

# THE ORIGINS OF THE SINISTER LOCUS IN JAUME BALAGUERÓ'S BARCELONA

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## INTRODUCTION

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Since its origins, Barcelona has been one of the two poles of the Spanish film industry, the other being Madrid. In terms both of studios and infrastructure and of the number of productions and the wealth of technicians, artists and directors, films produced in Catalonia and Catalan cinema occupy an important place in the Spanish and international film world.

Following the transition to democracy in Spain, Barcelona's global image was completely transformed thanks to the 1992 Olympics and Expo. Since then, the city has developed a brand image as a modern, tourist-friendly European city with a great cultural tradition. This transformation has led to the promotion of the city's new image through various films that have been set in identifiable locations in the city, such as *All About My Mother* (Todo sobre mi madre, Pedro Almodóvar, 1999), *Manual of Love* (Manuale d'amore, Gio-

vanni Veronesi, 2005), *Salvador* (Manuel Hueriga, 2006), *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (Tom Tykwer, 2006), *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (Woody Allen, 2008), and *Biutiful* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2010). Like Rome, Paris or New York, Barcelona is recognised today for a series of landmarks (the Sagrada Familia, Park Güell, Casa Mila) whose postcard quality make them ideal as cinematic backdrops (Poyato, 2012: 101).

The city's cinematic presence has run parallel with a phenomenon on the rise in recent years: film tourism, a form of tourism that involves visiting places that have been featured in or associated with prominent films. In the travel industry it is also referred to as "screen tourism" or "movie-induced tourism". In the context of these activities, specialist guides have been developed to help tourists plan urban or rural itineraries with the aim of identifying movie settings. In Barcelona there are the Barcelona Movie Walks, like the Barcelona of Woody Allen, of Pedro Almodóvar,

of *Perfume*, of Erasmus students, etc. In addition to such guides there are sources which, without intentionally aiming to promote tourism, explore the relationship between Barcelona's unique cityscape and the films that have been made there. The real estate website *Idealista* features a page with the title "Movie Houses: 7 homes in Barcelona that were used as film sets." And of those seven homes, three appeared in horror films by the same director, Jaume Balagueró: *Darkness* (2002), *Sleep Tight* (Mientras Duermes, 2011), and two pictures he co-directed with Paco Plaza, *REC* (2007) and *REC 2* (2009).

This real estate website has thus inadvertently recognised the relationship between Barcelona's urban landscape and Balagueró's work as a reflection of a visual imaginary that associates the horror genre with certain city locations, offering a picture very different from Barcelona's cosmopolitan image up to now. But this association is not merely another interesting titbit for a tour guide, as if we look closer at the settings of these films, we find a process of construction of a particular spatial imaginary that transforms specific locations of the city into a corpus of horror sets. Through the repetition of a series of stylistic features constructed through the cinematic treatment of the space, these films have established a spatial and symbolic topography based on an adaptation of the Anglo-American model of the sinister haunted house, the urban models of Polanski's psychological horror, and the local features of modernist Barcelona.

## TOURISM, IMAGINARY AND CINEMATIC LOCUS

In recent decades, the relationship between city, tourism and cinema has captured the attention of numerous scholars working from different perspectives, including Charney & Schwartz (1995), Barber (2004), Beeton (2005), Rosado & Querol (2006), Donald & Gammack (2007), and Mennel

(2008), among others. But one of the less explored questions in this area is the creation of imaginaries that connect cinema to spaces in the real world—in this case, urban spaces.

Film tourism can be developed in the real-life spaces of a city, a rural area or a landscape, or in spaces constructed specifically for the story, like the sets built by film studios. But what is it that tourists expect to find there? The real place or the specific set where a scene was shot? Imagine a tourist travelling to Romania to see Bran Castle in Transylvania, believed to have been the home of Vlad the Impaler, the historical figure who inspired Count Dracula. Even unintentionally, it would be impossible not to associate this real location with the cinematic vampire and to want to relive the sensations experienced as a film viewer within its walls. Tourists go to such places seeking confirmation of an imaginary, the images and fantasies constructed on screen.

Imaginaries are perceptions that are transformed into representations through a symbolic process, and which evolve into unquestionable assumptions as they are integrated into the collective consciousness. An imaginary is fed on images from reality and/or fantasy, on discourses and social practices that allow us to engage with reality as they act as frameworks of meaning. Daniel Hiernaux suggests that imaginaries create guiding images or enacting images; in other words, they are guides for action (Lindón, 2007: 9-10).

A cinematic imaginary is made up of spaces, character types and characterisations, objects, vehicles, etc.; in short, everything that makes up the universe of a film or a genre. In addition to its definitions associated with production and marketing in the industry, the concept of genre can be understood to refer to "the formal framework on which individual films are founded" (Altman, 1999: 14). The films of a genre share certain features that go beyond the repetition of themes and structures, as there is also a series of materials associated with narrative, visual and staging motifs.

In the case of cinematic spaces, an imaginary is fed by meaningful locations in natural or staged settings that transcend an individual film to become representative of the genre. Significant examples of natural settings include Monument Valley in Arizona, the rocky red-sand desert that has become associated with John Ford's Westerns, while an emblematic staged setting is the Bates Motel and family house in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), still on display at Hollywood's Universal Studios, which has become an icon for horror mansions. The role of unique spaces in cinema, like the city, has been analysed in studies like Barbara Mennel's *Cities and Cinema* (2008) and Edward Dimendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (2004). Both these texts reveal urban morphology as a source for the imaginaries of film noir, the utopian and dystopian city, the romantic European city, and the marginal spaces of the suburbs, as well as an influence in the opposite direction: how different genres make us view real cities through the filter of films.

The material reality of these cinematic spaces, like so many others, are imbued with a spirit of place that the imaginary has transferred to them. They thus become meaningful through their symbolic significance. This transfer process is not exclusive to cinema but extends to any process of transformation of a natural landscape. The first distinctions between natural and man-made spaces can be found in the concepts of *topos* and *locus* in classical mythology. Steenbergen and Reh describe *topos* as "a natural landscape inhabited by the gods. It is thus a magical, mythological concept (defined in the mythical landscape). It is also a labyrinthine concept without scale, because it lacks a geometry that would regulate it" (Steenbergen & Reh, 2001: 19). *Locus* refers to the construction of the *templum*, a mythical motif in the shape of a cross that is associated with the foundation of the city, the space constructed over nature for the coexistence and development of the community.

These two concepts of space reflect a binary: the primal, magical, and anarchic in contrast to the rational, and thus transformed by man, which today we find in the concepts of natural landscape and cultural landscape. Conceived in general terms, the cultural landscape can be characterised as the result of a meeting between culture (understood generally as human activity) and nature (Arntzen, 2003).

From the above we can conclude that cinematic space is a cultural space or landscape (or in classical terminology, a *locus*) created out of a natural space (or *topos*) by being imbued with a specific cinematic imaginary. In this study, I will use the term "locus" to refer to this type of cultural space charged with cinematic symbolism.

In the case of the horror genre and the specific space of the house, castle or mansion of terror, specific loci have been established over the years, such as the aforementioned motel and house in *Psycho*, the Winchester Mystery House in San José, California, or the house at 112 Ocean Avenue in the town of Amityville, New York. Behind the uniqueness of the architecture and the story associated with it, each of these houses shares the same genre locus, created through the establishment of a repertoire of films that have come to share, and thus to consolidate, a model for universal space.

The creation of a locus that is identifiable for spectators and may therefore turn into a tourist site is not a clear process that could be said to adhere to specific rules, and therefore such loci generally have to be identified after the fact. In this study, I will analyse what I define as the sinister locus in the work of Jaume Balagueró, which like any imaginary fuses together material from different sources. This locus is the product of various imaginaries of universal spaces (the haunted house of Anglo-American horror, and spaces of terror in the European tradition), real identifiable spaces (the bourgeois architecture of Barcelona), and the filmmaker's own audiovisual

style, all combined to create a locus of his own. In the next section, I will consider the features of the Victorian sinister house as a primary source of this sinister locus.

## **THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SINISTER HOUSE**

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If there is any space that literature and (especially) cinema have consolidated in the last century as a protagonist in the genres of horror and the fantastic, it is without doubt the sinister haunted house. It is a space quite different from the castle of the Gothic tradition or the solitary mansion in a desolate landscape characteristic of Romanticism as a sanctuary of monsters, vampires, or some other diabolical entity. Both the sources and the manifestations of horror and the supernatural have gradually taken over the ordinary world, including spaces closer to everyday life: the single-family house and the city apartment. Both have become emblematic spaces in horror and the fantastic since the mid-twentieth century thanks to the development of an architectural model that has seeped into the imaginary of both genres, and the mere sight of these spaces is enough to automatically elicit emotions tinged with shivers, fear, anxiety and dread. This model is associated with the Victorian architectural style, which possesses certain easily recognisable features: wooden façades, roofs with profusely decorated attics or garrets, cresting and porches around the entrance or lining the perimeter of the building, and central or side towers. The décor possesses a nineteenth-century air: elegant wooden furniture, elaborate wallpaper, thick and heavy drapes, and rooms cluttered with glass display cabinets, figurines, paintings, and plants.

The reason this style has become stereotypical of the horror genre has been revealed by authors like Sarah Burns (2012), who points out that this type of architecture is associated with the past and with a social class and an ideology

viewed as antiquated or in decline. To consolidate the stereotype, all that was needed was to connect this type of setting with a few very popular stories. Several historic milestones contributed to forging this connection. The first was the legend of the Winchester Mystery House, built by Sarah Winchester over thirty years to be haunted by the ghosts of those killed by the famous rifles invented by her husband. H. P. Lovecraft set some of his stories in old, sinister houses, like the one in “The Dreams in the Witch House”, published in 1933. But without doubt there are two constructions that truly founded the canon of the sinister house: the Addams Family mansion, which first appeared in the *New Yorker* comic strip in 1945, and the mansion in *Psycho*. Both these houses share stylistic features which from that moment would be considered essential to any house of horror, in film and television productions and in theme parks, ghost walks, video games, etc. Creaking boards, broken windows, dusty attics, and yards with leafless trees surrounded by broken, rusty fences.

From the origins of the house described above we can deduce the first two essential features: an architectural style associated with a significant period of the past, and the presence—either through objects, décor, living residents or their ghostly reflection—of a declining or forgotten society which nevertheless refuses to die once and for all, thus turning into a strange, disturbing or menacing presence for the contemporary protagonists.

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## **BOTH THE SOURCES AND THE MANIFESTATIONS OF HORROR AND THE SUPERNATURAL HAVE GRADUALLY TAKEN OVER THE ORDINARY WORLD, INCLUDING SPACES CLOSER TO EVERYDAY LIFE: THE SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSE AND THE CITY APARTMENT**

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Once the horrific or fantastic element has been made manifest, the spaces of the house lose their usual function—bedroom, dining room, living room, kitchen, etc.—and become a battleground divided between safe and unsafe locations. The safe spaces are where the characters take refuge, rest, or plan their strategies for salvation. In the unsafe spaces lurks the threat, and these are sometimes unpredictable or hidden and therefore much more disturbing. The pathways between one space and the other establish axes of movement with symbolic significance. The vertical axis is expressed in the architecture, in the layout of spaces like the basement, the attic or the garret and the channels that connect them: stairs and lifts. Basements and attics are evocative of realms outside the central axis of everyday life, realms of the obscure and the forgotten, parts of the past and of memory, where something banished from today's world lingers on. They evoke dungeons, the infernal, and the objects they contain belong not to the order or operations of the contemporary world but to the order of a spirit of the past. The stairways that connect these spaces are essential as drivers of the dramatic tension because the monster or killer obstructs them to prevent the protagonists from escaping, or they must be destroyed so that the threat cannot reach the protagonists.

## THE INFLUENCE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR: POLANSKI

Balagueró has also tapped into the European tradition, predominated by multi-storey apartment blocks. The filmmaker who has depicted this space most effectively in the fantastic and horror genres is Polanski. His Apartment Trilogy, set in three cities (London, New York, and Paris), is a source for constructions of the sinister in a context closely associated with European culture and is highly noticeable in Catalan cinema. In this section I will briefly outline some of the charac-

teristics of these spaces in his films. The first film in the trilogy is *Repulsion* (1965), about Carol, a young woman who lives in an apartment in London with her sister Helen. The film is a journey into the young woman's disturbed psyche, which leads her to suffer hallucinations and to murder a young man who wanted to begin a relationship with her. Polanski constructs a psychological space through the distorted vision of the apartment's topography. In the climax of her schizophrenia, Carol sees the hallways from impossible perspectives, with cracks through which hands emerge, and the bathroom appears to her as a cubicle with black walls. Finally, she shuts herself up in the apartment and ends up destroying it.

Passageways and safe and sinister spaces are also present in New York's famous Dakota building in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). The protagonist, Rosemary, wanders around a recently refurbished home that is nevertheless filled with echoes of voices from the other side. Next door is another apartment, old and dark, with gloomy artworks reminiscent of Goya's Black Paintings. Many years ago, the two apartments were a single dwelling, and they are still connected through an apparently shut-up wardrobe at the end of a long hallway. The satanic rituals performed in the neighbouring apartment will ultimately make Rosemary the mother of a new Lucifer.

In *The Tenant* (Le locataire, 1976), the setting is a tiny flat in a large, old run-down apartment block in Paris. Trelkovsky, a meek and rather dull office worker, bows to the bullying of an old landlord and the influence of the deranged neighbours he meets on the stairs (an old stairwell very similar to the one in the building in *REC*). Like Carol, Trelkovsky ends up going insane, taking on the personality of the previous tenant and following in her footsteps by attempting suicide by jumping out of the window while his strange neighbours egg him on from the courtyard. As Padilla points out, "[i]n these films, everything operates according to the following mechanism: the association

of a claustrophobic set design with the unbalanced psyches of troubled female protagonists" (Pardilla, 2016: 285).

## JAUME BALAGUERÓ'S FILMS

Jaume Balagueró belongs to the movement known as Barcelona's "Nova Escola", a group of filmmakers also including Paco Plaza and Nacho Cerdá, whose productions, although they fall into what could be described as mainstream (especially in their Filmax productions under the Fantastic Factory label), share certain features in common, particularly their alignment with international movements of genre cinema quite distinct from the more recognisable canons of Spanish cinema. While all three filmmakers approach the genres of horror and the fantastic through formal experimentation, Balagueró is the one whose work maintains certain auteurist constants in terms of both themes and visual style.

The cinematic universe constructed by Balagueró in his feature films is very clearly defined even in his earliest work. His short films *Alicia* (1994) and *Días sin luz* [Days without Light] (1995) reveal a preoccupation with deformed bodies and dreamlike atmospheres. His first feature film explores another of his regular themes: sects that engage in traumatic and bloody rituals and the perversion that drives their leaders; these are ideas he develops in *Nameless* (Los sin nombre 1999), *Darkness*, and *Muse* (2017). *Fragile* (2005) and the *REC* saga (2007, 2009, 2012, 2014) explore other aspects of the supernatural: the survival of ghosts in the first case, and the monstrous fruit of the diabolical in the second. *To Let* (Para entrar a vivir, 2006), a film made for the television series *Películas para no dormir* [Films to Keep You Awake] (2006), the short film *Fear* (Miedo, 2010), and the feature film *Sleep Tight* move away from the supernatural to explore individual madness as a cause of the horror that can destabilise everyday life. Along with *REC* and *REC2*, these films are the

ones that make the most effective use of the sinister locus of the building as a closed, oppressive space where ordinary people, much like the spectator, are subjected to a process of physical and psychological torture. These are buildings that are sometimes isolated, where evil manifests as an internal rotting that devours their residents.

In the following section, I will analyse some of these constants based on the parameters the filmmaker establishes for the architecture and symbolic space of the sinister house.

## OLD AGE, THE PAST AND DECAY

All the buildings in these stories are very old houses or apartment blocks. *Darkness* takes place in a single-family house—the type of dwelling that most resembles the traditional Victorian model—on the outskirts of Barcelona, with modernist touches to its interior design, which gradually becomes darker and more oppressive until it is finally revealed that in reality it is an occult temple. In *To Let* the setting is a tall apartment building on the city outskirts, in the middle of an industrial zone. A collapsing ruin, the building's dilapidated condition is obvious: the walls are dirty, grey, and cracked; the furniture and household appliances are decades old, and the outdoor areas and stairs are neglected and in terrible condition. *Fragile* is set in an old children's hospital whose upper floor has been closed for decades. When the protagonist, the nurse Amy Nicholls, ventures upstairs, she finds a space ravaged by the passage of time: debris, decrepit medical equipment and hospital furniture, and broken doors and fittings.

*REC* and *REC 2*, in addition to being the director's best-known films, are the ones that best depict their spaces as realms of confinement and access to a concealed horror. The setting in both films is a building located on a Barcelona street that resembles many other buildings in the same place and time: a turn-of-the-century bourgeois apartment block with large and spacious flats.

What little we glimpse of the different apartments suggests a state of neglect and of time suspended. This impression is especially obvious in the penthouse, where the infected girl ("La Niña Medeiros") and Father Albelda have been hiding out for years, a space filled with press cuttings, photographs, religious images, and lab instruments.

These settings present a physical appearance of ageing, waste and decay, an impression that is further aided by what Expósito & Pérez-Gómez refer to as analogue memories, those elements of the set design that "connect the present of the film to a not-too-distant past" (Expósito & Pérez-Gómez, 2013: 98). Audio tapes, photographs, video footage or newspaper cuttings evoke a bygone era without going as far back as one of the historical periods typical of stories of horror and the fantastic (like the nineteenth century or even the Middle Ages), evoking a certain physical appearance that at the same time is familiar to us, reminiscent of the experience of opening up a closet where our memories of the past can be recognised in objects that hint at the passage of time and, consequently, the shadow of death. The past is not just a point in time to place the date of construction and the lives of past tenants; as in every horror film, it is a period to which events are ascribed that live on in the protagonist's memory and act as a catalyst for the threat. The houses are receptacles for a congealed memory that preserves the traumatic events that threaten the protagonists in the present day.

## THE HOUSES ARE RECEPTACLES FOR A CONGEALED MEMORY THAT PRESERVES THE TRAUMATIC EVENTS THAT THREATEN THE PROTAGONISTS IN THE PRESENT DAY

In *Darkness*, in the foundation of the house is concealed the symbol of the *ouroboros*, a figure of a serpent coiled up in the shape of a circle eating its own tail, a symbol of evil that formed part of the Satanic ceremony that took place there forty years earlier. In that ceremony to unleash the ultimate evil, seven children were supposed to have their throats cut by the people who loved them most. Something went wrong, however, as one child escaped. In the present, that child is the protagonist of the film, now an adult who must be killed by someone who loves him so that the mission to bring the evil forth can finally be accomplished. The protagonist in *To Let* dedicated decades of her life to her tenants, but a fatal bureaucratic decision forced her to evict them all. Her sinister design is now to fill the building again with young couples, trapping them and shutting them up in different flats to simulate a new domestic life. In *Fragile*, the ghost of a dead nurse torments the children being treated on the floor of the hospital still in operation. *REC* and *REC2* tell the sad story of Tristana Medeiros, a girl with symptoms of demonic possession experimented on by Father Al-

### The past and the analogue, *REC*



belda to determine the physiological nature of her condition. Totally disfigured, she has been locked up in the penthouse for years.

## TOPOGRAPHY AND SYMBOLIC AXES

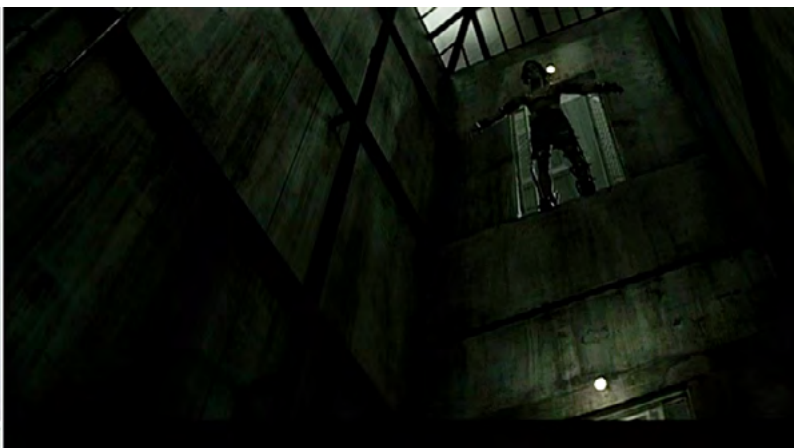
If there is any one space that appears as a permanent presence in these films, it is the stairwell and lift, which could in fact be considered a stylistic feature of Balagueró's films and a distinctive marker of his sinister locus. The role of the stairway as a connector between safe and threatening spaces and their symbolic value in the descending axis towards evil has already been noted above. Balagueró makes this idea his own, adapting it to a style of stairway found in elegant old buildings and to the open type of antique lift often installed in the shaft of a stairway, a box of wood and glass with iron gates and latticework. The morphology of this type of lift contributes to the filmmaker's signature horror themes. Because it is transparent, the passenger inside it can see a pursuer coming up or down the stairs and vice versa, increasing the anxiety over the looming threat. The lift passenger's visibility and the iron latticework evoke the idea of a cage, in which characters are often trapped or die. Balagueró takes this effect even further, as the shadows of the metal latticework around the lift shaft fall on the characters inside the lift, reinforcing the idea of a prison. This scenographic and visual effect is used repeatedly as an essential narrative stage in his stories. When the characters enter the building, their gaze falls first on this rather antiquated, dreary looking

stairwell, where the machinery of the old-fashioned lift is exposed. Then their upward journey always includes shots showing the bars and their shadows cast on the characters. The stairway is the ascending axis towards the evil. And the lift is a place of confinement or death. In *To Let* the young couple has been tricked into coming to the apartment block and will end up trapped there while the landlady threatens to attack them with a bar; in *Fragile* the nurse commits suicide by leaping into the lift shaft.

*Fear* tells the story of a couple who get into an argument over where to go for the weekend. She decides to go away alone with her friends, and he, out of spite, strikes up a relationship with a stranger in a bar. When he takes her home, the apartment we had been shown in the first few scenes now looks totally transformed: instead of bright and modern it is a dark and eerie space. And this effect is achieved with those same familiar shots. When he and his one-night stand enter, the stairway is shrouded in semi-darkness and the metal latticework of the lift casts its shadow over them. The two cross from the safe and real into the realm of the unsafe and horrific via the threshold that connects the two worlds: the stairwell and lift.

In *Sleep Tight* the vertical axis and the lift serve a much more complex function. Like the building in *REC* and *REC 2*, the building here is a typical apartment block in Barcelona at the turn of the century, which is divided into two types of spaces. One is the space of normalcy where we could place the apartments of the residents and the main

The lift serves as a means of access to evil and death. *Fragile*







Gatekeepers of evil at the foot of the stairs: *REC* and *Sleep Tight*

lobby on the ground floor. The other is the space of evil, controlled by César, the building's sadistic, intrusive concierge. This space is in turn split in two, between the basement where he lives (an improvised apartment in a cold, impersonal, windowless space with fluorescent lighting and functional furniture) and the rooftop. In both these spaces César shows himself as he really is: in his apartment, mixing up the drugs and chemicals he will use to gradually poison Clara; and on the rooftop ledge attempting suicide when his inability to feel empathy makes it seem too hard to go on living. As the master of the lives of Clara and the other tenants, César moves from one space to the other, up from his apartment to the lobby and to the tenants' flats, or down from the rooftop. Evil moves into the safe realm and invades it. This conquest has a correspondence in the lift, which once again is a symbolic connection between one world and the other. At the start of the story the

characters take the lift without a second thought. But as César begins to break into their lives and to dominate them physically and psychologically, we see them looking trapped inside it and coming out of it in an agitated state.

Once again, as Bracco notes, the bars are used as a metaphor for evil: "The shots where the protagonist is filmed on an angle behind the bars of the elevator cabin actually help express on screen the concierge's supremacy in the residential microcosmos" (Bracco, 2016: 32). But in addition to the vertical movement facilitated by the stairs and the lift, there is another axis that organises the characters' movements through the space: the horizontal axis. After the ascent in the lift or by the stairs, we are closer to the evil lurking in the deep, labyrinthine structure of the old flat. The perspective view of a hallway with a central vanishing point is one of the recurring images in Balagueró's films. In this way, he maps a route that the protagonists must follow to discover the evil that is always found at the end of it. However, the appropriate use of light to construct different spaces glimpsed through the side doors provokes the apprehension of a presence that is sensed but not easily located. Stairways and hallways are key in both *REC* and *REC 2*. Both films are organised around an ascent to the final destination where the evil is concealed—the Medeiros girl on the top floor—but the

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**IF THERE IS ANY ONE SPACE THAT APPEARS AS A PERMANENT PRESENCE IN THESE FILMS, IT IS THE STAIRWELL AND LIFT, WHICH COULD IN FACT BE CONSIDERED A STYLISTIC FEATURE OF BALAGUERÓ'S FILMS AND A DISTINCTIVE MARKER OF HIS SINISTER LOCUS**

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The bars of the lift as a metaphor for imprisonment. *Sleep Tight*

route there is structured into several encounters on each floor with different infected characters. The first encounter in *REC* serves as the paradigm for this structure. It occurs in the home of Conchita, the first infected tenant, who appears as a bloodied figure at the end of a long hallway offering just a glimpse of the dark bedrooms to which it gives access. Subsequently, every step of the reporter and her cameraman in their progress up the building will be interrupted by more infected residents, police officers and fire-fighters. This same mise-en-scene was already used in the labyrinthine building in *To Let* where, as a kind of gatekeeper to the space of evil and as hidden enemies in a “survival horror” video game, the supposed real estate agent and her violent, locked-up son are lurking.

## LOCAL FEATURES: THE MODERNIST BARCELONA

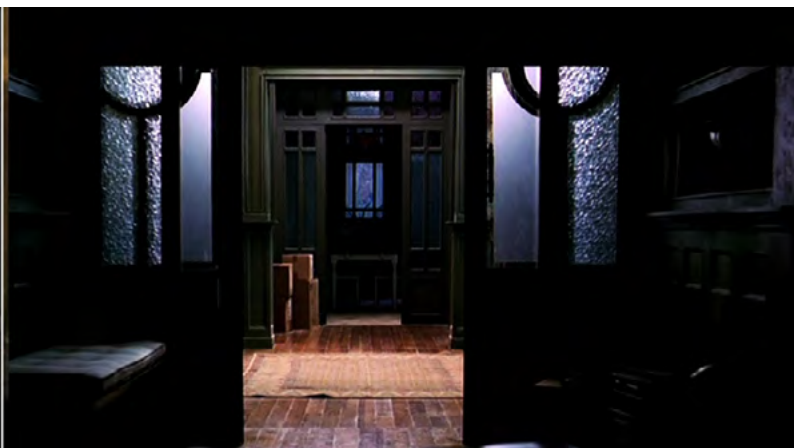
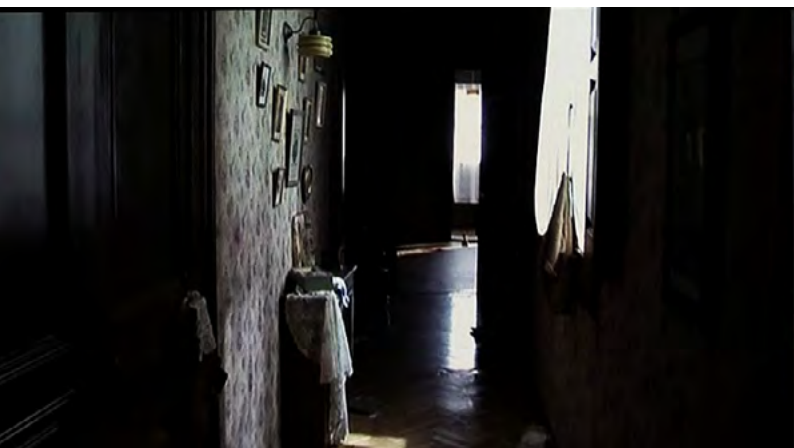
Balagueró adds local touches of Barcelona’s most classical architecture and scenery, always subtly without choosing easily recognisable settings, represented by buildings characteristic of the main

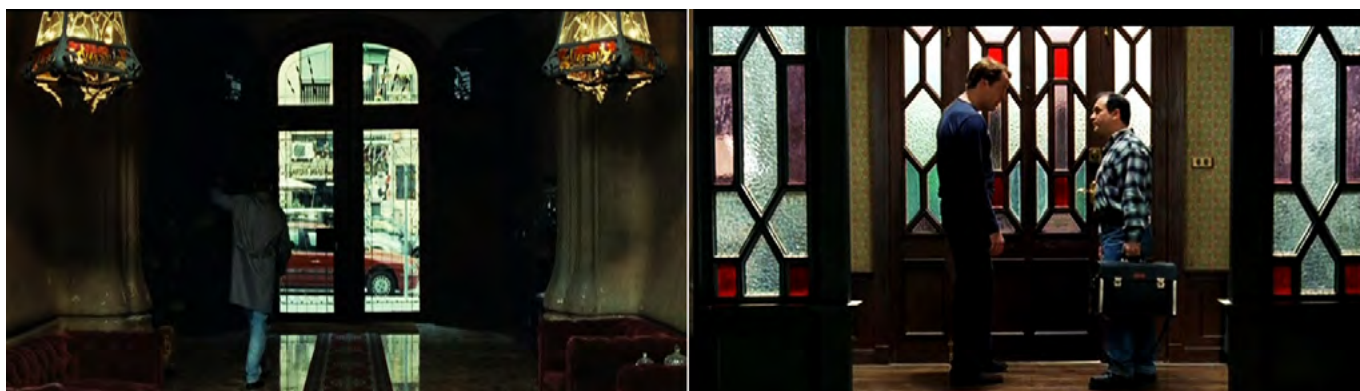
avenues of the Eixample neighbourhood, with various unique houses of the industrial bourgeoisie which, having been abandoned years ago, have gone through the same process as the paradigmatic constructions of the Victorian stereotype: once again, decay has meaning, not as a sign of the historical but as a vehicle for the strange.

His first film that uses a typical Barcelona building is *Darkness*; although the film is set in a single-family country home, the indoor scenes were filmed in a house located in the heart of Barcelona, at numbers 12-18 on Carrer de Girona. Built in the early twentieth century, the house belonged to the Burés family, the owners of a prosperous textile company. The indoor scenes in the apartments in *Sleep Tight* were reconstructed in a studio set, but the scenes in the lobby and the lift were filmed at a real property located at number 158 on Carrer de Provença. It is the Casa Segarra, another modernist property built around the same time as the Casa Burés.

But the most popular building is the one used in *REC* and *REC 2*. It is located at number 34 on La Rambla de Catalunya, and since 1930 it has been the site of the offices and workshops of the Ce-

The passageway as labyrinth: *REC* and *Darkness*





Modernist elements in *Sleep Tight* and *Darkness*

dimatexsa textile company. With the progressive deaths of its tenants the building ended up empty, at which point its owner, Jaume Argelich Twose, rented it out for a film production, and since then it has been known as Casa Argelich. Thanks to the popularity of Plaza and Balagueró's films, the house has been used as a set for numerous other movies, music videos and advertising spots, and has also become a pilgrimage site for tourists and lovers of the fantastic genre. The genuine deterioration of the property and the apartments with their high plaster ceilings, outdated wallpaper and old-fashioned furniture provided just the touch of realism the films needed.

These buildings conform to a model of five- or six-storey constructions designed for a mix of social classes, where the main floor was intended for the owner's residence, the upper floors were leased out, the garrets were used for services and the ground floor often contained the offices, warehouses or workshops of the property owner's business. Added to this structure is the significance of the modernist movement itself, not only for the construction of buildings that were emblematic of the city, but also for the decorative style that gained prominence as a marker of Catalan identity. Following international modernist movements, architects like Domènech i Montaner, Josep Puig i Cadafalch, and Antoni Gaudí made use of natural motifs in their work to adorn façades,

cast-iron balconies, or stained-glass windows with striking colours. The ornamentation of the Casa Burés and especially the Casa Segarra reflect a modernist style that Balagueró does not conceal; on the contrary, he highlights them, especially the details of the glass in the light fixtures in the lobby in *Sleep Tight* and the winding metal moulding of the lift.

## CONCLUSIONS

The increasingly widespread trend of film tourism is bringing tourist promotion companies and film studios together. Cities and landscapes (both natural and recreated) are taking up more space in specialist film guides. But in this specific case the decisive and complex factor of the imaginary comes into play as a veritable driver of activity. Tourists are looking for a strange intersection between reality and fiction, as they step into a real setting in search of the imagined one. The construction of this imaginary is a complex process, as it involves an operation that brings together influences drawing on multiple sources. In his short but successful film career, Jaume Balagueró has constructed a specific sinister locus, recognisable both to the tourist who goes to Barcelona's Casa Argelich in search of settings from the *REC* saga and to the spectator exploring new Spanish horror films that follow in the wake

of the Catalan filmmaker's work. This is where the value of Balagueró's creative process lies, in its influence on the creation of other sinister loci which, although perhaps geographically distant from Catalonia, maintain many of the same creative features. If we look closely at films like *Shrew's Nest* (Musarañas, Juanfer Andrés, Esteban Roel, 2014), *Veronica* (Verónica, Paco Plaza, 2017) or *32 Malasaña Street* (Malasaña 32, Albert Pintó, 2020), we find that the old Madrid flats that serve as their settings adhere to the Balaguerian canon, apart from the local modernist references. This trend in contemporary Spanish fantastic and horror cinema reveals its maturity and modernity as a genre in its appropriation of international film movements to develop a specific locus that exhibits its own more local identifying signs. ■

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## THE ORIGINS OF THE SINISTER LOCUS IN JAUME BALAGUERÓ'S BARCELONA

### Abstract

Barcelona has been used as the location for several films that have promoted the city's image as a cosmopolitan tourist destination, presenting it as a historical, cultural, and artistic centre. But it has also come to be known as the setting for a number of horror films, such as the *REC* saga or *Sleep Tight* by the Catalan filmmaker Jaume Balagueró. Film tourism is inspired by an imaginary that is the result of viewing a real location through the filter of cinematic creation. For many of his films, Jaume Balagueró has created a specific setting, a sinister locus resulting from a fusion of the Victorian haunted house, the influence of Polanski's spaces of psychological terror and the characteristic features of Catalan modernist architecture. This study explores the origins and characteristics of this process, as well as its subsequent influences.

### Key words

Film Tourism; Balagueró; Terror; Sinister House; Imaginary.

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## LA GÉNESIS DEL LOCUS SINIESTRO EN LA BARCELONA DEL CINE DE JAUME BALAGUERÓ

### Resumen

Barcelona se ha convertido en escenario de varios filmes que han promocionado la imagen de la ciudad como destino turístico cosmopolita donde se muestra como ciudad histórica, cultural y artística. Pero también se empieza a conocer como lugar donde se han grabado varias películas de terror como la saga *[REC]* o *Mientras duermes*, filmes del cineasta catalán Jaume Balagueró. El turismo cinematográfico busca un emplazamiento movido por un imaginario que es fruto de un escenario real visto a través de la creación fílmica. Jaume Balagueró ha creado un escenario específico para buena parte de sus filmes, un locus siniestro, fruto de la síntesis de la casa encantada victoriana, de la influencia de los espacios de terror psicológico de Polanski y de los rasgos modernistas de los edificios del modernismo catalán. Este trabajo explora la génesis de este proceso y sus características, así como señala sus influencias posteriores.

### Palabras clave

Turismo cinematográfico; Balagueró; terror; casa siniestra; imaginario.

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