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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## The representation of childhood in two contemporary films: *Estiu 1993* and *Systemsprenger*.

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### Abstract

Childhood became a popular subject in many contemporary films, especially after the 1960s. In this presentation, we are interested in the representation of childhood in films directed by women, from the perspective of the narrative construction, while also considering the form in which the stories are developed with young female characters in the centre. We will discuss two films from different countries: *Estiu 1993* (Summer, 1993, 2017), by Clara Simón and *Systemsprenger* (System crasher, 2019), by Nora Fingschseid. We will analyse the narrative construction in which girl characters find their own mode of cinematic enunciation. Following this direction, we will also focus our attention on cinematic storytelling (Lury, 2010; Lebeau, 2008; Buckland, 2021), in order to analyse the narrative discourse and we will use references from social science (James, 2007; Qvortrup, 2008; Malone, Tesar & Arndt, 2020) to understand whether the filmmakers bring a new perspective to the cultural representation of childhood.

*Keywords: childhood, film studies, narrative structures, sociology*

### 1 Introduction. Childhood in films

Since the 1940s, there has been a revolution in the cinematographic approach focusing on the relationship between different generations and, in particular, on the representation of childhood. This involved a move away from conformist models, those that were based on the depiction of perfect children, without a great degree of complexity in terms of the nuances relating to this stage of life. In the Italian neorealist films, for example, we can notice various approaches in terms of style and different ways of representing reality, as many as the topics. On many occasions, children show courage, curiosity and will, which makes the representation of childhood and children in neorealist cinema a fascinating image. We see this perspective in films made by male directors such as Roberto Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (Rome, open city, 1944) and *Paisà* (Paisan, 1946), Vittorio de Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (Bicycle thieves, 1948), or Robert Bresson's famous film *Mouchette* (1967), Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (The 400 Blows, 1959), as well as Tarkovsky's *Ivanovo detstvo* (Ivan's Childhood 1962). In *Mouchette*, for instance, the characters are shown as being on the fringes of society in a style that is distinctly unsentimental. In this case, the main character is a young girl lacking in acting technique, exactly what Bresson was looking for. There were many such realistic approaches to childhood, specifically updated according to context, social conflicts and the director's perspective. In recent film productions, the emphasis is on affectivity in order to highlight children's feelings, the relations between the need for care and dependence on adults, but also on children's attitudes, concerning their ties to society and family. An interesting element is that the narrative about

childhood being linked to aspects from the autobiography of the filmmakers, thus the focus is on personal stories, a form of expression related to the personal memory. Therefore, I am also interested in the relationship between female directors and actresses, especially when the plot of the story is focused on the lives of little girls, since the adult perspective is much more conditioned by performativity than it is in the case of children. In the same vein, Stella Bruzzi analyses the figure of children in documentary films and makes an interesting statement that we would like to discuss in this article: "Adulthood and adult performances are far more readily and frequently performative than children's." (2006: 8)

The first film *Estiu* 1993, by Clara Simón, is about Frida, a 6-year-old girl who lost both her parents and thus has to spend the summer with her uncles and cousin. The film's script is based on the director's biographical experience. In the second, *Systemsprenger*, the plot develops around the idea of a system which fails to support a young girl in a complicated social situation. The story is about Benni, a 9-year-old girl who is left in the care of social workers, due to the precarious economic situation which prevents her mother from being able to raise her. These two young girl characters, Frida and Benni, challenge the limits of responsibility and make us wonder to what extent these representations help us think about childhood not as a stage of dependence and obedience, but rather one of care for and attention to children's feelings and needs. What is interesting is how these characters experience inequalities with their bodies, emotions and how they confront and subvert them. In this context, it is necessary to pay attention to the development of the screenplay in relation with the memory and experiences of the female directors while the acting is influenced by the girls.

Karen Lury reflects in her 2010 volume, *The child in film. Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales*, on the image of the child as otherness, different from that of the adult, in which children are actors who participate, react and act in a world ruled by adults. Children play complex roles even though they are not professional actors, and are often expected to do what adults want them to do. Lury is interested in showing that child-actors do not show their apparent otherness, but rather "the strangeness of the world in which they live in" (2010: 14). Vicky Lebeau uses the figure of the child to reflect on the form and meaning of cinema itself, renegotiating its role as the personification of life, death and sexuality by transforming its gaze into a recognizable cinematic motif: "The child's enraptured gaze at the screen has become a recognizable motif in cinema" (2008: 44). Lebeau examines childhood in cinema as manifestation of desires, expectations and anxieties of life in relation to sexuality, death, alterity and language. Lebeau's approach is to consider cinema as a technology at the service of the gaze, offering new ways of seeing and showing childhood as both subject and spectacle. Warren Buckland analyses if female writers and filmmakers can change the normative perspective through their works by paying a close attention to the writers and directors who create "new non patriarchal form of narrative" and "construct proactive female characters who challenge patriarchal values and create alternative structures" (2021: 65, 71). It is at this point that I would like to enrich the discussion by including the problematization of childhood from a sociological perspective. Allison James (2007: 264) argues that children generally tell us about their everyday experiences in the social world, and this might reveal hidden pain and humiliation experiences by many of them, which adults often dismiss as unimportant. Jens Qvortrup (2008) emphasizes that every childhood is a unique childhood, with its own particular reference points, which cannot be fully shared by the childhoods of others. I would add here that what makes every child's experience different depends on gender, social context and cultural representations. From a posthuman perspective, according to Malone, Tesar & Arndt (2020:38) "Children within a nature/culture binary are determined to be undisciplined, wild, primitive [...] while becoming adult means to be cultured, controlled and civilised. This is just as slaves, blacks, woman humans have also historically been positioned as less than human based on biological determinism". Reflecting on the idea of the binarity between children and adults, I will draw attention to the different way of representing girls beyond the gender stereotypes by these two filmmakers.

## 2 The reconstruction of memory through film

Clara Simón's film is based on her autobiographical story: the director lost both her parents because of HIV. Actually, her previous short film *Lipstick* (2013) also focusing on this perspective of loss and mourning, which is about two children who find their grandmother dead. This emotional suffering prompted her to share in an interview that she wanted to present her perspective of how children experience the loss of a loved person, a family member. It is important to mention here that the process of preparing this film, *Estiu 1993*, involved building a relationship between two young girls, Laia Artigas, who played the protagonist, Frida, and Paula Robles, as Ana, her adoptive sister, and the production team. The approach of the director in order to create trust and intimacy among the child-actors and the team is also very relevant:

When you direct, you have to maintain the right distance and forget the fact that it's your story. The script process was introspective, thinking about how I lived this period through stories and pictures. For the shoot, it felt like I had to put this personal process to one side and treat it like a story. I blocked my emotions somehow. People would be crying on set and I would just stay so focused! I had this internal fight all the time, trying to really achieve what I had in my mind, the exactitude of my memories. But this wasn't possible, because you have to make it with other people and other locations. I had to learn to look at what was in front of the camera, and trust that this was also telling the story. (2018)

Clara Simón admits that she used improvisation in most of the film scenes, while also working on the relationships between the actors portraying each member of the family in order to reach the expressiveness and form of interpretation she desired. As she acknowledges, consulting the family photographic archive, as well as discussions with friends and the remaining members of her family, she managed to restore at least part of her memory, which meant a direct source of inspiration to recreate locations and atmosphere.

Having had to write the story and think about it and stretch the memories and talk to people in my family... it made me reconnect again with the little girl I was and also to be able to see the story from other points of view, which is something I had never thought about. [...] When you know something very well or you have memories of it, all the things can be very concrete and very rich. You don't have to invent details, because you remember it or because they existed. The material of those memories seemed to me to have value. The problem was to know how to arrange it well so that it could be in the form of a film. The first version of the script was those memories one after the other without being very connected. (2017)

It is important to point out that Simón talks about this process of directing the film as different from what she had originally planned because when she had the camera in her hand, the original plan was discarded. She adopted the stance that "the camera will adapt to the girls and not the other way around"<sup>4</sup> (2018). Therefore, we notice that the way she was filming was to show the world from a child point of view, as if we were led by a child's perspective in this story. This form of recording the actions emphasises a horizontal perspective, which give us the feeling that we should take into account Frida's way of seeing the world. To do that, Carla Simón uses the long shots to create a domestic, intimate space between Frida and Ana, but also to captures the spontaneity of the girls.

The characterization of the protagonist is both direct and indirect, and her arc of transformation throughout the film is natural and touching. On the other hand, the film does not shy away from showing the hardest parts of the protagonist's life, such as the loss of her loved ones, and ensuing grief. This film does not idealize the children either, but it shows their moral perspective, especially in the scene where Frida abandons her cousin in the woods, or the scene where she remains indifferent to Ana being about to drown in the lake. These actions are shocking at first glance, but they become justifiable in the life of a child who needs love unconditionally. She sees in her cousin as a rival who is in the centre of attention, and Frida does not want to take the second place in her adoptive parents'

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<sup>4</sup> "la cámara se adaptará a las niñas, no que las niñas se adaptaran a la cámara" (translated by the author of the article)

lives. The photography and camera movements are subtle in order to show sensitivity and emotion. In such manner, the public can be aware of the fragility of the world from a child's perspective.

Mourning is an important element in the film, even if it is not directly spoken about, but through silences, touches, moments of lost glances, changing the subject, the public can comprehend the pain. The sudden loss of someone very close implies a profound suffering, no matter the age. In the case of this film, the loss has an important meaning, because the one who suffers this loss is the director herself. This is why I would like to link the approach to memory that we see in Clara Simón's discourse to the concept of "lieux de mémoire" that Pierre Nora uses:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. [...] Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond typing to the eternal present. (1989: 8)

It is therefore engaging to take as starting point for the analysis of the construction of the story structure from the biographical elements in order to reveal introspective experience and the pragmatically way of selecting the most important moments when constructing the plot. Those moments of choosing the information are important for the film narrative because the director deals with the memory of her childhood through the filter of the adult and the director at the same time.

### 3 Deconstructing the narrative film structure of childhood representation

A different approach to childhood is seen in the film directed by Nora Fingschheid. *Systemsprenge* is the first feature-length fiction film of the director, a film which shows the fragility of childhood in contemporary society and the inability of the flawed system to find solutions to the problems it creates. The harshness of the film does not leave anyone indifferent, since the drama of the little girl named Benni (Helena Zengeil) is felt vividly by viewers due to the way in which the film is written, edited and presented. The director shared in an interview that she got the idea for the story while filming a documentary about shelters for homeless women:

I found a real "dead-end" place of society. You don't want to end up there. Yet, a girl shows up. I was shocked and asked the social worker what a girl is doing here and she replied: "Oh, that's a system crasher. We can always take them in after their fourteenth birthday." That was the first time I heard that term. "System crasher? What's that?" She replied: "It means that no institution in the country dares to take her in." That was the moment I began developing the story again. (2019)

Within this context, scriptwriting is challenging, given that the emotional dimension and the representational complexity which are clues in the story structure. As we follow the story, the life of the little girl unravels between intense emotional outbreaks, acts of violence and moments of calm. These events in her life are presented to us from different points of view. We get to see them from Benni's perspective, as well as from that of her mother, Bianca (Lisa Hagmeister), the social workers, educators, doctors. They all have the opportunity to express their concerns, solutions or limitations. The camera shifts its attention without losing the foreground. And it plays with distances in order to get closer to Benni when she loses control, or to move further away until it shows her in the depths of her loneliness, with wide shots, perhaps trying to show us the only shelter she can find in this world.

From the very beginning, we are able to follow the story of Benni with all the imperfections and all her struggles. In the sense, the clichés are avoided, and her story is complex because it is difficult to find a clear-cut solution. More specifically, we can bring into discussion, the moral ambivalence, because every episode Benni goes through, in which we think she might have hope, is, in fact, hopeless, offering her no way out. Having this perspective, Fingscheidt tries to make adults aware of children like Benni. She confesses in an interview:

It's a fiction film: very well researched, but we made little exceptions here and there, and it's certainly not a documentary. Still, everything is based on real situations. Things happen, and if a child suddenly turns up in front of your door, asking to stay, what can you do? But of course, nobody wants

to talk about it, because it's a professional no-go. I just needed to enable people to understand why they give up at one point. (2019)

In the film the viewers can feel the confusion Benni experiences when navigating different homes, families, and social workers. Therefore, the strong point of the story is the way Benni's narrative is constructed, contrasting the violent behaviour of the little girl with the tender gestures and friendship she receives from different social workers. In addition, the little girl tells does not call anyone by their names, except those she manages to forge deep, authentic emotional connections with. In fact, Benni's relentless quest to get her mother back or to have a family is driven by the traumas she went through.

Every time her face is touched, the frame is coloured pink and the image explodes like a broken glass, silhouettes of past memories reappear and Benni's rage increases dramatically. Her paramount desire to get her mother back intensifies as she challenges the limits of the system, she attracts everybody's attention, because she feels disconnected from society. She cries out for a way out that does not come until it may be too late. The camera contributes to these encounters through the cinematic aesthetics of the close-up between the social worker and Benni, and the hand-held camera movements that fix in the viewer's mind a perspective that changes everything, a reunion in an unexpected place. Benni's angry outbursts also have their root in the violence she experienced in her dysfunctional family. Her mother's partner, Jens (Roland Bonjour) is violent towards her, but also towards the mother. Carolina Kasimierski emphasizes that:

[...] we can think that the violence Benni expresses is actually a request for help, a search for containment that she did not get at home, an attempt to make the environment accept her needs of dependence and her identifying demands, so that the connection she establishes with other authority figures can make amends for the damage she has suffered.<sup>5</sup> (2021)

When it comes to relating to other characters, the care she receives from the social workers to whom her wellbeing is entrusted by the system, prompts her to further express her emotional lack by demanding their friendship. At which point, the vulnerable is bluntly reminded that their interactions are part of their work responsibilities. The social workers use a warm, intimate form of closeness to establish a course of action. But Benni becomes attached to one of the educators, Micha (Albrecht Schuch), because she needs love and affection. One of the most impressive sequences is when Benni goes on a walk in the woods with her educator and she calls out for her mother - the moment when she realizes that she is abandoned - her voice is heard, but she does not get a response. By the time Beni arrives at Micha's house, she understands what is a family, the stability of a loving household which can both respond to her emotional needs, as well as provide her with guidance in navigating the system. The disappointment sets in when Micha tells her that he already has a family, thus shattering her dreams to belong once more.

Beni's moments of turmoil are constructed through disruptive imagery, culminating in a moment of high intensity. However, it is not only Beni who experiences them, but also those who participate in her recovery process, the social educators. Benni's mother says: "If even the professionals can't take care of Beni, how can I take care of her?". Despite all these ups and downs, in last sequence, Beni demonstrates emotional maturity and an understanding of her situation when she becomes offers her support Frau Bafne (Gabriela Maria Schmeide), who feels disappointed that she cannot do anything to change Beni's situation. The director does not lapse into drama or excess, but sticks to her chosen point of view, building the narrative and staging around the central character.

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<sup>5</sup> "podemos pensar que la violencia que Benni expresa es en realidad un pedido de auxilio, una búsqueda de contención que no obtuvo en su hogar, un intento de que el ambiente acepte sus necesidades de dependencia y sus demandas identificatorias, por lo que los vínculos que establece con otras figuras de autoridad pueden enmendar el daño sufrido." (translated by the author of the article)

## Conclusion

Both films depict young girl characters who experience grief and loss in different ways. In the end, they find ways to navigate social structures and contexts which are, from the beginning, marginalizing them, treating them as outcasts. These two girls, Frida and Benni are examples, which underline that there are multiple kinds of childhoods, as well as ways in which childhood can be understood without placing children into predefined, rigid categories. Whether Frida or Benni, these characters invite us to reflect on the fact that this time in one's of life is very complex, beyond binaries and clichés, and that we need to understand it through intimate, radical and touching stories.

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