

DIALOGUE

ECHOES OF JAPANESE CINEMA

A dialogue with

CARLA SIMÓN
CELIA RICO

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MANUEL GARIN AND FERRAN DE VARGAS

When we proposed the interview for this issue of *L'Atalante*, which considers the influence of Japanese and South Korean audiovisual cultures in the Spanish-speaking world, we could have chosen to explore a direct, axiomatic reference by interviewing a filmmaker whose connection with both countries is clear and obvious. There are plenty of examples of contemporary Spanish films where the imaginaries of Japan (such as Carlos Vermut's pictures) or Korea (such as the correspondence between *Marshland* [La isla mínima, Alberto Rodríguez, 2014] and *Memories of Murder* [Salinui chueok, Bong Joon-ho, 2003]) are explicitly reinvented, and with very interesting results. But it seemed to us that this type of direct or stylistic referencing—as interesting as it may be—is already explained well enough in the films themselves, without the need to explore it in an interview that could run the risk of redundancy, poring over an issue that was already clear before the first question was even asked. This is why when the GREGAL research group at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona suggested the idea of interviewing Carla Simón and Celia Rico, it really struck a chord. Suddenly, everything that for oth-

er directors would be an explicit quote or reference turned into something much more oblique and intriguing: not an interview whose answers were written before it began, but an unrehearsed, open dialogue on a possible (non-automatic) relationship with East Asian culture which, in two films like *Summer 1993* (Estiu 1993, Carla Simón, 2017) and *Journey to a Mother's Room* (Viaje al cuarto de una madre, Celia Rico, 2018), can be sensed behind the images rather than in front of them, resulting in a free and very different conversation with the filmmakers.

Taking advantage of the fact that Carla and Celia have known each other for years (even before the release of their first feature films), we asked them a series of questions about this oblique relationship with “Japan-ness” that emerges in radically different ways in their films. Although both filmmakers share a special affinity for the physical gesture, which the legendary critic Hasumi Shigehiko always considered the great expressive force of Japanese cinema (rather than the theme or the image), their ways of channelling it, of revealing and interweaving everyday relationships through gestures, are very different. And this is

precisely the most stimulating aspect of engaging in a dialogue about something as delicate and difficult to verbalise as cinematic influences: rather than moving in a single direction on automatic pilot, Celia's and Carla's answers point to a network of details and latent memories whose asymmetry is essentially a way of understanding the relationship between countries and cultures from a pluralistic perspective. If, as Linda Hutcheon suggested, style is a way of coming to terms with the past, these are two filmmakers whose relationship with Japanese audiovisual history is neither violent nor nostalgic, but free and profoundly familiar. ■

You both form part of a generation of filmmakers who, for the first time in Spain, have been exposed to Japanese audiovisual culture and more recently to South Korean film culture as naturally as we have always been exposed to the cinematic production of other countries like France, Italy or Germany. Thanks to editions on DVD, on-line archives, and festivals like the Barcelona Asian Film Festival (BAFF) or Sitges, since the early 2000s there has been a whole range of options for seeing films that were previously hardly ever released here. With this in mind, how did you come into contact with Asian—and particularly Japanese—cinema in those years?

Celia: Twenty years ago, when the BAFF began, I had only read about filmmakers like Ozu or Mizoguchi in the odd book. I discovered some of their films at university or at the video store, but contemporary Asian cinema was completely unknown to me. It was at the BAFF that I discovered all those films that were being screened at film festivals and that weren't always released in theatres or took a long time to get there. That is how I discovered Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Jia Zangke, Wang Bing, Naomi Kawase, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, and Brillante Mendoza. What was interesting about the BAFF was that it gave us the chance not only to discover these film-

makers, but also to follow their careers, because at each edition they had a new film. And each film increased our awareness that in that "Asian" label there were as many different places as there were pictures. With its film cycles, the Casa Asia here in Barcelona also helped expand our horizons.

Carla: My first exposure to Japanese cinema was with a movie that I will remember for the rest of my life. In fact, just this week I gave it as a gift to my brother, who is much younger (he is twenty-three), and he watched it and sent me a message saying how beautiful he thought it was. It is Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* [To Live] (1952). My father recommended it to me when I was in my first year at university. My father doesn't work in cinema at all so I don't know why he knew about this film, because he does like cinema [laughs], and every now and then he makes these discoveries. I was able to find it because I was studying audiovisual communication at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), and there's a film archive there that is pretty good. Since I went to university with barely any knowledge of cinema, because I grew up in a house in the country with very little contact with TV culture and with cinema in general, that film library at UAB was really like my educator, in those four years I studied communication. At UAB there was also—and still is—a theatre on campus that was really cool, where they presented film cycles that were really great for the students. I think it was the first Japanese film I ever saw, at the age of eighteen, and I thought it was amazing. After that I saw more of Kurosawa's work... As for what you said about the BAFF, actually I didn't go that often because I was living at my grandparents' home in Badalona and studying at UAB, so my time in Barcelona was a little weird and I didn't get around the city much. It was later that I began enjoying the festivals there. It was through that film that I started to get interested, and then, because of my interest in family and in childhood basically, you could say that Ozu and Koreeda are

two filmmakers I've followed for a long time, but I discovered them later, after Kurosawa.

Beyond your conscious interest in Japanese cinema, having been born in the 1980s you both belong to a generation that grew up humming the songs of Arale Norimaki (the protagonist in *Doctor Slump* [M. Okazaki, Fuji TV: 1981-1986]) in the street and doing the *kamehameha* move in the schoolyard. We are also interested in that emotional, playful relationship with Japanese audiovisual production linked to childhood memories, made up of little details like a sticker, a melody, or the cut of a dress. We are not referring to the *otaku* culture or other intense forms of consumerism that came afterwards in subsequent generations, but to a freer and more unconscious contact with the popular imaginary, from cartoons to merchandising or games, apparently mundane things that reflect a perspective and a sensibility. How did you experience that Japanese boom? Did it get your attention?

Celia: I discovered Arale when I was already more than twenty, in a conversation with friends talking nostalgically about the cartoons of our childhood. Catalan television and possibly other regional TV networks bought the rights to the series, but not Canal Sur [the public broadcaster for the Andalusia region]. And of course, I was living in my hometown in Seville then, so I missed it. The big hit there was *Dragon Ball* (D. Nishio and M. Okazaki, Fuji TV: 1986-1989). I liked the character Bulma, because she had a little box of capsules that exploded when she threw them and transformed into all kinds of things. Who hasn't wished they had a box like that some time? In terms of things that reflect a perspective, I think that little box and something about that female character with a "scientific" attitude had a deeper effect on me than anything else in that series. Goku and Master Roshi also brought a series of images associated with a culture that was unknown then to a girl like me:

martial arts, the kimono... I would say the kimono was the first childhood image that revealed to me that the world was ancient and huge, because where could those women in kimonos that I saw fleetingly once in a movie on TV all be living? I didn't know what a geisha was then; I just fell in love with their outfits, the detail in the embroidery, the sashes, the fans—so typically Andalusian, at the same time. I recently travelled to the Jeonju Festival in South Korea to present my film; it was my first time in Asia. They were celebrating some regional festival at the time, so a lot of women were walking around in their *hanboks*, the traditional outfit, which look so much like the kimonos I first saw in my childhood. It was exciting. I was tempted to buy one and walk around with the women, but I didn't do it because there's nothing worse than feeling like a tourist.

Carla: As I mentioned before, in my house the TV was not something we looked at very often. We watched a few cartoons maybe one afternoon a week, and then the Disney movies and Buster Keaton pictures my father put on for us. As for the TV3 cartoons, now that Celia mentioned that she discovered Arale much later, I do remember Arale, but I had zero interest in *Dragon Ball*. I mean, I never watched it; it wasn't part of my imaginary at all, because when I saw people fighting it didn't interest me. It was something that obviously formed part of my culture because all my friends at school talked about it and watched it and everyone loved those cartoons, but I couldn't tell you the names of the characters in that series. But I did see Arale, and then *Doraemon* (Tsutomu Shibayama, TV Asahi: 1979-2005). *Doraemon* is a series I do remember a lot about. In fact, when *Summer 1993* was released I had two dream trips that I hoped to do for a festival: one was Argentina and the other was obviously Japan. They invited us to present the film there with the distributor, and of course it was a big experience touching down there and sensing what you've come to know about that culture without

having ever been in the country. And I remember the moment we bought pancakes, one of the *Doraemon* pancakes [laughs], which I had always thought were made of chocolate, and it turns out that it's something called *anko*, which isn't chocolate, it's a sweet paste, it's something else [laughs]. So, the *Doraemon* pancakes did mark my childhood, my wish, because of course, they didn't exist here and the first time I tried them was only recently in Japan. But anyway, the sensation was of arriving there and knowing a lot about the culture through the cartoons, and then especially through the movies. Tokyo is a city that has been portrayed so many times by so many different filmmakers that when you get there it's as if you know it already.

Without falling into the trap of exoticism and national stereotypes, one of the most productive aspects of cinema is the way it spreads gestures, characters, and lifestyles to different countries, without depending much on the language or particular cultural codes. To be clear, there is a lot of American cinema in the films of a Japanese filmmaker like Ozu (a big fan of slapstick), and a lot of Japanese cinema in the work of a Finnish director like Aki Kaurismäki. In different but related ways, your films have that capacity to convey something through gestures and gazes that reaches across different cultures, countries, and sensibilities. How has your exposure to Japanese cinema influenced your way of relating spaces and bodies? This isn't so much a question about specific filmmakers or films but about more general questions of mise-en-scene, from pacing to framing or the use of gestures. How the characters walk or sit, the presence of doors and windows in a shot, whether the table is a high table or a *kotatsu* that warms up the legs, the distance at which a song is playing...

Celia: This idea of spreading you mentioned is very interesting, imagining cinema as a constant dialogue between films and filmmakers, as if they

were constellations of gestures and gazes. Often when I hear someone talk about why a film made here (in a town in Catalonia or Andalusia, like Carla's or my hometown) works in other countries with such different sensibilities, the arguments are always the same: that they contain universal themes, that everyone has a mother or has lost one, and so they can identify with these situations wherever they live. However, I don't think it's the "themes" but the gestures that truly cross cultural and national boundaries. Gestures contain emotions, not themes. And in that, Ozu is the master; I don't think anybody else has been able to express so much with a gesture as trivial and everyday as peeling an apple. With the minimum means possible and with ellipsis, he manages to get to the very heart of things. Now that you mention Kaurismäki in relation to Ozu, you've reminded me of something he said about him: that he never needed to resort to murder or violence to show the essence of human life. To try to answer your question, I would say yes, my exposure to Japanese cinema, specifically to Ozu's films, has influenced the way I relate spaces and bodies, but above all I would say that more than an influence he has been a kind of compass to keep me from getting lost. Every time someone would read the script for my film and ask me why the characters spent so much time at home, around a table, without doing anything big, I would repeat to myself, like a mantra, something I read that Pedro Costa said in an interview, when he confessed how much he owed to Ozu and his belief that a film can be made with a lamp, a sofa and a vase of flowers.

Carla: This is kind of a hard question, because I don't have a very strong awareness of how Japanese cinema has influenced me, but it is certainly true that, talking about Ozu, there is something, especially in his children, that fascinates me. Because they're children who use gestures and a... I don't know if the word would be naturalness, but their gestures are so, so genuine, that when I

directed Laia and Paula in *Summer 1993*, my first film, but in general when I direct actors, I think that is what I need to look for. Those gestures, those things that somehow convey a sense of the everyday, almost as if there was no camera in front of those kids. For me this is something which, looking at those films, I thought “I want to get that out of my girls”, and then if only it could be transferred to the adults, but I think that’s a little harder [laughs]. With children I think there is something, in their authentic gestures—not realising they are acting—that is easier to get out of them. It seems to me that Ozu’s children have that, and many of Koreeda’s I think also have those genuine gestures I’m talking about.

And then there’s the question of camera placement, that obviously there’s something in Japanese culture where it makes sense to place the camera close to the ground. For me, seeing all those films also influenced me when I made *Summer 1993* in the placement of the camera to show the girls from their perspective; I mean, if the girls are short then the camera needs to adapt to them. For me that says a lot about the respect you have for the characters you’re portraying, in this case children. I can’t imagine Ozu’s films without the camera positioned low to portray those characters in their spaces, with that respect. And in a way that was also conveyed by trying to portray the girls from that respectful position, at their height, on an equal footing, you could say, which for me is the only way of understanding cinema: treating your characters with respect. I don’t know if I’ve answered the question [laughs] but I would say that these are the two things that have influenced me most.

And then, now that I think about it, there is something about tenderness that I would like to highlight about Ozu’s films, especially because there is something in the gestures between characters, the relationships between them and the family relationships, that for me reveals a lot of tenderness. I think it’s something that, hell, that isn’t obvious at all: for me they are the most mem-

orable gestures in his films and in cinema in general. I think he is a filmmaker who achieves this a lot and for me that is also very important. It was there in *Summer 1993*, trying to capture those gestures between characters, and I hope that it is in my films in general. I think when you see filmmakers that manage to capture that tenderness, for me that is key, and it’s really inspiring.

When defining classical Japanese cinema in relation to the classical Western cinema exemplified by Hollywood, the tendency is to highlight modularity, plot reduction and minimal expression as characteristic features. In *Journey to a Mother’s Room* and *Summer 1993* this stripped-down quality is recognisable, both in the reduction of narrative time (there is no typical introduction, climax or denouement, nor any plot to be resolved), and in aspects like the importance of objects, daily routines or ellipses. In *Journey to a Mother’s Room* there is also a striking similarity to Ozu’s films in that nearly the whole film takes place inside the house, and that the empty spaces and silences take on a life of their own. In *Summer 1993* the presence of nature carries more weight in the depiction of everyday relationships, as is the case in Kawase’s films, and the children’s prominence and spontaneity are explored in depth, as in various films by Shimizu or Koreeda. Do you think your way of filming connects in any way with this tradition? What filmmakers or films have affected you or interest you in particular?

Celia: I remember that after one screening of *Journey to a Mother’s Room*, someone told me that it seemed like a Japanese film. The person who said this wasn’t thinking of any specific influence; they weren’t a cinephile, and no specific Japanese film title occurred to them. It was just a sensation, a consequence of the calm tone and the silences because the characters spoke very little when in reality, they said, we Andalusians never stop talking. Beyond that cliché about Andalusians, this com-

ment made me think about how much of the reality around me there is in a film constructed out of what I know and how much there is of aesthetic positioning, echoes of the films I love. And at the same time, I think now that discovering these films I love, like *Tokyo Story* (Tōkyō Monogatari, Yasujirō Ozu, 1953), has simply brought me closer to my own reality, to the heart of things that matter to me, that it is a way of filtering the gaze, of finding my own minimalism, a minimalism for here. I think, like you said before, that the gestures in the way of sitting at a *kotatsu* have a lot in common with sitting at a traditional Spanish brazier table. In terms of the attention to daily routines or objects, I'd say there is something about the representation of the passage of time, connected to the stillness of nature, which has always interested me, but now that more than a year has passed since my film's release and I can look at it from a bit of a distance, I realise that this discourse doesn't belong to me, that it's an intellectual appropriation and, in my case, the representation of routines and objects is really related to something else that interests me more: caring, the intimate gestures that relate us to the other and which for me are a form of resistance. In this sense, if I had to say which filmmakers have marked me, I would bring Ozu into a dialogue with some of Chantal Akerman's films.

Carla: Of course, I always say that my cinematic culture is kind of random, because I never really studied cinema properly and I take my influences from all over the place... When I did audiovisual communication I had only one course in film history, and then I studied in London, where there



Anna Castillo and Lola Dueñas in Rico's *Journey to a Mother's Room*



Chieko Higashiyama and Setsuko Hara in Ozu's *Tokyo Story*

wasn't a single theory course, so you could say that my influences are things I've learned along the way. Well, I suppose that happens to a lot of people. But in any case, one film that really did seem important to me, returning to the topic of children, was *Nobody Knows* (Dare mo Shiranai,

2004) by Koreeda, above all because I am really interested in children playing and how to film children. That film is basically that, a bunch of children alone at home, and there is something quite beautiful there. And it was also something that made me think a lot about how to film *Summer 1993*, because [*Nobody Knows*] is a film that gives the children a lot of freedom and it has a lot of close-up shots, and based on that it is constructed in the editing, based on those details. And it was through that very film that I realised I wanted to try somehow not to do that [laughs], not because I didn't like it, I love it, but because with *Summer 1993* I wanted to try to give that sensation of filming a video, a home movie. We wanted to try filming in very long shots. In that sense, it obviously doesn't draw from that type of film, but yes, seeing various Japanese films with children that have a lot of that, close-up shots, the children's hands and gestures and their faces, and everything done with a lot of editing (referring to Koreeda now), I realised that I wanted to try going in the opposite direction. But anyway, I mention this because sometimes studying certain films that seem inspiring to you for one reason, as is the case there for the question of how to direct children at the performative level, sometimes it makes you realise suddenly how you want to shoot your film, and what camera style you want or don't want. For me that film was important for that.

And then, well, other films so as to be clear... I don't know, *Good Morning* (Ohayō, Yasujirō Ozu, 1959), I also remember sort of going over it a lot when I was developing *Summer 1993*. I can't recall exactly at what point I saw Kawase's *Shara* (Sharasōju, 2003), but it also has something in relation to the very pretty landscape. But anyway, the thing is too that sometimes it's hard to know exactly what inspired you, and in the case of *Summer 1993*, there are filmmakers that I know for sure were inspirations, and for Japanese films I think they're the ones I've mentioned more or less.



Paula Robles and Laia Artigas in Simón's *Summer 1993*



Yuya Yagira in Koreeda's *Nobody Knows*

Although you have two such different styles, your films share a special sensitivity for filming family life, like Ozu. But what is fascinating is that while *Summer 1993* especially brings to mind silent comedies, where the children (nearly always siblings) experiment, play and hurt each other, treading that fine line between tenderness and cruelty, *Journey to a Mother's Room* recalls the post-war films about adult life and the breakdowns that the passage of time causes between generations, when parents age or die and daughters falter. Does this reflect your way of approaching the theme of family



Anna Castillo in Rico's *Journey to a Mother's Room*

in Ozu? Do you feel the echo of certain films over others?

Celia: I find it rather curious that you would associate our two very different films with specific pictures by the same filmmaker. This makes me think that although some might say that Ozu always made the same film over and over again, his work as a whole covers a vast territory in relation to the family. Of all that territory, what interests me a lot are the regions where children worry about being unable to live up to their parents' expectations and parents worry that their children's lives won't be what they had hoped. And so, children worried about their parents and parents worried about their children are all trapped in the same way without fitting in anywhere. As you suggest, I suppose in my characters there is more of an echo of those films where the characters are ageing and the daughters are faltering, like *Late Spring* (Banshun, Yasujirō Ozu, 1949), *Late Autumn* (Akibiyori, Yasujirō Ozu, 1960), *Tokyo Story* or *The Only Son* (Hitori musuko, Yasujirō Ozu, 1936), his first sound film, which I discovered quite recently and which moved me to tears. What I like most about his films is that the events don't matter as much as the feelings they provoke.

Carla: Well, the truth is I haven't seen all of Ozu's films [laughs]. But if I had to name a few, well... I



Mariko Okada in Ozu's *An Autumn Afternoon*

Was Born, But... (Otona no miru ehon - Umarete wa mita keredo, Yasujirō Ozu, 1932), which I saw a long time ago, but clearly in the children there is that thing of the gestures I mentioned before; also, there are amazing scenes between children and all of them have those gestures I love, so natural. How they walk, how they move, how they eat [laughs], I don't know... And then, what I mentioned about *Good Morning*, which I also studied for *Summer 1993*, for the relationship between siblings; there is something quite beautiful between the two brothers which is funny, tender, and sometimes cruel all at once. Yes, I think I would say those ones, but as I said I haven't seen all of Ozu's films; I'm not a real expert. I think in that sense Celia has been more inspired than me and it comes out in her work, I think.

Focusing on the transformation of the traditional family model, Japanese cinema found a unique way to portray the consequences of "Western" imperialism and consumerism in a society that was struggling to keep up the pace of life that it was imposing on itself. As Agamben said, in cinema, a society that has lost its forms of expression tries to re-appropriate what it has lost and at the same time documents that loss. Your films connect with this attempt to document the changes to family life as a reflection of crisis and particular historic moments



Paula Robles and Laia Artigas in Simon's *Summer* 1993



Masahiko Shimazu and Kōji Shitara in Ozu's *Good Morning*

(HIV, the current employment instability), but without dogmas or strident pronouncements, revealing those problems through small details. This is something we also see in several Koreeda films, where what is hardest to say emerges little by little in the family routines, without being explicit. Do your visions of the present connect with this way of interweaving the familial with the social and the political in Japanese cinema?

Celia: The truth is I have never thought consciously about Koreeda during my filmmaking process, but I think he is a brilliant example for thinking about how to interweave these very sensitive issues. You only need to look at how he handles small details in *Nobody Knows*, for example, so that watching children play becomes so heart-rending. As Carla has suggested, I think there is a lot of this very fine and sensitive work in *Summer* 1993. Perhaps for both of us, the social and the political is not so much in the discourse as right in the heart of the project, in the decision, in my case, for example, to stay at home with a mother that nothing happens to, but that everything happens to: when you are dedicated exclusively to caregiving, you stop thinking about yourself, and become the support for the other. I like to think of what Agnes Vardà said, that she has never made political films, but has simply always stood on the side of workers and women. Yes, there is something I wanted to place the focus on more explicitly, but trying to bring it out through the little details. I'm referring to the economic question. I wasn't interested so much in reflecting the current employment instability or the disillusionment of a young generation that is leaving Spain, but I wanted to put the concern about the household economy at the centre of life.

It's something that I always miss in films; the question of money appears when the characters belong to a clearly impoverished context, or conversely, when they have huge fortunes, but what about those forty extra euros a week for English classes that someone can or cannot afford? That reality is discussed less in cinema because forty euros doesn't give rise to big plot twists. I've recently discovered Mikio Naruse's films and they're making me think a lot about this whole question of the economic, the

political and the narrative. Their protagonists are nearly always women, sometimes widows, worrying about making it to the end of the month, about being able to receive a pension or having to depend economically—as society demands—on a husband.

Carla: Well, the truth is I'd never thought about it, I mean, connecting it with Japanese cinema, but obviously there is a connection. For me there's no point in exploring anything social and political if it isn't through a specific story, which in my case always ends up being about a family. Through the family we can explore issues that affect us. I was always clear with *Summer 1993* that HIV was only the context; the film was about family relationships, and about childhood, and about childhood grief and about adoption. But all these themes... we knew that HIV for me was just context. And now with the new film it's kind of the same thing, because it's about a family of farmers who grow peaches in Lleida, and it's sort of about that world and that rural family model that is disappearing in a way. But we don't focus on the political, although it serves as a background, but purely on family relationships. And it's true that in that sense it has another strong link to Koreeda's and Ozu's films. I mean, yes, I hadn't thought of it that way, but it does connect, of course.

Along with these family (im)balances, there are two themes very central to Japanese cinema that appear quite powerfully in your films: the tensions between the rural and the urban (the country and the city, small-town life), and the initiative of women in an unquestionably patriarchal society. These are two key aspects that are not only central to your films—even in shorts like *Those Little Things* (Las pequeñas cosas, Carla Simón, 2015) or *Luisa Is Not Home* (Luisa no está en casa, Celia Rico, 2012)—but also issues shared between Japanese and Spanish societies, where the rural/urban tension and misogyny are both deeply rooted. It's almost a cliché to ask about the work

of Mizoguchi and Kinuyo Tanaka, or Kawase for a contemporary example... But beyond the names, do you see a connection with these two themes?

Celia: It's true that this tension is present in our films. Carla's character Frida travels from the city to a rural environment. My character Leonor travels from the country to the big city. And in that journey, gaps open up. In the case of *Journey to a Mother's Room*, that gap has to do with role models. Leonor doesn't see an example to follow in her mother (or in the country). However, I tried to have the film create a bridge between generations and places: when the two women separate for the first time we discover that in reality there aren't so many differences between them, or between life in London and in the country. In the end, the two have to confront an uncertain life where, despite everything, they have each other for mutual support in their endeavours. In the case of *Luisa Is Not Home*, the gap that opens up between the characters (husband and wife) is clearly a gender gap, but also a lack of role models: another older woman, one who is never home, is the model that Luisa takes to dare to go out every day in a society that is still misogynist. The town or the rural, in my case, is central, but contained in the dynamics, in the gestures, in the characters and lifestyles that surround the protagonists, although I don't explore it visually, as I hardly film in outdoor spaces. In this, maybe Carla and her way of relating characters with natural environments, with the sensations of *Summer 1993*, connects much more with Kawase and the importance of atmospheres and nature in his films.

Carla: In terms of the rural and the urban, definitely. For me, *Summer 1993* is about a girl who goes from the city to the country partly because one of the things I remember most about that change in my life was just that. To go from living in a city where as a child you are absolutely controlled and protected, always living in fear that you might get



Rico's Luisa no está en casa

run over basically, to the freedom of a rural environment where you can move around without any kind of restriction, or with less. And then, also for me it was a connection with the rural that wasn't just happy, I mean, it wasn't only happy in the sense of being positive; for me as well it was an atmosphere that would sometimes suddenly frighten me. I saw it as a threat, "yes, everything is lovely", but I didn't like the grass, or being dirty... or the animals scared me, the dogs near the house where I lived. I don't know, finding ants all over me [laughs]. I remember all that as something fascinating but at the same time disturbing at first. Then I got used to it and I turned into a real country girl, without any problems, and that has stayed with me. But it's true that this change, on a personal level, was one of the things I remembered most and that I felt it was very important to include in the film because it really bothered me and changed something in me: the fact of starting a life in the country. So, yes, in that sense... with *Summer 1993* there is something about the family atmosphere; you could say that Frida's parents—like my parents—have something of what we call, to simplify it, neo-rural; people who come from the city and have made the decision to go

live in the country because they think the lifestyle is, I don't know, healthier, a better quality of living. Because they like it, basically. And that type of rurality is a little like what Celia says, but the reverse of her character, who goes from the country to the city even though we don't see what happens there. They are characters who decide to go to the country although they aren't country people, and it's a life choice, in a way. Although it probably doesn't connect so much with these Japanese films we were talking about because it's a move from country to city. But in the case of the girl, yes, it's a case of discovering the country.

And as for the theme of women, of course, with *Summer 1993* I would say there isn't so much, that theme isn't there. There is the theme of the roles of father and mother, who are still a little, well, like my parents' generation, basically, where the mother has much more responsibility than the father. This is something that is depicted I think; she takes responsibility for the children (for the girls in this case). But it's not so much... And in *Those Little Things*, I don't know if it's there, as that short seems so distant to me now. My intention was basically to portray a mother-daughter relationship, and it's inspired by my aunt and my



Carmen Sansa and Ana Prada in Simón's *Those Little Things*

grandmother, who didn't live in the country (they lived their whole lives in the city), but I felt that desire to film in the country because it seemed to give it more depth and also solitude in a way, in those characters... I don't know if it was solitude exactly because you could also be alone in the city, but there was something about transporting that relationship to a rural environment that really appealed to me. Also because we shot a lot of it in a house that belonged to my grandmother, who went for her summer holidays there since she was little, and her family had lived there many generations ago. So, in a way, it really was connected to my family. But it's true that the relationship depicted didn't really occur in the country; that was a decision I made based on my desire to isolate these two women, who are waiting for a brother and a son who never arrives.

Yes, that question of misogyny... I think in *Those Little Things* that theme is not addressed and not really in *Summer 1993* either. Now, with the new film, yes, a little more, although it isn't exactly a central focus either, but like *Alcarràs*, in Lleida, which is the town where my mother was raised, and there are people there who work on the land basically, and who live according to some rather conservative values, so yes, the role of the woman and the man... You could say that I'm doing a study on that, because I would like to do a kind of portrait, but without judging, and what

I see sometimes is that there is still a lot of misogyny, from the men and from the women, who continue to adopt roles that are now suddenly capturing our attention. But well, that's the next film.

Having asked you both about the tensions between family and society, the rural and the urban, and female protagonists, it seems inevitable to mention one of the Japanese studios that have explored this issues the most—critically—over the years: Studio Ghibli. In several of

Carla's films a unique way of linking childhood and death reappears, with a naturalness that has a certain danger and fascination, reminiscent in a way of Miyazaki's films—the sisters, the forest and the sick mother in *My Neighbour Totoro* (Tonari no Totoro, 1988), for example. And the secret life of objects that so interests Celia, whether it's a sewing machine, a telephone, or a shoebox, is one of the most revealing and expressive constants of Ghibli films, where the specks of dust almost say more than the dialogue. Perhaps you have never thought of it this way, but we would like to know whether they are films you feel close to or not.

Celia: They are films I would have liked to have seen as a child, but that unfortunately I only found out about as an adult, like *Arale*. I would have liked to put myself in the skin of their characters, those independent, daring girls, so opposite to a certain female Disney characters that have done us so much harm. This summer I watched *My Neighbour Totoro* again with my nephew. It was the first time I watched a Studio Ghibli film through the eyes of a child. I became more aware of the complexity of its characters, of the issues it so fearlessly tackles, leaving room for us to fill in the gaps; that is, treating children like adults. I hadn't thought about the connection between *Totoro* and Carla's film, but now that you say it, the mother's illness, the two sisters, that whole part about going into the for-

est, like Frida when she takes offerings to the Virgin Mary or decides to leave, although she comes right back (that's one of my favourite scenes). In fact, it would be very interesting to program the two films together. What I like most about the Ghibli films is that the story, the plot is the least important thing, because above all they are films with visual emotions. As for your question about the objects, you've made me think about children when they play, and how, using any object they find around the house, their imagination travels at lightning speed. I have a few home movies on Super 8 from when I was a girl, where I'm playing with a telephone. I recently saw those films and thought about the images of Lola Dueñas clinging to the telephone in my film; the idea came to my mind that the imagination you develop in a script (like a telephone that connects three characters, that turns into an umbilical cord, that makes you travel to London without getting off your couch...) has a lot to do with those children's games. And the Ghibli films, in a way, connect me with that desire to imagine.

Carla: Well, the truth is I can't, I mean, I can't talk about it because I haven't seen *My Neighbour Totoro*, as strange as it may seem. But now after what Celia said I'm going to watch it [laughs]. But I can't talk about it because I've never seen it, so I don't know... But it does seem to me a really interesting type of animation, and when you've been raised on Disney, to think that children today have these alternatives is pretty awesome.

Would you highlight any other type of Japanese cultural expression that has marked you particularly? As Roland Barthes said, the method of making tempura is just as important as poetry or the ukiyo-e engravings for getting a sense of the Japanese sensibility, so this question is intended in the broadest sense: any detail that has been engraved in your memory and you remember with special intensity or affection, beyond cinema.

Celia: Unfortunately, I have never visited the country, and apart from the images that cinema has offered, my knowledge of Japanese culture is quite limited. I have a very powerful memory of reading Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask* (1949). Hokusai's *Great Wave*, despite being a picture so widely published and reproduced, always moves me. And the butoh dance, I think there's something very profound in the reflection on the body that I would like to explore one day. Then there's the food; the first time you try sushi, a green tea mochi or a *dorayaki* with *azuki*. I remember those first Japanese restaurants that opened in Seville's city centre and how I was dying of curiosity to try everything, fumbling with the chopsticks and refusing to ask for a fork. I also remember a friend who had lived in London who was a total expert. So, being able to use chopsticks properly meant you were *a person of the world*. I had very long hair and I started putting it up with chopsticks from restaurants. I loved to do my hair like that, and I started collecting chopsticks of all types and colours. Although it sounds like a trivial comment, I've always loved Japanese hair. When I was little, I even fantasised about being Japanese. There's something about the fascination with Japanese culture that I always found very funny about Segundo de Chomón's film with those very "Japanese" acrobats.

Carla: Of course, it is curious because when I went to Japan I thought: how can it be that such a small country has had such a big influence on the rest of the world? The reason for that. I think that after the United States, Japan is one of the countries that when you visit you get the strongest impression of having been there already. I had the same feeling in the United States, when I went to study there for a year, and I had the feeling of having visited these places because of the cinema, because I'd seen them on the screen. And with Japan you get kind of the same feeling, whether because of the cartoons or the films or all the things that reach us in the form of merchandising when you're a child, the toys

and such, or the food when you're older, because we've all tried Japanese food without being in Japan. So, for me the food is something that, obviously, is very much a part of my life because I like it a lot [laughs]. I remember perfectly—it's a strong memory—the first time I ate sushi: it was with my uncle, my father's brother whom I had met very shortly before (my biological father's brother), who took me to a Japanese restaurant... With my family I had [never] gone to a Japanese restaurant in my life, and I remember, just that, learning how to use chopsticks like Celia said. And then, when you go to Japan and try the sushi there, the food there, the way it changes your perception of the restaurants here is very strong, because there it really is like it's another world. So, I think that the food is something that affects us, or me at least because I like it. And as for the prints, it's curious because with Japanese prints—I don't have any hanging in my house [laughs]—there's something I remember really well, about when I was studying art history at the institute: we didn't study it in detail, but there was always that thing of Gauguin or of other painters who took inspiration from Japanese prints, and for me it was a bit like: "what are Japanese prints?" So I researched it on my own to understand that inspiration of so many artists that we were studying in art history, although we didn't study the Japanese prints themselves... Then I did discover that they were fascinating, and I have gone to the odd exhibition and such, and I think there is something very powerful there too that has influenced Western culture a lot. And no doubt there are other things that don't occur to me right now.

Summer 1993 was released in Japan, and you, Celia, have worked on Japanese productions here in Spain. What were those experiences like? Do you have any stories of cultural misunderstandings which, like in Jarmusch's and Claire Denis' films, might help us to grasp (or laugh about) the differences and points in common between two such apparently distinct cultures?

Celia: I worked on the production team for a Japanese action and suspense film that was shot in Barcelona, Andorra, and Seville. It was a big production for the Fuji network and they were looking for typical settings, from the human towers in Barcelona to the flamenco bars in Seville. I suppose that in every country they make films to sell popcorn; not everything is Ozu. And the translation of the script was filled with misunderstandings and nobody ever clarified to me whether the police officer in sequence 25 was the same one in sequence 80, for example. I prayed that the descriptions I had of minor characters and extras would make sense; I was responsible for hiring actors and extras. I remember a casting call I did in Seville. There were so many helpers and interpreters around the director that the instructions I received were like playing broken telephone and then the local actors asked me: "But who's the director?" I also have an especially fond memory of one time in a sound studio when we recorded the song that would be used in the flamenco scene. I was the intermediary between a large group of silent and attentive Japanese people and a group of very lively gypsies who might break into song and dance at any moment, until we started recording. Although it sounds like a stereotypical image, that's how it was. I remember with great fondness the seriousness and curiosity of the looks that the two groups exchanged at first, and the familiar smiles they were exchanging by the end.

Carla: Yes, *Summer 1993* had a première in Japan, and I went there for ten days in June of last year; no, of the year before [2018]. And the truth is it was a very powerful experience, apart from seeing Japan and being able to visit a few places, for the contact with the distributor. Because they are people... they looked after the première so carefully, it was something... So attentive, I mean, like they want to do a really good job, and then I realised that everything is very slow because they want to do it very well [laughs]. And then, of course, I was

stuck for three days—no exaggeration—for hours each day basically [laughs], in a room giving interviews; I did a lot of interviews for the première in Japan, which was in one theatre, or I don't know, two or three, but in any case, it was a very small release. I think it was one theatre actually, a theatre there in Tokyo, where they're bold enough to put on more independent films. And of course, these interviews were all with a translator; I think two different translators came, one who spoke English and he translated from English [to Japanese], and the other who spoke Spanish and translated from Spanish. And so, it was really slow, because when they have to translate everything you say the conversation doesn't really flow, and everything goes in slow motion. It's like you say something that might be funny and the other person translates it and then the other person laughs [laughs]. It was something... It was very exhausting, but it was a lot of fun.

As for misunderstandings I don't remember much... I came home with a lot of presents, because they gave us heaps of gifts: little cups, samples, tea, cookies. The people from the distributor, it was something... They looked after us really well. And also, it was a curious trip because it was like there were two sides to it. On one side was the distributor, and there's another thing I remember very well, which was the final dinner we had with them and the people from the theatre where they screened the film. We drank quite a bit, and I remember they do something that I find fascinating, which is they take kind of a short nap... When they had drunk a lot, there were two who slept for a bit and after a while they woke up and went on with the party [laughs]. That's something that we would never do and I didn't know they did it there, but I believe it's quite normal to take a nap at a table for a bit [laughs], like ten minutes. And that, that experience with them was really lovely. Then there was the other side of that trip to Japan, which was because Carlos Vermut was there. Well, of course, Carlos has loads of Japanese in-

fluences, even to the point that for inspiration he goes to live in Japan... or not to live, but he spends months in Japan, in Tokyo. He doesn't go to the countryside to get inspiration to write; he goes to Tokyo. At that time he was with his partner there, and we got together several times and he took us to places he knew, but with that perspective more of an outsider to the city, and he took us to restaurants and bars and that whole nocturnal side of Tokyo... and the karaoke bars [laughs]. It was like a totally different side and a different point of view, to see the city through the eyes of someone who loves it and knows it but isn't from there.

To conclude this question, yes, it is true that there's something, after you've travelled, that things don't impress you in the same way. I remember travelling when I was seventeen or eighteen, when you saw a country and everything impressed you, everything was new. Then a time comes when you've travelled enough that things don't impress you in the same way. Less, for me, places like Japan, and certainly Africa. Because I've travelled very little in Africa and when I go then I'll tell you [laughs], but Japan has that aspect, that however well you know it or you think you know things from the country, however much you've travelled (in Asia I've been to Korea, Taiwan, then India, Nepal, and Thailand), however much you've travelled around Asia, Japan is something different; that feeling of culture clash is always there, and it's very powerful, and it's wonderful that it's there, to feel that the codes are so different, that it's obviously hard to understand. And there's also the thing with the language, the difficulty of being able to find people who speak English. Yes, I don't know; it's lovely that it's like that, that there are still parts of the world so different even though we're so close. ■

CARLA SIMÓN AND CELIA RICO: ECHOES OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Abstract

Dialogue with the filmmakers Carla Simón and Celia Rico about the influence of Japanese cinema on their award-winning first feature films *Summer 1993* (Estiu 1993, 2017) and *Journey to a Mother's Room* (Viaje al cuarto de una madre, 2018) and on the rest of their filmography.

Key words

Carla Simón; Celia Rico; Spanish cinema; Japanese cinema; Hirokazu Koreeda; Yasujiro Ozu.

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CARLA SIMÓN Y CELIA RICO: ECOS DEL CINE JAPONÉS

Resumen

Diálogo con las cineastas Carla Simón y Celia Rico en torno a la influencia del cine japonés en sus premiadas óperas primas *Verano 1993* (Estiu 1993, 2017) y *Viaje al cuarto de una madre* (2018) y en el resto de su filmografía.

Palabras clave

Carla Simón; Celia Rico; cine español; cine japonés; Hirokazu Koreeda; Yasujiro Ozu.

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ve to That of National Cinema”, *Arts*; and “Tira los libros, sal a la calle: el concepto de taishû de Yoshimoto Takaaki y la concepción del cine de Terayam Shûji”, *Estudios de Asia y África*. Contact: ferranidus@gmail.com.

Article reference

Garín, M., De Vargas, F. (2020). Carla Simón and Celia Rico: Echoes of Japanese Cinema. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 29, 121-140.

Alternative to That of National Cinema», *Arts*; y «Tira los libros, sal a la calle: el concepto de taishû de Yoshimoto Takaaki y la concepción del cine de Terayam Shûji», *Estudios de Asia y África*. Contacto: ferranidus@gmail.com.

Referencia de este artículo

Garín, M., De Vargas, F. (2020). Carla Simón y Celia Rico: ecos del cine japonés. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 29, 121-140.

Edita / Published by



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ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com
