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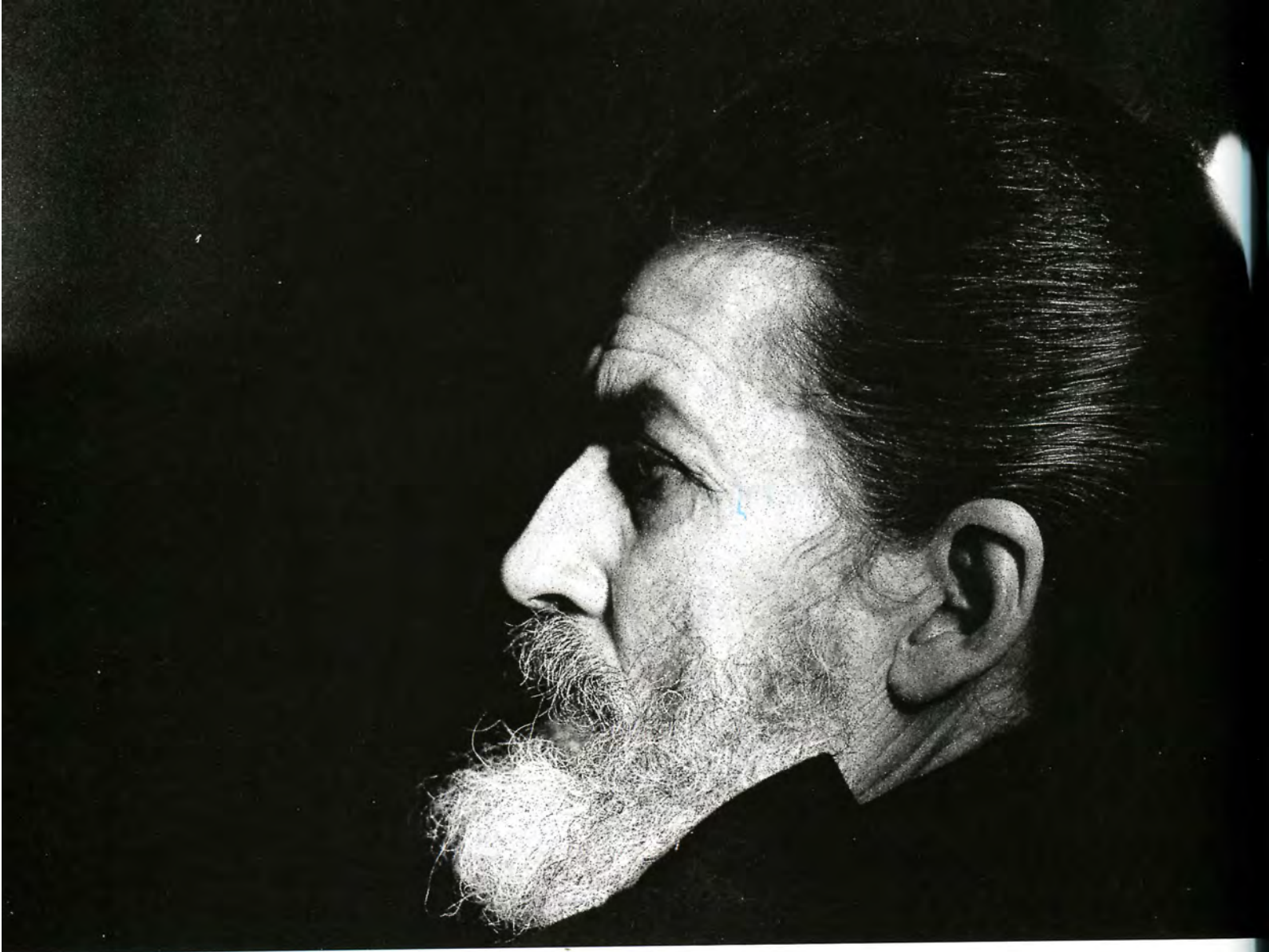
ART IN THE CARIBBEAN

Film & phantom labour **AGNIESZKA KURANT**

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*Història de la meva mort*  
(Story of my Death), production still,  
2013

# Adapt to Change

## The films of Albert Serra by Bert Rebhandl

Transylvania, on the southern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains in Eastern Europe, has been notorious for centuries as the setting for Count Dracula's fictional home. Given the area's associations with mortal danger, it seems improbable that the renowned Italian libertine Giacomo Casanova would have made the perilous journey to the region by horse and carriage back in the 18th century. Yet it is precisely this imagined expedition that forms the subject of Albert Serra's *Història de la meva mort* (Story of my Death, 2013), which won the Golden Leopard at last year's Locarno International Film Festival. The film's title hints at the purpose of Casanova's trip: the Epicurean atomist, master pontificator and quintessential womanizer is seeking information about the one thing everyone thinks they understand but don't: death. A visit to an expert in the field of evading death consequently seems apposite; although Serra's Count Dracula follows a set of stringent behavioural rules that aren't quite as might be expected: sunlight, for instance, doesn't seem to present him with the same issues vampires usually experience during the day.

What should come as less of a surprise is that, as in previous films, Serra found narrative inspiration for *Història de la meva mort* in noted historical and literary figures. His 2006 film *Honor de cavalleria* (Honour of the Knights), for instance, was a variation on Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605–15), while *El cant dels ocells* (Birdsong, 2008) relays the biblical tale of the Three Wise Men's search for the Christ Child. The Catalan director also contributed an extended meditation on the names of Jesus (*Els noms de Crist*, The Names of Christ, 2010) to the group show 'Are You Ready For TV?' at MACBA, Barcelona, in 2010, and at DOCUMENTA(13), in 2012, he presented the 101-hour project *Three Little Pigs* (2012), for which, over the course of the summer-long exhibition, he filmed costumed actors performing soliloquies based on texts from, or quotes by, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Adolf Hitler, with the actors speaking as if to themselves, never looking directly into the camera.

Serra's films are never adaptations in the true sense of the term; he doesn't adhere strictly to historical fact or follow, even vaguely, the plots of his literary sources. Totalling 3,700 pages in original manuscript format, Casanova's *Histoire de ma vie* (History of my Life, 1790–92) doesn't easily lend itself to being translated into a feature-length film – even by a director who has a tendency to play with the format. Serra's

trademark mode of storytelling is, at first glance, opposed to narration: he prefers long, seemingly directionless scenes in which very little action occurs. He appears consciously to strip away the plot and substitute mood – think 'mumblecore' in period costume. Take *Honor de cavalleria*: however illusory his quest to restore chivalry may be, the Don Quixote of Cervantes's tale is a man with purpose; yet in Serra's version he strolls aimlessly through fields of long grass or idles away his time sitting under a tree. Meanwhile, his portly companion, Sancho Panza, rummages about in the undergrowth looking for laurel bushes, instead finding mostly thyme, which he sniffs while twiddling with the sword that hangs from his belt. Dialogue is scarce, and if Don Quixote does utter something, it is usually a sententious statement such as: 'Chivalry is civilization.'

While Cervantes's novel is about the impossibility of sustaining chivalry in nascent modernity, Serra's take on the subject addresses the pitfalls of transferring a work of narrative from one medium to another, while also serving as a commentary on contemporary Spain. By reducing Don Quixote's actions to empty gestures, Serra extends Cervantes's original concept and lends it a new poignancy within the context of a post-housing-crash nation: in this setting, it becomes all the more affecting to see an old man in a doublet, stripped of his armour, walking through olive groves looking for somebody to fight, as though he were searching for the very tale from which he has been exiled, and to which Serra has no intention of repatriating him. Heralded as one of the most significant directorial debuts in recent world cinema, *Honor de cavalleria* appears to offer a Warholian approach to a literary classic, with long static shots substituting the process of storytelling, and with performances from actors seemingly running on empty.

Serra's follow-up, *El cant dels ocells*, did little to discourage that initial perception. Based on the biblical tale of the Magi's pilgrimage to Christ's birthplace, the film's three protagonists, echoing Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in *Honor de cavalleria*, are so preoccupied with the minor irritations they face during their travels – rather than the greater significance of their journey – that they struggle even to reach their destination. Filmed in black and white, and set in magnificent landscapes in the Canary Islands and Iceland, *El cant dels ocells* ends with a scene that is stylistically typical of Serra: a long shot of the three kings in the distance, seemingly trying to keep warm as they become gradually enveloped by the encroaching

darkness of subtropical nightfall. Serra seeks to draw the audience into the scene by adopting a centralized perspective but, since the characters are too far away for us to make out what is happening in any detail, the viewers – like the Magi – also fail to arrive. The focal point thus becomes a vanishing point, not only for the story but for the notion of mythical tales, and of actors somehow performing 'naturally'.

If it is Serra's intention with these films to stage an ironic deconstruction of holy or canonical traditions, then the irony is well hidden beneath unremitting deadpan. His adaptations never move beyond an initial attempt to broach a story and the final cuts of his films often give the impression of being outtakes of a much larger project, undermining the orthodoxy that movies are made by editing together the 'good' shots and cutting the 'bad' ones. In Serra's films, a moment of brilliance can sit alongside one of sheer mundanity.

When he was commissioned to produce a new work for 'Are You Ready For TV?', Serra's ambitious project functioned as an attempt to subvert the very concept of the artist commission. *Els noms de Crist* comprises a series of 14 episodes addressing a range of topics, from the relationship between text and image to the concept of names, the way in which the public inhabits the museum environment and the relationship between exhibition space and art work. *Els noms de Crist* is also a witty allegory of the process of filmmaking as a soteriological endeavour – soteriology being the study of religious doctrines of salvation. Christ, called the saviour (*soter* in ancient Greek) because he died on the cross to redeem the sins of the world, acquired numerous titles that Serra takes as departure points for his film series: Shepherd, Lamb, Husband, King of God, Prince of Peace as well as Bud, Beloved, Way, Mountain and, of course, Jesus. In the Shepherd chapter, Serra himself assumes the role of a 'pastor', defending his film crew against the criticisms of one of the producers. He intercuts these Godardian film-about-filmmaking scenes with images of a sheep in a mountain landscape. Eventually, the animal is revealed to be dead, apparently slaughtered: the 'pastor' was too busy filming to save this innocent creature.

*Els noms de Crist* differs from Serra's earlier films, not least because it was conceived to be shown within an exhibition context, and its frames of reference are wide-ranging, in particular drawing on works in the MACBA collection: iconic depictions of Jesus; art works by Antoni Llena or Robert Motherwell; excerpts from films as diverse

*Serra's films are never adaptations in the true sense of the term; he doesn't adhere to historical fact or closely follow literary plots.*



as King Vidor's classic Western *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and Helen Levitt's 1948 silent documentary about life in Harlem, *In the Street*; as well as the endless discussions about the film whose shooting *Els noms de Crist* supposedly documents. Serra uses these multiple references to draw analogies between, for instance, the saviour and the film producer (redeeming a film project by financing it). In a scene towards the end of *Els noms de Crist* the producer is speaking on the phone to someone reporting to him about difficulties on the set of the very film we are watching. 'I'll come by helicopter,' he declares, as if coming to save them and by extension, us.

While the 14 parts of *Els noms de Crist* can be installed over several screens in an exhibition space the piece would work equally well as a television series or shown in its uninterrupted entirety as a film. Personally, I feel this crypto-narrative needs to be viewed as a composite whole in order fully to grasp how the filmmaker and producer's rivalry concerning the roles they play in redeeming the movie undermines the whole project. But perhaps I chose to read a story into *Els noms de Crist* because I saw the 14 parts in sequence; had I not, I might simply have marvelled at Serra's inventiveness in devising so many peculiar and, at times, genuinely outlandish ideas relating to Jesus' multiple designations. This project, which I believe to be Serra's most important work, is one of the richest and most complex commentaries on the growing elision of art and cinema, both as media and in terms of their presentational environments.

It is up for debate whether the institutional critique that pervades *Els noms de Crist* is directed towards the art world, which frequently compels artists to travel from one residency to the next, or towards the international art house film sector, which has developed a similar mechanism by creating a class of nomad directors that must travel from funding body to funding body. Serra has made no secret of the fact that his pairing of Casanova and Dracula in *Història de la meva mort* was partially inspired by his being granted some production money from a Romanian backer. Nonetheless, he returned from the southern slopes of the Carpathians with a film that has moved closer to actual storytelling than the gestural and peregrinational projects of his earlier films. With *Three Little Pigs* set to be screened in additional institutions this year (although the sheer length of the project has meant that raising funding for the translation of the subtitles alone hasn't been easy), Serra's films increasingly straddle two fields: the modernist, non-narrative treatment of textual material as art work and the pursuit of linear narrative as art-house feature film. I, for one, will be keeping a keen eye on the evolution of his work in both fields – assuming, of course, that he regards the preservation of such a distinction something worth sustaining. ♦

*Bert Rebhandl is a journalist, writer and translator who lives in Berlin, Germany. He co-founded and co-edits Cargo magazine.*

*Albert Serra is an artist and film director living in Barcelona, Spain. In 2012, he produced Three Little Pigs during DOCUMENTA(13) in Kassel, Germany, which was also shown in its entirety in 2013 as part of a retrospective of the artist's work at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, France. Història de la meva mort (Story of my Death) won the Golden Leopard at the 2013 Locarno International Film Festival and was part of the New Directors/ New Films Festival at MOMA, New York, USA, in March 2014.*

1  
*Three Little Pigs*,  
production still, 2012

2  
*El cant dels ocells*  
(Birdsong), production still,  
2008

3  
*Honor de cavalleria*  
(Honour of the Knights)  
production still,  
2006

4  
*Història de la meva mort*  
(Story of my Death),  
production still, 2013



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