

*A Postmodern Exploration of the Screened Dialogue between Past and Present in
Barcelona (Un Mapa) and Barcelona as a Dystopia*

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Abstract

This paper highlights the postmodern elements in Ventura Pons' *Barcelona (un mapa)* (2007). In focus is the screened representation of a sophisticated Barcelona portrayed against the backdrop of a transformative post-Olympic era, and Pons' tendency to steer away from urban gloss. Rather, he highlights the dystopic elements of his native city. The film emphasises the negative aspects of rapid urban change in dialogues where ambivalent characters struggling to come to grips with Barcelona's global makeover reject the Catalan capital rather than praise it and take pride in their urban existence. Also analysed is Barcelona seen as a place that can be mapped and spatially explored, and the use of the photo effect to connect the pre-democratic past with the global present. Based on Lluïsa Cunillé's screenplay *Barcelona, mapa d'ombres*, the title *Barcelona (un mapa)* reflects shadows from the past that linger in a visual narrative mainly steeped in the present. 1990s postmodernity is reflected in pastiche elements and a collage-like structure, where a cinematic montage challenges chronological time patterns. The storyline criss-crosses between past and present through the repeated use of flashbacks and an opening scene featuring black and white footage from the moment Franco forces invaded Barcelona in 1939. The viewer is then swiftly transported into a colour-tinged present. This non-linear narrative structure underscores the film's postmodernity, as does the episodic plot containing a number of lengthy dialogues. Rather than on external action, Pons explores complex character relationships and the relationship between these characters and their increasingly postmodern habitat.

Keywords: Pons, Barcelona, postmodernity, post-Olympic, Spain, cinematic montage, past and present

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1. Introduction

This analysis highlights the postmodern elements in Pons' *Barcelona (un mapa)* (2007). In focus is the constant dialogue between past and present in the film partly achieved through interspersed sequences of real footage from Barcelona's past, which adds to the mosaic and cartographic layout of the film. Of additional interest is Pons' representation of Barcelona perceived as a dystopic place, achieved through a skilful use of camera techniques and angular shots that cause a feeling of unease in the viewer. Also, the characters themselves reject their city's non-traditional architecture by verbally criticizing more recent urban constructs and, particularly, Antoni Gaudí's highly contested la Sagrada Família.

Ever faithful to the Catalan region, language and culture, Pons has proven repeatedly that success can be achieved also by working in his regional language. In films where characters generally converse in their native Catalan, their often problematic and strained relationship with each other and also with their transformed urban space is highlighted while at the same time Pons paints a global image of Barcelona that reflects his awareness of concurrent urban developments. In the words of Jaume Martí-Olivella (2011, 200), "Ventura Pons is perhaps the only film-maker who has established a personal cinematic idiom about the city [of Barcelona], his own city." Indeed, this becomes evident in Pons' tendency to repeatedly use Barcelona as a metropolitan backdrop for his plots. Coming from a theatrical background, Pons in his oeuvre draws inspiration from novels or stage plays by prominent Catalan writers and playwrights such as Lluís-Anton Baulenas, Sergi Belbel, and Lluïsa Cunillé. The cinematic result is a number of theatrical elements, scenes where only a few characters converse at a time, and very direct dialogues that often have an almost visceral effect on the viewer.

Postmodern cinema has been defined as one that

thrives on simulation (using comedy or pastiche to imitate former genres or styles), prefabrication (reworking what is already there rather than inventing materials), intertextuality (texts exist in relationship to other texts and are tissues of quotations from other texts) and bricolage (assemblage of works from eclectic sources) (Chaudhuri 2005).ⁱ

In keeping with these criteria, several of Pons' films can be regarded as cross-disciplinary as the former theatre director establishes a connection between theatre and cinema. This is certainly the case in *Barcelona (un mapa)*, based on Cunillé's 2004 screenplay. The plot revolves around tenants notified to vacate their flats in an apartment building in central Barcelona when ailing elderly landlord Ramon declares that he wishes to spend his remaining days alone with wife Rosa. As the tenants individually react to the news we glimpse their personalities while at the same time Pons draws a seemingly fragmented yet ultimately complete portrait of the couple leasing the apartments. What appears to be a film firmly set in the here and now turns out to be much more when the past is invited into the present through a number of cinematographic techniques.

ⁱ This excerpt from page 9 of Shohini Chaudhuri's book *Contemporary World Cinema: Europe, The Middle East, East Asia and South Asia* (2005) paraphrases Susan Hayward's *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (pp. 277-8, 83). London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Postmodern Elements and Urban Landmarks

Translated into English as *Barcelona, Map of Shadows*, this title remains faithful to that of the original Catalan play. The historical shadow play that we become witness to could mainly refer to the shadows from the Catalan past that linger in a screened narrative generally steeped in the global present. Apart from in these visual fragments, the film's postmodernity is reflected in its pastiche or collage-like structure, with a deconstructionist *montage* at times considered "the primary form of postmodern discourse" (Harvey 1989)ⁱⁱ and which challenges a conventionally chronological time pattern in a nonlinear manner, and in lengthy dialogues where we glimpse the mind of each character. Thus, a slow narrative pace and a focus on character development take precedence over external action. Pons' theatrical plot structure makes for a film that criss-crosses between past and present by way of regular flashbacks from times gone by and an opening scene featuring black and white footage of the decisive moment when Franco forces entered Barcelona unopposed in January 1939.ⁱⁱⁱ A postmodern, hybrid filmic text is created which visually interweaves different eras and where real footage is used to complement a fictive storyline set in a screened present.

In the film, Pons paints a disturbing yet realistic picture of a number of individuals whose lives in global Barcelona are impaired by their inability to fully embrace an urban environment that they neither fully recognise nor tolerate. Here, the postmodern architecture, at a time when it becomes "the norm to seek out 'pluralistic' and 'organic' strategies for approaching urban development as a 'collage' of highly differentiated spaces and mixtures" (Harvey 1989, 40), contrasts starkly with the more classical architecture of old Barcelona. Making up the real, off-screen cityscape are more traditional buildings erected during Catalonia's periods of Romanticism, Neo-classicism and Historicism. Neo-Gothic elements also make up the city architecture. A product of the post-modernist^{iv} Catalan movement, Gaudí, whose Roman Catholic landmark the Sagrada Familia draws negative criticism in the film, has left a baroque imprint on the cityscape; with buildings often steeped in a ground-breaking modernity.^v His unconventional cathedral, which is estimated to be completed in 2026 ("Revealed: How Gaudí's Barcelona cathedral will finally look on completion in 2026," 2013)^{vi} has received mixed reviews from residents and visitors alike - and so it

ⁱⁱ Harvey, D. (1989). *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (p.51). Oxford, England and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell. Harvey here refers to Derrida.

ⁱⁱⁱ Not surprisingly, the film has been called a "metaphor for the recent history of Catalonia." Barcelona (un mapa) 2007. *Cambridge Film Festival*, retrieved from <http://www.cambridgefilmfestival.org.uk/films/2012/barcelona>

^{iv} Arthur Terry stresses that "Catalan modernism - not to be confused with Spanish *modernismo*, whose context is quite different - was above all an attempt to create a genuinely modern, European culture out of what was felt to be a purely local and regional one." Terry, A. (1995). *Catalan Literary Modernisme and Noucentisme: From Dissidence to Order*. In H. Graham, & J. Labanyi (Eds.), *Spanish Cultural Studies. An Introduction: The Struggle for Modernity* (p.55). New York: Oxford University Press.

^v In David Mackay's words, "Catalan culture, always at the cross-roads of European movements, absorbed these tendencies through Gaudí, Domènech and Puig, reshaping their contradictory aspects to produce the finest examples of national Modernist architecture: a Romantic architecture that, while harking back to an idealized medieval era, was free to respond to the functional requirements of a new mode, personally interpreted and popularly understood as being appropriate to the aspirations and self-image of a country that wished to express both its unique personality and its integral modernity." Mackay, D. (1985). *Modern Architecture in Barcelona (1854-1939)* (p. 42). UK: The University of Sheffield Printing Unit.

^{vi} Revealed: How Gaudí's Barcelona cathedral will finally look on completion in 2026... 144 years after building started. (2013, October). Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article->

does also from the protagonists, some of whom scream at the monument in open rejection and disgust while, ironically, in the same breath sympathising with it by pitying it for being surrounded by other in their mind equally abominable, more recent, urban constructs.

Urban Dystopia

Barcelona (un mapa) highlights the complex relationship between the protagonists and their partly unrecognisable urban habitat. They experience a bewildering sense of *architorture*^{vii} and remain apprehensive towards buildings that are architecturally and aesthetically non-homogeneous and whose surface glamour reflects the sleek postmodern architecture of Barcelona; such as the 1957 Camp Nou stadium and the Torre Agbar skyscraper, erected in 2005. These modern constructs add a shiny gloss to a city with a troublesome past that still haunts the characters.^{viii} And thus, although there is constant communication between the protagonists in this metropolitan, semi-historical drama, they are all the more incapable of establishing a dialogue with their own city. Drawing from Deleuze, Anton Pujol (2009, 172) talks of a sense of deterritorialisation in the film, brought about by “nationalism, *Modernisme*,” and “anarchism.” In our global era, this feeling of ‘un-belonging’ and rootlessness also signifies the erosion and eventual collapse of any clear delimitations between culture and a specific place. Rather, in today’s multicultural society urban space, in particular, has become more fluid (to borrow a Baumanian term) and there is a loosening of cultural ties and boundaries which is reflected in *Barcelona (un mapa)*. There is a sense of alienation amongst the characters towards their architecturally experimental habitat. In a de-territorialized Deleuzian fashion, “[w]hen the cosmic connections of an endless line of the universe are severed,” the result is the “emergence of a disoriented, disconnected space” (Bogue 2003, 99). Specifically, in the film the protagonists are seemingly as disoriented in their post-Olympic environment as Barcelona itself would have been even fifteen years after the games were being held; a comparatively short time-span from a historical perspective. This is a city subjected to constant architectural, societal and political changes.

A Historical Shadow Play

Cunillé’s, “mapa d’ombres” relates to the recent history of Catalonia and what has been called a “shadowy city” [of Barcelona] “[u]nder the Franco regime” (Resina 2008, 179) and to the gradually unveiled secrets of the protagonists. The title mainly hints at the many social, spatial and historical layers that dwell at the surface of

2440014/How-Gaudis-finished-La-Sagrada-Familia-cathedral-look-completion-2026--144-years-building-started.html

^{vii} This concept has been defined as a “sense of homelessness ... a primal sense of loss, a loss that has lost nothing, that has always already existed and that, like Baudrillard’s simulacrum, has no origin or original, but underpins the very possibility of existence.” Sorfa, D. (2003). *Architorture*: Jan Švankmajer and Surrealist Film. In M. Shiel, & T. Fitzmaurice (Eds.), *Screening the City* (p.108). London and New York: Verso.

^{viii} According to Antonio Sánchez, “[f]iguratively speaking, it can be said that Barcelona’s redevelopment has transformed the ailing modern city into a gigantic postmodern mirror reflecting an idealized image of itself to local and global audiences alike.” Sánchez, A. (2002). *Barcelona’s Magic Mirror: Narcissism or the Rediscovery of Public Space and Collective Identity?*. In J. Labanyi (Ed.), *Constructing Identity in Contemporary Spain: Theoretical Debates and Cultural Practice* (p. 303). New York: Oxford University Press.

Barcelona's current condition and that make up a complex Catalan capital. In more concrete terms, behind Pons' smooth façade of postmodern Barcelona are years of historical turmoil.^{ix} His film spectator "moves across an imaginary path, traversing multiple sites and times" (Bruno 2008, 19). The film becomes a mosaic where Pons invites us on a both geographical and historical journey back in time, whereby he brings us almost seamlessly back into the global present.

Barcelona (un mapa) opens with an archival map serving as a stark reminder of the Catalan cause and the still problematic and controversial relationship between Barcelona and Madrid. This is achieved through footage from the decisive moment when Franco forces entered the Catalan capital unopposed in 1939, with General Juan Bautista Sánchez ultimately thanking the citizens for (involuntarily) facilitating the recognition of Franco as sole leader of all of Spain^x in a historically significant speech directed to the Catalan people and which has been audio-visually recorded for the after-world.

In this introductory scene, an effective photo effect is achieved when the scene featuring the Franco general addressing his contemporary audience provokes the dual sensation of the cinematic viewer being likewise spoken to in a manner which merges reality and fiction and which conforms to John Ellis' statement that "[t]he cinematic image is ... in some sense the perfection of photography: superior in its ranges of nuance of colour or black-and-white to video; firmly within the paradoxical regime of presence-yet-absence that can be called the 'photo effect'" (1982, 38), similarly described as cinema being "present absence: it says 'This is was.'" (59)^{xi}

The black and white documentary shots depicting crowds gathering for the arrival of the national forces become additionally effective through Pons' close-ups of select spectators - among others a young girl seemingly seeking reassurance from her father. The viewer is lured into believing that the narrative will linger in the past but Pons soon proves to us that "cities are spaces of transitions" (Bruno 2008, 18). Through fluid camera movements the focus on the human element in this emotionally charged urban scene is gradually replaced by a shift into real time, through an establishing shot featuring a now colour-tinged Barcelona skyline. The visual narrative suddenly anchored in the global present perfectly conforms to a "typical exposition of spatial relationships", which "will begin with an establishing shot of a general location, for example, a cityscape, and might be followed by a shot of a street or building, before moving to an interior shot of an apartment" (Jordan and Allinson 2005, 55).

Barcelona (un mapa) is, indeed, soon transported into internal milieus and the narrative incorporates conversations between six main characters. Regular flashbacks with images from, e.g., within the Liceu Opera House that are heavy in nostalgia, help

^{ix} In light of this, Josep. M. Muñoz calls *Barcelona (un mapa)* "una metáfora sobre la devastación del franquismo." El hombre invisible, *La Vanguardia Opinión*, (2008, January). Retrieved from <http://hemeroteca.cdmae.cat/jspui/bitstream/65324/6616/1/20080111MAE-VAN-I.pdf>

^x "These are the images of a hungry Barcelona who throws itself to the streets to cheer the entry of Franco's army. In these images resides the key of a splendid film about the permanent defeat", Cambridge Film Festival 12-22 September 2013: *Barcelona (un mapa)* 2007, La Vanguardia. Retrieved from <http://www.cambridgefilmfestival.org.uk/films/2012/barcelona>

^{xi} Pons' cinematic portrayal of a *now* and a *then* in this opening scene has a Barthesian photo effect on the viewer, in the sense that images are conjured "of individuals who are apparently present but actually absent." Elwes, C. (2005). *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (p. 123). London and New York: I.B. Tauris.

continuously interconnect the past and the present. These brief images create a fluid notion of time and space, collapsing the boundaries between the two. Pons' flashbacks also heighten and underscore the characters' re-narrated personal recollections. References are made to times gone by^{xii} and to well-known landmarks making up Barcelona's cityscape. Thus, a crystal effect is achieved "that fuses the historical past and the present in perpetual exchange" (Pujol 2009, 65). Pujol further notes that "[t]he movie's historical hopscotch subjugates the characters, who cannot conceive an auspicious exit" (74). Indeed, in the film the characters come across as adrift within their urban existence and seem to have lost their footing in life in general. They are stuck in a circular narrative where they recall the past while at the same time they battle to come to grips with post-Olympic Barcelona. The story told thus becomes not only a recollection of the past but in equal measure one of dissatisfaction and malaise in the urban present. As effectively summarised by two characters in the first scene of the movie: "- I don't like looking back," "- [and] I don't like looking forwards" (Pons 2007).

The cartographic overall layout of the film extends also to the protagonists' own hitherto unexplored inner territory. Their individual preferences, predilections and secrets have all been revealed to the viewer by the end of a film that leaves us with a multifaceted image of global Barcelona and some of its citizens.

2. Conclusion

Barcelona (un mapa) thus operates on different levels yet the various personal, historical, and societal narratives are symbolically intertwined and in the end they form one greater narrative.

The map of shadows that initially defined Pons' urban map is finally illuminated in several ways and the shadows from both past and in the present have largely disappeared by the last scene. The episodic and circular plot development hence comes full circle and any loose ends are tied up. The narrative circularity of the highly postmodern storyline allows us to again witness the same elderly landlords around whom the plot revolves, after having been initially introduced to us in the first (fictive) scene. However, their conversation has now taken on a rather different aspect. No longer do they play the formal role of lessors but, rather, they embrace their own peculiarities by voicing secrets in the open; secrets that not even a lengthy marriage has managed to unveil. As they embark on a mutual cross-dressing session in a scene showing Rosa dressed as a man in suit and tie, Ramon only dons lipstick but in doing so he, too, embraces the mask of performativity. A number of secrets between the two unravel from here, including such varied themes as incest and adultery, and Ramon's confessed burning of the Liceu Opera House through a sheer act of willpower.

^{xii} Interestingly, Ramon, central to the urban narrative, even dreams of the war: "Lately I dream of the war. The day the war finished, mostly" (with an obvious reference to the Spanish Civil War), to which his tenant cynically retorts: "Wars never finish, Ramon. They just go on one after the other, but don't finish." *Barcelona (un mapa)*, dir. Ventura Pons, Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya - Institut Català de les Indústries Culturals (ICIC), Els Films de la Rambla S.A., Televisió de Catalunya (TV3), and Televisión Española (TVE), 2007. DVD.

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