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Review

Cine dentro del cine. 50 películas sobre el séptimo arte

Pablo Echart

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Pablo Echart goes as far back as the dawn of the 20th century to locate the origins of “cinema within cinema.” In two well-known primitive shorts such as *How it Feels to Be Run Over* (Cecil M. Hepworth, 1900) and *The Big Swallow* (James Williamson, 1901), the author identifies the first self-reflexive traces, the “moving image” showing its own devices and processes. As a starting point, the idea is most stimulating: even when cinema was still to be defined as an art, metacinema already existed. As Echart explains, both cinephiles and filmmakers have shared, since the movies were born, an enormous interest in representing cinema within cinema. A perennial trope –the author is reluctant to call it a genre– rich in examples. Even with the fifty (–one) films selected in the book, plus an alternative list of fifty in the appendices, most readers will find personal preferences omitted.

The relevance of “cinema within cinema” certainly justifies the inclusion of this volume in the *Filmografías esenciales* (Essential Filmographies) collection published by the UOC. A series of books that deal with genres, movements or transversal themes in cinema. The collection, now reaching 55 issues, has a fixed format: an introduction and fifty short comments, one for each chosen film.

Echart makes the most of this format. *Cine dentro del cine* is an excellent example of the virtues that the art of the film review can offer, when well exercised. How, in a thousand words or so, do we unfold ideas and trains of thought for the reader, knowing that we don't have the room to dwell enough on them? What can we afford to leave out? How do we balance between the consistency of our approach and the need to cover all the relevant issues? Or even, what is the criterion for something to be *relevant* in relation to a film?

In the book's reviews, we can tell the author has struggled with all these questions. It underlies the notion that what we read is a small part of what the author has seen, read and thought before putting it through the Ockham's razor of writing and editing. Even though the book imposes a clear thematic prism, Echart explores the films from different perspectives; perspectives that, although sometimes do not directly address their meta-cinematographic nature, are essential in order to contextualize it. In this sense, the author refrains from schematisms and lets each film determine the needs of its text. In some cases, the social or political context is more important, in others the production conditions, in others the director's career...

For example, on this last point, Echart writes about several filmmakers who have extensively practised meta-cinema, but of whom he only reviews one film even though he mentions the rest. In the case of Peter Bogdanovich, the chosen one is *The Last Picture Show* (1971). The author acknowledges that it is not the most obvious example of “cinema within cinema” in the American's filmography, but justifies his choice by means of a brilliant analysis based on the only two film quotations that Bogdanovich lets us see.

This analysis, which Echart concentrates in just two paragraphs, is an example of his propositional approach. That is, an ability to suggest ideas, leaving it to the reader to continue pulling on the thread, to the point that it can lead to think or rethink the whole

film. This is the greatest virtue that the review genre can offer, bringing together academic and divulgative insights whilst transmitting them from the nowadays so feared (in our academic environment, at least) cinephile passion. It is worth adding that, in these times of intellectual endogamy, papers inflation and other submissions to the “publish or perish” system, the academy needs this encounter more than ever.

Returning to the book, it is also worth mentioning the effort made to put together a diverse selection in terms of periods, nationalities and genres, combining expected metacinema classics such as *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, 1952) or *La nuit américaine* (François Truffaut, 1973) with more unknown titles, stimulating the desire to discover them. Echart announces in the prologue that the selection is limited to fiction films, with two exceptions. One is inescapable, *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s Kino-apparatom*, Dziga Vertov, 1929), the other is more personal for Echart, *The Search for Emak Bakia* (*Emak bakia baita*, Oskar Alegria, 2012). But the truth is that both films cannot be reduced to the category of “documentary” and that other fictions included, such as *Close-Up* (*Nema-ye Nazdik*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1990) or *After Life* (*Wandafuru raifu*, Hirokazu Koreeda, 1998) include a number of documentary traits. This opens up another stimulating train of thought: does “cinema within cinema” offer a wide way to make the boundaries between fiction and documentary irrelevant?

Finally, the introduction to the book proposes a categorisation of metacinema variants, that serves not only as a navigational guide, but also as a useful taxonomy to classify the different ways in which filmmakers have practised cinema within cinema. Thus, Echart proposes to distinguish between dramas about actors or directors and their off-camera lives, films in which cinephilia serves as a creative force, films about fictional shootings, films about real shootings or celebrity lives, autofictions or mirror-films (in this section, equally interesting sub-branches are proposed), games of permeability between life and cinema, and films that function as intertextual exercises. Thus, it enables a more structured reading of the book for those who want to delve deeper into the question of metacinema, while still serving as a resource for occasional consultation.