


July 2020

Cinema "Turns": Catalan Creative Documentary

Celia Sainz Delgado
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/masters_theses_2

 Part of the [Film Production Commons](#), [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Spanish Literature Commons](#), [Visual Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sainz Delgado, Celia, "Cinema "Turns": Catalan Creative Documentary" (2020). *Masters Theses*. 895.
<https://doi.org/10.7275/17164070> https://scholarworks.umass.edu/masters_theses_2/895

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

CINEMA “TURNS”: CATALAN CREATIVE DOCUMENTARY

A Thesis Presented

by

CELIA SAINZ DELGADO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2020

Hispanic Literatures and Linguistics

CINEMA “TURNS”: CATALAN CREATIVE DOCUMENTARY

A Thesis Presented

by

CELIA SAINZ DELGADO

Approved as to style and content by:

Barbara Zecchi, Chair

Barry Spence, Member

Name, Department Head or Dean as
appropriate
Department of Languages, Literatures and
Cultures

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge every person that has helped me in my academic journey until the completion of this work. First at all, I am grateful to my advisor, Barbara Zecchi, for her help, ideas and support throughout this entire journey. I have to thank her the opportunity to being able to submit the first video-essay as a master's thesis, and her inspiration to use it as an academic tool. I would also like to thank professor Barry Spence, for helping me throughout the process of this thesis.

I am highly obliged in taking the opportunity to thank professor Kevin Anderson, for helping me in the first stages of my video-essay with important ideas and contributions of how to create the tone and style of my work. Also, I am grateful to the entire class of Advanced Video Production, for their contributions with comments and ideas.

I would also like to thank my fellow graduate students, for supporting me both academically and emotionally: Elisabet Pallás, Aitor Bouso, Daniela Narváez, Paulina Ochoa, Pilar Osorio, and Eva Vázquez. I would also like to thank Eric Vázquez for helping me with the editing.

Lastly, I would like to extend my gratitude to my parents, my brother and friends for helping me cope with the uncertainty and stress of this journey. Specially to Karol Zanabria, for her company and encouragement, both in closeness and distance.

ABSTRACT

CINEMA “TURNS”: CATALAN CREATIVE DOCUMENTARY

MAY 2020

CELIA SAINZ DELGADO, B.A., UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III

M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Barbara Zecchi

This thesis focuses on four women-directed films as a way to illustrate some characteristics shared by the new Catalan creative documentary: *El cielo gira* (*The Sky Turns*, dir. Mercedes Álvarez, 2004), *Nedar* (*Swim*, dir. Carla Subirana, 2008), *La plaga* (*The Plague*, dir. Neus Ballús, 2013), and *Penèlope* (*Penelope*, dir. Eva Vila, 2018). My aim is to highlight their alternative cinematographic strategies, which stray from the hegemonic discourses of documentary filmmaking. In so doing, I analyze these films from three different angles: the relationship between the filmmaker and the material world; the alternative modalities of time; and the haptic connection between the spectator and the screen. Instead of preparing a traditional thesis in manuscript form, I engage with these films through a video-essay, the most appropriate mode of academic rhetoric and presentation to address this topic (see Keathley, 2011). Entitled Cinema “Turns”: Catalan Creative Documentary, my video-essay articulates my study into three parts: in the first part, I analyze the limits of the realist discourse; in the second, I focus on how these films approach temporality; and in the third, I address their haptic visuality.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. REALITY OR FICTION?	3
3. ALTERNATIVE TEMPORALITIES	5
4. HAPTIC STRATEGIES TO FILM THE AGING BODY	7
5. TOWARDS A POETIC AND REFLECTIVE CINEMA	8
WORKS CITED	9
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	10

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, Catalonia has become a prestigious hub of documentary filmmaking, featuring films that have stood out for their quality and the production model they have developed. For Casimiro Torreiro (7), three factors have been key to the continuous and growing success of this cinema: the financial support of Catalan television channels; the involvement of universities in the diffusion of culture and the formation of professionals; and the collaboration of two generations of filmmakers. This body of works is in great part the result of the Master's Degree Program in Creative Documentary (el Máster en documental de creación) offered by the University Pompeu Fabra, the major academic center sponsoring this film production. The program features, among their faculty and students alike, a striking number of women filmmakers.

This thesis focuses on four of these women-directed films as a way to illustrate some characteristics shared by the new Catalan creative documentary: *El cielo gira* (The Sky Turns, dir. Mercedes Álvarez, 2004), *Nedar* (Swim, dir. Carla Subirana, 2008), *La plaga* (The Plague, dir. Neus Ballús, 2013), and *Penèlope* (Penelope, dir. Eva Vila, 2018). My aim is to highlight their alternative cinematographic strategies, which stray from the hegemonic discourses of documentary filmmaking. In so doing, I analyze these films from three different angles: the relationship between the filmmaker and the material world; the alternative modalities of time; and the haptic connection between the spectator and the screen. Instead of preparing a traditional thesis in manuscript form, I engage with

these films through a video-essay, the most appropriate mode of academic rhetoric and presentation to address this topic (Keathley 190). Entitled Cinema “Turns”: Catalan Creative Documentary, my video-essay articulates my study into three parts: in the first part, I analyze the limits of the realist discourse; in the second, I focus on how these films approach temporality; and in the third, I address their haptic visuality.

CHAPTER 2

REALITY OR FICTION?

The Sky Turns, *Swim*, *The Plague*, and *Penelope* are driven by the desire to explore the boundaries between reality and fiction, or to eliminate them altogether. *The Sky Turns* and *Swim* seem to move towards reality, whereas *The Plague* and *Penelope* seem to move away from reality. However, as I argue in the first part of my video-essay, the four films reside on the edge of these two cinematic discourses. Pinpointing some common film techniques allowed me to avoid traditional divisions between documentary and fiction and show the hybridity of this cinema production.

According to a classic division, cinema has two functions in relation to reality: it can be either a “window onto” or a “frame of” reality¹ (Elsaesser and Hagen 14). The window metaphor highlights the idea of a transparent and unmediated registration of the material world, whereas the frame puts forward the artificiality of the medium and manipulates reality to construct a story. As a “window,” the stories told in these movies depart from the meticulous and long observation of people and their surroundings. To film these subjects, the filmmakers abandon a cinematic style that tries to control everything happening within the frame. Instead, these movies sometimes use an improvisational style that allows the action to develop uncontrolled in front of the

¹ In the first chapter of *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (2010), Elsaesser and Hagen discuss the division of cinema as window and frame. The former concept is circumscribed within the realist school, represented by the film theorist André Bazin, whereas the latter stems from the constructivist approach, whose main contributors are Rudolf Arnheim and Sergei Eisenstein. However, the authors acknowledge the limitations of this conceptual division and the need to dismantle the binary opposition between these two analytical modes.

camera. Nevertheless, these Catalan directors do not try to create an illusion of objectivity. They privilege their own gaze in the world, representing a certain reality through a carefully planned frame. After the filming process, the sense of the images is articulated in the montage, highlighting the connotative nature of films. In this way, the movies do not conceive cinema as a frame or a window, but rather as a combination or juncture of these two approaches.

CHAPTER 3

ALTERNATIVE TEMPORALITIES

Departing from the idea that cinema can create a time flux independent from the everyday experience in the exterior world, I propose that these movies offer a temporality that challenges the straight time of modernity. Tom Boellstorff coined the term *straight time* to refer to future-directed linearity “shaped by linked discourses of heteronormativity, capitalism, modernity, and apocalypse” (228). Against straight and lineal time, I want to oppose Julia Kristeva’s idea of women’s time. For Kristeva, women’s time represents a flow of time formed by cyclical and monumental repetition, in contrast to notions of time that universalize the masculine experience (17). Instead, Kristeva proposes a consideration of the interrelation between time, gender, and, I argue, age.

In this video-essay, I examine temporality as a subjective experience linked to a gendered and aged body, conceiving it as the combination of cultural and social constructions along with the specificities of the material body (Sandberg 17, Schües 8-9). In these terms, women’s time can be interpreted as a feminist strategy rather than as an essentialist characteristic of women. In order to challenge the future-oriented timeline that belongs to the capitalistic and patriarchal society (St. Pierre 56), I contend that these films invite engagement with a non-productive present.

The cyclical and repetitive flow of time depicted in these movies is shown through the changes of seasons or the reiterative actions of the characters, allowing us to linger in the present instead of constantly wondering what will happen next. The

characters depicted, the spaces shown, and their slow and contemplative rhythm encourage us to imagine modalities of time outside the hegemonic temporality.

CHAPTER 4

HAPTIC STRATEGIES TO FILM THE AGING BODY

This corpus abandons the illusion of objectivity not only through expressive and poetic techniques, but also by making us aware of our own involvement in the construction of meaning. In the last section of this project, I explore the use of haptic images that, according to Laura Marks, appeal to the viewer in a multisensory way and create a dynamic subjectivity between the spectator and the image (332).²

The close shots of aging women, of the texture of their skin, as well the roughness of the image or the limited range of colors create an undefined, densely textural image that keeps the gaze on the surface instead of penetrating it. Furthermore, it urges us to be aware that the camera functions as a mediator between us and the filmed subject, thus inviting reflection on the images observed.

The movies feature older women as characters with a major role. Instead of applying techniques that try to hide and mask the signs of aging (Medina and Zecchi forthcoming), haptic strategies are used to approach growing older through a narrative of affirmative aging (Sandberg 14-15). This discourse conceives aging as a constant producer of difference. Through haptic strategies, the camera foregrounds the changes generated by the course of time, bringing forward the specificities of the aging body.

² Whereas the ideas of “window” and “frame” privilege the visual dimension of the film experience, haptic theory brings a “return” to the body, which becomes relevant in film analysis of the last decades (Elsaesser and Hagner 110).

CHAPTER 5

TOWARDS A POETIC AND REFLECTIVE CINEMA

In this video-essay I posit that, through the presence of older characters, these movies present the world around us with the objective of disclosing a reality that is not usually visible in commercial cinema. Thereby, these films do not try to conceal the cinematic apparatus that is conveying that story. Instead, they put forward the artificiality of the medium through a very poetic and personal style and invite reflection on the world and on us as viewers.

WORKS CITED

Filmography

El cielo gira. Directed by Mercedes Álvarez, José María Lara P.C / Alokatu S.L, 2004.

La plaga. Directed by Neus Ballús, El Kinògraf / Televisió de Catalunya (TV3), 2013.

Nedar. Directed by Carla Subirana, Benecé Produccions / Televisió de Catalunya (TV3), 2008.

Penélope. Directed by Eva Vila, Araki Films / Eurimages / ICIC / ICAA / PolandStudio / Televisión de Galicia (TVG), 2017.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakker, Kees. "The contract of (Un) Truth: Looking for the differences between documentary and fiction film", *The Fiction of Reality*, Mar. 2002.
- Boellstorff, Tom. "When Marriage Falls: Queer Coincidences in Straight Time", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2-3, 2007, pp. 227-248.
- Canet, Fernando. "La fricción entre el azar y lo controlado en el cine de José Luis Guerin", *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, no. 72, Oct. 2013, pp. 145-159.
- Elsaesser, Thomas and Malte Hagener. *Film Theory: an introduction through the senses*. Routledge, 2010.
- Keathley, Christian. "La Cámara-stylo: Notes on video criticism and cinephilia." *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, edited by Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan, Routledge, 2011, pp. 176-191.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Women's Time", *The University of Chicago Press Journals*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1981, pp. 13-35.
- Medina, Raquel and Barbara Zecchi. "Technologies of Age: The Intersection of Feminist Film Theory and Aging Studies." *Special Issue on Feminist Methodologies*, edited by Lisa Cuklanz and María Pilar Rodríguez. vol 11, no. 2, 2020, forthcoming.
- Marks, Laura. *The Skin of the Film*. Duke University Press, 2000.
- Prout, Ryan. "Critical condition: Alzheimer's and identity in Carla Subirana's *Nedar* (2008)." *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2-3, 2013, pp. 245-263.
- Sandberg, Linn. "Affirmative Old Age: The Ageing Body and Feminist Theories on Difference." *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2013, pp. 11-40.
- Schües. Christina. "Introduction: Towards a Feminist Phenomenology of Time." *Time in Feminist Phenomenology*, edited by Christina Schües, Dorothea Olkowski and Helen Fielding, Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. 1-17.
- St. Pierre, Joshua. "Distending Straight-Masculine Time: A Phenomenology of the Disabled Speaking Body." *Hypatia*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2014, pp. 49-65.

Torreiro, Casimiro, editor. *Realidad y creación en el cine de no-ficción*. Cátedra, 2010.