

## **Ágata's (Filmmaking) Girlfriends: The New Wave of Women Directors in Catalonia**

*Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera*

A review of *Ágata's Girlfriends* (*Las amigas de Ágata*, Alabart, Cros, Rius, Verheyen, 2015) in *The Hollywood Reporter* concluded that the protagonists 'are perhaps less interesting as characters than as representatives of a generation' (Holland, 2016). The film constitutes the master thesis of a group of female students from the University Pompeu Fabra (UPF) and it depicts the social interactions of a group of middle-class girlfriends from Barcelona during their transition from high school to college. As such, according to the reviewer, the characters' mundane narrative conflicts and 'apparently superficial' dialogues evoke their generational issues. Holland claims that *Ágata's Girlfriends* storms into Spanish cinema as a wonderful surprise, as it emerges in a country with a 'sadly low quota of female-directed' films. This critique picks up, perhaps unknowingly, on a broader phenomenon of the Spanish film industry: the recent rise of young Catalan female directors making successful films with a strong generational component in spite of the challenges endemic within the Spanish audiovisual industry.

This new wave of Catalan female directors such as Carla Simón, Mar Coll, and Elena Trapé share a few similar features: they are very young, they make middlebrow films, and they are somehow connected with UPF or with ESCAC, the Catalan School of Cinema and Audiovisuals. Their films return consistently to urban, middle-class narratives about white, young, educated women. The characters experience existential crises defined by their relationships and aspirations, and the topics of these stories illustrate their generational component. The relationships among friends and the dynamics within a group constitute the

main premises of films such as *Blog* (Elena Trapé, 2010) and *Ágata's Girlfriends*. Meantime, living abroad in modern cosmopolitan cities like Berlin shapes the stories in *Julia Ist* (Elena Martín, 2017) and *The Distances* (*Las distancias*, Trapé, 2019). These directors rely on middlebrow cinema to navigate the context of the economic recession in southern Europe, the crisis of the Spanish film industry, and the disparate situation of women directors in the sector.

### **Weathering the storm**

Since the beginning of the economic recession in 2008 in southern Europe, many filmmakers have struggled to produce and monetize their films to the extent that an official crisis of Spanish cinema has been declared. Its tangible effects include the closure of thousands of film theatres, the high rates of unemployment among audiovisual professionals, the decrease in the production of films, and the reduction of budgets. Only recently has the industry started a slow recovery (Bernárdez-Rodal and Padilla-Castillo, 2018: 1250), partly due to the increase in consumption of Spanish TV shows that are often distributed by international platforms like Netflix (Villena, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Scholars tend to agree about the causes of this multilayered phenomenon. The popularization of digital platforms of 'content distribution' (Winer, 2016: 2), the limited purchasing power of the general public affected by the recession, and the unprecedented rise of the Spanish cultural taxes of 2012 established by the conservative government of the Partido Popular, which raised the price of tickets, leading to the crisis of film exhibition in Spain and Catalonia alike (García and Maestro, 2015: 89; Winer, 2016: 1). But one of the most controversial contributing factors of the crisis of Spanish cinema is the poor design of the funding initiatives of the Spanish state through the Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (ICAA). Created to support the Spanish film industry, its policies have been widely criticized

because of their ineffectiveness and precariousness (see, for instance, Heredero and Reyes, 2017: 361; Pérez, 2012: 3; Winer, 2016: 2). While the debate regarding the limitations of the ICAA remains inconclusive, most professionals and academics agree that the post-recession austerity policies and the imperfections of the film law of 2007 are the main issue (Bernárdez-Rodal and Padilla-Castillo, 2018: 1250). In sum, the ICAA has not managed to protect the film industry during the economic recession sufficiently, despite its efforts.

Subsequently, besides the TV-show sector, many Spanish filmmakers have turned to low-cost productions. Often referred to as ‘crisis cinema’ (Allbritton, 2014), ‘other cinema’ (Vidal et al., 2014), or ‘low-cost cinema’ (Loriguillo-López and Rubio, 2020) these precarious films have become a popularized business model in Spain, with its own production, distribution, and consumption structures. This model, which has incited a strong academic interest, tends to rely on free labor, interns, personal funds, or crowdfunding campaigns (Daryanani Melwani, 2017:1). While it is tempting to read the low-cost production model as the only possible response to the crisis of Spanish cinema, many Catalan filmmakers, especially women, have responded to the economic crisis in a way that has not been as common in the rest of Spain and which the literature does not address: middlebrow productions.

### **Female directors and middlebrow cinema**

The Spanish film industry has traditionally been a hostile environment for women, especially in the leading roles. Between 2000 and 2006, women only accounted for 10% of directors, 10% of producers, and 15% of scriptwriters in Spain (Sabina, 2015: 538). In response to such a tangible disparity, the Spanish government introduced clauses in favor of gender equality in the industry in its aforementioned film law. Yet this disadvantaged situation has become aggravated due to

the crisis of the Spanish film industry (see Bernárdez-Rodal and Padilla-Castillo, 2018).

Additionally, female filmmakers have traditionally worked with smaller budgets than their male counterparts. This difference has become an obstacle to receiving public funding because ‘the average budget of films directed by women’ (800.000 euros) is lower than the amount required by the ICAA (1.200.000 euros) (Bernárdez-Rodal and Padilla-Castillo, 2018: 1248).

Subsequently, they have less chance of receiving substantial public support (1248). Because of the budget disparity, most women filmmakers struggle to participate in a financially stable model and to establish themselves in the industry. In fact, some scholars talk about ‘the fake boom of female directors’ to describe the group of filmmakers who started their directing career in the early 2000s but who had only made one feature film by 2015 (Zurián et al. 2017).

Despite these challenges, a generation of young women directors working in Barcelona has managed to succeed in the film industry and participate in a financially sustainable model. It is constructive to trace their genealogy to understand their films, as many of them collaborate or have been involved in one another’s professional training. Some of the most renowned are Rosa Vergés, Isabel Coixet, and María Ripoll. This essay will, however, focus on a younger generation whose career started after 2008, in the midst of the recession. Despite the challenges of their generation, many of them have established themselves in the industry, such as Elena Trapé, who has directed four feature films since 2009; Mar Coll, who has made two films and a TV show since her debut in 2009; and Liliana Torres, who has directed two documentaries and is about to release her second fiction film with the support of Coixet’s production company Miss Wasabi. Even newer directors with more recent débuts are starting to succeed and are currently working on their next films. These filmmakers started their careers more recently, even if they are not necessarily younger age-wise. The clearest example is Carla Simón, who premiered

*Summer 1993* (2017) with great success. Similarly, the lead actress of *Ágata's Girlfriends*, Elena Martín, recently co-wrote and directed her first film *Julia Ist*, which won a number of awards in Spain. Some others are the directors of *Ágata's Girlfriends*, Laura Rius, Laia Alabart, Alba Cross, and Marta Verheyen; and the youngest one, Sara Gutiérrez Galve, whose debut film *I Look for Her* (*Yo la busco*, 2018) received prestigious awards at Spanish festivals.

This new wave of Catalan female directors illustrates how middlebrow cinema serves to negotiate with the aforesaid discrimination that women endure in the Spanish industry, as it allows them to make films that balance creative freedom and financial stability. To deal with the difficulty of accessing big budgets, women filmmakers gravitate towards affordable genres. Most of the films directed by women in Spain are dramas (39%), documentaries (31%), and comedies (18%), while their experience with traditionally expensive genres such as science fiction is almost inexistent (Lucía Tello, 2016: 11-12). In response, these Catalan directors blend elements of *auteur* cinema and genre conventions. The result encapsulates the essence of middlebrow: while accessible for the vast majority of the audience, these films do not fall into mass culture, but they do not stick to the canons of high culture either. Defining the middlebrow poses many challenges, partly because it has become a topic of academic inquiry recently, although in Anglophone contexts exclusively, but mainly because it does not refer to a clearly fixed classification. As Sally Faulkner explains, 'as a cultural category that is so intimately intertwined with shifting definitions of identities, shifting class alignments and shifting processes of working through, the middlebrow is always contingent' (2016: 3). What has traditionally defined middlebrow culture is its appeal 'to a broad middle-class public' (Holmes, 2017: 2), which means that it is unavoidably linked to the taste of the audience. Middlebrow thus constitutes a contingent category that changes with the socio-economic reality in which it emerges, regardless

of ‘the intrinsic qualities of the cultural artifact itself’ (Holmes, 2017: 3). Thus scholars agree that middlebrow fiction associates with social mobility and class aspiration, and accordingly it should not be considered merely as a synonym of the middle-class, because it can also appeal to more impoverished audiences who strive to climb the social ladder and see themselves represented in the imaginary of these films (Faulkner, 2016: 6). In general, the middlebrow appeals to an educated audience that values cultural consumption (Holmes, 2017: 3) without being elitist or inaccessible for popular spectators. Institutions condition middlebrow cinema as well, as the spaces of circulation of films, such as theatres or online platforms, ‘might confer a middlebrow status’ to them (Faulkner, 2016: 7). In the context of the Spanish recession, middlebrow cinema is specifically defined as a set of aspirational narratives that appeal to spectators affected by the crisis but who dream of becoming or returning to the middle-class. While the films under investigation introduce some progressive elements, such as the proliferation of narratives with female protagonists or a collaborative production model among women filmmakers, they do not aim to confront the status quo nor to question the privileges of the protagonists.

Middlebrow cinema does not aim for formal experimentation and innovation. It utilizes genre conventions, sometimes pushing their boundaries but without departing too much from traditional cinematic codes. Middlebrow fiction privileges the suspension of disbelief and the audience’s feeling of immersion, thus avoiding ‘formally demanding techniques’ and resting on ‘realist, representational’ strategies (Holmes, 2017: 3). The next section explores how this use of cinematic conventions in middlebrow cinema applies to Catalan cinema. For now, I want to examine the main defining elements of the middlebrow: its historical association with the middle middle-class as well as with the ‘feminine’ or with a ‘feminized’ fiction.

### **Modern independent women and the urban middle-class**

Most middlebrow culture is either produced by women, consumed by female audiences, or at least ‘perceived to be consumed by’ female audiences (Faulkner, 2016: ch.1).<sup>2</sup> In the Spanish context, contemporary women directors have actualized and modernized the articulation of gender roles in narratives with alternative perspectives (Everly, 2016: 190; Guillamón, 2015: 287; Álvarez and González de Canalés, 2018: 28). Their films privilege the focalization of subjects who identify as women, feature more female protagonists, and include three-dimensional female characters in that they are constructed as complex and realistic individuals with rich background stories and motivations beyond their relationships with their male characters (Tello, 2016: 10). Spanish films directed by women tend to show a modern reality pertaining to the situation of women in contemporary society (Torremocha, 2016: 13). For instance, female characters are no longer limited to the roles of caretakers or assistants of their male counterparts (Bernárdez-Rodal and Padilla-Castillo, 2018: 1258).

In the specific case of the new Catalan wave, their portrayal of modern gender roles is unavoidably intertwined with their middle-class component. Films like *Three Days with the Family* (*Tres días con la familia*, Coll, 2009), *The Distances*, *Ágata’s Girlfriends*, *Blog*, *María (and the Others)* (*María y los demás*, Nely Reguera, 2016), and *We All Want the Best for Her* (*Todos queremos lo mejor para ella*, Coll, 2013) depict strong, educated, independent women in the leading roles. In all of them, the relationships of these protagonists with their family or friends constitute the main narrative conflict, and in most cases the secondary characters are also women. These characters clearly belong to the white, (upper) middle-class of Barcelona. The teenage characters come from well-to-do families, as they are able to go to college, study abroad,

and even speak many languages such as the protagonists in *Julia Ist* and *Three Days with the Family*, both college students living in Germany, or the girls in *Ágata's Girlfriends*, who also study at university and whose families have a beach house in addition to their comfortable apartments in Barcelona. The slightly older protagonists, in their late twenties or in their thirties, are independent and educated women with qualified, middle-class jobs. For instance, the main character in *The Distances* works as a marketing strategist organizing events and the protagonist in *María (and the Others)* is a writer and an editor at an independent publishing house.

As part of the character's social status, all these films feature urban narratives. They take place in modern cultural metropolises, often Barcelona but occasionally also other European cities like Berlin (*Julia Ist* and *The Distances*). Professional development, cultural circulation, and middle-class status converge in their exciting depictions of the big city. Without reinforcing a touristic gaze, the metropolis appears as a necessary background for the characters' experiences. Sometimes these films juxtapose the city to the idealized countryside, where the characters go to 'disconnect' at their *masía* or traditional family house, and they experience it as a place of gathering instead of rural labor. In the end, the depiction of educated protagonists in a culturally exciting metropolis serves as a strategy to cultivate the cultural capital of the films under investigation.

These middle-class urban narratives also exemplify the obsession of Spanish cinema with upward social mobility described by Faulkner (2013), especially considering that these films emerged during the economic recession. A scene from *We All Want the Best for Her* illustrates this idea. After a traumatic accident and a slow recovery, Geni, an upper middle-class woman, wants to start working again but feels unprepared for qualified positions. During a family gathering, she offers to work as a maid for her sister, who claims to need domestic help. Geni's



relatives respond in disbelief and say that she can only be joking, exhibiting the stigma of downward social mobility. Yet the significant decrease of the middle class in Spain, the drastic impoverishment of Spanish youth (Pozzi, 2019), and the rising economic inequality in Barcelona (Blanchar, 2018) contrast with these narratives. The analyzed films clearly depart, therefore, from their social reality, but instead of being oblivious to their immediate context, they act in response to it through socially aspirational stories that appeal to the audience. The new wave of Catalan female directors constructs a rather idealized diegesis in which the effects of the economic crisis are hardly visible, with the exception of Torres' *Family Tour* (2013). In their avoidance of social issues, their films correspond with one of the main characteristics of middlebrow cinema: how it negotiates 'historical change' (Faulkner, 2016: 2). The middlebrow does not confront or represent social events. It does not criticize or denounce; it tends to 'rehearse before and revise after' (Faulkner, 2016: 3). In other words, middlebrow culture works through historical moments by anticipating the change to come or by showing its impact in the aftermath, but only as vague background stories. This way, the films under analysis maintain a certain cultural capital without alienating wider audiences who enjoy the comforting representation of privileged middle-class characters free from financial concerns.

### **Catalan cinema and the audiovisual industry**

Catalan cinema has a long history of merging genre conventions and artistic exploration as well as of telling urban, cosmopolitan narratives. This tendency gained popularity during the Francisco Franco dictatorship (1939-75), when Catalan directors relied on genres to negotiate the 'grandiloquent epic' style of dominant fascist cinema (Balló, 1987: 38). This strategy intensified after Franco's death in 1975, this time with the purpose of industrial stabilization. During the

political transition (previously referred to as transition to democracy), local institutions implemented policies to support Catalan culture and differentiate it from the homogenizing fascist imagery, focusing primarily on promoting the Catalan language (Rimbau, 1992: 20). Public institutions overlooked the local audiovisual industry until the late 1980s and 1990s, when they started supporting Catalan cinema, which had struggled financially for a decade. To stabilize the loyalty of the audience, local filmmakers reinvented the previous strategy: they relied heavily on genres, especially horror, comedies, and adaptations of Catalan novels (Pérez, 1991: 44). Eventually, the local industry became established with the support of Catalan regional and city governments that compensated for the lack of support from the central Spanish institutions (Rimbau, 1992: 19).

Simultaneously, since the 1980s, Catalan cinema has truly become part of the European audiovisual space by participating in international coproductions, often with the support of the funding program Eurimages (José i Solsona, 2015: 86), and by telling urban stories about the youth, which could be exported to other European countries easily (Pérez, 1991: 45). In fact, Catalonia exports more cultural products than it imports, while the opposite is true for Spain as a whole (José i Solsona, 2015: 42), and this is clearly a result of the public support of the local cultural industry. Catalan cinema is perceived as a 'fractal of European cinema' internationally. Without losing their 'Catalanness,' the narratives about 'thirty-year-old urbanites' from Barcelona that appear in many Catalan films could in fact talk about Parisians, Berliners, or citizens from any other European capital (Derobert, 2006: 54). Catalan cinema has succeeded in its representation of cosmopolitan narratives that appeal not only to local middle-class audiences, but also to continental ones, to secure its place in the audiovisual market.

The new wave of female Catalan directors emerges within this genealogy. Local and

regional institutions from Catalonia play a crucial role in the financial stability of the audiovisual sector. The average wage per individual in each region of Spain offers a good indicator of cultural consumption, but while, for instance, individuals in Madrid are comparatively wealthier, Catalans spend more money on cultural products (Murciano and González, 2018: 11). More specifically, going to the movies is reportedly among Catalans' favorite cultural activities (Winer, 2016: 2). The regional policies in support of its audiovisual industry, along with the nationalist sentiment in the region, have propelled the cultural interest of the citizens for Catalan cinema, which the local audience overlooked until relatively recently. With multiple specialized public agencies that promote Catalan culture (Murciano and González, 2018: 23), large numbers of individuals with higher education, and a good average wage, Catalonia constitutes a fertile ground for middlebrow cinema.

### **Collaborative productions, friendship, and cosmopolitanism**

Film schools like ESCAC and UPF also comprise powerful agents in the audiovisual industry of the region and the new wave of female directors is strongly connected to both. With the exception of Carla Simón, all the women of the group studied at ESCAC (Trapé, Torres, Coll) or at UPF (Martín, Gutiérrez Galve, the directors of *Ágata's Girlfriends*). Both of these schools support the production of their students' debut films. ESCAC has its own production company that makes films of their senior students and at UPF students produce their first features as their Master's theses with the guidance of tutors who are often renowned filmmakers themselves. These two schools 'aim to recover the participative role of universities in social processes ... and to reach the public sphere' (García López, 2012: 122). They place emphasis on the creative value of educational institutions and they do not merely serve private companies but also support the

more independent filmmakers, thus creating a ‘healthy relationship between industry and knowledge’ (123). In this way, they facilitate the emergence of middlebrow cinema by balancing commercial and independent styles. Both schools have established agreements with industrial agents and television stations that allow for the national and international circulation of the students’ debut films (123). A good example would be Filmin, a popular Spanish distribution platform with a catalogue of independent, auteur, and middlebrow cinema and TV shows. Created in Barcelona in 2008, Filmin places great emphasis in distributing films by young talents in general, but they have a special relationship with ESCAC, where one of its funding members Jaume Ripoll studied (Ripoll, 2019).

ESCAC and UPF have operated as production hubs that foster collaboration among the new wave of female Catalan directors. The young women from these institutions often work with each other, make their films with a collective production style, or even mentor one another. While their films do not confront their sociopolitical context, the socially conscious dimension of these directors comes from the way they work. The cases of *Ágata’s Girlfriends*, *Julia Ist*, and *I Look for Her* clearly illustrate the importance of the local collaborative network in the films of these directors. All of them emerged as final projects at UPF, which is becoming a popular production center thanks to these female directors (Gutiérrez Galve, 2018). Their films count on the same production resources from the university and with the same tutors guiding the creative process, including filmmakers such as the forenamed Mar Coll, Isaki Lacuesta, and Elías León Siminiani. In addition, the three films are group projects in which the production process is reportedly cooperative and included students from ESCAC, especially in the technical roles (Gutiérrez Galve, 2018). Similarly, at ESCAC, many of the professors are women directors of this new wave who mentor younger filmmakers. As a result, these films share many stylistic

choices because the filmmakers work with the same tutors, count on the same ‘production infrastructures,’ and follow the same cooperative ‘filmmaking dynamics’ (Gutiérrez Galve, 2018). This collaborative culture comprises a relevant characteristic of the group: by working together and relying on the same team, they influence each other but they also support one another in the industry. The audiovisual sector operates through networking, which has traditionally contributed to marginalize women in the industry (Sabina, 2015: 540). However, this generation of directors uses networking for mentorship and collaboration, creating a strong industrial tissue that supports other women as well, knowingly or not.

This collaborative production style permeates into one of the main topics of these films: friendships, especially among women. *Blog* and *Ágata’s Girlfriends* are clear examples that focus on the evolution of a group of friends. The tensions between the group and the individual identity of the members constitute the main narrative conflict, highlighted by cinematic aesthetics. Both have a fresh style, portraying everyday scenes with a sense of intimacy. *Blog* relies on the technique of found footage to depict how the girls of a class bond over the feeling of being special and make a secret plan: getting pregnant at the same time. The originators of the idea convince their female classmates to join them one by one. The film shows the growth of the group, their power dynamics, and the deepening of their bond using footage from their bedroom webcams and from the amateur camera with which they document their everyday life.

The combination of the video-blog, the handheld home movie, and realist acting evokes spontaneity and naturalism. The ambient sound is naturalistic, free of non-diegetic music, and the cinematography relies on natural lighting and warm colors. The girls confess to their body-image issues, their break-ups, and their sexual preferences candidly. During a fieldtrip to an anthropology museum, Áurea, one of the group orchestrators, films how the others convince a

classmate to join Makamat with the excuse of documenting the museum. Significantly, while Marta, the leader of the group, winks at the camera, the teacher is explaining the importance of belonging for human existence. The film consists of a series of apparently trivial moments like this one, and it only dedicates a few minutes to the execution of their plan. The sex scenes with their male classmates during their end-of-school trip and the uncovering of their situation by their teachers and parents are the only sequences with stylized aesthetics that contrast the rest of the film. Through an unsaturated color palette, long shots, contained acting, and an unjustified presence of the camera, the film disrupts the intimacy and the perceived freedom of the group.

*Ágata's Girlfriends* tells the opposite story: the progressive deterioration of a group of high school friends after starting college. While they are initially inseparable, the protagonist Ágata starts to gravitate towards her new classmates. The candid style of *Ágata's Girlfriends* is achieved through the use of handheld camera, disjunctive editing, and natural lighting. The film shows their interactions in mundane situations, such as waiting for the bus, and focuses only on their social life. *Ágata's Girlfriends* reaches a sense of intimacy with the characters: the scenes often rest on close ups and long takes, highlighting their emotions while allowing for a certain degree of improvisation. The film sets up the group identity from the beginning and introduces Ágata's aloofness progressively. The opening scene stages the four friends partying together, prefiguring the story. With the exception of a close up of Ágata, the entire scene frames the characters in relation to one another. The first shot of the scene is a medium close-up of their four faces lying together as they chat, announcing the importance of the group in the story. The shots always include at least two of the actresses, even if they move in and out of the frame as they dance. As Ágata's arc develops, framing redistributes the group. Instead of using the traditional shot-reverse shot technique, the camera focuses on her reactions during the dialogues.

The conversations remain candid, but the framing continues to isolate Ágata from the rest. When Ágata tells the others that she has plans with other people, the conversation juxtaposes Ágata's close up with a medium close-up of the others, who are lying down together. Significantly, these scenes are intertwined with shots of Barcelona, which constitutes the crucial background of the story: Ágata's transformation emerges as she is more exposed to the cultural and social opportunities that the urban scene has to offer.

The other main topic in the films of new wave of Catalan female directors is the idea of a cosmopolitan identity that is unavoidably linked to their generational experience. In many of the films the characters live in other metropolitan cities, like Berlin, with a privileged social status that allows them to enjoy an exciting urban life. The protagonists in *Julia Ist* and *The Distances* are originally from Barcelona and live in Berlin. The films do not show Berlin with a touristic approach, as they do not depict emblematic monuments. Instead, the city defines their stories. In spite of the age difference of the characters in the two films, they share similar experiences: they both deal with the difficulties of living in a new country, but they manage to overcome them and get immersed in the host society to the point of feeling more included in Berlin than with their Barcelona friends.

*Julia Ist* focuses on the year-long study abroad of Julia, an architecture student in Berlin. After her initial challenges adapting to her new life, she soon joins engaging projects and exciting friends. Many scenes illustrate the generational component of her experiences, such as the deterioration and eventual break up of her relationship with her Barcelona boyfriend via Skype, the international experiences of some of her new college classmates who have attended universities in other European capitals as well, and the misunderstandings with her new romantic interest, with whom she communicates in German. The film depicts Julia's experience with an

intimist style featuring candid close-ups, yet Berlin appears as a crucial character itself, mirroring her internal evolution. During one of Julia's classes, the professor explains how Berlin is the city of the present because of how it had to be rebuilt in the last few decades. Additionally, the editing of the film inserts shots of Julia walking around the city or taking the train. These transitions include upbeat music, depicting the city as a socio-cultural hub with interesting opportunities. Berlin operates as the set, in which Julia and her classmates explore buildings with artistic curiosity. In these scenes, the film deploys medium-long shots that underscore the interactions of the characters with their surroundings as they analyze the architecture. Constant dialogues about how cities should be designed and about the urban lifestyles in different European cultures highlight the cosmopolitan identity of the protagonist as well as of the film itself. In the end, Julia does not want to go back to Barcelona and feels alienated upon her return.

*The Distances* similarly relies on this urban landscape of cultural and professional opportunities, even though it has a more ambivalent approach. A group of friends in their early thirties travel to Berlin to surprise their college classmate Comas by surprise. Comas receives them reluctantly, abstains from talking about his personal life, and eventually spends the weekend avoiding his friends. Since Comas remains off-screen most of the time, the film omits his potential sense of uprooting experienced as an educated migrant running away from the Spanish economic recession. Instead, it focuses on the personal tensions that emerge in the group as he avoids them, even though the effects of the crisis have affected some of their lives. The closing scene of the film shows Comas returning to his empty apartment after the departure of his frustrated friends. As he starts listening to his voice messages, the film fades to black and the audience hears the messages that his friends have left him during the weekend, which had appeared beforehand, on screen, from their point of view. The now disembodied voices of his



friends capture Comas' feeling of disconnection and summarize the evolution of their visit. While they initially express concern about Comas' disappearance, later they exhibit anger and resentment. In the last voicemail, his mother's cheerful voice hopes he had enjoyed the surprise visit of his friends. The contrasting audio summary highlights the decomposition of the group. Ultimately, like Julia, Comas feels alienated from his Barcelona friends and seems more connected to Berlin than to his hometown.

### **By way of conclusion**

The new wave of Catalan female directors navigates challenges of the audiovisual sector by making middlebrow films. These directors have managed to become both commercially established and artistically acknowledged in the audiovisual sector while creating a cooperative production culture. Their films are infused with a strong generational component about urban characters with personal crises defined by their relations, often with female protagonists, and they deploy candid cinematic resources to create a sense of intimacy with the characters. These narratives appeal to the local audiences through aspirational stories of educated, middle-class individuals hardly affected by the economic recession and whose challenges emerge from their personal relations. In this way, the analyzed films garner their cultural capital from their privileged middle-class characters and their cosmopolitan urban settings. The new wave of Catalan female directors also balances the specificities of the Catalonian audiovisual industry and the middlebrow appeal to the cosmopolitan European space. Rather than merely a generational cinema, their work can be more constructively thought as an opportune feminized cinematic response to the Spanish economic crisis.

### **Bibliography**

- Allbritton, D. (2014) 'Prime risks: the politics of pain and suffering in Spanish crisis cinema', *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 15:1-2, 101-15.
- Álvarez, M. and González de Canalés, J. (2018) 'Que sean, que estén. Volver a pensar el cine hecho por mujeres', In: Álvarez, M. & Scholz, A. (eds) *Cineastas emergentes. Mujeres en el cine del siglo XXI*, Madrid, Iberoamericana Vervuert. 19-30.
- Balló, J. (1987) 'El Cine Catalán', *Catalònia*, 3, 38-39.
- Bernárdez-Rodal, A. & Padilla-Castillo, G. (2018) 'Mujeres Cineastas Y Mujeres Representadas En El Cine Comercial Español (2001-2016)', *Revista Latina De Comunicación Social*, 73, 1247-66.
- Blanchar, C. (2018) 'Barcelona recupera clase media y reduce ligeramente la brecha social', *El país*, <[https://elpais.com/ccaa/2018/01/08/catalunya/1515423184\\_431180.html](https://elpais.com/ccaa/2018/01/08/catalunya/1515423184_431180.html)> (accessed 5 June 2019).
- Daryanani Melwani, V. (2017) *El cine low cost como modelo de negocio. Nuevas formas de producir, distribuir y consumir el cine español (2008 - 2016)*, PhD dissertation, Universitat Ramon Llull.
- Derobert, E. (2006) 'Le cinéma catalan, fractale du cinéma européen', *Positif*, 540, 54 -55.
- Everly, K. (2016) 'Acercamientos feministas al cine español y latinoamericano: la mujer como producto y productora de imágenes', *Hispanófila*. 177:1, 179-93.
- Faulkner, S. (2016) *Middlebrow Cinema*, London & New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Faulkner, S. (2013) *A History of Spanish Film: Cinema and Society 1910-2010*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing.
- García López, S. (2012) 'Hincándole el diente a lo real: las óperas primas de los másteres de creación documental de Barcelona', In: Berthier, N. & Fernández Reyes, Á. (eds) *Opera Prima En El Cine Documental Iberoamericano (1990-2010)*, Universidad de Guadalajara, 121-43.
- García Santamaría, J.V. & Maestro Espínola, L. (2015) 'La exhibición cinematográfica española: una industria en recesión', *AdComunica: revista científica de estrategias, tendencias e innovación en comunicación*, 10, 77-97.
- Guillamón Carrasco, S. (2015) 'Los discursos fílmicos de las cineastas en España', *Dossiers feminists*. 20, 285-301.
- Gutierrez Galve, S. (2018) 'Hemos hecho "Yo la busco" para crecer', Interview by Pablo Sancho París, *Industrias del cine. Revista digital de cine*, <<http://industriadelcine.com/2018/05/08/sara-gutierrez-galve-hecho-la-busco-crecer>> (accessed 15 September 2019).
- Heredero Díaz, O. & Reyes Sánchez, F. (2017) 'Presente y futuro de las ayudas a la industria cinematográfica española', *Fotocinema: revista científica de cine y fotografía*, 14, 341-63.
- Holland, J. (2016) "'Ágata's Friends'"("Les Amigues de l'Ágata"): Film Review', *The Hollywood Reporter*, <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/Ágata-s-friends-les-amigues-909581>> (accessed 1 June 2019).
- Holmes, D. (2017) 'Introduction: European Middlebrow', *Belphégor*, 15 (2): 1-12.
- José i Solsona, C. (2015) *Cinema Català a Europa*, Barcelona, Observatori de la Producció Audiovisual.
- Loriguillo-López, A. & Rubio Alcover, A. (2020) 'The limits of low-cost cinema in Spain: an analysis of the #Littlesecretfilm movement', *Creative Industries Journal*, 13:1, 36-49.

- Murciano Martínez, M. & González Saavedra, C. (2018) 'Las industrias culturales y creativas en las comunidades autónomas españolas: el caso Cataluña', *Revista Latina De Comunicación Social*, 73, 146-67.
- Pérez Rufí, J. P. (2012) 'La tormenta perfecta del cine español: la situación de la industria cinematográfica en España', *Razón y palabra*, 81.
- Pérez, X. (1991) 'El cine catalán abierto a Europa', *Catalònia*, 24, 43-45.
- Pozzi, S. (2019) 'La OCDE advierte sobre el declive de la "exprimida" clase media', *El país*, <[https://elpais.com/economia/2019/04/10/actualidad/1554852737\\_287760.html](https://elpais.com/economia/2019/04/10/actualidad/1554852737_287760.html)> (accessed 10 November 2019).
- Rimbau, E. (1992) 'Una cierta tendencia (vanguardista) del cine catalán', *Nosferatu, Revista de cine*, 9, 16-25.
- Ripoll, J. (2019) E-mail interview, Conducted by Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera, 5 November.
- Sabina, J. (2015) 'Spain: Four Female Screenwriters', In: Nelmes, J. & Selbo, J. (eds), *Women Scriptwriters: An International Guide*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 538-44.
- Tello Díaz, L. (2016) 'La "mirada femenina": estereotipos y roles de género en el cine español (1918-2015)', *Ambitos: revista internacional de comunicación*, 34.
- Torremocha Carrillo, S. (2016) *Mujeres Por Mujeres: La Representación Femenina En El Cine De Iciar Bollaín E Isabel Coixet*, Master's thesis, Universidad Pompeu Fabra.
- Vidal, B., Kourelou, O. & Liz, M. (2014) 'Crisis and creativity: The new cinemas of Portugal, Greece and Spain', *New Cinemas*, 12:1-2, 133-51.
- Villena, M. (2019) 'Más estudiantes de cine y series que nunca', *El país*, <[https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/06/20/actualidad/1561028633\\_590228.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/06/20/actualidad/1561028633_590228.html)> (accessed 15 September 2019).
- Winer, F. (2016) *La crisis del cine en Cataluña: innovar para escapar del lustro negro (2008-2013)*, Bachelor's Thesis, Universitat Oberta De Catalunya.
- Zurián Hernández, F., Vázquez Rodríguez, LG., Andreu, C. & Pérez Sañudo, D. (2017) 'El falso boom de las mujeres directoras. Realizadoras españolas con un solo largometraje de ficción (2000-2015)' In: Zurián Hernández, F. (ed), *Miradas de mujer: Cineastas españolas para el siglo XXI (del 2000 al 2015)*, Madrid, Editorial Fundamentos, 21-38.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing (July 2020), it seems that the Spanish film industry will likely experience a setback due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> Middlebrow culture has historically been disregarded for being outside of the high culture cannon. Recent scholarship, focused on recovering these cultural artifacts, applies an intersectional feminist approach to include other texts "excluded from the cannon for regional, ethnic or racial reasons" (Faulkner, 2016: 2).