

A portrait of Albert Serra, a man with shoulder-length brown hair and a mustache, wearing a light blue t-shirt and a dark, vertically striped jacket. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera against a dark blue background.

THE

ALBERT SERRA CONTINUES TO DEVELOP HIS PERSONAL

PRIMITIVE

CINEMA POVERA WITH *STORY OF MY DEATH*

MODERNIST

BY MANUEL YÁÑEZ-MURILLO



Story of My Death

WHAT DO DON QUIXOTE, THE THREE KINGS, CASANOVA, AND DRACULA have in common? For a start, they're all characters wandering through fiction and history. Secondly, all of them have been caught in the spider-web of Catalan director Albert Serra, Hispanic philology and comparative literature major and ravenous connoisseur of mythological figures, whose mission is as ambitious as it is stripped-down: the alchemical transformation of literary prose into cinematic poetry. Serra's art stems from the impulse to convert the psychological density of text into iconic images, and while dialogue has been progressively gaining ground in his work, his literary adaptations continue to position themselves on the frontier between "impure" art—from Bazin's definition—and a primal cinema haunted by an idea of purity's ties to the primitive. Comfortable in his role as enfant terrible, Serra has denounced the banalization of the mysterious in contemporary cinema, and to watch any of his films is to enter an arcane, almost mystical realm. For that reason, it seems reasonable to attempt to find the keys to the "Serra enigma"—current Spanish cinema's most provocative riddle.

THAT ENIGMA WAS UNVEILED TO the world at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival, when *Honor of the Knights*, the director's second feature, was screened in the Directors' Fortnight. Completely unknown to Spain's critics and film culture, Serra sprang forth brandishing a deep knowledge of art history and a desire to situate himself in cinema's vanguard. Serra's self-described "free and apocryphal adaptation" of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*—shot on Mini-DV with non-professional actors—revealed an alignment with Bresson's aesthetic, Pasolini's poetics of

myth and the body, and the spiritual realism of Rossellini's *The Flowers of St. Francis*.

Honor of the Knights is a minimalist interpretation of Cervantes' text dominated by three central motifs: the rough landscape of Serra's native Alt Empordà, in the far northeast of Catalunya; the crude gestures of his actors, tennis coach Lluís Carbó as Quixote and construction worker Lluís Serrat as Sancho Panza; and a few recurring phrases in Alt Empordà dialect. Serra partly reinvents the novel, keeping alive its spirit through the romantic sentiments of its protagonists: men possessed by a

bygone idealism based on the values and practice of knighthood and a faith in the purity of the spirit.

Serra's fascination with archaic figures—symbols of resistance in the face of a present that, to the filmmaker's eyes, is both chaotic and decadent—continued in *Birdsong* (08): a black-and-white HD retelling of the journey of the Three Kings in search of the newborn Messiah. Serra has explained that he took medieval painting and its two-dimensional figures as an aesthetic reference point for this project, borne out in the purposely minimalist characterizations of the nameless Magi as they wander across the screen. However, this depiction gains depth through the exuberant presences of the three protagonists—Carbó and Serrat once again, with the addition of the latter's father, Lluís Serrat Batlle. Recapturing the delicate burlesque spirit of his first film *Crespià, the Film Not the Village* (03), Serra turned the Three Kings into figures from Beckett's theater of the absurd, the roughness of amateur performances closer to theatrical declamation than film acting.

AT THIS POINT, WE SHOULD PAUSE to acknowledge an important pillar of the Serra enigma: the tenderness and bonhomie that radiate from these two films. Beyond the sophistication of his theoretical conceits, these films are dominated by an aura of innocence and cheerfulness, qualities embodied by the characters, in particular those played by Serrat, who functions in Serra's films much as Ninetto Davoli did in Pasolini's.

Happiness and beauty: two principles that shape the singular politics of Serra's cinematic universe. This is evident in an extract from the diary that the director kept during his participation in the 2012 DOCUMENTA in Kassel, where he filmed a 200-hour project called *The Three Little Pigs* (12), depicting three crucial moments in European history through Hitler's diaries, Goethe's writings, and interviews with R.W. Fassbinder. According to Serra, when asked by some German art students about the place of politics in his work, he responded: "If the final goal of every ruler is to guarantee the happiness of its citizens (Plato) and if beauty is the promise of happiness



Birdsong



Honor of the Knights

(Stendhal), in that case I am the most political artist of all.” This politics of well-being is made patently clear in *Crespià*, a succession of surrealist postcards of rural life that conflate Dalí’s imaginary Catalan traditions and the countercultural spirit, set to music by The Jam, Tom Jones, and Frank Sinatra. Pure juvenile exaltation, Serra’s debut film is at times joyful, at others simply ridiculous.

Despite the fact that Serra’s films reclaim the legacy of Romanesque art, he remains a 21st-century filmmaker clinging to dreams of modernity. This has enabled him to work outside the realm of cinema. For instance, Serra’s publicity campaign for his hometown soccer club, *Atlètic Club Banyoles* (07), merges the Liverpoolian soccer-crowd anthem “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” archival footage, photographs of Fassbinder and the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti, and intertitles modeled on those in Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.

In 2011, Serra embarked on two projects organized by Barcelona’s contemporary art museums. In *The Names of Christ* (11), a 14-episode, 193-minute Web series, Serra adapted a 16th-century text by Fray Luis de León, a monk and Spanish Renaissance writer. Constructed as a meta-fiction about the problems of financing and producing an undisclosed audiovisual project, the series plays with the contrast between an invocation of the transcendental power of art (the heavenly) and a satirical portrayal of the filmmaking process (the earthly). This conceptual collision allows Serra to make explicit his love of quotation, from a text by Thomas Carlyle about the fantastic

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nature of religious imagery, to a fragment from King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun*, to a sculpture by Antoni Tàpies that creates a dialogue between materialism and spirituality. On the other hand, in *The Lord Worked Wonders in Me* (11), Serra once again uses the shooting of an undefined project as a narrative MacGuffin—it turns out to be a “making-of” for a nonexistent movie—as he meditates on the spontaneous nature of his working methods.

S *tory of My Death*, WHICH WON THE Golden Leopard at last year’s Locarno Film Festival, suggests that Serra’s austere cinema has absorbed the impact of his museum works—it’s denser in dialogue and more engaged with a certain historical specificity. As such, the film’s eventual fictional encounter between Casanova and Dracula represents a key moment in European history: the transition from the Age of Enlightenment to that of Romanticism. Anticlerical, anti-monarchist, and admiring of Voltaire and Montaigne, Serra’s Casanova serves as a spokesperson for the dying 18th century: a man committed

to knowledge and a form of pleasure in which joy and decadence converge. Casanova’s expressive exuberance—embodied in the voice and gestures of Catalan poet Vicenç Altaió—lifts Serra’s cinema to new heights of structural complexity and philosophical density, expressed in a series of rambling yet lucid dialogues.

On the other hand, the character of Dracula—played by artist and “supernatural biker” Eliseu Huertas—is closer to the iconic, hieratic figures of Serra’s previous films, although he is a messenger of evil and darkness as opposed to virtue and innocence. In certain passages lit only by candlelight (like a lo-fi, digital *Barry Lyndon*), a literal darkness threatens to devour the screen. Dominated by symbolic images of death and transfiguration—the guts of an ox, shit turned into gold—the final act of *Story of My Death* conveys, like all of Serra’s work, a profound sense of estrangement, which in this case opens the film to a contemporary dimension. It’s hard *not* to see this story of decadence and collapse in terms of the socioeconomic and cultural crisis currently ravaging Southern Europe.

With each new cinematic and audiovisual riddle, Serra has added new layers of meaning. Who knows what other literary figures will fall prey to his vampiric vigor. In the meantime, the enigma remains gratifyingly unsolved. □

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