

Imma Merino

From the *Xino* to the *Raval*

Cinema and the construction of a new reality

Whether in the north or the south, all cities have their ugly district. A district with narrow streets where the sunlight barely reaches; a district of wretched dwellings, with just enough air so as not to suffocate, inhabited by humble folk forced to exist side by side with crime and immorality

(From *Sin la sonrisa de Dios*, a film directed by Juli Salvador in 1957)

During 1998, a group of students on the Creative Documentary Master's course at Pompeu Fabra University began a cinematographic experience in the district now called the Raval. They did it together with a filmmaker born in Barcelona who, up to then, had made films in Castile, in the Ireland discovered with John Ford and in Normandy where he glimpsed trains in shadows.

For the first time he was preparing to film in his hometown, but not on his own patch, because the *Xino* (as he prefers to call the district, though he is aware that the name refers to a lost reality) is a long way from his middle-class origins. It so happened that, while he was preparing for a shoot that was long and patient, the filmmaker stayed in several hotels in the district. Like a traveller who wants to make contact with a reality unknown to him. With a gaze that wishes to become

a quest for something, he's not quite sure what. Because José Luis Guerin, the filmmaker in question, tries to experience the making of a film (in short, the cinema) as a learning process.

The Transformation of a District

So it was that, without a definite screenplay written in advance, he began shooting a film that three years later was presented at the San Sebastián film

festival with the title *En construcción* (Under Construction). In fact, together with the crucial intervention of the editing that synthesised a hundred hours of footage into 127 minutes, the film was constructed from the filming of (or taking as its reference) the construction of a new apartment block in front of the church of Sant Pau del Camp. At the beginning of the film, after some documentary footage relative to the atmosphere in the district at the end of the 1950s, there appears a wall with some eyes painted on (we later see it demolished) whilst, overprinted, some letters define the idea: “Things seen and heard during the construction of a new building in El Chino, a working-class district of Barcelona that was born and died with the century” —the 20th century, obviously, at the end of which the film was made. It continues with the image of a poster that, with a design for the Rambla del Raval, announces: “landscaping work for the new public space of the Raval Central Plan (July 1998-December 1998)”. Straight away an old ex-seaman (one of the characters in the film) starts, or perhaps resumes, talking to himself, saying that, having travelled the world and seen a city like London with such large squares and streets, he now walks narrow, old-fashioned, outmoded streets. The verbal diarrhoea of the seaman (on land and homeless) ends as some graffiti appears: “No to demolition, yes to renovation”.

In just over five minutes, then, *En construcción* places the audience in the context of an urban space affected by a process of transformation that, designed in the offices of the local authorities in connivance with the real estate investors (if not speculators), was to put an end to a working-class district, as seen in the documentary images by

the photographer Joan Colom, filmed in 8 mm in 1959, and in *El alegre Paralelo* (1960), by Enric Ripoll Freixes. These fragments, which end with a sailor in the 6th Fleet staggering drunkenly towards the Columbus monument, also reflect an atmosphere of prostitution that has had something to do with the degradation of the *Xino*, many of its inhabitants succumbing to a marginalization and a precarious existence that cried out for social intervention. But, pointed to by the graffiti “No to demolition, yes to renovation”, what is evident in *En construcción* is the questioning of an urban redevelopment plan that, rather than improving the living conditions of the population of a district that should have been renovated, brought about the demolition of buildings that led to the inhabitants being moved out to other areas.

Thus, in relation to the transformation of the place, the building site foreman tells his son that, upon arriving in Barcelona, migrants like him bought a watch and paid a visit to the *Xino* (“what with all the life there was”) whereas now “we’ve decided to create a new district... the mayor of Barcelona wants it done and we have to achieve it”. At the same time Abdul Aziz El Mountassir (builder, poet and communist) maintains a significant dialogue with another Moroccan who is starting to learn the job of building houses: the latter says that although the new buildings are not for the people of the district, those moved out are given a flat in another district, while his workmate replies that they only give them 800,000 pesetas to be going on with... At the end of the film, the potential new occupants arrive, who, when visiting the flats, assess the quality, ask about security and make comments, often

derogatory, with regard to the human (children and old people staring from the balconies) and physical views: "Let's hope that in years to come everything is new and the views are prettier..." or "What I don't want is people hanging washing out on the balcony...".

Despite these specific references within dialogues that José Luis Guerin claims to have recorded without dictating or manipulating them, although the presence of the camera always determines what people say and the possible induction of situations and comments forms part of the "chef's secrets" of the film, *En construcció*n does not contribute an explicit message as do militant films or those trying to make a point. Explicitness goes against the grain of Guerin's subtle and suggestive cinema; influenced by Rossellini, he prefers to show why the audience should be free to reflect on the matter. The filmmaker provides a portrait of a series of characters (a possible criticism of the film is that all of them are Spanish speaking, as it gives a biased view of the social make-up of the place and, contrasted with the fact that many of the hypothetical new occupants speak Catalan, creates the reductionist impression that a working-class immigrant district is being occupied by the Catalan middle class) while, with a lot of brief shots, he sketches other portraits: children playing in the street, women hanging out the washing, old men looking from a balcony or, homeless, taking refuge in a building site on New Year's Eve. Through these snippets, a human landscape is seen.

Guerin, however, has not avoided criticism from those who consider that his denunciation is not incisive enough or that, generally speaking, he softens the harshness of the reality shown and

thus hidden. The filmmaker claims that the cinema (unlike the television or other media, which, in the specific case of the Raval, have tended merely to present the district and its inhabitants in relation to criminal acts, the situation of marginalization or the conflicts resulting from the recent immigration, as well as the pederasty case dealt with by the other great film made there in the last few years: *De nens*) is a medium capable of reflecting the complexity of life and highlighting sides of people reduced to a single dimension: the lives of immigrants, then, are not just about problems with the law or racism, they can talk about poetry, the class struggle and the sadness of loneliness; the young girl who becomes a prostitute can find true love and, at times, play football; the old tramps can fantasize about their lives. Moreover, the filmmaker's idea is that reality, in all its harshness and crudity, is there and it's not necessary to emphasize it: it's enough that old men sleep in the street or girls become prostitutes and that, evicted, they wander from house to house, whether being built or torn down. By the way, despite its title, the film contains more images of destruction than construction: houses demolished, walls knocked down, rubble piling up. And, in this landscape that looks like a disaster area or the aftermath of a catastrophe, aggressive mechanical diggers, impassive cranes and haughty scaffolding. Only inside the chosen building is the work humanised and the dignity of the job seen as the builders talk, putting up walls, mixing the cement, looking at the plans or using the spirit level.

The machine that builds and destroys, however, is halted by an unexpected discovery announced by the change from a trowel to a spatula in successive

shots: skeletons appear and a Roman burial ground emerges. The past thus bursts in on the present and reminds us that human life, and human works, are subject to the devastating passage of time and therefore to expiry: they come back as remains. In a splendid choral sequence, the neighbours talk about the inevitable destiny common to all (death, which makes us all equal) and the futility of so much worrying; they comment perplexedly that they have been living on top of the dead; they claim that a cemetery is a sacred place and that they ought to stop building; they speculate on the language of the dead people (“did they speak Catalan?” “No, they all spoke Latin then”) and about their identity (“were they Romans? So, they weren’t Spanish then?”), and when they lived. It is as if they were calling on the dead of all ages: the Roman period (as is the case), the 6th century, “the time of the Moors”, even the Spanish Civil War. Thus, a man maintains: “They’re from the civil war. The ones they killed, they buried and you wouldn’t have known, it was as if nothing had happened”.

These remains were found in front of the church of Sant Pau del Camp, which, dating from the 10th century, is the oldest conserved building in a district that for a long time was an area mostly occupied by monastery gardens. The fact that this church is still standing must have something to do with what we glean from a conversation concerning *Land of the Pharaohs*, the film by Howard Hawks about the construction of the pyramids: in the end the buildings that last the longest are those that are designed to be the expression of power.

Crime fiction in the *Xino*

The church of Sant Pau del Camp appears fleetingly in a film that Juli Coll made in 1957, an adaptation of *És perillós fer-se esperar*, by Josep Maria Espinàs, entitled *Distrito v*, in a decade when part of the Barcelona film industry opted for the crime or detective genre, under the influence of the so-called American film noir. With production companies like Emisora Films, Iquino’s and Este Films, and the participation of, among others, the afore-mentioned Juli Coll, Juli Salvador, Antonio Isasi, Joan Bosch, Francisco Pérez Dolz, Alfonso Balcázar, Juan Fortuny, Josep Maria Forn and, obviously, Ignasi F. Iquino, there developed during the 1950s and part of the 60s a genre that caught the public’s imagination with films of inevitably varying quality based on original works of literature or at times on true events, although they could be so transformed as to turn (as the Francoist press did) the armed actions of the anarchist resistance fighters Facérias or Quico Sabaté (without mentioning them by name, obviously) into common criminal acts. Examples of this are *El cerco*, *Los atracadores* and the notable *A tiro limpio*, by Pérez Dolz.

In the well-researched book *Ficción criminal a Barcelona 1950-1963*, to which I refer readers who may be interested in the subject, Ramon Espelt claims that, made in 1950, the two films introducing the police genre to Barcelona (and indeed Spain) are *Apartado de Correos 1001*, directed by Juli Salvador, and *Brigada criminal*, directed by Ignasi F. Iquino. In the two films, but especially in Iquino’s, there is a moralistic aspect (not always associated with the turmoil and the ambiguities of the noir genre) and an exaltation of the police, but, as Ramon Espelt points out, they brought a realist

dimension that, with regard to filming in urban settings, marks a difference with respect to the historical, folkloric, rural cinema that predominated in Spanish films of the 1940s. This realist dimension even led to the consideration that they introduced certain neo-realist criteria.

This was also said (although, certain critics of the day added, with a much more positive moral outlook than Italian neo-realism, accused of Marxist influence and therefore of being negative with respect to the possibilities of human redemption) about a film not within the police genre, but which was also shot partly on location in Barcelona: *Sin la sonrisa de Dios*, which, directed in 1957 by Juli Salvador, also features in the credits of *En construcción* for having had footage taken from it. The church of Sant Pau del Camp is also in it, near to which are the Felip II schools where a teacher (Conrado San Martín) tries to prevent the kids of the district ending up as “yobs —old, bored and disappointed kids whose only aim in life was to become more mindless”. This is stated by a narrator’s voice, which adds: “They are the first victims of the district, with nothing nice about their lives, as if they didn’t even have the consolation of a smile from God”. This district, as seen in the film, is none other than the Barrio Chino which, without actually being mentioned by name, is presented at the beginning of the film with the quote that heads this text: “Whether in the north or the south, all cities have their ugly district...”

Sin la sonrisa de Dios (based on a novel by José Antonio de la Loma, who, over the years, was to turn “El Vaquilla”, “El Torete” and other “street punks” into short-lived film stars), exemplifies a kind of approach to marginalisation where (with the children, always the love for the

children, as a paradigm of human frailty) social sensitivity, conformist moralising and melodramatic, even theatrical, exploitation of a certain reality are mixed up. Not much to do with the profound spirit of neo-realism, which some years later Pier Paolo Pasolini would take to extremes. The film also points to the uncertain frontier between the reality of the Xino district and an imaginary one that links it with a scene of crime and ruin.

This lack of definition is also present in the afore-mentioned *Distrito V*, a title that, at the time of the film’s release, brought forth this consideration from J. Ruiz, the critic of *El Correo Catalán*: “Couldn’t they have found another title that sounds less like a dramatic story from the inter-war years?” However, despite the title’s explicitness, the physical geography is barely noticed (and, in fact, neither is the human). There is only the above-mentioned fleeting image of Sant Pau del Camp, some brief shots of Carrer Nou de la Rambla (then Conde del Asalto) filmed from a window or a roof, from where we can also see other roofs in the surrounding area with the bell tower of Sant Agustí Vell visible. This is because, based on the play by Espinàs, *Distrito V* is a film of interiors (of a single interior) and not exteriors.

As the title of the adapted play says, the character played by Alberto Closas (a delinquent suspected of having committed a crime) will find out for sure that “it’s dangerous to keep others waiting”. The film begins with a group of men going up the stairs of a building to the top floor, where on the door a notice says “Dance School”, but which is also a run-down hostel. They have just committed a robbery and are waiting for the last man (Closas), who has the money they have stolen from a factory.

The wait drags on and the suspicions about the character who does not arrive (after all, a stranger to the group) mark the beginning of a narration in flash-back that, from different points of view, reconstructs how they spent the days leading up to the robbery in this same hostel/dance school. A combination of moralising (guilt, repentance, punishment) and pseudo-existentialist fatalism (all the characters have a frustration and have stolen impelled by a personal dream that will not come true) leads to a denouement where, without them actually appearing, the arrival of the police is announced.

As I have said, Juli Coll's film makes an abstraction of the physical space of *Distrito V* to project on it the idea of a place of corruption or, in the words of another critic of the time (A. Martínez Tomàs, of *La Vanguardia*), "the legend of being a dissolute and dangerous area" with regard to a "district whose reputation is still ambiguous". This "still" has to do with this previous claim: "the old district, now in the process of transformation and disappearance". So it is that, almost forty years before the carrying out of the redevelopment plan in the fifth district, it is claimed that the old district is in the process of transformation and disappearance. At the height of Francoism, then, the need to cleanse the district (of prostitutes, poor people and criminals, I suppose, after eliminating the anarchists) must also have spread, in keeping with an ideal of order, hygiene, safety and morality. Filmed in the same period, at the end of the 1950s, the images reproduced at the beginning of *En construcció*n contradict this, showing a bustling life based around prostitution. Even the above-mentioned fictional films of the period denounce

(with all the limitations you can imagine) the wretched living conditions in the district.

Nowadays, despite the "cleansing" operation of recent years, the Raval still does not conform to the ideal conceived in the town hall. "They wanted to cleanse the place of poor people and turn it into a kind of intellectuals' district. But while they were emptying the district of one sort, Moroccans and Pakistanis were sneaking in under the door", says Joaquim Jordà, a local resident and director of the film *De nens*, about the trial of those accused in the pederasty case that shook the Raval in 1997. In the film, the anthropologist Manuel Delgado insists that one thing is a (hypothetically) ideal city, designed in the council offices, and another thing is the real city, alive, contradictory and full of conflicts.

Against defencelessness

In the summer of 1997, the Barcelona police announced that a pederasty ring in the Raval had been broken up. A large part of the media spread the police's version of events. After some months, the supposed pederasty ring had been reduced to five men charged: two with abusing minors and three with having "sold" their children for sexual purposes. Some people initially involved in the case (and later freed without charge) were members of groups that, against the judgement of the Raval Residents' Association, had questioned the urban redevelopment, denouncing the real estate speculation and the re-housing of people without resources.

It was also in summer 1997 that Jordà, after living for some years in Madrid, returned to Barcelona, where in the 1960s (along with José Maria Nunes, Pere

Portabella, Jacinto Esteva, Carles Duran, Ricard Bofill) he had been part of the so-called Film School of Barcelona, which, with its formalist concerns, showed little interest in the social reality of the *Xino* district. As the result of a stroke, Jordà had become disoriented in Madrid and chose to regain his bearings in the Raval district. Then, he took part in Pompeu Fabra University's first venture in the creative documentary master's course: *Mones com la Becky*, where he talks to patients in a psychiatric hospital and, based on his own experience as a result of the stroke, questions the boundaries between health and illness, normality and abnormality. *Mones com la Becky* launched an initiative with a freedom that seems to have inspired that of much of the subsequent productions created within the master's: *En construcció*, *Cravan vs. Cravan*, *El cielo gira*, *Tierra negra* and, among others, *De nens* itself.

Living in Carrer de la Cera and becoming interested in the libertarian groups that are trying to relive the district's anarchist past, Jordà monitored the pederasty case as a resident of the Raval. He met people affected for having been arrested without proof and was made aware (since the stroke he has had difficulty reading) of the book by the journalist Arcadi Espada (*Raval. Del amor a los niños*) who develops the theory of a police set-up with the media's complicity. A theory shared by Jordà, who is convinced that there was a desire to discredit certain groups opposed to the criteria of the council's policy in the Raval.

Unlike Guerin, Jordà began shooting with an idea about the reality he wanted to show: the Raval and its transformations, based on a certain and significant diverse fact, so that the cinema once again became interested in the "dark history"

of the district, although with a critical spirit and cinematographic criteria very different from the crime fiction of the 1950s. However, despite basing himself on a previous idea, Joaquim Jordà (who also explores the uncertain territory between documentary and fiction) does not work with a closed screenplay that would make the film immune to the unforeseen events that may take place during filming. Thus, he was clear that the film would be constructed with the images filmed at the trial. After all, a trial has a strong dramatic structure, but at the same time a real trial cannot be controlled by the director. For this reason the attitudes of judges and lawyers (arrogant gestures, class-based attitudes, details of incompetence and some nodding off during the sessions) could not have been staged, but were caught in an unforeseen way, though deliberately chosen and edited.

De nens (with a free, but at the same time firm, structure that incorporates interviews, representations of the events and songs with which Albert Pla acts as a reporter) is a film that takes aim at certain forms of power that tyrannise reality or make it their own at the service of a certain order of things: the judicial system, the police, the media, town planning. All this, while Jordà tries to protect the accused from the prying eyes of the cameras. Guilty or not, they are examples of the defencelessness of the poor and excluded. In the end, of a certain population of the Raval ■