

FORMATS 2

A Neorealist essay: *El nostre pa de cada dia* (1950). News of an amateur short recovered

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In 1950, two *cineistes* from Sabadell (1), Joan Blanquer and Ramon Bardés, in difficult conditions in terms of both the footage available and the harshness and brutality of the repression of the Franco dictatorship in the first years after the Civil War, a surprising film, which is just now beginning to emerge from the shadows of the history of the culture in which the cinema is set: *El pa nostre de cada dia* (2). The film is a short which lasts barely ten minutes, silent and without any soundtrack. The film-makers - Blanquer wrote and directed and Bardés did the photography- were not sufficiently well received in the film-club movement at the time to add the soundtrack and they limited themselves, in the few showings they managed to hold, to projecting the film accompanied by music from a record: a foxtrot.

The credits had informed the 1950 audience that they were about to watch a "Neorealist essay", which makes the idea of restoring the sound even more attractive; the film is an important piece of the social history of the cinema in Catalonia. *El pa nostre de cada dia* is an important film because it talks about the cinema as document and, possibly even more indicative, as a space of the collective imagination which means that, although the film-makers had not seen a film which was totally banned at the time, *Tierra sin pan*, the Sabadell short can be related to the medium-length feature that Luis Buñuel shot in Les Hurdes in 1933 and which was announced as a "cinematographic essay". Like Blanquer and Bardés, Buñuel showed his film without sound the first few times, with just background music from a record-player, the opening of Brahms' Fourth Symphony. When the soundtrack was added to the images and the commentary, it was a shock to the audience of the day, in particular to the critics, and with the passage of time led to some noteworthy theoretical and practical disquisitions on sound in the cinema (3). In both cases, moreover, we are looking at films which are talking about a subject which is seldom dealt with in the cinema, hunger, one which both films announce in their titles through the same word, "pa" (bread) (4).

I shall now give an account of the narrative construction of *El nostre pa de cada dia* and then go on to consider its interest as a document and as a work of cinema.

A field of waving wheat fills the screen and, by way of contrast, thistles in the

foreground give way to a slow pan across the wheat field with factories outlined against the sky in the background. It is harvest time; the wheat is beginning to be stacked. The camera then pans again, this time across a group of caves and takes us to rows of dwellings carved out of the land. There is a boy of about ten on the street. He is dressed in rags and is waiting. A woman, still young, with a black handkerchief on her head walks up to him, gives him a piece of bread and walks away. The boy eats whilst his mother takes a path that starts to climb. The boy continues to gnaw the crust and the mother continues to climb; the earth steps wind upwards and the woman keeps climbing up to the plain. The boy goes along the road; it seems that he is going to climb the same steps as his mother, but he turns away, his hands in his pockets, his head bowed.

The boy enters one of the houses, which is almost bare. There are a few cooking utensils and a table with a large drawer, which he opens to look for bread, but he does not find any. He looks at the room, opens a trunk, but finds nothing there either. He goes out onto the road, lit from behind, moves gradually away, looks up, finds nothing. He walks on and slowly climbs the same steps that his mother went up earlier.

There is a kite flying. A group of children are chasing after it. The boy passes nearby and shakes his head, follows his road alone; the other children carry on playing with the kite.

We are up on the level of the wheat fields. The boy walks in among the crops; behind we can see the electric pylons and some low hills. The boy touches the wheat, looks at it, walks through the stubble and the stalks that have not yet been cut, goes up to them and starts to eat grains of wheat.

A peasant throws stones at the boy to chase him away; the boy runs and runs; his mother is coming along the road. The boy runs towards the camera, a car hurtles towards the audience in extreme close-up; there is a violent impact. The car goes out of frame, the mother runs, the children with the kite run too, the boy is stretched out on the ground. The car raises dust off the road as it drives on towards the factory, on and on until it arrives.

The mother runs, so do the children, the mother runs, the children run, the boy is still stretched out, the mother arrives and kneels down, takes him in her arms, hugs him and kisses him, looks into the distance, her face expressionless, the car and the factories make up the frame, the other children cluster round the mother and her son. The camera focuses on the boy's face, travels over the dead body and ends on the hand, which is still holding some wheat stalks. The end.

As a document, *El nostre pa de cada dia* speaks volumes. It is an invaluable and possibly unique cinematic witness to the extent to which, even in 1950, in the industrial and industrious Sabadell countryside and city, wheat and industry, the caves and the car, lived side by side, in the same visual field. The caves in the film are the

constructions where the first wave of immigrants settled after the Civil War; they had only recently arrived there. They had never been filmed before and, what is even more striking, they disappeared twelve years later, in 1962, in the great flood that changed the landscape of Sabadell, destroying both the caves and the wheat fields that appear in *El nostre pa de cada dia* (5).

The film is also interesting as a document, because it is a daring statement about the world of immigration. A statement that is not interested in dealing with the question of local people and outsiders. The contrast is between country and city, between pre-industrial and industrial ways of life, between the wheat and the factory: the two ways of life existed at the time, in Sabadell, as in so many other places, and one had to be sacrificed to the other. The very brevity makes the narration especially forceful in cinematic terms, in particular when the car fills the screen with an abruptness that takes the audience back to other cinematic moments of violence through surprise, like the appearance of an alien that bursts into the film without the slightest warning.

The foxtrot on the soundtrack completed the story, the Neorealist essay of the two *cineistes*, their post-war film tryout. Can we imagine the effect on their contemporaries, on the amateurs who saw it at the discreet family gatherings which, in the post-war years, the daring meetings of *cineistes* in the years of the Republic had become? Neither Blanquer nor Bardés made any more films (6), and even today they find it difficult to remember those years and the impulse that led them to go Sunday after Sunday to the caves on the banks of the river, to make friends with the boy who played the lead in the film, a sick child who was soon to die, to choose the woman who would play his mother (7).

The film should be restored. The soundtrack should be installed within its cinematic architecture, just as Buñuel provided the sound for *Tierra sin pan* years later, in 1937 in Paris. *El nostre pa de cada dia* is a film construction which is both part of the history of cinematic aesthetics and the social history of the post-war and, moreover, of considerable interest in the growing field of study and research represented by the amateurs, the *cineistes* (8).

Notes:

(1) The history of the cinema in Catalonia has its own word *cineista*, meaning a person who, in the cinema from the 20s on, is known as an amateur film-maker, and who has no intention of turning professional. Nevertheless, owing to the development of the non-professional movement in Europe and the United States, the French word *amateur* replaced it and only now has it been recovered in different studies in France and the United States. In this article we use it to refer to the impulse behind the movement in Catalonia, which gave rise to a substantial filmography and the word itself. The history of the Catalan movement, which was the pioneer in Spain, has been written by J. Torrella in his now classic *Crónica y análisis del cine amateur español* (Madrid, 1965) and has been the subject of various local publications: by the Federació Catalana de

Cine-Clubs and the Federació Espanyola de Cine-Clubs. Sabadell has been one of the nerve centres of the history of the *cineistes*, with film-makers such as Llorenç Llobet-Gràcia, who was to produce a splendid account of the *cineista* experiment in what we might call his only commercial film, *Vida en sombras* (1947).

(2) I would like to thank Muriel Casals, lecturer at the UAB, and Jordi Calvet, director of the Sabadell Historical Archive, for introducing me to the film which is the subject of this article. *El nostre pa de cada dia* was shown (on video) in the presence of the authors on 9 December 1997 at the Sabadell Historical Archive, where the original copy is conserved. Torrella's work mentioned above makes no mention of the film, which has no bibliographical references prior to this article.

(3) See (1997) Ibarz, M. *Buñuel documental*. Las Hurdes, Tierra sin pan i el seu temps. Doctoral thesis. Media Studies Department. UPF. Barcelona (to be published), in particular the epigraph "La concepció sonora de *Las Hurdes* com a genealogia cinematogràfica" (The sound conception of *Las Hurdes* as cinematographic genealogy), pp. 293-301, of the chapter on "L'obra i els seus crítics. Distanciaments i assimilacions (1934-1997)". In Buñuel's film, the sound conception experiments both with the music and the tone of the delivery of the commentary.

(4) There are few studies of conceptual, rather than narrative, themes in the cinema which are related to hunger. One of the first scholars to point that out was a commentator on Buñuel's film, C-J Philippe, in (1963) "Luis Buñuel, auteur de films", in *Études Cinématographiques*, n° 20-21, Paris. Other films dealing with hunger which might be considered are Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, also 1933, Jean Renoir's *Toni* (1935), the anarchist production *Aurora de esperanza*, directed by A. Sau in 1937, or John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Another turning point is to be found in the cinema news bulletins and, from 1945 on, in the television ones.

(5) Testimonies collected by the author at the session mentioned in note 2, at the Sabadell Historical Archive, in the framework of some meetings in memory of the floods in 1962.

(6) Joan Blanquer later wrote the screenplay for *Sonata* (1953), made by the Barcelona *cineista* and photographer Quirze Parés, silver medallist at the Union Internationale de Cinéma Amateur (Torrella: op. cit. pp. 176-177). Both the theme and the aesthetic are radically different from *El nostre pa...*

(7) There are strong connections between the film and Buñuel's. Both are films made outside the industry of the time. They share images (the roads in the village, the insides of the houses, the people's ragged clothes) and, speaking as a student of Buñuel's documentary, I see that the Sabadell film confirms from an unexpected angle, almost twenty years later, that the treatment in *Tierra sin pan* does not exaggerate the situation of the inhabitants of Les Hurdes in 1933. The two films seem to be saying, moreover, that the cinema can bear witness to a past which is being rapidly tucked away in the

attic by the dominant social memory, in the case of the two films the statement - anarchist and surrealist in Buñuel, Neorealist in Blanquer and Bardés- about the extreme poverty of Les Hurdes in 1933 and Sabadell in 1950. The two films also share a documentary *mise en scène* and their classification by their authors as essays, something very unusual in the history of the cinema before the 70s.

(8) Notable among the studies which have taken such an interest in recent years are the works by Patricia R. Zimmerman (1995) *Reel families. A Social History of Amateur Film*, Indiana, and Roger Odin, director (1995) *Le film de famille*, Paris. Zimmerman's book proposes a history of amateur cinema, from 1897 to the present day, as an independent way of seeing and practice: it traces the amateur cinema scene in the USA from the avantgardes in the 20s to experimental cinema (from Maya Deren to Kenneth Anger and others) and video in the 70s, stressing their close relation with Hollywood and, in a brilliant chapter, the amateurs' influence on the films of the Second World War, which would lead to a major modification of documentary aesthetics, inherited later by direct cinema. The volume coordinated by Odin focuses on the diversity of uses: private (the family film and its role in the family and its evolution) and public (the family film as historical document, as artistic production, as an element of a television broadcast, etc).

