

Falling Between the Cracks

Abstract

This article draws attention to, and identifies, the principal landmarks of Barcelona included in *Bamboleho's* panoramic views. The meaning and history of these monuments add a further dimension to the film: the city's shifting character. How is our understanding of crucial moments for the protagonists informed by the urban backdrop?

Key Words

Barcelona
landmarks
gentrification
immigration
post-industrial
xarnego

If not in the same league of mythologization as Paris and Jerusalem, Barcelona is a storied city, the subject for Carlos Ruiz Zafón's runaway bestsellers and for Woody Allen's *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, to name just two among many more possible references. Pedro Almodóvar's vivid cinematography romanticised the Gothic Quarter and the Barceloneta in *All About My Mother*. These, and other images, draw tourists to the city in search of Gaudí, Miró, and a splash of Dalí's colourful surrealism. But in Barcelona, unlike Paris, they are not discombobulated tourists who are up in arms about how the destination fails to meet their expectations; instead, the locals are the ones impatient with inhabiting what seems increasingly to be a stage set. Jakob Isak Nielsen has written of how *Bamboleho* oscillates between paradisiacal inner space and grim urban reality (2004: 40): this feature of the film is also evocative of the localising and globalising narratives competing to determine the city's future, a congruence which forms the starting point for my analysis.

In 2017 residents staged protests against mass tourism, proclaiming 'Barcelona is not for sale' (Frañça 2017). Like aggrieved Venetians, some who live in Barcelona feel they are being squeezed out by speculators, leaving those who remain as unpaid

extras in a site dedicated to the economy of visitor experiences that, we are told, replaces the economy of situated things.

Made 15 years before protests against mass tourism spilled out onto the streets, *Bamboleho* anticipates frustrations over the growing gap between Barcelona as a place where people live, and Barcelona as a themed destination. My intention is to take up Prieto's invitation to orient ourselves through visual reconnaissance, as viewers atop a building with a commanding view of parts of Barcelona's skyline.

From the opening flashback sequence, we know this is going to be a Barcelona seen differently (Shots 1-29). Prieto shows us families living in *chabolas* (shanty towns) on the fringes of the city, a throwback to earlier times when Spain witnessed waves of migration from rural areas to the metropolises. In *Bamboleho*'s preliminary sequence Migue's mother is cradling a piglet alongside a child asleep on the back of a donkey (Shot 12). The animals reference the pull of the cities during Spain's rapid urbanisation, and the temporal proximity between an agrarian Spain and *Bamboleho*'s post-industrial landscape.

When Migue takes flight from the *chabolas* we see a landmark that pinpoints the location (Shot 26). The makeshift encampment skirts San Adrián de Besós, clearly identifiable from the three 200 metre tall towers of the power station. The modernist chimneys are a stark contrast with the stalagmitic spires of Gaudí's cathedral, the more usual landmark in panoramic views of Barcelona. Residents voted in 2008 for the chimneys to be preserved and the city's administration has since given the structures listed building status. In 2014 plans were mooted to turn the site into a development of luxury housing, and for the power station to be repurposed as a cultural centre (Lamelas 2014). Since the plant at San Adrián was already slated for closure in 2002, when *Bamboleho* was made, I would argue that Prieto's choice of this backdrop points us to Barcelona's shift from an industrial to a cultural economy.

Fast forward about 15 years and we are on a rooftop in the city centre, but this is only revealed as the camera pulls away from Migue and Mara and we see that the harbour side, conjured aurally by ships blasting fog horns, is an elongated poster

image of Hong Kong (Shot 30d). In the far right of the picture, the red bands around the two towers of the Shun Tak centre can just be made out. Why Hong Kong? Could it be to signal that the rooftops are in El Raval, a part of the city forming what used to be known as the Barrio Chino before being sanitised ahead of the 1992 summer Olympics in Barcelona? The end of the Barrio Chino was arguably the beginning of the process of aestheticization that now draws residents to protest in the streets.

The moment in the film where Mara and Migue draw closer together, includes the most pivotal line of dialogue. Migue says 'El amor no se puede contar', a phrase that means 'Love cannot be told' and also conveys the sense of 'Love cannot be quantified' (Shot 30c). Mara's counting picks up on the ambivalent meaning of *contar* while the first of the film's end credits negates Migue's assertion with its inclusion of an English subtitle: 'Bamboleho: a love story' (Shot 221). The string of cardinal numbers makes us aware not only of the transitory nature of intense experience but also of the effectiveness of the film's formal brevity in conveying ephemera. Enumeration also references ludicity and the fuzzy metrics marking the transition from being a child to a teen and an adult: steps begin to seem smaller, and distances, for a while, are hard to judge. Am I grown enough to jump across that space, a child will ask himself? And this is a question Migue has been asking since before he fled. We see him balancing like a tight rope walker as he carefully advances along the ridge of a wall (Shot 216).

His balancing act takes us to three more of the cultural landmarks picked out in *Bamboleho*. From the Raval rooftop we see the statuary likeness of Christopher Columbus atop his monument, pointing towards maritime voyages of discovery (Shot 90). His outbound gesture contrasts with Barcelona's becoming, since the early twentieth century, a city that first hosted incomers from other parts of Spain, and then refugees and economic migrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Completed in 1888, the seven foot likeness of Columbus has recently attracted controversy. In 2016, the far left CUP party called for the monument to be dismantled (Blanchar 2016).

Less political, but still controversial, was dressing Columbus in the Barcelona kit for a 2014 publicity stunt that brought the city's administration significant income. For Ahmed, too, wearing the uniform is a gesture of belonging (Shot 116). His donning of the Barcelona stripe is counterpoised with Migue's rejection of regional symbols. Catalan cuisine is distinctive in making liberal use of snails: this puts it closer to France than to the southern regions of Spain. It is just at this moment, where the two characters negotiate markers of identity, that Migue recalls the childhood injunction to consume snails: he links them in his conversation with Ahmed to an intense dislike of all things French (Shot 123). If Migue is a *xarnego* (a pejorative Catalan label for an internal immigrant), does this distaste signal a troublesome offset from the adoptive culture? On the other hand, snails, as natural historians have remarked, enjoy voluptuous, and seemingly amorous sexual congress making them a model for Mara and Migue's physical love (Tova Bailey 2010: 119-29).

While the three friends smoke pot we see one of the film's most arresting images: a big cat set against the Raval skyline (Shot 133). Alongside the feline face can be made out the cupola atop the Basilica of the Madonna of Mercy, built in 1888 by Joan Martorell. A statue made by Maximí Sala of the Virgin, and Patron of the city—she is said to have saved it from a plague of grasshoppers in 1637—crowns the dome and we can just make out her flowing robe. What cannot be seen is that she holds an infant precariously in her left hand. Perhaps this also prefigures Migue's perilous balancing act. The statue is a reminder of Spain's violent past. It was destroyed during the Civil War and was not restored until 1959.

Suspension above the city is also referenced when Prieto's composition includes in the distance a view of one of the three towers that hold aloft the aerial tramway connecting the port with Montjuic (Shot 122). The architectural features of the Jaume I station are further reminders of Barcelona's industrial past and of its achievements.

Free running across the rooftops of El Raval, Migue does not have the benefit of cables linking the stations between his leap of faith. His suspension conjures a city

on the brink of change (Shot 207). The sanitisation of the 1990s anticipated the property bubble of the 2000s, and then the post-industrial perplexity in the 2010s. The spatial leap points to temporal cusp and to *Bamboleho*'s capture of a city caught between gentrification and diversification. The contrast of seemingly enduring landmarks with the unknowability of Migue's fate unsettles the meanings of familiar landmarks. The city may look the same on the surface but is also disappearing under a blanket of speculative aesthetics. When Mara says she wants to be free, like a seagull, Migue's retort is 'Rubbish. Nobody is free' (Shot 170). The rejoinder also points back at a city being developed in the image of the capitalist fantasy of unrestricted self-realisation, a fantasy that leaves some to fall, for real, between the cracks.

[Main text: 1495 words]

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