

Mirant al cel (Eyes on the Sky): The (Im)possible Expiation of the Spectral Other

Jaume Martí-Olivella
University of New Hampshire
Jaume.Olivella@unh.edu

Abstract

This article analyzes the contribution of the new Catalan documentary in the current process of reclaiming the collective historical memory repressed by Francoism and by the Silence Deal established during the political transition to democracy after Franco's death. This analysis will consider some films that use the family metaphor as a national allegory to represent the plight of the Catalan nation. The main thesis of this study is to underline the need for reparation regarding the crimes committed by Francoism during and after the Spanish Civil War and the fact that such a reparation has not taken place neither in fiction nor in historical terms. This essay relies on the post-Derridian concept of "hauntology" as a theoretical framework to study the spectral textual encounters that mark the symptoms of an uninterrupted mourning process that appeals to the historical memory in search of dignity and closure.

Methodologically, this study offers a close textual reading of Jesús Garay's film *Mirant al cel* (Eyes on the Sky 2008) as a perfect case study where the spectral conflict between victims and victimizers is acted out in the context of Barcelona and Catalonia and the series of urban mass bombings carried out by the Italian Royal Legion under the direct supervision of Il Duce, Mussolini. Garay's film special relevance lies in the fact of its being one of the few documentaries that revisits those three dramatic days in March 1938 that became a tragic rehearsal of the massive urban aerial raids of the Second World War.

Keywords: fiction in documentary; Catalan cinema; historical memory

Resum

Aquest article analitza la contribució del nou cinema documental català al procés actual de reivindicar la memòria històrica col·lectiva que fou reprimida pel franquisme i pel pacte de silenci establert durant la transició política a la democràcia després de la mort del dictador. Aquesta anàlisi s'emmarca en un seguit de pel·lícules que s'estructuren a partir de la metàfora familiar entesa com a al·legoria nacional per representar la lluita de la nació catalana. La tesi central d'aquest estudi és la de subratllar la necessitat de reparació quant als crims comesos pel franquisme durant i després de la guerra civil i el fet d'indicar que aquesta reparació mai no s'ha produït ni de manera fictícia ni en termes històrics. Aquest assaig emprà com a marc teòric el concepte post-derridà de "hauntology" per tal d'estudiar els encontres textuais de caràcter espectral que il·lustren els símptomes d'un procés de dol ininterromput que interpel·la la nostra memòria històrica a la recerca de la dignitat i el tancament. Metodològicament, aquest treball ofereix una lectura atenta de la pel·lícula *Mirant al cel* (2008) de Jesús Garay, entesa com un cas d'estudi perfecte on el conflicte espectral entre víctimes i botxins és representat en el context de Barcelona i de Catalunya sotmeses a una sèrie de bombardejaments urbans massius perpetrats per la Legió Reial Italiana sota la supervisió directa d'Il Duce, Benito Mussolini. La rellevància especial de la pel·lícula de Garay rau en el fet

de ser l'únic documental comercial que s'ocupa de revisitar aquells tres dies dramàtics del març de 1938 que esdevingueren un assaig tràgic dels grans raids aeris urbans de la segona guerra mundial.

Paraules clau: nou cinema documental; cinema català; memòria històrica col.lectiva

I. The historical context—The emergence of a new Catalan documentary: A few critical observations

In a conventional sense, documentary films deal with reality, that is, they use history and historical documents as their basic reference. In the case of Catalan cinema, historical truth, even its documentation, was not easy to be represented, even accessed, during the Franco years since the regime had practically hijacked the possibility of telling other histories beyond the official one. This long historical monologue, or to put it more properly, this long absence of a real historical discourse, was compounded in the Spanish and Catalan cases by the pact of silence that was more or less explicitly underwritten by the main political actors in the transition to democracy once the physical presence of the dictator disappeared in 1975. In short, it may be safe to say that the bulk of the best new documentary cinema to emerge in Catalonia since Franco's death runs counter to both historical silences: the one imposed by the dictatorship and the other one upon which the entire precarious edifice of Spain's new democracy was built. The words of Carla Subirana, one of the youngest filmmakers to appear in the context of the new Catalan documentary with her remarkable feature film *Nedar* (To Swim 2008) are quite clear in this sense:

I don't agree with the message from the transition that all we can do is to forget. I don't want for all these stories to remain forever in the shadows of the past. It was enough with the pain and fear felt by my grandmother. As somebody told me, this is "*the rebellion of the grandchildren.*" (Subirana in Marimon; emphasis is mine)

These grandchildren have decided to break that pact of silence once and for all. What I want to emphasize in this chapter is the dual reality expressed in Subirana's words, the need to recover the historical memory and the need to do it by rearticulating the family metaphor. I have described elsewhere the persistence of the family metaphor in all the four most representative genres in contemporary Catalan cinema, namely, the urban comedy, the literary adaptation, the documentary, and the new avant-garde.¹ Here, and to go back to the title of this section, I need to add that there is not a unique and new documentary school in contemporary Catalan cinema. In fact, the documentary genre has a solid tradition in Catalonia.² Rather, what is new is the cultural centrality achieved by a number of significant films and filmmakers working in or around the parameters of the documentary genre. What is also novel is the convergence of cultural institutions in their support of the production and exhibition of documentary films, which had been traditionally relegated to marginal venues. Local and national televisions, major museums, new academic programs in the most prestigious universities, and even a few commercial theaters have consistently sponsored and promoted this refashioning of the documentary tradition in quite an unprecedented way. Among this new wealth of venues, when trying to map out the current wealth of the Catalan documentary genre, one should emphasize the formation of three more or less independent schools: the creative documentary backed by the new academic programs at the Pompeu Fabra and the Universitat Autònoma in Barcelona, the variations upon the traditional journalistic formats practiced by many professionals working for television stations, and the most experimental

output of new filmmakers working from and with new technologies. Not all those filmmakers are concerned with the issues related to Catalonia's cultural and political identity and its historical memory.

My focus here will be on the reclaiming of historical memory and its articulation using different variations on the family metaphor. In the context of Catalan cinema and of this chapter, the first use, so to speak, of that family metaphor, can be seen in the clear lineage established by many of the new directors with their predecessors in the documentary genre. Formally and even thematically, there seems to be a clear link between the current output of historically and politically committed documentaries with some of the groundbreaking documentaries produced during the transition years by a select group of Catalan directors whose careers have not necessarily been built around their non-fiction films. This is the case, for instance, of Pere Portabella's *Informe general* (General Report 1978), Jaime Camino's *La vieja memoria* (The Old Memory 1977),³ or Ventura Pons's *Ocaña, retrat intermitent* (Ocaña, an Intermittent Portrait 1978), all of which constitute true cinematic landmarks in their own right.⁴ There seems to be critical agreement, however, in considering the turn of the century as the historical moment that marks a before and an after in the Catalan cinematic scene as far as the documentary genre is concerned. Both Esteve Rimbau and Casimiro Torreiro argue this critical position as they also represent further agreement in terms of proper names that point towards the figures of Joaquim Jordà and José Luis Guerín and of their films *Mones com la Becky* (Monkeys like Becky 1999), and *En construcció* (Work in Progress 2000), as the clearer markers of a before and after. The fact that both directors have played a fundamental role as teachers and creators also reinforces their prominent position as the forerunners of that cultural construction we now refer to as the new Catalan documentary school. Further proof of that familiar relation may be seen in the strong authorial presence and the hybrid nature that characterizes many of these new documentaries.

These two elements—hybridity and auterism—have centered the critical reappraisal and the aesthetic connection with the Barcelona School and its own experimental brand of filmmaking. Ultimately, this historical link with the Catalan cinematic avant-garde has offered the new Catalan documentary a critical subject position that claims a direct lineage with what Sara Nadal Melsió calls the “invisible tradition,” a position that sets it apart from the narrative filmmaking still quite hegemonic in Spain at large, thus echoing the cultural schism brought about by the appearance of the Barcelona School in the nineteen sixties and seventies.⁵ The fact that Joaquim Jordà was both the main ideologue and one of the most important practitioners in that Barcelona School while assuming one of the leading roles in the theory and practice of the new documentary school offers a tangible bridge that helps sustain such historical connection.

The figure of Joaquim Jordà looms large over the new Catalan documentary devoted to the recovery of Catalonia’s historical memory. As if echoing the transnational nature of Catalan cinema as a whole, this new documentary points inwards and outwards. In both cases the family metaphor remains the central structuring device. This essay is concerned with the inward gaze, looking into Catalonia’s own loss of memory in order to create textual encounters that exorcize the ghosts of the past. The second cinematic direction of this new Catalan documentary casts its gaze outward across the Atlantic in order to intervene in the ongoing debate over the historical memory in many Latin American countries.⁶ Jordà’s presence in both of these cinematic directions is not only a symbolic one. He appears on screen as mentor and friend, almost as surrogate father, in Subirana’s *Nedar*, the first film to deal with the reality of Alzheimer, both as a degenerative illness and as a possible metaphor for the Catalan body politic itself.⁷ Additionally, Jordà’s last cinematic role was as co-screenwriter in Germán Berger-Hertz’s *Mi vida con Carlos* (My Life with Carlos 2010), a documentary that tells the story of Carlos Berger Pizarnik, a leading

supporter of the Allende regime who was killed by Pinochet's death squads in Chile. Berger-Hertz's political exile brought him to Barcelona where he studied film with Jordà whose support and collaboration helped the young Chilean director to produce his remarkable testimony. Jordà was also Isaki Lacuesta's professor and friend and, together with José Luis Guerín, helped shape the bold vision of the most acclaimed of the new Catalan documentarists. In this context, Lacuesta's *Los condenados* (The Damned 2009), reads almost as a counter-image of Berger-Hertz's family reunion by presenting a challenging vision of the family clashes surrounding the actual process of trying to recover the body of the lost father in the jungles of an unnamed Latin American country.

Jesús Garay's *Mirant al cel* (Eyes on the Sky 2008) constitutes almost a compendium of all the features that define new Catalan documentary film-making. It blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction in order to become a remarkable example of what Bill Nichols described as "performative documentaries."⁸ It is another powerful illustration of the family metaphor with an echo of Alzheimer's disease, represented here both as a personal malady and as a means to denounce the country's collective amnesia. The film also takes the private/public divide into the realm of the monumental, that is, of the tension between the legible ruins of the past and the unmarked public sites that illustrate the many hidden and/or forgotten "lieux de mémoire," those memory places covered up by the triple silence of Francoism, the Transition, and the discourse of sanitation and gentrification imposed on Barcelona and Catalonia to turn them into tourist paradises. *Mirant al cel*, becomes one of the most interesting memory exorcisms of Catalan cinema, where, that (im)possible justice called for Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* is visually articulated. *Mirant al cel* inscribes itself in the prominent Catalan tradition of spectral films emblemized by Llorenç Llobet Gràcia's *Vida en sombras* (1948), Pere Portabella's *Vampir-Cuadecuc* (1970), and *Umbracle* (1972), José Luis Guerín's

Innisfree (1990), and *Tren de sombras* (1997), or Jesús Garay's own *Manderley* (1980).

II. Metaphor, Intertext, and Spectral Memory in *Mirant al cel*

Among the many genre bending documentaries that have emerged in Catalonia since the turn of the century and the arrival of the epochal work by Joaquim Jordà and José Luis Guerín mentioned above, Jesús Garay's *Mirant al cel* emerges as an example that takes a step further by not only fictionally and thus publically recreating private accounts of the historical past, but by imagining, and thus rendering visible, the Other's (impossible) expiation, that spectral encounter where, as Jacques Derrida formulated it, a kind of ultimate justice may be achieved:

To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other *arrivants* to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome... Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of concern for *justice*... One must constantly remember that the impossible ("to let the dead bury their dead") is, alas, always possible. (*Specters* 175. Emphasis is mine)

Garay seems to have taken Derrida's formulation literally when he makes the ghosts of Manel Beltran, the young officer who defended Barcelona from the anti-aircraft battery on top of the Turó de la Rovira in the outskirts of the city, meet that of Mario Brindisi, the fascist pilot from the Italian Royal Legion that bombarded the Catalan capital in the three tragic days of March 1938, who now returns as a famous professor to give the keynote address in the Dante Conference organized by the University of Barcelona. That impossible encounter is made cinematically possible in order to imagine a moment of

private expiation for a crime that has received no public apology. This is precisely how Jo Labanyi interpreted Derrida's claim in her essay "History or Hauntology":

For ghosts, as traces of those who have not been allowed to leave a trace (Derrida's formulation again)—are by definition the victims of history who return to demand reparation; that is, that their name, instead of being erased, be honoured. (Labanyi 66)

This is the ultimate goal of a film that stages such a public/private moment of historical reparation in the protracted and climactic montage where we see a combination of archival footage and digital reconstruction of images of the actual bombings of the city in March 1938 while listening to the deeply moving verses of Dante's *Divine Comedy* as the poet guided by Virgil enters into the first circle of Hell. Read by the deeply affecting voice of Italian actor Paolo Ferrari, who embodies the figure of Mario Brindisi, that tragic arrival at the gates of Hell, with its "città dolente" [grieving city], its "eterno dolore" [eternal pain], and its "perduta gente" [lost people] becomes a public act of personal contrition. Viewers are subject to a double interpellation, that of the accusing gaze of Maria Beltran, the journalist whose chase of the historical ghosts of her grandfather, Republican Army corporal Manel Beltran, and of Mario Brindisi, the fascist Italian ex-pilot now emeritus professor, gives *Mirant al cel* its film-within-a film structure, and the additional "mute interpellation" (Resina 2) offered when the living ghost of Maria's grandfather climbs the big stairs and enters the University's Aula Magna in order to carry out the symbolic encounter, as if to "radicalize the present" with his spectral demand. Joan Ramon Resina, building on Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault, gives a powerful account of such radicalization:

Until that second coming—the end of history—, though, specters will not let up. They will continue to importune the remorseful memory of the living, asking for the arrears of an ever-outstanding debt. If the endurance of the grief of history as lived in each agent’s particularity—social class, ethnic or racial others, women, oppressed national groups—is evidence of a melancholy disposition, of incapacity to renounce a bygone world, it is also clear proof that affect has survived the strictures of bourgeois abstraction and has returned to haunt the *ruined spaces* of our technologized postmodern fantasy. Specters can *radicalize the present*, whose roots they are. (Resina 3; emphasis is mine)

Indeed, all the peacefulness of the present, symbolized by the audience applause upon the conclusion of Mario Brindisi’s recitation of the *Divine Comedy*, becomes disturbed for the spectator of the film with the arrival and the mute interpellation of Manel Beltran’s ghost, whose affective demand carries with it all the burden of his private history and of collective guilt. The film’s entire efficacy in terms of its capacity to elicit an emotional response largely depends on the spectator’s willingness to accept and to be moved by its hauntological appeal.⁹ A different kind of appeal, although charged with a similar critical import, is the one established by Jesús Garay from the very beginning of *Mirant al cel*, when the camera softly pans over the colorful graffiti that cover the film’s first and foremost location: the unmarked ruins of the anti-aircraft battery placed on top of the Turó de la Rovira—those “ruined spaces” mentioned by Resina. In fact, Garay’s recurrent, careful, and caring shots of those graffiti and of the ruins they both mask and unmask constitute another “mute interpellation” of sorts. They seem to lie in an in-between space, equidistant from both, the monumental ruins and their allegorical value as a legible connection between present and past, or from those other graffiti inscribed on the walls of ghettos or concentration camps, what Kathryn Sederberg calls the “rubble texts” that characterized the early expression of many holocaust survivors.¹⁰ Here, the graffiti mark the site as

one of marginal consumption thus effectively hiding its historical value as a true “lieux de mémoire/memory place.” As Quim Casas notes, Garay himself mentioned his surprise when he found these abandoned remains while looking for shooting locations for one of his television series. The first montage of the film shows in its juxtaposition of the colorful graffiti of the old battery, a series of black and white photographs of purported victims of the city’s bombings, and a panoramic shot of Barcelona framed by one of the holes in the ruined walls of the battery. What Garay seems to demand is not only the chance to look again into the past but the need to do it through the cracks of those unmarked ruins that constitute the city’s own invisible traces, the spatial ghosts that coexist with the city’s “technological postmodern fantasy” and that, from time to time, reappear to haunt it. That explains why the film’s initial panning shot ends with a soft upwards camera movement that discovers the silhouette of a contemplative figure gazing into the sprawl of the city from “el lloc on es va intentar defensar-la, on ara només hi queden restes perdudes, oblidades. Es possible que elles propiciessin la història” [The place where one tried to defend it, a place where now there are only lost and forgotten remains left. Possibly, they originated this story] (*Mirant* 1:10-20). The silhouetted figure is that of Maria Beltran, the fictional journalist whose research of the events surrounding the fatal bombings of the city in 1938 becomes the film-within-a-film that allows Garay to introduce the technique of the false documentary while, at the same time, offering him a stand-in position in order to create a performative documentary that stages both a direct reenactment and remembrance of the historical facts and a harsh critical reading of its present state of “disremembering.”¹¹ The film may also be seen as Garay’s political intervention as part of the ongoing debates on the need to recover both Catalan and Spanish historical memory. Thus, *Mirant al cel* becomes an echo and a response of sorts to the *Ley de Memoria Histórica*, approved by the socialist Spanish government in 2007, just a year prior to

the release of Garay's film. The ongoing persistence and the scope of those debates, specially concerning the series of mass graves exhumations and the highly publicized removal of Franco's remains from the Valle de los Caídos on October 24, 2019, adds an additional layer to the film's relevance today.

If we return our critical attention to the initial montage, we can see how Maria Beltran's silhouette is mirrored by the dark figure of an old man rambling around those ruins. Then, Garay's subjective camera work forces the viewers to follow Maria as she chases the ghostly presence, sharing in her feeling of his inevitable absent/present nature, both a familiar and an uncanny marker of the past haunting the present. Again, Jo Labanyi, writing about one of Spain's most remarkable spectral films, Víctor Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena* (The Spirit of the Beehive 1973), offers a persuasive analysis of the significance of such a gesture:

Thus the monster cannot be explained away as a projection of Ana's fantasy: it is "really there." Or rather, as befits a ghost of the past, it is and is not there, for it is a cinematic shadow: intangible but nonetheless embodied. The monster is thus a perfect illustration of the ontological (hauntological) status of history in the present. (78)

Here, of course, the monster is the living ghost of Maria's own grandfather, Manel Beltran, the young artillery corporal we see recreated as the young defender of his home, his city, and his country. Maria's pursuit of that spectral presence seems to be echoed by the dramatic hide and seek game that the film establishes between the two "imagined contenders" until their final climactic encounter amidst the "placid present" of the applauding audience after Brindisi's recitation of Dante's trip to hell. As mentioned earlier, the entire affective demand of the film lies on the spectator's acceptance of its hauntological structure. More than simply documenting the horror of the terrible bombings over Barcelona, Garay wants to document the spectator's

emotional response (or lack thereof) in front of those events. He seeks to embody our (lack of) memory in front of the absent presence of Manel Beltran. That Manel Beltran's memory was already lost to the ravaging effects of Alzheimer's disease, a fact only tangentially inscribed in the body of the film, simply adds to the unrelenting need for recognition and reparation. Garay's intentions are clearly echoed in Quim Casas's critical appraisal, arguably the most accurate and thorough reading of the film to date:

In the present time, the camera captures *two ghostly figures* in a different way. Whereas in the scenes concerning the war the ageing of the image gives them an unreal feel, as if they were appearing among the dead, in those that take place in the present the effect is achieved through the actors' tired expressions, the places they move around in, the digital treatment of the light and the *spectral appearance* of Manel, *a living ghost*, a rhetorical figure from the past that must not be forgotten. Old Mario exists, he is real, it is he who has aged and not the images, but during his appearance before journalists and experts on Dante he seems to be *the ghost of an implacable time* who, without lost memories, even though he refuses to acknowledge the truth, returns to the city he saw burning from the sky. That he is a specialist on the author of *The Divine Comedy* is no coincidence, as the reading of some of the poet's verses will serve him as a form of expiation before travelling across the city to that point from which Manel looked at him, on the *site* of the anti-aircraft battery, now, seven decades later, a pile of stones covered in graffiti when perhaps it ought to be *a place of permanent tribute* and not of the *poor forgotten remains* of the time that changed everything, (Casas 75/166; Trans. Andrew Saucey; emphasis is mine)

The circular ruins invoked by Jesús Garay by starting and ending his film at that same site of graffiti covering forsaken remains, far from suggesting a Borgesian or Nietzschean return of the same, becomes in itself a place of memory, a "lieux de mémoire," which Pierre Nora, as recalled by Christina Duplàa, defined as "espacios donde cohabitan la memoria y la historia" [spaces where memory

and history coexist] (Dupl a 30). In fact, Nora makes a further distinction, visually illustrated in Garay’s film: “Memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events” (Nora 22). Again Dupl a elaborates on the historian’s words:

Memory is thus a process that starts in the past but that is lived from the present, whereas history is a secular and intellectual representation of the past that becomes attractive to our critical analysis. The kind of elitism inherent in this definition of history is confronted by the “popular” character of memory, which stems from and feeds on tradition, and, for many people, is based on orality as the only means of communication. Memory is thus collective and plural while, at the same time, individual, whereas history belongs to everybody and to nobody and claims a universal authority. (Dupl a 30)

This distinction is crucial here since Garay’s film does start from a past event that it wants to memorialize in the present, namely, those tragic bombings in March 1938 that gave Barcelona the dubious honor of being the first large European city to be randomly bombed in a massive attack, becoming a historical rehearsal for the future ones in London, Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Mussolini’s direct orders to hammer Barcelona with uninterrupted bombings and his belief “that the war might be won using terror” are documented in the film with the oral testimony of Italian journalist Federico del Monte who shows a “Telegrama di Arrivo” with Il Duce’s orders to carry out those attacks. Del Monte’s testimony contributes to the film’s attempt to let the Other speak, or, at least, to imagine their response. Del Monte’s words, thus, supplement the recreated images of a young Mario Brindisi, who proudly declares:

I’m in Spain as a volunteer in the “Blackshirts.” I’m in the Legionary Air Force, a pilot of one of the best war machines built up to now, the 3-engined Savoia-

Marchetti SM79. [...] We reach the Mediterranean red cities in less than an hour from our base in Majorca. And Barcelona in half an hour. I like to fly. Aviation is the soul of the future.” (*Mirant* 30:50-31:22; English subtitles)

Indeed, Brindisi’s bravado words suggest not only his military faith but the Futurist movement’s fascination with moving machines which had such a clear impact on Mussolini’s brand of fascism.

The array of oral testimonies that Jesús Garay includes in *Mirant al cel* illustrates Christina Duplàa’s notion of memory’s “popular character” as opposed to the regulatory narratives of history. However, in this case, the voices of Catalan historians, journalists, or public officers are juxtaposed with the ones belonging to survivors of those tragic bombings. Their combined testimony of a specific historical event gives the movie a historical truth that seems to counter Mario Brindisi’s skeptical words to Maria: “Memories and the truth are destined to not cross paths ever. Believe me, Maria, it’s better to forget” (*Mirant* 55:22-43; English subtitles). Mario’s “E mellio dimendicare,” his final appeal to what Ernest Renan called “l’oubli nécessaire” is countered by Maria’s own words: “Someone once said that facts are tenacious” (55:45-48). Ultimately, the tenacity of someone searching for the facts combined with the affect created by the spectral encounter between the old enemies turns Garay’s film into a remarkable example of a performative documentary that ends up constituting a genuine contribution to the recovery of the historical memory of both Catalonia and Spain.

I would like to close this analysis of Jesús Garay’s *Mirant al cel* with a reference to his impressive use of intertextuality, both visual and literary. The structural and narrative use of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, as we have seen, occupies a center place and contributes largely to the dramatic final montage of the film where the infernal aspect of the recreated bombings is effectively and affectively compounded by Paolo Ferrari’s recitation of Dante’s powerful verses:

The infernal storm, with no respite, drags the souls with its plunder, twisting and beating them on. And like the starlings carried by their wings, in the cold, in dense flocks, so does that puff carry the bad souls from here to there, up and down; no hope ever comforts them, gives them a break, or the slightest pity. And like cranes, singing their praises, forming a long line in the air, I saw them arrive, bearing cries of pain, shadows carried away by that storm. That is why I said to him; Master, who are those who punish the black air so? (1:10:46-1:11:38)

Mario Brindisi's public expiation via Dante's excruciating portrayal of "the infernal storm" is dramatically compounded by the images of panic, havoc, and destruction of the "black air" created by the bombs over the city. Garay ends that infernal montage with another horrific document, this time the voiceover account of the Barcelona Firemen Chief whom we hear alongside an intensely dramatic "txalaparta" soundtrack:

I ordered the immediate removal of the dead body of a woman who was in an advanced state of pregnancy, and who, due to the shock wave, had ended up hanging from the iron gate of the university, totally torn apart. (1:12:55-1:13:00)

This is the same university where, in the fictional present, Mario Brindisi is reading Dante's verses. One would be hard pressed to imagine a better way of bringing back the past horror, of remembering the "dismemberment" of that atrocious attack.

Another less prominent but very important intertextual element in *Mirant al cel* is its reference to Francesc Betriu's *La plaça del Diamant*, the filmic adaptation of Mercè Rodoreda's celebrated novel. In this case, history, fiction, and inter/intratextuality are combined when Garay shows Catalan historian Josep Maria Contel explaining the existence of an underground refuge that lies 13 meters under the popular plaza in the midst of the Gràcia neighborhood in Barcelona. This is part of Contel's description of that refuge: "I aquí al fons,

el configuren diferents mines o gal.leries en forma laberíntica” [Here, at the bottom, we see a configuration of different mines or galleries in the shape of a labyrinth] (27:50-54). As is well known, the labyrinth is one of the central metaphors to represent human memory which has been employed by other Catalan documentarists, such as Joaquim Jordà in *Mones com la Becky* or Albert Solé in *Bucarest, la memòria perduda*. The fact that among the more than one thousand localized war refuges in Barcelona, the filmmaker has chosen to foreground this one in the *Plaça del Diamant*, clearly shows his desire to merge the historic and the fictional in yet another way: that of uncovering another possible site of memory right under one of the most popular “lieux de mémoire” in Barcelona, the real and symbolic location where Mercè Rodoreda had built one of the literary cornerstones of Catalan cultural identity. The visual reference to Betriu’s film is offered in a sequence that recreates how the Barcelona Metro was often used as an underground makeshift refuge by many people during the bombing raids. In the intertextual logic of the film, just like the ruined anti-aircraft batteries, most of those underground refuges have also been literally closed up, forgotten, and erased from collective memory. That is why Garay has Maria Beltran film part of her interviews with survivors of the bombings inside these refuges and why she sees Mario Brindisi himself visiting those underground labyrinths, a symbolic counterpart to his recitation of Dante’s own entrance into the gates of Hell, itself a metaphoric itinerary that Brindisi acts out in search of his own expiation.

With the inclusion of Juan Goytisolo’s *Coto Vedado* and its evocation of the writer’s mother’s tragic death in those very bombings that the film commemorates, Jesús Garay creates yet another small film-within-a-film that works like a *mise-en-abyme* of its entire project. Indeed, the passage from personal memory into oral history via the direct testimony is duly illustrated when after a superimposition of Goytisolo’s text we see the author himself giving a direct oral account of that crucial moment in his life. And yet, as he

himself ponders: “Es que el recuerdo de un recuerdo de un recuerdo es todavía un recuerdo? No lo sé. Yo creo que fue una imagen creada posteriormente por el remordimiento de no haber intervenido para que se quedara” [Is the memory of a memory’s memory still a memory? I don’t know. I think it was an image created afterwards by the guilt of not having intervened so that she stayed] (18:40-19:07). Ultimately, what Goytisolo suggests is the intimate connection between memory and mourning, the central focus also of *Mirant al cel* as it exorcises social guilt while forcing spectators to recreate historical memory, even if this is achieved via the fictional images or imagined ghosts that come back to haunt the present. As viewers of the film, we engage in a collective act of mourning that rests on the capacity to accept and respond to the emotional demands posed by these traces of the past in our lives. Like Maria Beltran’s final act of throwing the ashes of his grandfather into the sky above Barcelona from that very ruined anti-aircraft battery where he defended the city, we, the spectators of the film, are also invited to pay tribute to our deceased loved ones in a conflict whose victims never received an official reparation. After all, as Derrida said: it is possible “to let the dead bury their dead.”

Notes

A note on translations: unless otherwise specified all translations are by the author.

- 1 See my essays “Tradició i modernitat al nou cinema català: El cas d’*Elisa K.*” and “Catalan Cinema: An Uncanny Transnational Performance.”
- 2 For a detailed analysis of the richness within Catalan documentary, see the volume *Realidad y creación en el cine de no-ficción: El documental catalán contemporáneo, 1995-2010*, edited by Casimiro Torreiro. Also, for an informed discussion of the different trends within this new Catalan documentary, see Gonzalo de Pedro’s and Elena Oroz’s essay “Centralización y dispersión: (Dos movimientos para cartografiar la ‘especificidad’ del documental producido en Cataluña en la última década).”

- 3 In the case of Jaime Camino, it is worth recalling here how his contribution to the recovery of the country's historical memory was a constant in his film production, as illustrated in his *Las largas vacaciones del 36* (Long Vacation of 36 1976) and his remarkable, *España, otra vez* (Spain Again 1969), where, with the help of the prestigious cinema historian, Roman Gubern, he crafted the first commercial film to fully address the Spanish Civil War from the point of view of the vanquished. For a detailed analysis of that film and its relevance in the context of the historical memory debates, see Jorge Marí's "La hora perdida: memoria, olvido, reconciliación y representabilidad en *España otra vez*."
- 4 See, for instance, Esteve Rimbau's consideration of these and a few other documentaries from the transition as "cuñas" or wedges against the traditional separation between reality and fiction in this cinematic genre (Rimbau, op. cit; 27).
- 5 This concept was first coined by Sara Nadal-Melsió in her "Editor's Preface: The Invisible Tradition: Avant-Garde Catalan Cinema under Late Francoism." *Hispanic Review*, vol. 78, no. 4, Fall 2010.
- 6 For a detailed reading of this transnational aspect of the Catalan documentary, see my essay "El nuevo cine catalán y la memoria histórica transatlántica."
- 7 I have analyzed the centrality of the Alzheimer's metaphor in the new Catalan documentary in the essay "Historical Memory and Family Metaphor in Catalonia's New Documentary School." For a further discussion, see Sonia García López's essay "Filling the Voids of Memory: Alzheimer's Disease and Recent History in *Nedar* and *Bucarest, la memòria perduda*."
- 8 See his volume *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*.
- 9 As an illustration of a critical rejection of the film based on the lack of such a response, see Alex Gorina's review "Mirant l'enganyatall."
- 10 For a detailed account of this concept, see Kathryn Sederberg's dissertation: *Germany's Rubble Texts: Writing History in the Present, 1943-1951*.
- 11 I borrow this term from the title of Joan Ramon Resina's edited volume, *Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy*, a book that offers some of the basic analyses that inform this essay.

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