

An Approximation to Catalan Cinema from the Study of its Creative Process

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- *The film approximation put forward in this paper is tackled from the perspective of the Psychology of Creativity, starting from the grounds that studying the creative practice in a field makes it possible to devise new ways for understanding it. In particular, in the film sector in Catalonia (which appears to be immersed in a structural crisis) the basic hypothesis of the research work was the idea that film practice is limited just as much or more by the creators' restricted approaches and concepts as it is by purely economic and industrial issues within the sector.*

Introduction

This document sets out some of the results of a doctoral thesis that involved an in-depth analysis of the creative practice in Catalan cinema, which was innovative in the sense that no research had previously been carried out into Catalan films from that point of view.

The analysis made it possible to outline attitudes in relation to the creative process, which, because they were repeated in the different interviews, defines common procedures and can therefore help describe the imaginary of the film universe developed in Catalonia. It also worked on the idea that the concept the people who work in a field have of the creative process involved can reveal symptoms that make it possible to diagnose the sector.

The contributions of the research work were:

- a) A description of the concept that filmmakers currently working in Catalonia have of their work (i.e., from the

creative process of their work) and an analysis of the parameters on which this concept is based.

- b) The way new knowledge supports the theoretical and methodological perspective of the Psychology of Creativity (the processes involved in ideas generation).

The research was designed on the basis of the psychological tradition of studying cases that determine a series of representative constants that make it possible to unify concepts about creativity and the processes involved in ideas generation. Bearing in mind that one of the tasks of Psychology of Creativity is to know the creative process and circumstances that stimulate or hinder the production of original ideas, I developed this study with the final purpose of generating a new way of understanding Catalan cinema.

The work involved detecting mental blocks and conceptual limitations, i.e., the limits that individuals impose upon themselves and which, although not explicit, can in one way or another restrict the practice of an activity. Although there are many research works on economic and industrial questions relating to film practice in Catalonia, they do not reveal the limits of approach, ideologies or concepts.

The situation of Catalan cinema forces us to ask a number of questions that have already been formulated too often. It is true that when something doesn't work despite repeated efforts we soon lose interest in it, ignore it and make it a "taboo topic". If there are no voices that interpret a type of cinema that appears to be inexistent, it is extremely important to listen to the voice of some of its artists. In-depth interviews are useful in any study, but in this case they were particularly valuable.

Thus, any investigation into issues relating to Catalan cinema involves knowing what the filmmakers who work in the area think and how they conceptualise their work in this context.

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Methodology

The following steps were taken to achieve the abovementioned goals:

a) Field research of a qualitative nature, articulated in the form of in-depth interviews with filmmakers within the territorial and geographic sphere of the city of Barcelona, understanding that film production in Catalonia is focused mainly on the capital city. Films are the result of group work, but I chose directors because they participate in the whole of the creative process.

b) I established a theoretical body based on the Psychology of Creativity. I added a number of aesthetic, philosophical and anthropological considerations to this body with the purpose of defining concepts such as *imaginary* or *fantasy* and to decode myths related to this artistic practice. I also examined the bibliography of the filmmakers considered to be key in the history of filmmaking to explain the genesis of their works.

I used the theoretical body described above to develop the interview protocol.

Within the phases of the creative process of films (ideas generation, the script, the shoot and the editing), I chose to place particular emphasis on the initial phase of ideas generation.

With regard to the sample, I used the list of film directors who belong to the Barcelona College of Film Directors. From a total of 100 affiliated directors, I chose a sample of 25, giving a representativeness of 25%. In fact, it would represent more than 25%, given that there are very vague limits with regard to professional dedication. The sample was designed with the intention that the filmmakers interviewed would represent the different trends present in Barcelona. The criteria were as follows:

- By film genre: psychological thrillers, psychological terror films, fantasy films, comedies, documentaries and dramas.
- By script origin: their own scripts, scripts by other people and literary adaptations.
- By the age and experience of the directors: directors with many years' experience, directors with recognised years' experience, young directors whose careers were just taking off. I also interviewed directors who formed part of the Barcelona School.

The interviews should be treated not as a loyal reflection of reality but basically as an indication of the following:

a) How directors conceptualise their creative processes, the stereotypes they include and their values and goals.

b) According to this conceptualisation, I also assessed the type of films that for some reason or another they felt they ought to see; their possibilities and limits; how they justify their film practice; how they relate to the industry, viewers, critics, etc.; how they see their place in and contribution to film history and the role they award it.

This article is structured from some of the results of the research work. I do not set out in detail all the conclusions strictly related with the Psychology of Creativity, as they are simply contributions to this discipline and not data that can be used as symptoms able to generate a diagnosis of the situation of Catalan cinema.

Before making a summary of the research work, I would like to set out the theoretical interpretations and historical trajectory of Catalan cinema.

Theoretical Interpretations

An analysis of authors such as Balló, Espelt, Lorente (1990), Oltrà & Costa (1990), Gubern (1995) and Riambau (1992) suggest that Catalan cinema is the product of a historical trajectory that occurred because there was no homegrown or quality cultural identity and thus the industry was marginalised.

In general terms, the causes that led Catalan cinema to a situation of marginalisation are, according to the abovementioned authors, the following:

- Catalan cinema did not form part of official culture and only later joined the Yellow Manifest (1928) which, during the time of the Generalitat of the Republic, had led to the opening of the Orpheus (1932); but the thing that appeared able to be the starting point for the Catalan industry was buried with the failed attempt to establish the Statute of Autonomy and when the country was subjected to an interminable dictatorship.
- Marginalisation was consolidated during the Francoist regime with the imposition of a strong ideological censorship that preserved particular religious and ideological dogma

and which furthermore represented a pessimistic and repressed view of life that left few possibilities for innovation.

- The intellectuals on the left who had not gone into exile rejected filmmaking as an artistic expression and the ones who did make movies disassociated themselves from political beliefs and moved into experimentalism as the only possible way forward in a situation of extremely strong censorship. The Barcelona School¹ went through a similar situation.

- The system of economic protection from the State safeguarded censorship. An industry which had been fairly badly run down because of the severity of the official censorship subsequently collapsed when aid was withdrawn.

- Screenwriters applied a form of self-censorship in order to work within the censored environment.

- Producers and businessmen made films as a business option without taking cultural aspects greatly into account. Oltra & Costa said that for a period of 60 years (1930-1990), every time new paths or issues were opened up, the moneymen would end up making low-quality products.

Immediate Background. Genres and Directors

In Madrid in the 1960s and 1970s, producers such as Elías Querejeta were making films that managed to break with Francoist norms, gained a lot of acclaim in international festivals and introduced to the public people such as Carlos Saura, Víctor Erice, Jaime Chávarri, Montxo Armendáriz, Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón and Ricardo Franco, who belonged to an official film school and had the support of television. Meanwhile, in Catalonia, film as an artistic manifestation ran up against a certain level of resistance because, on the one hand, there was a lack of knowledge about the medium and, on the other, the country was going through a political and economic situation that did little to favour creation. These could be the reasons why Catalan filmmakers were more prone to make products that met particular genres rather than a type of film that expressed a personal universe. The lack of an industry prevented systematic productions with professional screenwriters. Directors therefore wrote their own scripts, inadvertently leading to auteur cinema. Comedy was the most representative genre

of Catalan production overall in the period up to 1975. The fact that producers considered comedy a slighter genre led to a long list of comedies being made with minimum resources and without the participation of professional screenwriters (BALLÓ, ESPELT & LORENTE, 1990).

With regard to thrillers, there were a number of directors, such as Pomés, Luna, Herralde, Cadena and Abril, who followed the formal structure of the genre in all its elements. To some extent, it would also be possible to include names such as Agustí Villaronga and Jaume Balagueró.

Another genre that enjoyed a renaissance in the wake of the Francoist regime was the documentary. These were not documentaries in the traditional sense but rather involved the use of reality inserted into film fiction. This trend was shown in the films made within what was known as the Barcelona School, based on the influence of Neo-Realism and Nouvelle Vague. The genre was eventually called "creation documentaries" and currently has a considerable representation in Barcelona. Joaquim Jordà and José Luis Guerín are the best-known examples, being filmmakers who use documentary features within fictional works, as does the director Marc Recha.

Catalan cinema in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s was based on things ranging from the historical reclamation proposed by Antoni Ribas' *La ciutat cremada*, through to comedies, which could, to a greater or lesser extent, be considered to be in poor taste. One proposal that managed to attract an audience with a more commercial product without renouncing quality and which showed the talent of its director was *Boom, Boom* (1989), by Rosa Vergés.

The same period saw the rise of a type of film that was a continuation of the Barcelona School (EdB), with Pere Portabella's *Puente de Varsovia*. New filmmakers upheld a certain avant-garde trend, including Gerardo Gormezano (*El viento de la isla*, 1988), José Luis Guerín (*Los motivos de Berta*, 1983 and *Innisfree*, 1990), Manuel Hueriga, (*Gaudí*, 1987), Agustí Villaronga, (*Tras el cristal*, 1985 and *El niño de la luna*, 1989), Jesús Garay (*Pasión lejana*, 1987 and *La bañera*, 1990) and Marc Recha (*El cielo sube*, 1992).

According to Riambau (1992), "the best Catalan cinema has always been one that follows avant-garde concerns and which continues the parameters characteristic to film noir". With regard to the influence the Barcelona School has on contemporary Catalan cinema, it has more to do with issues

and style, the most radical sign being the trend to act within marginalisation.

Results of the Research Work

The Creative Process

It is firstly important to mention that the situation of Catalan cinema makes it necessary to investigate obvious matters. Given that questioning Catalan cinema is to question the seriousness, honesty and professionalism of Catalan directors, the research work carried out was aimed at obtaining information from Catalan filmmakers on how they perceive their creative process, which could allow them to clarify what is obvious.

The conclusions to the work suggest that, in effect, the filmmakers interviewed were able to explain the creative process they follow and have a solid process with regard to ideas generation composed of phases that they explained in detail. For example, they talked about how they feel during each phase, as well as the methods and procedures they use. Their statements seem to be completely in line with the theoretical positioning of a number of psychologists who work in creativity, such as Boden (1994), Getzels (1976), Gruber (1984), Gardner (1999), Csikszentmihalyi (1998) and Sternberg (1988), who understand the creative process as something that includes observation, complex mental operations, the approach towards problems through to advanced work phases, documentation and the involvement of emotions which rise, fall and are repeated. Ideas are the products of their imaginary or system of preferences. They are things that struggle to arise; there is a need to bring out the issues inside them and to uncover basic structures.

We can find an absolute dedication and continual organisation and re-organisation of the information they work with, which is what guides their choices throughout the process. It is also important to mention that they carry out operations that belong to creativity and self-administer external stimuli (books, films, exhibitions, etc.) in order to trigger doubt, conflict and the approach to problems; as well as chance, in a fundamentally ludic attitude and with the idea of making contact with ambiguity to explore stages of chaos that are very productive.

However, I would like to specify one particular aspect. If we

take Gardner's (1998: 50) contributions to the Psychology of Creativity into account, the element that characterises creative people is that they think deeply about the most advanced knowledge in a field and are able to link it with the experiences, problems, issues and feelings that characterised their childhoods, i.e., their experiences as a child amazed by everything around them. Furthermore, if we look at the bibliography of the directors who explain the genesis of their work, one of the most important conclusions is that they see the use of childhood and adolescent feelings, memories and experiences in a diaphanous and clear manner. In other words, they are fully aware that their childhood is present in their work, are conscious of the social and political situation they have been fated to live in, and take a long hard look at their personal problems and their origins.

In the case of the directors interviewed, I detected contradictions with regard to the assumption of a personal universe. Without mentioning names, a number of people said they had recurring issues that did not stem from their own experiences of childhood but subsequently, during the interview, I found a very clear relationship between them. In other cases they said they did not remember much about their childhood.

We could say that some of the filmmakers interviewed had a mental block when it came to assuming their role as creators, i.e., they had not assumed the use of personal imaginary and childhood experiences in their works.

Creating Effects on Viewers

One of the goals of a film is to create effects on viewers. In relation to this goal, which is closely linked to the process of ideas generation, two different positions arose with regard to the directors interviewed.

a) Some directors completely refused to understand the viewer because they associated this with commercial cinema, which they hate. However, that does not mean they don't wish to create effects on viewers, such as arouse sensations or make people feel or think, etc.

b) There was another group who kept the viewer in mind at all times during the film, without this having the negative connotations that the word *entertain* had for the first group.

In the case of directors who made genre films (particularly psychological terror or intrigue), creating effects on the

viewer was a basic goal. In some way they established themselves as specialists in transmitting emotions (positive emotions to a certain extent, but particularly negative and preoccupying ones) and this was their main motivation in making a film.

Genre cinema that wants to transmit a particular effect on the viewer and carry it to a number of peaks so that particular emotions are felt requires a special type of editing. Ander S. Labarthe "internalises this idea of editing as the science of effects, particularly in Hitchcock's films" (Villain, 1994: 138). It is interesting to note that one of the directors interviewed who was most robust in his condemnation of entertaining viewers hates Hitchcock's work.

Documentary Films

Documentary films represent a type of freedom for some of the directors interviewed because they involve a work dynamic that does not depend as heavily on the system of film apparatuses, e.g., the script, big equipment, large budgets, actors, etc. Because they are films that offer the director's personal take on a particular topic, it seems that documentaries, even when they have their own strategies, do not follow certain canons like those imposed by fiction films. "Fiction documentaries" that are on the borderline between documentaries and fiction are freed from the credibility imposed by fiction and the textual strategies of realism. They do not have to establish an agreement with reality or meet the precepts of fiction².

From the mythical point of view (Eliade, 2000), the director of documentary films (located in the borderline area between documentaries and fiction) is the creator of a new time, who also passes through a historical time that he reconstructs as he wants. He makes visible the things that are hidden behind visibility; he crosses and decodes secrets and establishes himself in discovering hidden truths (discoverer and interpreter). The artist's desire to recreate the dawning moment in which one sees things for the first time is, in the case of documentary films, revealed through practice (location + camera) rather than a structured and, in some way, rigid guide (the script). From the perspective of the imaginary and using the terms that Durand (1993:139) applied to the voyeur, documentary films, which are on the borderline between fiction and reality "are a precious and delicious violation of the gaze" which demonstrate a

predilection for "cracks, skylights, windows and even crystal and glass", but which also participate from the supreme sense of the function of fantasy.

The directors interviewed who make classical narrative films using a structured script said that the most pressurised filmmaking process is script development. According to the psychologists Barron, Feldman, Gardner, Gruber & Davis and Simonton & Torrance (Sternberg, 1988: 431), without taking into account the particular content, type of product or domain in which creativity is developed, the process involved in creation requires pressure. Taking the above point into account, the directors of documentary films do not experience a time of maximum pressure (such as directors who prepare a structured fictional script do) but rather experience a more regular type of pressure throughout the whole filmmaking process.

The Film Field and Sphere

Csikszentmihalyi (1998: 46) said that creativity could only be assessed by taking the field, sphere and person into account, as well as the interaction between them. The field is the concrete material, which has its rules and symbolic processes. The sphere corresponds to the individuals who assess and control the field and dictate the new products to be included. In the case of film, we could say that the sphere is made up of historians, theorists, critics, festivals and viewers (box-office success). The individual person uses the symbols of a particular field and contributes a new idea. But regardless of the novelty of the idea, it will only be considered new and useful if it is chosen by the sphere in order to be included in the field.

In Catalonia, films are made that go unrecognised by the sphere, which means that the people don't know the films that are made, despite a number of successes. Ventura Pons and Bigas Luna would be the most significant examples in this regard. That does not mean that other filmmakers are not recognised, but that people's general perception, i.e., the social representation (speaking in terms of social psychology), is that films are not made in Catalonia. This is even more incomprehensible when we consider that the films of the directors interviewed have won prizes abroad.

However, the most worrying problem is not just that the sphere fails to recognise the products but that, in short,

there is no well-defined field. Proof of this is that it is considered to be a triumph when a film is actually released, even if it is only in the theatres for three weeks. Film lacks the necessary industrialisation process that has occurred with other cultural manifestations.

With regard to the field, again it is surprising how silent the directors are. It seems as if they are not sure it is legitimate for them to claim their rights. They do not identify with either the field or the sphere. Another surprising thing about this sector is that directors and producers appear to not inhabit either the same community or the same landscape.

The Position of Directors

Perhaps the most relevant conclusion from the research work with regard to Catalan cinema are the two different positions that the filmmakers interviewed adopt when it comes to doing their work:

a) Some of the filmmakers were interested in breaking with classic film or narratives and continue to be influenced by Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais and Andréi Tarkovski with in their clear attempts to damage so-called commercial films, without having any clear goals about where to direct innovation, possibly because they are unable to find the aid to develop their projects.

b) Some filmmakers interested in making good films that correspond to classic narrative establish the category of "well-made films". Some of the filmmakers interviewed appeared to be more interested in making well-made films, i.e., in meeting a number of canons, than in innovation in terms of reinventing procedures. This attitude was conditioned by the environment in which films are developed. The film imaginary in Catalonia to some extent imposes a demonstration of the message implicit in the slogan "we are capable of making good films". It is important to bear in mind that both positions build two schools of thought³: that of transgression (want, desire) and that of adaptation (duty, obligation)⁴.

Both the filmmakers interested in film deconstruction and the ones interested in making "well-made films" leave the return to origin open to interpretation. In mythological terms, they reconstruct the myth of eternal return (Eliade, 2000), the cosmogonic myth, which considers the first manifestation of something as denotative and valid. On the one

hand, the myth of eternal return makes man aware of the world around him and ensures his permanence in it; and, on the other hand, offers the possibility of improvement, regeneration or treatment. However, it is obvious that this persistent return to the origins (classic film, transgressional film) can impede innovation. Given that film already has a long history, the big problem is not the lack of models but the attempt to make products that have already been made; on the one hand, in order to show that you know how to make a film and on the other hand, because you are living in a state of perplexity with regard to the model.

Conclusions

The research work in the Catalan film context about the conceptualisation that filmmakers have of their creative process revealed a series of issues that led me to draw the following conclusions:

The directors interviewed follow a clearly explained creative process with differentiated phases; they organise and re-organise the material they work with, employ resources of time, energy, documentation, etc. typical to creative people and carry out their own operations of creativity, which makes it possible to realise creative products.

- In confronting the processes of ideas generation and, in particular, creating effects on viewers, I found that there was very often a battle between the profound and the superficial, between art and show, thought and entertainment, etc. These dualities can make innovation more difficult.

- They were excessively aware of what it takes to make a movie, i.e., that viewers should not be bored, that some directors have an open field while others are not allowed to make the film they want, etc. They suggested a discourse of despondency (related to the syndrome of the masterpiece, while they usually work with amateurish gestures, eternal apprentices.)

- Considering the existence of interaction between creative producers and the environment in which films are generated, it is important to say that in the case of Catalan cinema, there was a greater influence of the environment on the process than the creator on the environment. As such, the creative process followed by the directors interviewed

was clearly influenced by a relatively undefined environment that does not transmit security or legitimise their work, something that makes it impossible for the resulting products to break with inertia, become clearly innovative and transform both the field and the sphere. The lack of entity conferred on Catalan filmmakers as a group leads to a lack of assuming their role of creators.

- Historically, Catalan cinema has not shaped its own identity, i.e., it has not been the carrier of a collective spirit. The spirited necessity of the people (which Jung referred to in 1994) is not met by Catalan filmography. To date, the Catalan public has not identified with the films made in this country. Although this might make readers think Catalans are not good storytellers, it is clear that the creative ability focuses on the theatre. (It is also curious that in the case of the theatre there is not obviously this battle between the profound and the superficial, between art and show, between thought and entertainment, but rather a broad theatrical offer is involved that covers all the phases of the aforementioned dualities).

- The historic trajectory of Catalan cinema suggests that the film collective has been discouraged and is now going through a slow recovery. The sector is immersed in a vicious circle that impedes putting into practice strategies that require a certain timeframe in which to obtain results. It seems that each person acts off his or her own bat and there is a type of short-circuit between the different artists involved in the film process.

- So-called creation documentaries establish a new link between images and reality, i.e., they are another way of making films. The creative process involved with the documentary is less pressured and has fewer stimuli. It could liven up the Catalan film sector because it represents another way of creating that seems more viable to producers. Documentaries such as *Mones com la Becky* and *En construcció* are opening up new paths. As Balló (2001) said: "We have to take into account this new way of making films as the movie theatre is a creative strategy, not just a form of funding (...). Documentaries give us the chance to prove you can make popular and profitable films without them having to be commercial"⁵.

As a general conclusion we could say that it is important to move beyond the two positions that Catalan filmmakers

adopt (deconstructionist films, classical narrative films), and in particular that it is necessary to move beyond having products that are generated with the purpose (even if unconsciously) of proving we are able to follow a model properly. Once the industry has got over having to show that it knows what to do, films in Catalonia could develop their own identity.

The people who return to "well-made" films (i.e., Hollywood films, even though there are references such as Welles, Carl Theodor Dreyer or Ingmar Bergman), are the "golden-haired boys", while the ones who return to the model of deconstructionist films (Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Andréi Tarkovski, etc.) are the "bad boys" (they are, we could say, two schools of thought with rigid canons) but, regardless of the case, both carry the weight of film regeneration in this country. We are currently witnessing the beginning of a renewal of Catalan cinema, promoted in many cases by the directors themselves, i.e., it is not part of a specific overall restructuring of the sector.

All of the above leads me to think about something that goes beyond the research work presented and also beyond the present document to raise the following question, i.e., whether there is somebody interested in maintaining the battle between the two types of films, when really the only goal should be to build a film industry in Catalonia that covers all types. Ideological positions are being maintained that stop the industry from becoming stronger and lead some directors to choose to work outside Catalonia⁶.

Perhaps there is no alternative but to recognise that Catalan cinema lacks tradition and is too militant. However, it would also be worth asking whether promoting the idea that it involves a somewhat invalid collective is a good justification for not fostering the building of an industry.

Notes

1. The Barcelona School was not a film school, but a group of people with cinematographic concerns who went by this name. Joaquim Jordà used a phrase that has since been regularly employed to describe it: "Seeing as we couldn't do Victor Hugo, we thought we'd do Mallarmé", i.e., in the Francoist context in which he was speaking, filmmakers were not allowed to make "realist" films that approached transgression or modernity (García Ferrer, Rom, 2001: 73).
2. I would like to make a clarification: the filmmakers interviewed who work in documentary films, creation documentaries or films considered to be on the borderline between documentaries and fiction do not make these films because they are unable to make fictional ones but because they choose to.
3. Limits are also imposed and precepts established in films that struggle against the classic narrative style of Hollywood and its canons. See Masson's article, "Un cinéma inamerican?" In: *Positif*, 1999, no. 458, pp. 69-71.
4. In Catalonia there is no middle ground between transgression and adaptation, as can be seen, for example, in the works of Julio Medem or Alex de la Iglesia, to give two examples from Spain.
5. BALLÓ, J. "Le llamamos documental...". In: *areavisual.com*, November 2001, no. 21, p. 1.
6. On the one hand, a genre film that achieves a certain amount of box-office success is considered a commercial product (with negative connotations). On the other hand, the "documentary gaze" is insulted and classified as "intellectual glamour" and its quality questioned.

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