

DIA LO GUE



Each character in a film is the result of an extensive negotiation that can involve various crew members, from the cinematographer to the head of the makeup department, but in which the cornerstones are the screenwriter, the director and the actor. Although the end result tends to be completely personal and non-transferable, turning the actor *into* the character, the process for achieving it is as collective as it is fascinating, the result of agreements and tensions, of consensuses and conflicts, and we may thus conceive of it as a product of shared authorship.

Who better to reflect on this topic than Icíar Bollain (Madrid, 1967), whose career has allowed her to approach acting in all its dimensions and in its various conceptions? As an actress, she began her career when she was still a teenager, under the direction of Víctor Erice. As an adult, and more aware of her craft, she has worked with other renowned filmmakers, representatives of antagonistic cinematic models, such as the classicism supporting the *mise en scène* of José Luis Borau, the abstract symbolism of Pablo Llorca, the Rohmeresque film-

Filming/being filmed Acting according to **ICÍAR BOLAÍN** filmmaker and actress

“Actors are great scriptwriters because they come up with things that the scriptwriter should have written”

making of Felipe Vega, or the centrality and organic quality of acting in the work of Ken Loach. These very different performing experiences have all shaped her learning as a filmmaker.

And in fact, despite her extraordinary career as an actress, Bollaín has achieved recognition primarily for her work as director. From the small intimate projects that she began with, such as *Hi, Are You Alone?* (Hola, ¿estás sola?, 1995) and *Flowers from Another World* (Flores de otro mundo, 1999), to major international co-productions like *Even the Rain* (También la lluvia, 2010), her work is notable for the brilliance of the performances. Her rapport with Luis Tosar, who has starred in three of her films (in addition to co-starring with her on many other occasions), has resulted in truly memorable performances like *Take My Eyes* (Te doy mis ojos, 2003).

Thus, with her profound understanding of the craft of acting, which she has given considerable weight in her work as a filmmaker and which has fed on her eclectic background as a performer, Bollaín brings together a diverse range of practices and expertise that make her ideal for exploring

the questions that form the core of this interview, beginning with the relationship between the filming approach and the conception of performance, which forms the cornerstone of this exploration. Her background as a scriptwriter, director and actress is crucial to her approach to the transferral of the character in the script onto the screen, embodied by an actor as a result of the casting process and the problems that that process entails. It also enables her to consider, from both perspectives, the collaborative work between filmmakers and performers in defining the style of performance, and the construction of the characters in rehearsals or while filming, and how this construction can hold the film's narrative together. And, thanks to her latest project, *En tierra extraña* (2014), she can also reflect on these issues in relation to documentary films.

For all these reasons, Bollaín's career represents a privileged position from which to examine the task of the actor in cinema. With this in mind, we asked her to share her vision and her experience with us. ■

THE ACTOR'S WORK AND THE FILMING APPROACH

As a filmmaker, you've worked with highly experienced professional actors and actresses, and also with amateur performers. You yourself started your acting career when you were very young and without prior training, under the direction of Víctor Erice, Felipe Vega and Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón. Already in these early performances, your work not only had a wonderful freshness and spontaneity, but was also quite complex and rich in nuances, which might in a way support the theories of directors like Hitchcock, von Sternberg or Bresson, who viewed actors as mere marionettes in their hands. Could you comment on your position on this issue from your dual experience as a filmmaker and actress?

I think there are two ways of working with actors. There are directors who construct the characters based on their image and the things that surround them. I have worked with a director like this, José Luis Borau, who had the image of the film in his head, shot by shot. I imitated Borau because he made all the characters in his films... even the dogs. So, I looked at him and thought, "ah, what he wants is that image" and I had to find a way of giving him that truthfully. But what he wanted was a visual expression rather than an emotion. With the *mise en scène*, the lighting, the set, the position of the camera, the editing of the shots, Borau was narrating and giving life to the performance, and you, as an actress, had to adapt.

There is another kind of director who works more with the actors, who relies more on the characters and what they communicate themselves. Of the people with whom I have worked, at the other end of the spectrum from Borau would be Ken Loach, who would do the opposite: leaving the actor alone in a context as natural and real as possible, so that his work is the least affected and *performed*, closer to truly living the part.

In this other type of work, you also have two choices: working with professional and non-professional actors. In my experience, when I look for non-professional actors it is because a professional is not going to give me the qualities of the character truthfully. For example, right now I am looking for a very old man from the country. Country people have a certain type of hands, body, leathery skin... which actors don't generally have, simply because they don't work under the sun. It also happened to me in Bolivia, where the industry is very small and the acting world is very limited: we were looking for the indigenous character in *Even the Rain* (También la lluvia, Icíar Bollaín, 2010) and there was no one with that profile among professionals. But when you look for that profile in the street, what you can't do is ask an actor who has never performed a role before to play someone very different from himself.

What you are going to get, instead, is an overwhelming truth, because he is playing himself; but you have to find someone very similar to the character you're looking for, because he won't have the resources to do anything else. In *El Sur*, I was definitely very similar to the character of Estrella that Erice was looking for, an introverted, quiet girl... But when I decided to continue acting and I was asked to do different things, I really struggled with it. I remember once I had a role as a fifteenth century Anabaptist in a series with José María Forqué [*Miguel Servet. La sangre y la ceniza* (TVE: 1988)], which involved, in addition to period clothing, pre-modern dialogue... I had to start going to acting classes because I didn't know how to study, how to do a read-through or how to build a character. I think that the great actors are the ones who combine both things: they maintain their freshness, they keep in touch with themselves, and at the same time, they have resources.

My films rely heavily on the characters; it's the characters that tell the story in a way. But I've worked as an actress in both types of films; I have seen how Borau worked, which is perhaps a more artificial method, but extremely interesting and extremely valid too. Borau, for example, does nothing to make the environment favourable for your performance: he decided to shoot the whole film of *Leo* (2000) with a 40 mm lens, and that required lifting all the furniture so that it came into the frame... you had to work on a surreal set. It is the opposite of what Loach would do; he hides the crew, he almost lets you forget that you're filming. But I think both, each in their own way, communicate a lot of emotion.

Borau's filming methods were, indeed, more at the service of precision of framing than at facilitating the work of the actors. For Borau, even the position and size of the actors in the frame, the duration of each shot... all this conveyed meaning and affected the viewer, and it was necessary to control these elements so that they worked for rather than against the story. Do you consider it the lesser of two evils to lose this meticulous control over the image if, in exchange, you get more authentic performances?

It depends on the story you're telling and how you want to tell it. What you say about Borau is true: it was very different from the way that I have worked, but it was fascinating, because the colours he chose told the story, or the arrangement of the objects... which is a technique of classical cinema as well. There are elements, or lines, which suggest violence, or that the character is trapped. There is a whole hidden or suggested visual language, which also tells a story. I also take these things into account when I'm filming, but above all I've learned to keep them in mind from people like Borau and from good cinematographers who say: "look, rather than against a wall, which doesn't tell you anything, if you put this same thing here, you're saying much more." And now that I've done a documenta-



Icíar Bollaín and José Luis Borau in the shooting of *Leo* (José Luis Borau, 2000)

ry film, even more so: anything you can't tell with narration you have to tell with images, with visual metaphors. I have always given much more importance to words, to acting, to emotions, but, in fact, you can construct your story in other ways as well. And I don't dismiss them at all, as long as you're aware of what your elements are and you make good use of them. Because if you want a truly authentic, emotional and fresh performance, you can't subordinate it to the lighting: you're going to make the actor suffer and you won't have the emotion. Of course, in the end, you have to be able to see the scene, but if you want an actor to give you one hundred percent, you have to help him a little; he's going to give a lot of himself, but you have to create the conditions. And if you think that you are going to tell the story better with the lighting, then go for it. You can mix the two languages, but one is most probably going to hinder the other. I sometimes try to achieve a compromise: ideally, everything will be expressive, the actor, the set, the lighting... everything should express something. In *Mataharis* (Icíar Bollaín, 2007), I had a lot of discussions about this with Kiko de la Rica, because I wanted, then more than ever, to follow the actors without rehearsals and with a very free camera. And I found myself with scenes with insufficient lighting because I hadn't ensured the necessary conditions. It's always a tug of war. In other film industries, they make up for these problems with time and money and, if you don't succeed on the first try, you succeed on the fifth. But we don't have that option, we can't afford to do that.

Luis Tosar, who took part in the filming of *Leo*, and also commented on the discomfort caused by all the artifice, was surprised to find his performance much more natural than he expected when he saw the finished film. As a result of this, he wondered whether he had a somewhat idealised notion about certain acting methods; whether certain ideas, like the idea of working organically, were maybe not as important when, in the end, what remains

on screen works perfectly. Do you think that there is some idealisation of acting methods based on an organic approach, on the importance of feeling as an actor the same way as the character is feeling?

I think that you don't have to be fanatical about anything and yes, there may be some idealisation. We were hugely surprised by *Leo*. During filming, the actors were laughing because Borau, as I said before, was determined to cram everything into a 40 mm lens. That meant, for example, that the actors were often nose to nose, less than a hand's span apart, a distance that is not natural for conversation, because you only get that close to someone when you want to intimidate them or kiss them. So we would say to him: "Borau, this is ridiculous". And Borau, who had a very strong character, would shout back: "No, it's not ridiculous! It's just fine!" And in fact, when you see it you have to take your hat off to him: it works, there is tension, and it's not ridiculous, as you felt it was during filming. So, yes, of course, the organic approach is a little bit overrated.

**I don't improvise;
what I often do is let the
scenes continue, to see what
happens when the actors run
out of lines. And sometimes
things come up that can
be included**

The question of improvisation is exaggerated too. I don't improvise; what I often do is let the scenes continue, to see what happens when the actors run out of lines. And then, if an actor is good, he goes on, because he is in character. And sometimes things come up that can be included. That's one way to work.

And, on the other hand, I thought that filming directly without rehearsing helped the actors, because that way they would feel freer, but in *Mataharis*, for example, the actors would say, "For God's sake, let's rehearse, because I don't know where I'm going." And they were right, because a set is an unnatural place, a set is not a house, things are not where they should be... We can't play at naturalness in an unnatural space. So it is also good for actors to rehearse, to learn how to move naturally around the set in a rehearsal in order to be more relaxed when the time comes to say their lines. Ultimately, I think what you have to avoid is being inflexible; the ideal approach is to incorporate different methods and techniques.

A film is analysed as a finished product and it is impossible to know whether the performances were adjusted to the other elements of the *mise en scène* or vice versa. For example, in *Take My Eyes* (Te doy mis ojos, Icíar Bollaín, 2003), there is a clear relationship between the use of close-ups and the containment of Luis Tosar's performance, compared to the use of increasingly open shots when he makes more agitated gestures that lead to an outburst of violence. For the analysis of the film, it is easy to identify these patterns, but what is hard is to reconstruct the logic of the decisions behind them: was a close-up used to capture Tosar's contained gestures, or did the actor perform in a contained way because he knew you were going to film him in close-up?

Both answers are right. In the case of Tosar, who has a very good training in theatre and in film as well, he knows that a close-up is a matter of nuance, of really feeling what you're playing, because the camera is like a big magnifying glass they put in front of you and, if you lie emotionally, it will show. You don't have to do great things, but your gaze has to be real, because a close-up is mostly about the gaze and Luis knows that. So, usually, a great actor like Luis will know what to do when performing in a close-up.

And as for me, I choose how I tell the story in each scene. In this way I do what Borau does: I draw my storyboards, I do my homework and then I share it with the cinematographer. This homework at least includes coming to the film shoot with a proposal, because, like Chus Gutiérrez once told me, thinking with forty people waiting for you is much worse than doing it at home. So I try to visualise the *mise en scène* in advance, how I'm going to tell the story, what kind of shot I can use to express it better. For example, after watching *Mataharis*, Borau told me that I used too many close-ups, which are very dramatic and should be used only as punctuation marks, because if you use them all the time, they lose their dramatic force. *Mataharis* was filmed primarily in medium shots; the shot range in the film is quite limited. In the language of classical cinema, the close-up has a value, the medium shot has another, and the wide shot has yet another. That's the sort of thing that I think about beforehand and then share with the cinematographer, just in case there are better ways to tell the story that haven't occurred to me. It's always different when you're already on the set, with the lighting and with the actors; there are always new things that come up. And later, it is in the editing process where, again, you apply your cinematographic considerations and choose when you will use a close-up, when you go to *off* and when you go to *on*, what phrases you see being spoken and what phrases you don't see... You are always looking for what best expresses the story you want to tell, but you always have a prior idea.

The filmmaker has a prior idea but, usually, the actor will also have prepared the character before arriving at the shoot: it is possible that he will have an idea in mind for how to approach a scene and that his idea proves unworkable. For example, he may find out that a scene in which he planned to introduce certain body gestures is going to be filmed in close-ups, and he has to abandon his initial idea...

Yes, of course, and vice versa. It has happened to me as an actress and I remember my frustration. In *Nos miran* (Norberto López Amado, 2002), my character was nice but it didn't have much substance; it was a supporting role to Carmelo Gómez's character. The most important scene I had was a very dramatic one, in which I had to go, crying, very distressed, to ask for help from a policeman – played by Karra Elejalde – because my husband was going crazy. And when I got there, the director had set up a tracking shot from miles away; we were a couple of ants at the end of the shot, the camera passed us and went on. I was astonished... I am very disciplined and I never turn directorial when I work as an actress, because I can see things from the director's perspective, but for the first and only time in my life I said: "Buddy, are you really going to do it that way?" He said yes and I answered: "Look, I can't do anything, you're the director; I understand that a tracking shot over a whole hospital hangar full of loonies is visually a very cool shot, but what are you talking about in this scene?" When he explained that what he wanted to reflect was the madness of Carmelo's character, I told him that it seemed fine to me, but, that, in that case, he didn't need me. However, I did it. And I cried my eyes out. But it's off the shot. So you prepare your role at home, but then the director does what he wants, logically.

FROM SCRIPT TO CASTING: MATCHES AND MISMATCHES

The casting process is usually understood as the search for the perfect actor or actress for the role, as it was written, but sometimes what was written is discarded completely in order to include a performer. Can a casting choice justify rewriting a whole character or even shifting the plot and the gist of the story away from what was initially intended?

I think that, if you change too much, you end up doing another film and that is not in your interest, because you get into a mess where your script falls apart. The casting process is very close to the shooting; in fact, it is part of the preparation. If you pull your script apart just before shooting, you have no structure, so I don't think it's a good idea to change everything. But in the casting call some very interesting changes *can* be made, depending



Juan Carlos Aduviri in *Even the Rain* (También la lluvia, Icíar Bollaín, 2011) / Courtesy of Morena Films

on the flexibility of the director and of the screenwriter. I've done it several times, but always keeping the spirit of the story. For example, in *Even the Rain*, we made two significant casting changes. One was the character of Columbus, played by Karra Elejalde. On paper, the character was older; he was sixty years old. We looked for actors that age but we were not quite convinced by any of them. And, suddenly, someone suggested Karra, who did a spectacular audition. I stood there with my mouth open, because the character fit him like a glove. And then you ask yourself: "Is it so important if the character is fifty or sixty?" The spirit is exactly the same, and perhaps even more heart-breaking, because such a cynical man, that's been there and done that, at fifty is harder than at sixty; so you're not going against what was written, you're reinforcing it.

The other big casting change in *Even the Rain* was the indigenous character. At first it was written as a single character, the leader, but then it was split in two, the leader and his bodyguard, which became the lead role. After a very long and very difficult casting call, where we saw no possibilities, we found Juan Carlos Aduviri, who is very short, and so could not be the bodyguard. And in addition, he had never acted before; he was a carpenter. But he had that dignity, that gaze, that strength ... So you bet on him and you adapt the character to him. The two roles were merged again into one. And what happened when we filmed with him? He was a man who had trouble making long speeches, so we made them shorter. We also discovered that he had a devastating silence, that he was more eloquent silent than talking. Why use words if you have that? You have to be attentive to what you've got, but without sacrificing the essence of the story you're telling. When

you make your choices without losing your sense of direction, ultimately, your choices will reinforce the story you're telling.

Several filmmakers, like Pablo Llorca in *Jardines colgantes* (1993) or Borau in *Leo*, have chosen you to play roles bordering on the *femme fatale*. Although there are certain qualities of your image (smart, strong, not corny or sentimental) that would make you suitable for such characters, your core values as an actress (freshness, spontaneity, a frank smile) and your refusal to adapt to a stereotypical and hypersexualised femininity, make those characters, because you've been chosen to play them, brighter and nobler on the screen, more victims than victimisers. On the other hand, in *Mataharis*, as director you made a casting decision that might also seem risky: casting Najwa Nimri in an ordinary, unglamorous role when she is an actress whose previous roles and media image have given her that halo of the enigmatic *femme fatale*. How do you think such casting mismatches affect a film?

In Borau's case, it's all his fault... Besides, he was like that, he always said: "I make my bed, I lie in it, and in it I have nightmares." And actually he did have nightmares, the poor thing. I have had the great fortune of suggesting to directors like Felipe Vega, Gutiérrez Aragón or Borau a type of character that I do not identify myself with but that I love, because they are beautiful, interesting, dark and luminous at the same time. I don't think it's something I have done; it's something that actors sometimes suggest. I suppose these directors would have in mind a type of woman who does not have a conventional beauty and who isn't entirely neat and dazzling. I imagine that I suggested

this type to them because at that time I was very shy and quiet, with wide eyes watching everything, and I think that inspired them.

And as for Najwa Nimri, we asked her to come to the audition without makeup, because it was a character with two children, without the time even to cut her finger nails. And what I found was an actress eager to work in another direction, different from the sophisticated thing that she had been doing, with a physical appearance that is much more interesting without makeup, because it expresses much more. A very good actress, extremely interesting whatever she does, because she is not predictable: Najwa suddenly looks, gestures, changes the rhythm when she says something... She is constantly changing position and that is very enriching. And I intuit all this in the auditions, because I do auditions on a working basis, where we do the scene several times and we try a lot of things. It was really a sure bet. Actors don't usually like auditions, though I think they are less and less bothered by them, but they are very important, because it is not about deciding whether they are good or bad, but whether they can take on that particular character.

One of the basic strategies of film casting is to find an actor who, with his very physical presence and gestures, fits the image of the character that he is to play. Sometimes, however, that fit between performer and role is problematic, because the character takes a 180-degree turn over the course of the film, because he evolves psychologically, or because he pretends to be one way at first and later reveals his true identity. This happens in two of your films as an actress, in which you are assigned a set of traits at the beginning of the film – shyness, puritanism, prudery – that do not fit at all with the image that we have of Icíar Bollaín, which makes the audience suspect that the character is lying (*Subjúdice*, Josep Maria Forn, 1998) or that she is going to transform, sooner or later, into another type of person (*Niño nadie*, José Luis Borau, 1996). In both cases, the performer tends to be chosen based on the final image of the character, which makes the film more predictable for the viewer. What do you think this tendency may be due to?

I guess the tendency is to cast the character according to what he *is*, not what he appears to be, and in that sense you become predictable, of course. On the other hand, when you make that casting choice, when you have a contradictory character, who is fragile but strong, dark but luminous... you ask yourself: "What is easier to get, a luminous, energetic and charismatic actor to play someone dark, or an actor who, apart from the torment, also has the ability to give me that luminosity?" Because you'll have to choose one type of actor, and it is very difficult to find that needle in the haystack that *is* the character. You have to think about where it is easier to work from. And, from

there, hiding that other trait that appears later will depend on your skill and the actor's.

Another basic casting convention is to respect the correspondence between the hierarchy of characters in the film and the hierarchy of performers in the "star system". Choosing anonymous actors for leading roles or assigning supporting characters to renowned actors is a way to subvert this standard. In your career, we can find examples in both directions. As a director, on various occasions you have chosen unknown actors for starring roles, such as Luis Tosar in *Flowers from Another World* (*Flores de otro mundo*, Icíar Bollaín, 1999) and Laia Marull in *Take my Eyes*, where supporting roles were filled by actresses who were better known than her (Candela Peña, Rosa Maria Sardá, Kiti Manver). And, as an actress, you have played roles – for example in *La noche del hermano* (Santiago García de Leániz, 2005) or *Rabia* (Sebastián Cordero, 2009) – that were supporting roles on paper, but that gained weight by the fact of being performed by you. What effect do you think that this way of subverting the hierarchy of the characters in relation to the actors has on the story and its reception by the viewer?

I personally always look for credibility, I don't select the actors according to any aesthetic, or to subvert a hierarchy. I just try to find who I think is the best actor for the role, whether he is a professional actor or not. There are other wars out there; broadcasters want names and the director is sometimes forced to include a famous actor, if not for the main character, at least to play a supporting role. But I have never been in that situation.

I do keep other things in mind. For example, I think that the fact that Tosar was unknown in *Flowers from Another World* was good for the film, because he's very fresh and believable. What took us a long time to decide was who would play the character that José Sancho ended up portraying, because we had a group of actors that fitted perfectly in the village – both Luis Tosar and Chete Lera integrated very well – and I was reluctant to include a face as well-known as Sancho's. I was afraid of exactly what you're pointing out, because it could throw the cast completely off balance. But in the end, he was the best actor for the role. He was excellent, a wonderful actor, and he also fitted in: he is José Sancho, but, suddenly, he isn't José Sancho anymore, but a bachelor with his Cuban girlfriend bragging around the village.

Casting a film is a constant search for balance. Right now I am in a casting process and we have the same situation: I have seen well-known and unknown actresses. Do I think it would be better for the actresses not to be so famous? Yes, because the story takes place in a village and that would give it a certain authenticity. But it is also a pleasure to watch Cesc Gay's films, where all the actors are famous but the freshness isn't lost.



Marilyn Torres and Pepe Sancho in *Flowers from Another World* (*Flores de otro mundo*, Icíar Bollaín, 1999) / Courtesy of Santiago García de Leániz

THE FILM SHOOT, ACTING AND ITS DIVERSIONS

The film shoot is where the shared construction of the characters between the filmmaker and the actors begins. In *Hi, Are You Alone?* (*Hola, ¿estás sola?*, Icíar Bollaín, 1995), a key idea was to use the acting to emphasise the contrast between Candela Peña's character, who is funnier and more expressive, and Silke's, who is a little more serious and dull. The latter claimed that this was not exactly the vision that she had of La Niña, but that she had to adapt her performance to the contrast you were looking for. Moreover, you had been working with Ken Loach and you set out a filming process open to improvisation, which led to Candela's character gaining importance. As a result, a story centred on Silke's character in the script ended up becoming the story of the friendship between the two girls. To what extent do you think the actor can contribute on set to rewriting the script? Aren't you worried that your directorial point of view might be altered by the way in which each performer approaches his or her character?

I have always worked, except once, with a script of my own, and I don't think of the script as set in stone; it's a work in progress that keeps evolving. When I write, I am clear about the story I want to tell, but in a very neutral way, trying to give the characters all the traits possible so they can be complex, but without imagining a face for anyone. Then, the actors give them a body, a voice and a soul. In the rehearsals, I always listen to what the actors have to say; I keep discarding and accepting suggestions. Sometimes, I feel their suggestions are very good; but, sometimes, the actors give you suggestions that dis-

tance you from the character and don't support the story you want to tell.

On the set of *Hi, Are You Alone?* Candela and Silke grew as friends and they contributed a lot to their characters; Candela was tremendously creative, bringing in a lot of things. The same thing happened with her as with Karra in the role of Columbus: their characters fitted them like a glove and it gave the impression that they had written them themselves. Actually, they made their dialogues sound so natural that it seemed like they came out of them.

I always avoid digressions, because you can end up nowhere, but I do film with a certain flexibility, trying to pay attention to what's going on. For example, you have a love story, you make a casting mistake and there is no chemistry between the actors, but the love story goes on regardless and to make up for the lack of chemistry you add violins and twilight to emphasise what the actors aren't providing. But in *Hello, are you alone?*, a film that could breathe a little more, when I was editing and I got to the end that we'd filmed (which was different from the final cut), I thought it was a happy ending in terms of the love story between the Russian and Silke, but it was also a bit claustrophobic because it ended in a hospital room. That ending, where they return on the train and La Niña finds the Russian, who has fallen off the roof and is in hospital with a broken leg, once shot and edited, seemed a little sad to me. And, at the same time, if you listened a little to your own story, you realised that the friendship between Silke's character and Candela's character had grown. So you ask yourself: "what is my film about? What have the characters done?" Well, the characters have created a very nice chemistry between them, and this, I think, is what the film is about. And I

discovered it in the editing room. So I removed the scene of the Russian with Silke in hospital and went off to shoot a different ending. But I did it based on what had happened during the shoot.

The same thing happened with the subplot starring María Vázquez in *Mataharis*, which was a love story, but there wasn't any chemistry between the characters. I saw it in the scenes: the actors got on really well, but there was no spark between them. So I gave more importance to the moral decision made by the character than to the decision made for love. And in a way, if you listen to what is happening and you incorporate it into the film, it reinforces your story; because, in this case, the character seemed more dignified by making an ethical rather than a romantic decision. It was an unconventional solution; after all, we have seen the romantic story many times. But I can afford this because I have written the script, I have filmed it... And also because my films are not as closed as others, they are stories about people, small, and without a script tied to a thriller, comedy or mystery structure, which is like a clock, where all the pieces have to fit. So I can listen to what happens and I can be faithful to what unfolds with the characters, within certain limits.

It also depends on the director. Borau, who is the most extreme example, never changed a comma of the script. He added or removed things later, at the most, but it was all very controlled. On the other hand, as long as the meaning is more or less the same, I always let the actors say the lines in their own words. This turns the film shoot into a time to discover things.

Although it is often not taken into account in film analysis, the use of one acting style or another is key to the classification of a film as belonging to a particular genre. The films that you acted in for your uncle, Juan Sebastián Bollaín, had a lot of humour in them and could be considered comedies. Yet, in the performing style, they avoided parodic gestures, the choreographic movement of bodies and other features of the comic acting tradition, that we see more clearly in another of your films, Felipe Vega's *An Umbrella for Three* (*Un paraguas para tres*, 1992). Is the acting style defined from the outset by the script, or do you think that the same script is always open to different acting styles?

Well, sometimes it isn't, but supposedly the tone of the film should already be clear in the script: if it's a comedic tone, if it's a tragedy, etc. The thing is that there are more and more hybrids, more mixing of genres: there are tragicomedies, social dramas with a touch of comedy and a bit of magic realism... and to control the tone, so that it doesn't veer off, is perhaps one of the hardest tasks the director faces. There is nothing worse than a tragedy that ends up making people laugh, but it happens: there are actors who don't hit on the right tone. I have said actors,

but, in reality, it's the director who is watching and whose role is to prevent that from happening.

Every script has a thousand interpretations, and the director's job is to make *one* film that does not have to be better or worse than another, but it is the one he has chosen. That is the job that a director is paid for, to go in one direction. And there are a thousand factors that keep pushing you away from the direction you've taken: in the end things are not like you thought they would be because there is no money or no time, because of the lighting, for a thousand reasons... And also actors, naturally, have a tendency to bring their roles round to the tone in which they feel most comfortable, or which they like best, or which they think is right. Actors who like comedy, for example, often give their lines that tone, if they can, because being funny is very gratifying. And the director has to constantly rectify the situation to keep the pulse and tone of the story he is telling, getting everyone to work in the same direction, and also convincing them that it is the right direction, and trying to make them fall in love with that direction, because there is nothing worse than a team of people who aren't enjoying their work.

It will be even harder to keep that balance or that direction when, in the same film, there are different acting styles. For example, in *The Night of the Brother*, your performance contrasts with that of the two boys who play the protagonist brothers. Your performance is dazzling, earthy, straightforward, compared to theirs, which are mostly based on silences, on gazes, on mystery. Also, in *Hi, Are You Alone?*, *La Niña* and the Russian adopt a lower, more contained style compared to the characters constructed by Candela Peña and Alex Angulo, Trini and Pepe, who are over the top, at times even bordering on the ridiculous. How are these potential tensions between the different tones balanced?

That is the job of the director, to balance everything very carefully. There are films that have good ingredients, but they aren't linked together... It's a soup in which everything floats separately: there are good actors, a good story, good lighting, but the result hasn't gelled. And conversely, there are other films that have fewer elements or elements that are not so spectacular, but that work well together, as if it were a good paella: the ingredients have set and the rice is just right. Why? Well, that's the art of the director, to know how to amalgamate all that. And to ensure contrast, so that the actors don't all go their own way or grate against each other when they're all together. And so that the scenes have the right tone, because sometimes the actors feel like being humorous and you have to say, "guys, no; it's very funny, but this scene can't be that funny yet." Or the opposite: there are very dramatic actors who turn the scene into a melodrama, and you think, "if I have this melodrama in minute

fifteen, where am I going to end up in the minute fifty?" In each scene you shoot you have to keep the whole film in view. It is the opposite to the work of the actor. The director has to have it all in his head and make sure that each element fits with the rest. The actor needs to be focused on his scene, keeping his character in mind, but nothing else.

But some actors want to have just that global view. In the documentary *El oficio del actor* (Mariano Barroso, 2005), Luis Tosar, Eduard Fernández and Javier Bardem explained that they needed to get an idea of the whole film to build their own characters beyond a particular scene.

The actor needs to know a little about how everything goes. The thing is that there are things that are only in the director's head. It's your job to see the overall effect that the film is going to have, from the casting to the sets. I like the actors to watch a day of filmed material. But they shouldn't watch themselves too much because I think that it can mislead and obsess them. I myself, as an actress, would go crazy if I was constantly watching myself. But they should watch themselves a little bit, so that they can see how they look and how the film looks, so that they can relax. Because otherwise, the poor actor is the only one who doesn't see his own work. Everyone on the set sees his work: the sound team listens to it and the cinematographer, the costume team and the make-up team see it... all except the actor, who feels it and has the mirrors of the director and the rest of the crew to get some feedback, but doesn't see it for himself. Sometimes, it is an act of faith. So if you give them a little piece so they can see themselves, at least they have a picture of their work.

CHARACTER PORTRAITS: THE CONCEPTION OF ACTING IN DOCUMENTARY FILM

You have just released your first documentary film as director, *En tierra extraña* (2014). The work of the filmmaker with the people who are on the other side of the camera is different, of course, between fiction films and documentaries. But we would like you to tell us, instead, what they have in common, how your conception of acting and the decisions or strategies that you adopt to address a fiction film and a documentary film are alike.

I had never done a documentary film before. I had made a mockumentary, *Amores que matan* (2000), which was the germ that led to *Take My Eyes*. I have learned a lot and it has given me a dose of humility, because there is a certain arrogant belief in the world of fiction that making documentaries must be easier. But I have found it more difficult. My first surprise was that it has many similarities with

In a documentary film you have to have characters and your characters have to act in front of the camera, but the way of achieving it is different.

You can't, as a scriptwriter, decide what to do, instead, they do things and you follow them. But you have to offer a portrait of them. And you have to find the images that portray them

fiction: characters, story, narrative arc... It has the same elements but they are much more fragile, much more elusive... They are there and you have to catch them and build a structure, a story... unless you start with an existing story that already has a substantial structure. But, in my case, it was something open, about a huge issue, immigration and the economic crisis, and so it has been an incredible learning process. There came a moment when I thought, "I think I'm missing a lot, but I would like someone to tell me how much." Then I had the good fortune of attending a seminar on documentaries taught by Patricio Guzmán in Madrid. I spent a week captivated by him and I realised that, in effect, my project had none of the elements that a documentary should have. Because you have to have characters and your characters have to act in front of the camera, but the way of achieving it is different. You don't have a written dialogue, you can't tell them "go from here to there". You can't, as a scriptwriter, decide what to do, instead, they do things and you follow them. But you have to offer a portrait of them. And you have to find the images that portray them. Patricio Guzman described this really well: from their silences to their way of walking, their personal belongings, their home, their memories, all of that portrays them...

Did you do a casting call for the film? Did you select the people who were to be protagonists?

There was a call on Facebook and people who were interested responded. Around a hundred people came. Of that hundred, some didn't do the interview, either because they didn't want to or because they didn't fit the profile. Everyone else did the interview, about sixty people. And from there, I cast the characters. I chose the most elo-

quent, the ones whose stories didn't repeat one another, the most representative... In the end, I think we edited twenty-two. The documentary is condemning a situation: the government says everything is great, but the reality is that some people don't have opportunities and have to go abroad, although I didn't want to leave out the people who were happy, because they're out there as well. If I don't dwell on them it's because they already have a whole TV show devoted to them, called *Espanoles por el mundo* (TVE: 2005-).

How did you work in the film shoot with these people? Did you encourage them or try to direct them towards certain moods?

In a documentary film, you don't interfere, or you shouldn't interfere, but at the same time, you have to make it expressive. Gloria, the main character in *En tierra extraña*, started collecting gloves when she arrived in the U.K. Through these gloves, she expresses the frustration of many people who have left Spain and who ask themselves: "What am I doing here? How am I going to get back?" The first artificial thing that you do is to ask Gloria to look for some gloves while you're filming her. Then she'll go to look for gloves and she'll find them – in fact, she found ten in one morning, which are the ones shown in the documentary. That's not false, but you have to provoke the situation. You can't just follow her around until she decides to go out to look for gloves. There is a mixture of intervention/non-intervention. Of course you have to generate situations, but what is important is not to manipulate them, but that they happen and you film them.

CONSTRUCTING THE CHARACTER: THE ACTOR AS PART OF THE FILM'S STORY

The gestures that serve an actor to construct his character are, in turn, the same gestures that gradually build up the narration of the film. One of the key decisions related to the conception of acting in a film is, in this sense, the degree of expressive ambiguity of the performances, since this will largely determine the obviousness or the mysteriousness of certain scenes or even of the film as a whole. The intrigue of *Take My Eyes*, for example, starts with Antonio attending group therapy, which provokes doubt in the viewer about the possibility of his rehabilitation. In these therapy scenes, Luis Tosar maintains an ambiguity on his face that keeps the viewer guessing about whether or not he is taking in what he is listening to. Did you plan this expressive ambiguity as a strategy to delay the resolution of the intrigue, i.e., to control what the viewer should know, intuit or be unaware of at each moment of the story?

More than ambiguity, what Luis and I wanted in this film was to control the intensity of his violence and aggressiveness. In fact, several times – not in the therapy scenes, which were, in this sense, quite easy – I asked Luis to repeat the same scene with graduations in the intensity of his bad temper, from high to low or from low to high. I knew that we had gone into difficult terrain. At that time, the way gender violence was spoken about turned the man into anathema; he was the devil with horns, and looking closely such a man was a sensitive issue. One thing was to understand him and another thing was to justify him, but it was a very fine line, and the scriptwriter and I were afraid that we might be misunderstood. Luis and I handled this in the performance, and I took the biggest amount of material possible with me to the editing room, to measure it carefully. I had one round of edits where Luis was much more aggressive, another round where he was less so... And I watched it with other people, always measuring, because his character couldn't be a "poor little dear", nor could it just be a "complete bastard"... he couldn't be either black or white; he had to be grey, that is, in relation to the aggressiveness and violence of the character.

Regarding the uncertainty that Luis conveys in the therapy scenes, we talked to a therapeutic specialist, Enrique Echeburúa, and he told us that the first thing that happens to these men is that they don't recognize themselves as abusers. So, in these therapies, Luis is in the phase of "I don't belong here, I just came because my wife told me to, but this is not for me, but, at the same time, what they're saying sounds familiar." He is processing, trying to understand, he's confused... he is in between "that's me" and "that's not me". And that's what his face is showing. I think Luis is acting out that confusion, that's how he feels. If afterwards, as a result, this has a "thriller effect", because we don't know whether he is going to change or not... all the better, because the film is founded on that question "will he be able to do it?" But, of course, it's very complicated, and probably no one knows, not even Luis.

In a way, every narrative model is linked to certain types of characters: there are films that focus completely on the characters and their psychological condition; others whose characters are more clearly defined by their sociological characteristics; others in which the characters are shallow, because what matters is the plot, etc. One of the most unconventional films that you have starred in is Pablo Llorca's *Hanging Gardens* (Jardines colgantes, 1993), where we find characters whose psychological state is left undefined and who are also very difficult to locate sociologically, since the story takes place in an unspecified time and place. How does an actor construct a character that is more symbol than flesh and blood, and how do the different narrative models that you have faced as an actress affect your work when constructing a

character? There was no way to construct the character in *Hanging Gardens* because it was an abstraction, just like the rest of the film. There can be no character construction because none of the conventions that you work with as an actress (who am I, where am I, what do I want to achieve...) are present in the film. It is an act of faith in the director, who knows what he is doing. You don't have the sensation that you're doing a very demanding acting job; you try to imagine what he is seeing in you and what he wants from you. And that's what I do: I let myself be filmed, doing exactly what he asks me to do, which basically involves going from here to here, looking there.... As I am a bit of a non-conformist, I told the director: "Pablo, I'm walking around the frame, is that okay or do you want me to do something else?" And he told me, "No, it's great just like that." When you see it, it's magnetic, it's beautiful, it's interesting. I'm not sure what it's telling me, but I like it. And you become part of it.

The character in *Leo* was also very difficult. I read the script over and over again, but I had trouble understanding the character. I never understood the one in *Niño nadie*. In both films I worked like crazy to get into every situation, every scene: now I fall for this guy, now my mother is dying... I didn't quite understand where it was going, but I tried to be connected to the character in every scene, though Borau filmed the scenes out of order, shooting the end first... We had funny discussions, where I'd say, "but Borau, how can you make it so complicated?" And he would answer: "the trouble is that you think too much like Ken Loach." It was a real challenge.

Working with Felipe Vega, on the other hand, was wonderful, because he told me about the script while he was writing it. I also learned a lot from Felipe as a director, because he is a man who is very close to what he tells. He took us – the actors in *El mejor de los tiempos* (Felipe Vega, 1989) – to Almería before shooting, so we could meet the people who did the work that we would be portraying in the film. That allows you to do some really good research work, something that I have done since as a screenwriter and director. It's a kind of filmmaking that sticks very closely to the reality it's depicting, that doesn't invent anything but reformulates reality. It was very enriching work, because it wasn't about sitting at home thinking about where your character comes from or where she's going; instead, Felipe introduced you to your character: "you are her". So you could start talking to her and incorporating things into your character.

Sometimes the actor or actress does not have all the information that he or she would need to construct the character.

What happens is that often the character is not well written. I think the actors are great scriptwriters because they come up with things that the scriptwriter should have writ-



Fédor Atkine and Iciar Bollain in *Hanging Gardens* (Jardines colgantes, Pablo Llorca, 1993) / Courtesy of La Cicatriz-La Bañera Roja

ten. For example, Paul Laverty, my partner, writes a biography of the characters and shares it with the actors before shooting. That is something that few screenwriters do and that, ultimately, the actors have to do at home: to find the reasons, to look for the roots of their characters. The actor needs to hold on to something, he has to know what to do in each scene; otherwise, he is lost. These are questions that, sometimes, the scriptwriter has not asked himself: the character is there in the scene simply because it's in the writer's interest to provide the viewer with some information. But not because the character has the need or a reason to be there. Finding a motivation, discovering what drives the character... is a job that is ultimately always done by the actor.

A very special case, in this regard, is found in the work of Ken Loach, who looks for more spontaneous reactions from his actors and, to achieve that, conceals some major events that are going to happen to them during the film. You have always argued that Loach's methods favour the work of actors, but, in this case, doesn't this lack of knowledge of what will happen in a particular scene or even in the story as a whole actually hinder their work?

The truth is that, shooting with Ken, you have a very curious feeling: you feel that things happen to you, it's more like real life because in real life you don't know what's going to happen to you. And that is basically the principle. The thing is that Ken only uses this for certain moments and characters, when he is looking for an emotion in a particularly dramatic scene. In *Carla's Song*, the protagonist finds the Nicaraguan girl in the bathtub in which she had attempted suicide. In that scene, the actor didn't know what he was going to find. Ken surprised him. Why? Because there is a first reaction, a brutal initial surprise at something you don't expect. Then, the scene is repeated many times because the first time, as the actor doesn't

know what he is going to do and neither does the cameraman, you can even miss it. But, what Ken is giving you with this surprise is the gift of a very real emotion, which you can return to in every take. You have to reproduce it, but you actually felt it the first time.

As a director, I've often thought about it... it requires a kind of production logistics that everyone has to agree to. In addition, it means you can't work with the actor in the rehearsals, and I think that is a shame, because the actors have so much to contribute. So you win and you lose. But, of course, there are advantages with this way of working, especially with non-professional actors, because the surprise is genuine and it gives you something that is stunningly, overwhelmingly true.

On the one hand, advocating this method is like denying the actor's ability to perform that surprise, and represents, in a way, the denial of the actor. But, on the other hand, it is also the celebration of the actor, because you are placed in a different situation: you know you're shooting, and you have to make an effort to continue the scene when what you feel like doing is turning around and saying: "You bastard... you've messed me up!" You're surprised but, at the same time, you are forced to follow the rules of the game that have been laid down. In *Land and Freedom* (Ken Loach, 1995) I enjoyed myself a lot; it's fun not knowing what's going to happen. Because you don't know what they're going to say to you, you have to listen. That's a part of the actor's job that gets lost over time: you know exactly what others are going to say and you're so self-aware of your own lines that you don't listen. So, what does working this way force you to do? To be alert, you and the whole crew. Because even the crew ends up relaxing: "We are going to do this take again, he will get into the frame here and will go out there". But no, he'll come into the frame here or he might not; and he'll go out there or maybe not. So pay attention. And that turns out to be very truthful, because things *happen*. ■

Pablo Hernández Miñano (Valencia, 1982) has a degree in Communication Studies from the Universitat de València and has completed a Masters in Film Screenplays from the Fundación para la Investigación del Audiovisual - Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo (FIA-UIMP). He has been involved in various cultural association projects, and between 2003 and 2008 formed part of Cinefòrum L'Atalante and of the team that promoted *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*. He has participated in the technical organisation of various conferences and seminars related to cinema and, between 2008 and 2013, he served as cultural management specialist in the communications department of the Filmoteca valenciana (CulturArts IVAC). Currently, he teaches monographic courses on film at the Universitat Politècnica de València and is the technical coordinator of the Aula de Cinema de la Universitat de València.

Nuria Castellote Herranz (Valencia, 1979) holds a degree in Communication Studies from the Universitat de València and has completed a Masters in Subtitling and Dubbing at the Universidad de Sevilla. She has been a specialist in the programming department of the Filmoteca de Valencia (CulturArts IVAC) since 2006 and, since 2013, has been teaching monographic courses on film at the Universitat Politècnica de València. She has contributed articles to the collective publication *Mujeres, culturas y literaturas* (Caracas: Escultura, 2001) and to the *Diccionario del Cine Iberoamericano* (Madrid: SGAE, 2009).

Violeta Martín Núñez (Valencia, 1982) has a degree in Audiovisual Communication and Journalism from the Universitat de València (UV) and a Masters in New Trends and Innovation Processes in Communication from the Universitat Jaume I (UJI). She is a member of the Association Cinefòrum L'Atalante, which has been managing the Aula de Cinema de la UV since 2004 and is executive secretary of *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*. She was also editorial board assistant at *Archivos de la Filmoteca*. She works at the company Projectem Comunicació.