



LA CULTURA Y LA CIUDAD

JUAN CALATRAVA
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(eds.)

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Y
LA CIUDAD

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BARCELONA CINECITTÀ
THE CITY INVENTED THROUGH SCENOGRAPHY

DICLE TASKIN

Federico Fellini was, in his own words, «a terrible traveller»¹. He felt «helpless, vulnerable and rootless» whenever he found himself away from Cinecittà, «the magical kingdom» which permitted him to travel without moving by inventing and recreating whatever occurred in his imagination. For him, the only authentic way of travelling was there, in «teatro 5», where he could feel the same excitement and the thirst for knowledge that he would have felt if he had travelled literally². When he was asked during an interview why he hadn't been to Barcelona, supposedly the most «fellinian» city in the world, his answer was unpredictable. Fellini, in reality, had actually been in Barcelona after giving in to the endless comments of his friends and his answer was that his friends were right, Barcelona was really a fellinian city, but then, he had to revise and redefine what word truly meant. He continued that even if it was the case, if he ever wanted to make a film about Barcelona, he would do it in Cinecittà, in «teatro 5», «playing with silks and *gelatinas*»³.

Regardless of the question whether Barcelona was fellinian or not, Fellini never made a film about Barcelona. His friends, on the other hand, continued contemplating the idea, tracing the fellinian aspects of the city, envisioning the labyrinths of *Agenzia Matrimoniale* in the streets of Raval⁴ and capturing the nostalgia of *Amarcord* in the memories of school parades in Montjuic⁵ (...) All evoking a certain curiosity to ask what Barcelona would have looked like if invented by Fellini. What would have been his primary inspirations and how would he have distorted the reality, how many meters of silk and how many kilos of gelatine would have been spent in order to construct this «fellinian» version of the city?

Even though Barcelona was never recreated by Fellini, there are films which undertake the endeavour. Some, partially recreate it with its exteriors and recognisable features as settings in studios, while others convert the city itself into a studio. Barcelona becomes a background to be altered and adapted to depict stories belonging to other geographies or time periods. The first ones construct typical streets of «El Barrio Chino» or attic houses

1. Jorge Grau, *Fellini desde Barcelona*. Barcelona, ÀMBIT Serveis Editorials, 1985.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

3. Interview from *Barcelona, Metròpolis Mediterrània: Barcelona, ciudad de cine, cuaderno central*, 6, Barcelona, Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 1987.

4. Grau, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

surrounded with enormous cycloramas of the skyline while the later examples Paris of the eighteenth century replaces the urban scenery, just as easy as the revived rush of the Expo 1929. Among all these interpretations and disguises, the idea of imagining a Barcelona invented by Fellini starts to lose its importance and appeal. The curiosity no longer resides within the given authenticity of the director but it becomes replaced in the searching for the real value of this process, the potential in being able to depict two completely different contexts within the same background, the ability to synthesise and communicate with connotations, all achieved through very efficient compositions.

«From an image, a story can be invented. It is a fun game. Then the ideas flow. But it is necessary to have an initial image. (...) An image can lead to a story; a story can never lead to an image, only to an obscure multitude of images»⁶.

As the images lead to a story, so was the case of Fellini. His primary creative impulse was not filmmaking but drawing which he started at early ages and continued later on in the «Funny Face Shop» in Rome making comical portraits of German soldiers while the city was under occupation⁷. He never stopped drawing which later became almost an intuitive process in his filmmaking, a crucial phase through which he acquired an immense collection of observations and trivial knowledge, a collection which inspired him creating his authentic characters and archetypes. All of his «caricature notes, little figurines staring from the corner of the page, the obsessively hypersexualized feminine anatomies, the descriptive portraits of cardinales and other infinite number of sketches (...)» used to come back to him as he entered the studio on the first day of each shooting⁸. As this collection became an intermediary between his films and the reality, it also revealed his proper expression all along the process with each single deformation, abstraction and exaggeration.

Juhani Pallasmaa refers to Sartre in his book called «The Architecture of Image» where he explains how the scenes created by the artists become experientially real. According to Sartre, when a painter creates a house, he creates an imaginary house and not a sign of a house. And the house, in return, preserves all the ambiguity of real houses⁹. One can argue that the different versions of Barcelona, recreated and disguised, carry the same ambiguity similar to the imaginary house, an ambiguity which gives each of them a certain authenticity. The filmmaker, just like the painter, recreates an imaginary reality, a representation filtered through the sum of his or her recognitions, observations and past experiences. The process was made quite visible in the case of Fellini where not only his inspirations but also the way he perceives was materialised in his detailed caricatures and sketches. In other cases where there is no such possibility to refer to an explicit and extensive catalog, the references might be much more obscure and subtle. Still, tracing them would show how the reality is interpreted, how it is represented and which notions it is filtered through.

6. Jacinto Esteva (dir.), *Dante no es únicamente severo*, 1967.

7. Vittorio Boarini, *El cine pintado por Fellini*. Madrid, Filmoteca Española, 2007.

8. Federico Fellini, *Fare un film*. Turín, Giulio Einaudi, 1980, cited in Boarini, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

9. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is literature?.* Gloucester (Mass.), Peter Smith, 1978, cited in Juhani Pallasmaa, *The architecture of image: Existential space in cinema*, Hämeenlinna, Rakennustieto, 2001. p. 21.

While the drawings of Fellini were derived mainly from an intuition, the art directors actually acknowledge the process as a requisite and a rational method of «documentation». Félix Murcia defines it as a motto for his profession, as the primary condition in which one «should know all there is to know to be able to invent what is unknown»¹⁰. Gil Parrondo admits having more than forty books in his library solely about the inquisition¹¹ while Javier Fernandez states that «documentation» is just as crucial for the films which «pass in the present day in the suburban outskirts of a city» as for the ones which happen in eighteenth century. «If you don't go for a walk in the marginal neighbourhoods, you can't achieve the credibility and the film doesn't have good results. You have to investigate how those people live, you have to get inside their houses because a shanty is a world to be photographed, people can see that it is a shanty, but you have to depict even its odor»¹².

Documentation, in such cases, goes beyond the definition of solely acquiring knowledge and becomes almost a quest to create the most convincing representation of reality that is possible and to achieve almost a mental image. The texture, color, smell and all the other things included in this image help creating an existential space which can extend beyond the limits of frame. Even when the representation is meant to be the most credible version, there is always an interpretation and thus a distortion which takes place, a translation of reality into the image and the film language, where the «optics do not correspond to that of the human eye, the color does not correspond to the natural and for a person to look natural, he should wear a make-up»¹³.

—People disappear everyday.

—Every time they leave the room.»¹⁴

As the art directors put a certain emphasis on the importance of creating a convincing representation, *La Calle Sin Sol* stands out as one of the examples in which «el Barrio Chino», the old china town of Barcelona is recreated almost with «its odour». Directed by Rafael Gil in 1948, the film tells the melodramatic story of a french fugitive who finds a refuge in the neighbourhood, in such a narrow street that not even the sunlight enters, a setting which represents all that the name «El Barrio Chino» can suggest. The plans and the elevations of the set designer Enrique Alarcón consist of the layout of a backstreet and a series of fronts all elaborated with utmost meticulousness. A backdrop painted with a false perspective marks the end of the street which is articulated by adjacent buildings, vaulted doors, shop windows, niches and fountains. The walls appear rendered with worn out textures, stairs and cracks on the plasters which reveal the brick underneath. A series of windows, balconies and niches, some with banisters and some with roller blinds, all uneven and without a continuous order... Small arrows around the balconies marking where the clothes are put out to dry, posters and advertisements on the walls, the panels with the «menu of the day» on the thresholds and at the corners where the men and women

10. Jorge Gorostiza, *La arquitectura de los sueños: Entrevistas con directores artísticos del cine español*. Alcalá de Henares, Festival de cine de Alcalá de Henares, 2001.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 372.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

14. Michelangelo Antonioni (dir.), *Reporter*, 1975.

are drawn standing or waiting for their next clients... All the signboards that indicate the bars, taverns, hotels and shops as well as everything else that fits in these façades belong to a collection which relates to «El Barrio Chino», not only with its physical aspect but also through its history and its well-known myth.

Since the construction of a set presents itself with certain physical and economical limitations, the efficiency carries an utmost importance. The art director never defines a space as an architect does, he transmits a feeling of what that space should be. The walls never have thicknesses, the rooms tend to lack some of its walls and the doors don't even open to other spaces. In the case of *La Calle Sin Sol*, the same rules of efficiency apply in a similar fashion. While a backdrop closes one end of the street, the subtle bevelling of the particular layout provides another end in order to close the framing. The façades are constructed only till the first floor as the high camera angles can reduce the visible area and enable to build less. In the set, only what is visible is constructed and therefore, everything that is «included» carries a specific importance.

According to Michelangelo Antonioni, «a certain line spoken in front of a wall or against the setting of a street can change in meaning»¹⁵. One can argue that, in reverse order, that certain line can also change the meaning of the wall or the setting in front of which it is spoken. Such a hierarchy can provide a narrative depth to the composition and enhance the cinematic space which is experiential and not real. All the details which are «included» in the design are not chosen only because they belong to the collection, but also because they create a more dramatic outcome in the composition, an outcome which can augment this cinematic space, which can extend its limits far beyond what is seen and not seen or what is built and what is left out.

«—You look strange, as if something is missing (...) I see, you are still wearing tuxedo trousers.

—It doesn't matter, they are off-screen. Besides, order is one thing, meticulousness is another.»¹⁶

While some of the movies recreate Barcelona in the artificial environment of film studios, there are others which convert Barcelona to a film studio itself, depicting stories and fictions that do not match the context or the place and time. According to the art director Félix Murcia, the most important advantage of not filming in a studio is to be able to «make use of the same methodologies over the pre-existing things (...), over a real architectural base and a real natural environment; to try to give them the necessary form as one could have done in a studio designing it, building division walls, opening holes and modelling spaces»¹⁷. Many of the productions which prefer to make use of these resources and natural exteriors disguise the urban background with fictitious landscapes or impressive historic scenes. On the contrary of the sets built in film studios, none of these settings are built from scratch; they are all achieved by superimposing the fiction with the reality and the invented with the existing. As working with the city is not the same as working in a studio, the process also differs slightly;

15. Pallasmaa, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

16. Jacinto Esteva (dir.), *Dante no es únicamente severo*, 1967.

17. Gorostiza, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

the importance and the ambiguity which gives the authenticity to the representation no longer resides in what is «included», but most importantly in what is «excluded». The angles and the framing of the camera define the area of intervention, the portion of the urban background which needs to be changed and manipulated while the rest is left completely irrelevant.

As the frames define what would be the range and the scale of this meticulous transformation, it also defines the relationship between the location and the setting which disguises it. The sequences filmed mostly with close-ups and medium shots would exclude an important part of the surrounding while putting the emphasis on the dramatic qualities of the script rather than the visual aspects of the scenery. On the other hand, the use of panoramic shots would cover a much larger area where the location would require transformations and constructions almost as ambitious as to that of a film studio. Placing objects, characters and distractions may no longer be sufficient to create the desired ambiance; it might require the construction of false façades or the replacement of pavements. The streets might need to be smudged with mud almost until the first floors of the buildings and the façades of the shops might need to be replaced with those of Hamburg, Budapest or Havana as well as the post-war period of Barcelona...

As the locations never appear in their totality, the way that they are occupied and filmed also shifts the way that they are perceived. «La Plaza Mercé» which appears as a fish market in eighteenth century Paris in *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*¹⁸, also appears in another film, *La Mujer del Anarquista*¹⁹, as a bombed square in Madrid. As the location almost remains anonymous in the first example, the emphasis is put mainly on the construction of the fish market, on the awnings and booths surrounded with a dazzling traffic of people and merchandise, excluding most of the recognisable features but still transmitting the feeling of the space. In the later example, panoramic shots include a much bigger portion of the location including some of its recognisable features, to be able to cover the totality of the intervened façade which is given a ruined effect. While the fixed camera angles place the emphasis on this façade due to its dramatic role in the sequence, they also fail transmitting the enclosed feeling of plaza, reducing it almost to a two-dimensional composition, where the façades look like backdrops painted with false perspectives, similar to those that are used in film studios.

Fellini once stated that the set of Rimini recreated at the beach of Ostia was more real than Rimini itself²⁰. Different versions of Barcelona that are put together along this brief discussion may also be considered within the same argument. While the recreation of the city underlines the importance of seeing what is essential, disguising the city shifts the focus to understand the value of the disposable. In conclusion, the curiosity and the real interest do not rest within analysing the image of the city which simply appears on the screen but, within the quest for seeing an image of Barcelona more real than Barcelona itself, Barcelona which is «invented, theatrical and seen in its essence».

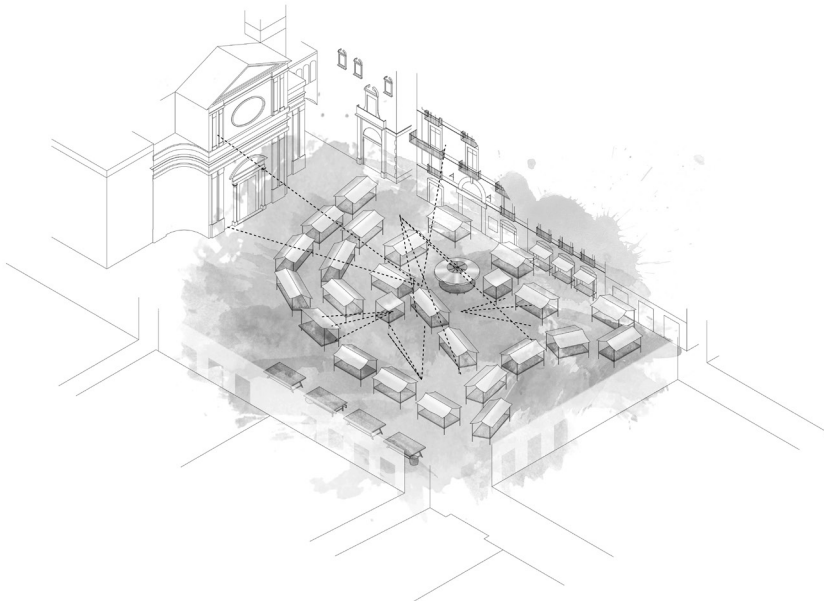
18. Tom Tykwer (dir.), *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, 2006.

19. Marie Noëllea and Peter Sehr (dirs.), *La mujer del anarquista*, 2008.

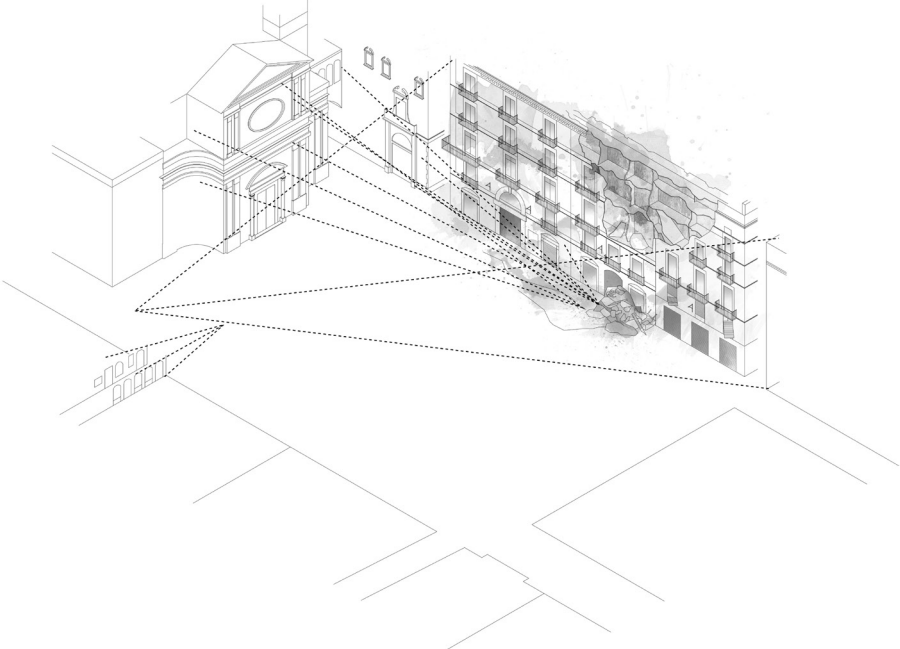
20. Grau, *op. cit.*, p. 10.



Enrique Alarcón, *La Calle Sin Sol (Complejo Callejuela)* (Source: The set drawing of *La Calle Sin Sol*, Enrique Alarcón: *Un arquitecto de cine*. Barcelona, Museo de Cera, 1986. Catálogo de la Exposición del Ministerio de Cultura)



La Plaza Mercè in *'Perfume: The Story of a Murderer'*. (Source: Author's drawing)



La Plaza Mercé in 'La Mujer del Anarquista'. (Source: Author's drawing)

