (1982), min. 28.10.
13. In *Terenci a la Fresca* (1985), min 11.05.

Vídeos de referència

Terenci a la Fresca. TVE, 1985.

The writer Terenci Moix interviews Mercè Vilaret.

Retrat de dona. TVE, 1982.

The writer Marta Pessarrodona interviews Mercè Vilaret.

Mercè Vilaret. Retalls de temps. TVE, 1994

Posthumous programme devoted to the life and work of Mercè Vilaret.