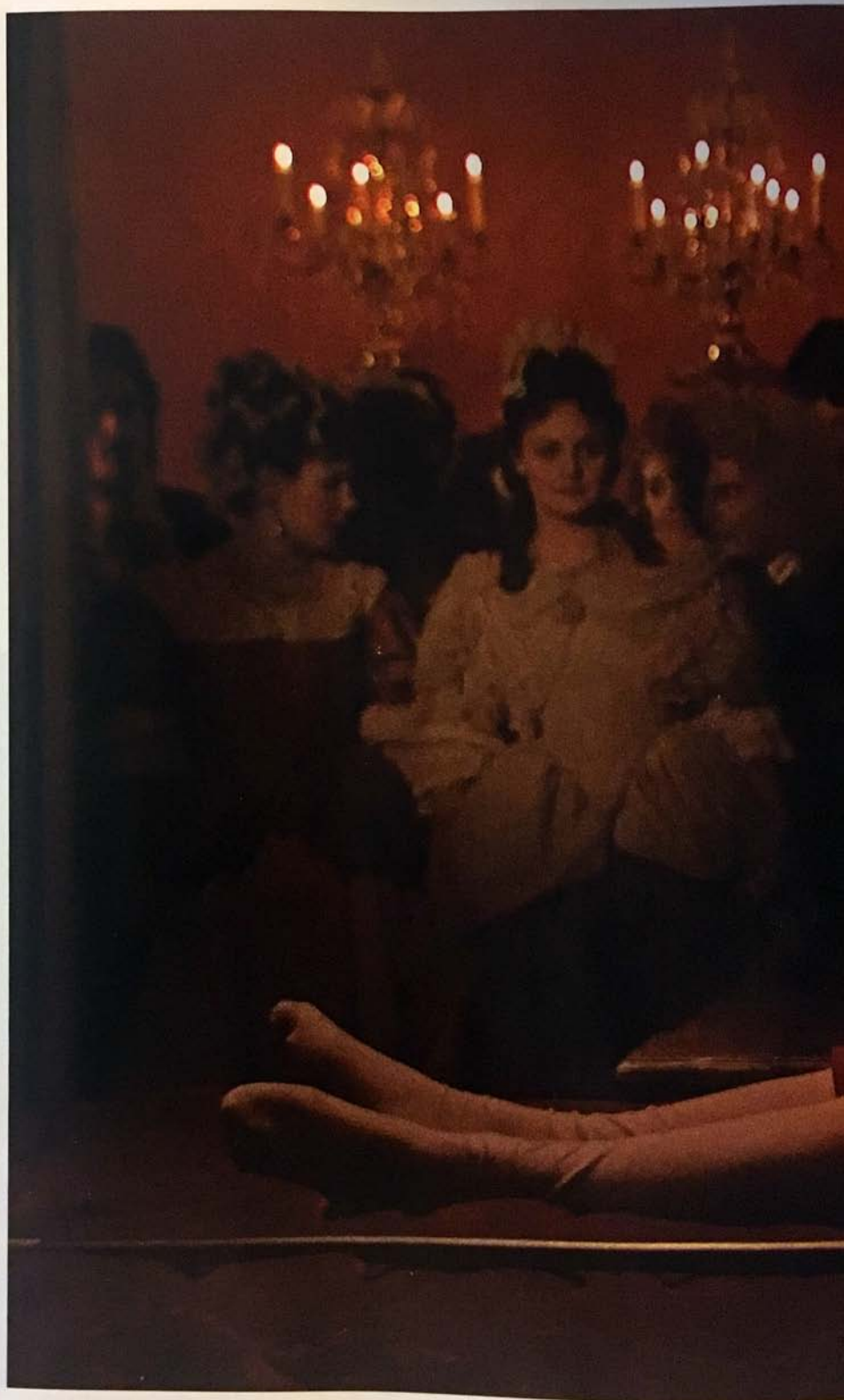


Albert Serra. *La mort de Louis XIV* (The Death of Louis XIV), 2016, HD video, color, sound, 115 minutes, Louis XIV (Jean-Pierre Léaud).

## SHOT IN THE DARK

JAMES QUANDT ON THE FILMS OF ALBERT SERRA

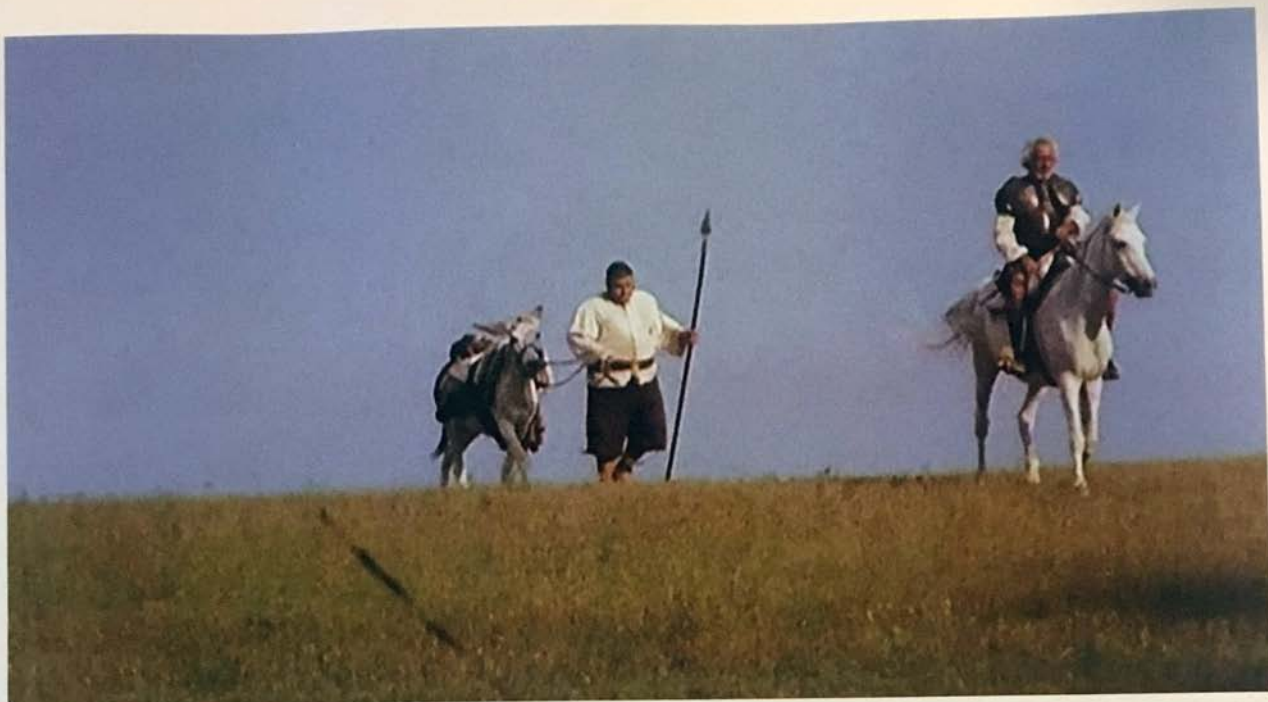
"DON'T YOU LIKE THIS HALF-LIGHT?" Casanova inquires of his servant as they travel by carriage through a dim Carpathian forest in Albert Serra's *Història de la meua mort* (The Story of My Death, 2013). Like his libertine protagonist, the Catalan director is a connoisseur of obscurity. Shooting his films almost exclusively using available light, which is often scant or even absent, Serra revels in a low-lumen setting—the final scene of his *Cant dels ocells* (Birdsong, 2008) transpires in a nocturnal murk that renders it indiscernible—so the candlelit interiors of Versailles, the site of his latest historical drama, *La mort de Louis XIV* (The Death of Louis XIV, 2016), prove ideal for Serra's studies in extreme chiaroscuro. The film begins as a misty aubade on the palace grounds, as the eponymous monarch surveys the formal gardens from his wheelchair, but then retreats into the twilight sanctum of his bedchamber for the remaining two hours. (We will not view the landscape again, or the radiant sun that bestowed on the king his nickname, but for a brief glimpse through a grated window.) A claustal chronicle of Louis's protracted death in August 1715, Serra's masterpiece (which







Albert Serra, *Honor de cavalleria* (Honor of the Knights), 2006. 35 mm, color, sound, 110 minutes. Sancho Panza (Lluís Serrat) and Don Quixote (Lluís Carbó).



opens in US theaters this month) contrasts the sumptuousness of the court—enveloped in lace and brocade, the sovereign sports a proliferating peruke of ringlets and frizz that seems to encroach on his cranium as he withers—with his sickly limb, rapidly blackening from gangrene. Though appearing to be a closet royalist in his sympathetic portrait of Louis, Serra also seems to equate the decay of the royal appendage with that of the monarchy. (In *The Story of My Death*, Casanova prophesies the French Revolution.)

Serra prefers obscurity of a second sort. Though he loosely bases his films on canonical texts and oft-told tales—Cervantes's *Don Quixote* in *Honor de cavalleria* (Honor of the Knights, 2006); the biblical account of the three wise men's visit to the baby Jesus in *Birdsong*; the voluminous memoirs of Casanova in *The Story of My Death*; and, most recently, Saint-Simon's meticulous journal entries on Louis XIV's demise—Serra evacuates them of customary content, concentrates on eccentric details, or contrives uncanny encounters (Casanova encamps near Dracula's castle, where his young hostesses fall under the spell, and teeth, of the sanguinary count). Advised by a Warholian aesthetic—Serra has cited *Chelsea Girls* (1966) as a lodestar, and the word *boring* ranks high in his lexicon—his early films, directed by an autodidact and acted by nonprofessionals, most of them recruited from the filmmaker's hometown of Banyoles, seem content to tarry. "As you know, we've had a lot of adventures, Sancho," Quixote suggests to his squire in the final twenty minutes of *Honor of the Knights*, but one has to take it on faith; we have seen no such exploits in the previous hour and a half, only a great deal of pastoral idling and aimless ambling. It's difficult to imagine Serra's desultory duo rousing themselves to tilt at a windmill or defend a horse against Galician attack—and that, of course, is precisely the director's perverse point. It is critical commonplace to say that Cervantes was careless and "not a meticulous craftsman," as the literary scholar Ilan Stavans did in his 2015 study of *Don Quixote*, further remarking that "his sentences go on and on and on and on, and so on." Serra, then, effects a mimetic attenuation, extending takes, deadening time, and ignoring niceties of

continuity: Characters disappear as suddenly as they emerge, without explanation or identification. (Perhaps reading retrospectively from Serra's later style, some critics have described *Honor of the Knights* as statically shot and sparsely edited, whereas there is considerably more cutting, camera movement, and use of effects—more copious panning, jerky handheld close-ups, rack focus, follow shots, intercutting—than in his subsequent cinema.) Quixote's knightly armor creaks and rattles in a materialist touch that, unlike Bresson in *Lancelot du lac* (1974), Serra intends not as a correction to the conventional tropes of medievalist cinema but merely as an absurdist jape—a hint of the antichivalric irony that Cervantes nurtures through hundreds of pages but which the nascent director fails to sustain in his exercise in enervation.

Pilgrimage proves less pointless in *Birdsong*, Serra's second feature (or third, if one counts the lost, and disavowed, 2003 film *Crespia* as his first), as his three magi do finally reach their destination, though only after much directionless trudging and several nonevents. Shot in rich black-and-white that exploits the volcanic expanses of the Canary Islands and Iceland—"At times, we're awestruck with the beauty of things," one of the trio announces proleptically—*Birdsong* replaces the freer style of *Honor of the Knights* with a formalist approach that intends to confer axiomatic rigor but in its familiarity seems indolent, characterized as it is by locked shots, long takes, and sparse dialogue. (The first line, "Yes, look at that," appears about four minutes into the film.) Serra's hapless wise men, enrobed in bedsheets and capped by heavily gemmed coronets as they ford gorges and flee the sea on their way to Jesus's manger, appear to have been plucked from a kindergarten crèche. In one deadpan setup, the three wander over white dunes, the static camera lingering on a diptych of glistening sand and glowering sky after the men have disappeared over a hill—only to slowly resurface, retracing their steps. "We've had enough of this sand," they proclaim, making their arduous way back from their visitation with Mary and Joseph before finally being obliterated in the image by pitch-darkness, Serra's nocturnal signature.





Serra's new masterpiece, *The Death of Louis XIV*, contrasts the sumptuousness of the court with the monarch's sickly limb, rapidly blackening from gangrene.

THE BABY-FACED SERRA has sometimes presented himself as a magic child, self-taught and bereft of influences, determined to maintain cinematic purity at all costs. He claims he no longer watches any other films, to avoid "contamination" of his own—employing a favorite term of both Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jean-Marie Straub, both of whom clearly influenced *Birdsong*: the former the film's sacral primitivism, the latter its severe materiality. The very opening shot—showing the back of a head studying a landscape—reveals a debt to the cinema of Straub and Danièle Huillet, with whom Serra shares a passion for the films of John Ford and a stated indifference to audience reaction: "Sometimes they love the film for the wrong reasons," Serra has carped, sounding like the cantankerous Straub. Serra's

Clockwise, from top left:  
**Albert Serra, *Honor de cavalleria* (Honor of the Knights), 2006.** 35 mm, color, sound, 110 minutes.  
**Don Quixote (Lluís Carbó).**  
**Albert Serra, *El cant dels ocells* (Birdsong), 2008.** 35 mm, black-and-white, sound, 98 minutes. Second King (Lluís Serrat Masaneillas).  
**Albert Serra, *El cant dels ocells* (Birdsong), 2008.** 35 mm, black-and-white, 98 minutes. Second King (Lluís Serrat Masaneillas), Third King (Lluís Serrat Battle), and First King (Lluís Carbó).







Three stills from Albert Serra's *El Senyor ha fet en mi meravelles* (*The Lord Worked Wonders in Me*), 2011, digital video, color, sound, 146 minutes. From left: (Seated, from left) Lluís Serrat, Lluís Carbó, and Jordi Pau. (Seated, far left) Albert Serra. Albert Serra, Lluís Carbó, Euseu Huertas, and Jordi Ribas.

seraph in white toga who declaims her lines about the son of God in an expressionless sprechstimme would not be out of place in the duo's mythological landscapes. The director also shares with Straub-Huillet a tendency to the painterly, as when Mary and Jesus arrange themselves in the frame in the hieratic manner of a Bellini Madonna and Child—that is, after the sacred baby finally does appear, feet only, once his parents tire of sitting around, endlessly petting a lamb that seems to be the sole object of their affection: Agnus Dei, indeed.

Serra's resolve to form a close-knit troupe of actors and technicians, a kind of Catalan Factory or, alternatively, a "family" like the entourages of Ford and Fassbinder (the latter also a major influence on the director) is apparent in the opening sequence of *El Senyor ha fet en mi meravelles* (*The Lord Worked Wonders in Me*, 2011), a leisurely road movie that Serra submitted as his exchange with Argentinean director Lisandro Alonso in their filmic "correspondence" commissioned by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. The static opening shot lasts almost six minutes, capturing Serra's ensemble—including the portly, hirsute Lluís Serrat, his Sancho Panza, and the elderly Lluís Carbó, Serra's erstwhile tennis instructor in Banyoles, who became his Quixote and died this past August after appearing in most of the director's subsequent films—at lunch before they set out through La Mancha to revisit locations for *Honor of the Knights*. Essentially a mock post hoc "making of" documentary, the film never shows any actual making, though a windmill makes a taunting appearance, perhaps to underscore the egregious absence of any in Serra's ultimate take on Cervantes. The troupe, warily incorporating a volatile actor called Toti (Jordi Pau), a legendary figure from Ibiza's hippie scene, mostly lounge around like Warholian odalisques, discussing drugs (heroin, LSD, Nolotil) and consuming alcohol (beer, wine, anisette); expounding on such echt-Iberian topics as Dalí, Francoism, and toreadors; and preparing for shoots that never seem to happen. (Comparison to Fassbinder's hang-fire *Beware of a Holy Whore* [1971], which Serra admires, is inevitable.) The latter part of *The Lord Worked Wonders in Me* is dedicated to Carbó's amorous pursuit of Serrat—his attempts at seduction include donning "the black underpants that give you a boner"—who repeatedly rebuffs the older man's proposals of marriage. Serra films Carbó's romantic crusade (which looks forward to the director's installation epic *Singularity*, 2015, in which the aged actor portrays the gay owner of a gold mine who pursues and marries a slave laborer played by Serrat), mostly in long shot, the two men framed symmetrically at the end of a hallway, the director's tone hovering uneasily between amusement and derision.

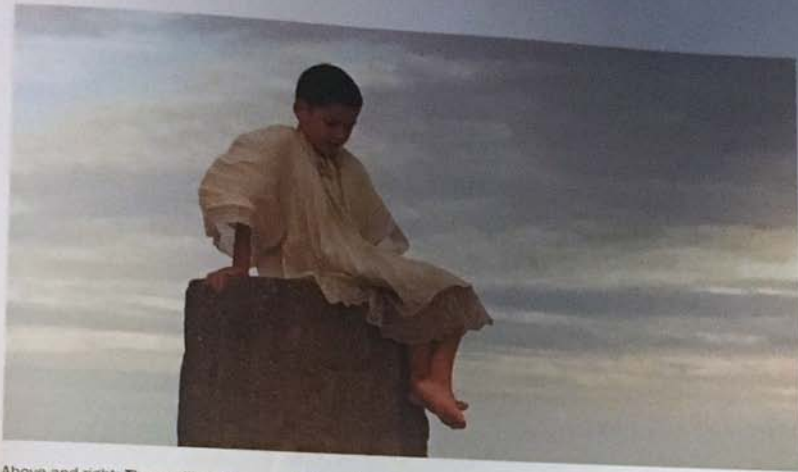
"All intelligent people are moving from cinema to the art world," Serra recently averred, suggesting that museums "understand cultural heritage" whereas the film industry does not. As if to prove his assertion, the director submitted for another

MACBA exhibition, "Are You Ready for TV?," a fourteen-part series called *Els noms de Crist* (*The Names of Christ*, 2010). Both Godardian and christological, *Names de Crist* spends its three-plus hours contemplating the mysteries of film finance and of Jesus's martyrdom, implying parallels between the movie producer determined to secure the €100,000 necessary for Serra to finish a film and that other savior. (In "following the money," the fragmented narrative about a stalled movie production evokes both Godard's *Grandeur et décadence* [1986] and Fassbinder's *Holy Whore*.)

Serra's unremitting irony renders his religiosity impossible to parse. "If you believe in God you cannot ask questions, you cannot criticize God, you trust him," the director has stated, and his version of Cervantes deletes any spiritual doubt and blasphemy in favor of rapt paeans to divine creation: Quixote looks to the sky in perpetual wonder and instructs Sancho that the river in which they bathe is "God's water, Christians' water." (Serra said that a photo of the pope gave him courage during the making of *Honor of the Knights*.) So the christological aspects of *Names of Christ* remain ambiguous, as will the role of religion in the degraded world of *Singularity*. In the former, Serra provocatively titles each of fourteen chapters with a moniker conferred on Jesus in the Scriptures (King of God, Prince of Peace, Mountain, Shepherd, Way, Bud, etc.) and introduces many of them with close-ups of religious statuary. The primary tale of financial connivance—one producer schemes to sell his mother's apartment to fund the film—keeps getting sidelined by mysterious tangents: shots of romantic landscapes (a mist-shrouded mountain accompanied by Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*) and sacrificial animals; invocations of art (e.g., Motherwell's use of rag paper) and artists' outrageous statements (Dalí's famous "Jesus is cheese" is traced obliquely back to Saint Augustine's metaphoric association of Christ with a "mountain of curds"); a striking rhyme of a Dan Flavin work at MACBA with the neon lighting at a gas station; sayings of the saints and stretches of black leader. Serra's cinephilia asserts itself in copious clips from classic films, including the finale from Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* of 1941 (also a Fassbinder favorite); the campy *Liebestod* from King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946); the head-stomping, alligator-chomping Colosseum games from Cecil B. DeMille's 1932 *Sign of the Cross* (set to Bruckner's Ninth); and Hedy Lamarr's nude-bathing and horse-chasing sequence from Gustav Machatý's *Ecstasy* (1933). The producer's pronouncement in chapter 7, "We're moving off the traditional path. . . . We'll take risks—take maximum risks," captures Serra's experimental modus in this, his first great work, with the proviso that its proliferating sprawl—it was conceived as a TV series and debuted as a webcast on MACBA's site—works best when presented as one continuous, single-channel work (unlike his later multiscreen video installation, *Singularity*).

Ironically, a film producer inspired Serra's next feature. A Romanian funder



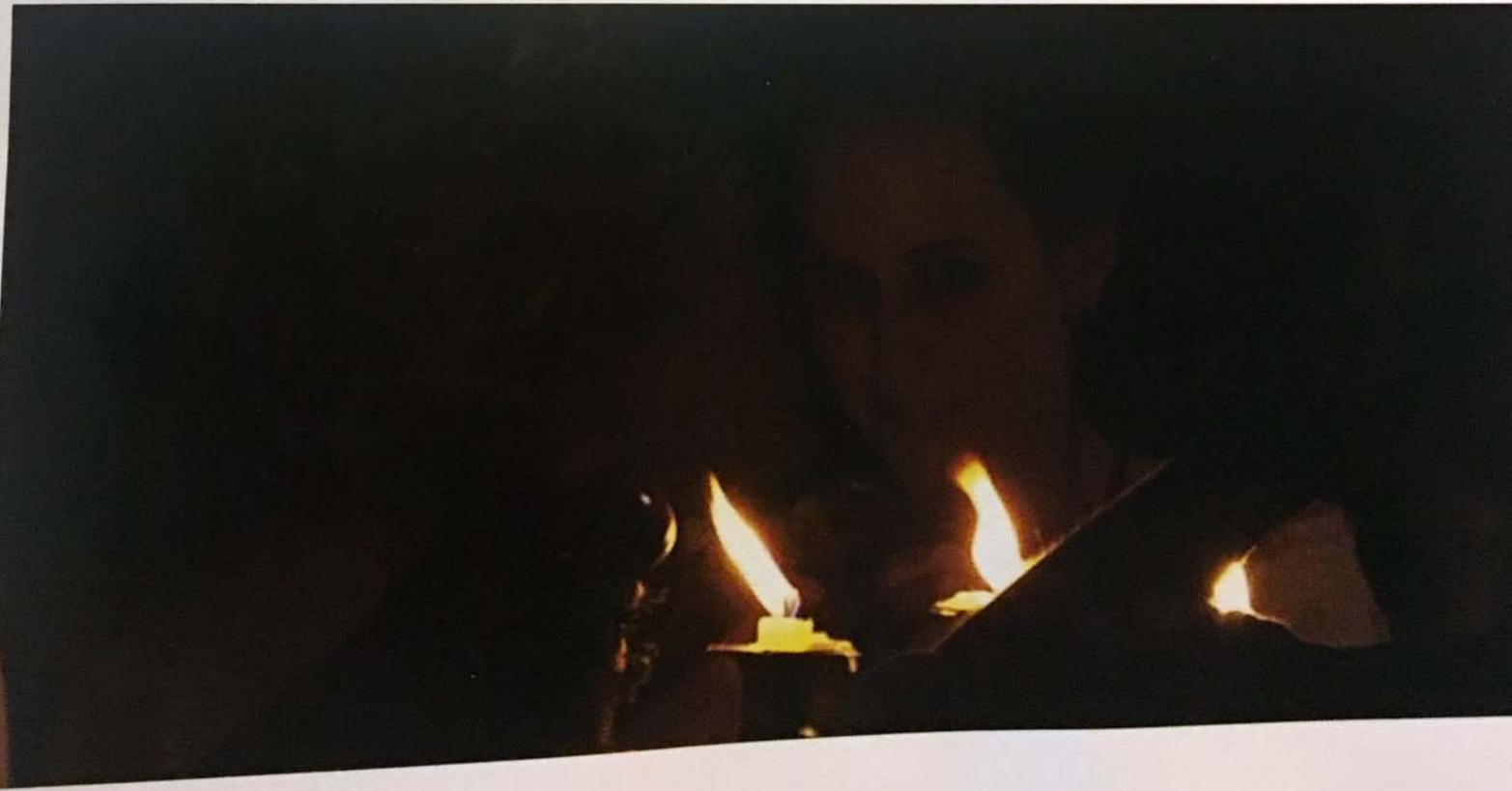


Above and right: Three stills from Albert Serra's *Els noms de Crist* (The Names of Christ), 2010, HD video, color, sound, 193 minutes.



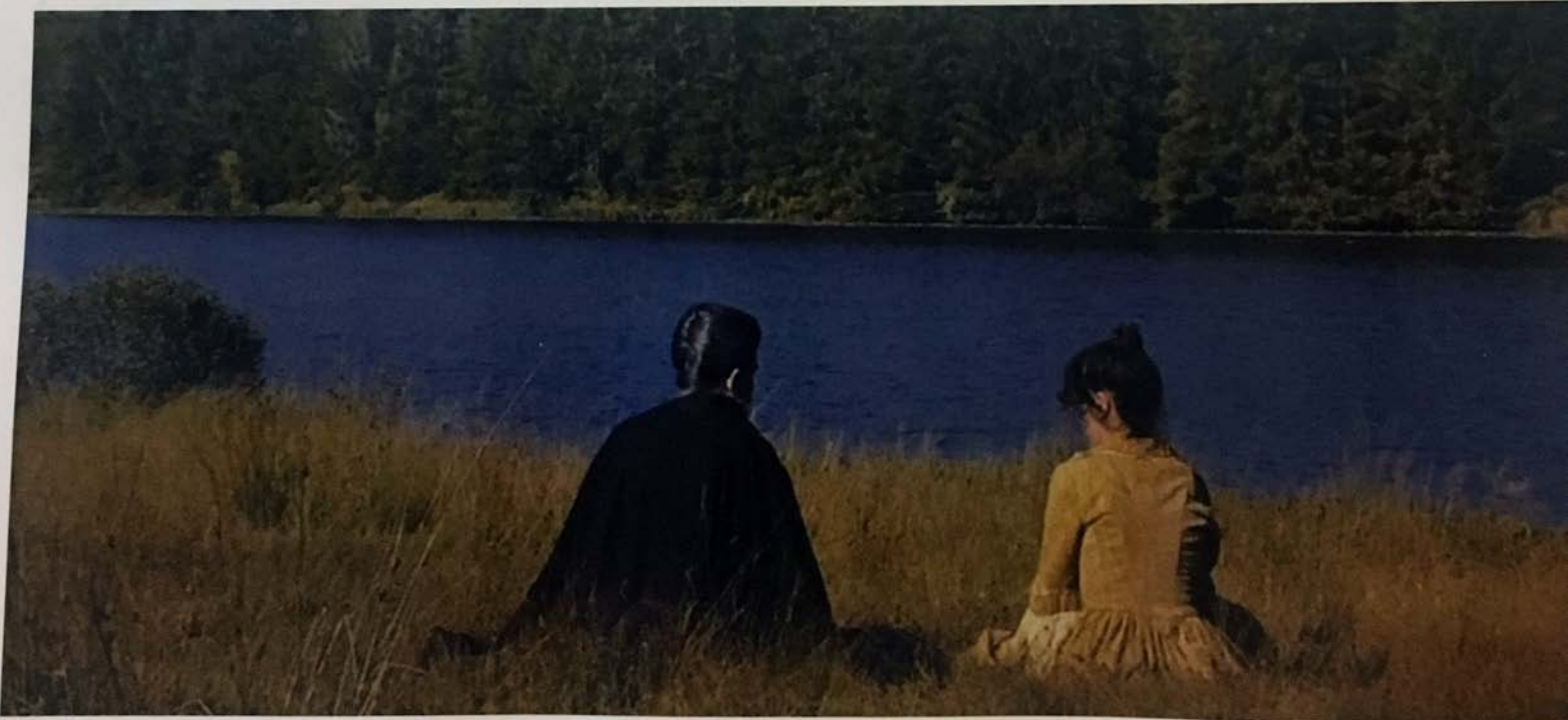
Below: Albert Serra, *Història de la meva mort* (The Story of My Death), 2013, 35 mm, color, sound, 148 minutes.

Serra's unremitting irony renders his religiosity impossible to parse.





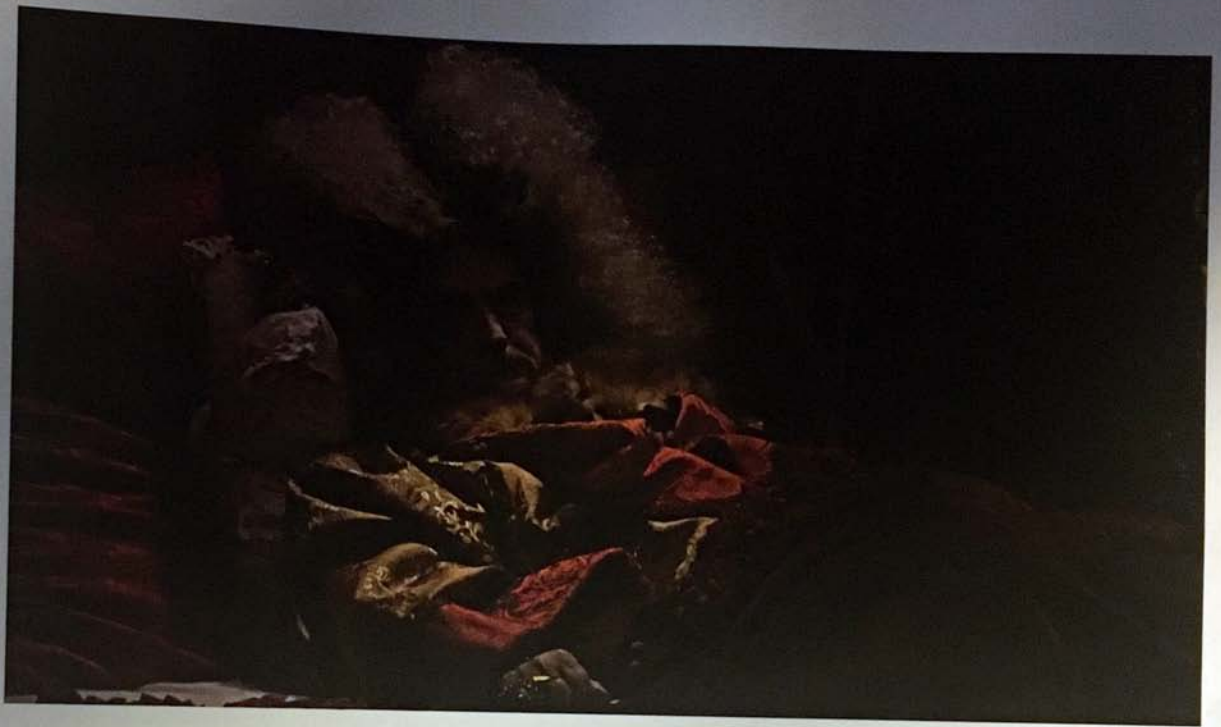
Serra's images transform the stuff of everyday life into radiant still lifes that luxuriate in color, light, and texture.





Opposite page: Five stills from Albert Serra's *Història de la meua mort* (*The Story of My Death*), 2013, 35 mm, color, sound, 148 minutes. Clockwise, from top left: Casanova (Vicenç Altaió) and Carmen (Montse Triola), Pompeu (Lluís Serrat) and Casanova (Vicenç Altaió), Dracula (Eliseu Huertas), Dracula (Eliseu Huertas) and Carmen (Montse Triola).

This page: Albert Serra, *La mort de Louis XIV* (*The Death of Louis XIV*), 2016, HD video, color, sound, 115 minutes. Louis XIV (Jean-Pierre Léaud).



suggested that the filmmaker treat Dracula in the manner of his Don Quixote, and, though appalled by the horror genre, Serra decided to blend the mythology of the vampire with something “closer to his universe,” in a high-modernist version of those cheesy B-films in which Frankenstein “meets,” say, the Wolf Man. Serra’s revision, *The Story of My Death*, matches Dracula with Casanova, though the two reprobates never actually cross paths in this Transylvanian fantasia. (Vampires also appear in *The Names of Christ*, perhaps in homage to Serra’s Catalan compatriot Pere Portabella’s classic *Vampir-Cuadecuc* [1970].) *The Story of My Death* opens on an alfresco dinner in a darkness that candles do little to illumine, though Serra’s frequent cinematographer, Jimmy Gimferrer—self-taught, like the director—working in old-fashioned Academy ratio, which Serra capriciously converted to its expansive opposite, CinemaScope, shoots the interiors of Casanova’s Baroque château in crisp, sun-flooded deep focus. (Daylight, oddly, seems to hold no horror for Serra’s Dracula [Eliseu Huertas], who verily romps in its radiance.) The director claims he cast Vicenç Altaió as Casanova because the Catalan poet and essayist is exceptionally well hung, though the philanderer’s horsemeat appears hapless, as he shatters a window with his head while humping one of the farm girls in his Carpathian lair. Altaió revels in his licentious role, merrily swatting at a cross as he denounces “the plague of Christianity,” discoursing on Voltaire and Vivaldi, and incessantly popping grapes and pomegranate seeds into his gap-toothed maw. Little wonder that he bolts for his commode, cackling madly as he triumphantly expels each turd, the coprophagist’s steaming buffet he deposits in the chamber pot afforded an affectionately lingering midshot. Serra’s conception of Dracula is no less arch; with his helmet of raven hair neatly bifurcated at the back, the coiffed count appears like an Orthodox high priest imagined by El Greco. (Casanova also does some bloodletting; a close-up of his heavily beringed fingers smeared red after violating à maiden recall stigmata on the hands of Christ in *Names*.)

In *The Story of My Death*, Serra resorts to Straubian anachronism when two

farm girls pause in the forest to listen to far-off voices singing Fauré’s late-nineteenth-century *Messe des pêcheurs de Villerville*. Serra’s Louis XIV, performed by a regally recumbent Jean-Pierre Léaud, also hears music from the future, after he ingests some Alicante wine and a biscuit—a performative feat that appears to cue Mozart’s Great Mass in C Minor (music Bresson employed in *A Man Escaped* [1956], another film about incarceration) to soar on the sound track for nearly three minutes. Though the music from seven decades hence is obviously non-diegetic, Louis, pinioning us with his baleful glare, seems to heed Mozart’s Kyrie, a prayer for mercy. (Was Serra aware that Handel’s dotted rhythms, which Mozart employed in the Mass, were the signal in Baroque France for the arrival of the king?) The director once proclaimed that he would abjure the use of professional actors, save for Léaud, whose deteriorating Louis, all but consumed by his cumulus of a peruke, a nerve leaping in his ashen cheek as he nuzzles his beloved borzois and parodies the appurtenances of power with exaggerated gallantry, poignantly embodies not only the expiring ancien régime but also the last of the Nouvelle Vague, long synonymous with the actor. Altaió returns to Serra’s cinema as a sly impostor porting an elixir of bull sperm, blood, and frog fat to halt the king’s disease; when he debates medical professors from the Sorbonne, the palaver resembles dueling imbecilities. “His gaze is arrested,” assures the charlatan, his observation contradicted by the feverish monarch’s rheumy, reddened eyes. As Louis atrophies, Serra foreshortens his images of the king’s wracked body, a ploy traceable via Pasolini to Mantegna. Ever painterly in disposition—the Sun King’s cherished Caravaggista Valentin de Boulogne could have supplied the tenebrous lighting—Serra appears to have cast his film with an eye to art history: Women in the royal entourage resemble Ingres’s Madame Moitessier or Titian’s La Schiavona; several of Louis’s courtiers suggest Liotard caricatures; and his Madame de Maintenon (played by Irène Silvagni) has the visage of one of Christian Seybold’s *alten Frauen*.





Two stills from Albert Serra's *Singularity*, 2015, five-channel video projection, color, sound, 181 minutes 34 seconds screened simultaneously, 732 minutes screened sequentially. Above: Lluís (Lluís Serrat) and Lluís (Lluís Carbó).

A summa of sorts, *Singularity* brings together all the familiar elements of Serra's style but introduces a political aspect hitherto oblique in his work.

**SERRA'S SUPERCILIOUS CONTENTION** that his cinema is “unfuckable”—by which he means, as he told an interviewer in 2013, that his “films are so radical and special . . . that there are no weak points: They are impossible to criticize”—was put to the test by his grandiose project for Documenta 13 in Kassel, *Three Little Pigs*—i.e., Goethe, Hitler, and Fassbinder—which he created on-site, shooting an hour per day for each of the hundred days of the exhibition. The brief sequence available for preview, *Cubalibre*, named after the ubiquitous cocktail in Fassbinder's *Holy Whore* and starring Serra stalwarts the two Lluïses (Serrat and Carbó), stranded in a gay nightclub with a gaudy cabaret curtain and the annoying lounge singer Xavi, suggests that the full hundred hours of porcine playacting might induce fatal vitiation. Not so Serra's other major art installation, the ravishing *Singularity*, a five-screen, twelve-hour epic commissioned for the Catalan pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale. A summa of sorts, *Singularity* brings together several elements of Serra's style—*anachronism, chiaroscuro, stasis, tactility, reiteration*—but introduces a political aspect hitherto oblique in his work. An “introductory” screen condenses the work's imagery in rapid montage and sets its corrosive tone with a denunciation of drones and the defense industry, of our “world of greediness” and omnipresent surveillance, and of our “avid, avid, avid” love of gold. The other screens variously revert in chronology and setting to a gold mine and whorehouse in what at times would seem to be 1930s Ireland and, at others, contemporary Eire, a locale perhaps explained by Catalan nationalists' abiding historical support for Irish independence. (Stretches of







Albert Serra, *Singularity*, 2015, five-channel video projection, color, sound, 181 minutes 34 seconds screened simultaneously, 732 minutes screened sequentially. Lluís (Lluís Carbó) and Lluís (Lluís Serrat).

*Singularity* transpire over Christmas and seem based on James Joyce's Noel-set "The Dead," much as the prevailing aura of eroticized lassitude evokes Warhol.) Though fragmented over the quintet of screens and more temporally disjunctive than *The Names of Christ*, *Singularity* eventually divulges a narrative, a neo-Marxist telenovela in which a group of female miners, overseen by an imperious madam, Imma (Imma Merino), conspire to open a brothel to service the male workers at a nearby gold mine, and other patrons. Mine owner (and novelist manqué) Sebastian (Sebastian Vogler), accoutered with a leopard-print beret, exploits his recruits, including Didier (Román Bayarri), a failed painter from Dublin who accuses his boss of sexual abuse. Laying meretricious claims to a *Gemeinschaft* in his mine shaft by portraying his personnel as "a family" whose labor has aesthetic value—"This is very artistic work, too," he assures an underling learning to survey land—Sebastian represents the falsity, violence, and avarice that Serra locates in the narrative's two sites of monetary production: quarry and cathouse. Almost all of the sexual relations depicted in *Singularity*, both male and female, are gay—"Men are not my type," sniffs one young woman who dreads work as a prostitute—though, perhaps pointedly, the paid sexual transactions (all unseen) are exclusively heterosexual. A competing mine is owned by the elder Lluís (Carbó), an investor with many interests, including the brothel, who persuades his long-pursued sweetheart (Lluís Serrat, repeating his role as Carbó's chubby innamorato from *The Lord Worked Wonders*) to marry him and adopt a child. Whereas throughout *Singularity* Serra leans heavily on the Godardian metaphor

that transforms heterosexual prostitution into the very paradigm of capitalist exploitation, he presents the two Lluís's betrothal as celebratory—and yet the event is shot through a disfiguring scrim. One cannot shake the growing suspicion that if, as Sebastian claims, "everything's connected," homosexuality here might be seen as a distortion of the natural order, a metaphor for capitalism's aberrancy.

"I am always looking for beauty," Serra has said, and *Singularity* supplies its profusion. The unabashed aesthete who, in the last chapter of *The Names of Christ*, composed an underwater image of Don Juan's crumpled boot and a woman's slipper as gorgeous as that of the sunken chalice in Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) here dotes on aqueous landscapes and amber-lit interiors, where crucifixes, oil lamps, and animal skins predominate. (A cavalcade of Christmas tunes supplies the backbeat, including the inevitable exhortation to "make the Yuletide gay.") Serra's images transform the stuff of everyday life into radiant still lifes that luxuriate in color, light, and texture: a pristine heap of bleached sheets next a stout bar of white soap; a rococo tableau featuring a giant red lipstick, a chartreuse lamp, and an Asian fan that recalls Fassbinder's *Chinese Roulette* (1976); close-ups of drenched black feathers and abstract whorls that serve as lengthy interstices. Even the grille on a confession booth flaunts its floral design, and the gold mine, insidious site of sexual and economic depredation, assumes "a beautiful shape"—at least according to Sebastian. In coming this far for beauty, Serra seems intent on remaining forever unfuckable. □

*Albert Serra's Death of Louis XIV opens on March 31 in the US.*

JAMES QUANDT IS SENIOR PROGRAMMER AT TIFF CINEMATHEQUE IN TORONTO.