



Albert Serra *Birdsong* 2008, introduction, courtesy Aesthetica Film Photograph: Martin Trill



Albert Serra *Story of My Death* 2013, introduction, courtesy Aesthetica Film © Sergio Azzurri

ALBERT SERRA: DIVINE VISIONARIES AND HOLY FOOLS

Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
11–20 March 2015

The first major survey in the UK of maverick filmmaker Albert Serra, a powerful and unique voice on the history of literature and art.

The season will launch with Serra's most recent film *Story of My Death* 2013; a baroque reflection on pleasure and desire that imagines a meeting between Casanova and Dracula. Earlier award-winning films range from the minimalist take on Don Quixote in *Honour of the Knights* 2006 to a reworking of the biblical parable of the Three Kings in *Birdsong* 2008. Unfolding in beautiful and often remote landscapes, these films mine history to create philosophical parables blending the mythical with the everyday.

Albert Serra will present a unique preview of his latest in-development project *Singularity*, commissioned by the Institut Ramon Llull for the Catalan participation at the Venice Biennale as a Collateral Event. The specially conceived event will explore Serra's ongoing collaboration with curator Chus Martínez with an exclusive presentation of his upcoming project and a performance by legendary musician Jordi Valls.

Serra's acclaimed feature films will be screened alongside rare shorts and elements from the monumental project *The Three Little Pigs*, created one hour per day throughout Documenta 13 and not shown in the UK before. The season will conclude with *The Lord Worked Wonders in Me* 2011, a making-of film about Serra's past and future films. Produced as a correspondence between Serra and Argentine director Lisandro Alonso, the film reunites the cast from *Honour of the Knights* for an anarchic visit to the legendary landscape of La Mancha in central Spain. Drawing together many themes from Serra's work, reflections on landscape, culture and history, the film is a highly original celebration of freedom, art and the pleasures of filmmaking.

Curated by George Clark and Andrea Lissoni

ALBERT SERRA: WE HAVE TO AVOID THE WORD CINEMA

On cinema

Change the word cinema, and it will change everything, slowly, but it will change. It's not easy, but I think it's not impossible. We have to be audacious. It's extraordinary and it's difficult, but not impossible. I see some open spaces.

Moving image, screen, whatever, never use cinema... And then you just pick up people who come from the cinema, because they are the more interesting. Pedro Costa, Apichatpong Weerasethakul... There are 25 people that are hundreds of times more interesting than all the video artists working nowadays.

It's not that cinema is dead, it's that we will not use the word anymore, it's another thing. We don't have to discuss about the death of cinema because we are not part of cinema anymore.

We have to avoid the word cinema. Change the word, never use cinema: people, rich people, when they hear cinema, they think about Alfred Hitchcock, about Rodolfo Valentino, Humphrey Bogart, they would never put money on that... We have to work just for the art world, I think. It's the future: Cinema is over... Stop cinema, the TVs will not finance anymore of that, that's sure, so what do you want us to do?... Give them cinema and give us art.

On art, film and literature

I really love art, and I follow it, but I'm only interested in the moving image. I don't know why because I really love the avant-garde of the beginning of the 20th century, surrealism for example... The most interesting things we see in the art world come from film.

It's the last experience of art, I think, nowadays. All the others are so trivial. Exhibitions are trivial, usually, not always, but they usually are trivial: the way they are shown, the way they are experienced, is a trivial thing... The art world is too fast, it's like our life, it's like fashion, every year, every summer, there is a new collection, and it's not serious. I mean, it's serious, but it's not challenging.

With film you have to be concentrated, you have to be there, you have to give everything. And when you finish this experience, you feel satisfied... You have to live it, you have to watch it, and you have to spend two hours, for me it's very beautiful because it approaches the experience of literature. It doesn't matter how rich you are, it doesn't matter how intelligent you are: to talk about a book, you have to read the book, you have to do the experience. You have to lose the time it requires to read the book. You cannot escape from that... For Pasolini, or authors from the past, literature was the most important background. Nowadays, for most of the filmmakers, the background is TV, visual art or moving image in itself, and for me this is not very rewarding. I quickly see everything, there is no mystery. But then some filmmakers have another background, and I am talking about filmmakers who are not classical, because usually the influence of literature goes to filmmakers that make classical narrative feature films, conventional. You need to find somebody that is avant-garde but also has this literature background... We don't find this nowadays!

On beauty and morality

[Carmelo Bene] is a refreshing influence, it's not the asphyxia of the visual. It's an asphyxia for filmmakers because you cannot fill a film with the visual, you need something else... It's like a lesson, every shot is like a lesson, a lesson of lightning, a lesson of colour, of

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composition. Ok, that lesson is good, but then what happens? ... When you know how to deal with the light, when you are talented with that, it's easy to make one shot, and then another one, and another one... All are beautiful, all are perfect, all are original. But then, what is inside, what's the literature of that?

It has to be narrative, it's the ambition of being narrative, you can talk about anything, and it's not just visual. Morality only arrives when there is time. And cinema gives you the time, it is moving images, fixed images will never have content, morality.

It's very difficult to find this balance, and I think the future of moving images, at least in the next years, will be this crossing point that comes from Jean-Luc Godard and Carmelo Bene.

Excerpts from a conversation with Andrea Lissori and George Clark, Monday 15 December 2014, London

Albert Serra: *Divine Visionaries and Holy Fools* is presented in collaboration with the Institut Ramon Llull, organiser of the Catalan participation at the Venice Biennale

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And Jordi Valls and the performers: Matt Atkinson, Andy Bolus, Steve Cammack, Sonia Dietrich, Rudolf Ebner, Alice Eldridge, Keira Fox, Ellen Freed, Michael Gilliam, Tim Goldie, Alan B. Jones, Thomas LaRoche, Rob Lewis, Chris Low, Nausicaä Chélie Martino, Joaquim Montessoris, Cécile Quillu, Kirsten Reynolds, Cristabel Riley, James Sherry, Gareth Turner, Zoi Valls, Jesse Webb, Nick Whalidon, Wajid Yaseen.



Albert Serra: Divine Visionaries and Holy Fools. © 2014, Institut Ramon Llull. All rights reserved.



Albert Serra *Cuba Libre* 2013, production: UFF, Courtesy Andragrau Films

traces, we can just fly with them and try to convert them (this is the subject of the film) into organic material. – Albert Serra, *Mousse*, October 2012

Cuba Libre 2013, a stand-alone film from *The Three Little Pigs* project in which a singer charms a crowd in an atmospheric nightclub. A homage to German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder and named after a cocktail ordered in his film *Beware of a Holy Whore* 1971.

THE LORD WORKED WONDERS IN ME

Friday 20 March 18.30–21.00

The ludic side of the way I work is hidden in my previous films because of their formalism, but it's an important element for me: it's why I decided to make cinema, for fun, to make a break with routine daily life, which is getting more mediocre all the time. Cinema was a way of escaping this. Cinema is a social art that creates a certain ambience; it's work but there's also the element of friendship and family – Albert Serra, *Sight and Sound*, February 2014.

THE LORD WORKED WONDERS IN ME / EL SENYOR HA FET EN MI MERAVELLES Spain 2011, video, colour, sound, 146 min

The Lord Worked Wonders in Me began as an attempt to rediscover the mythical landscapes of La Mancha from Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Together with the cast from *Honour of the*

Knights, Serra and his crew arrived to discover the landscapes no longer existed and so decided to film themselves. This unique project is part portrait of his collaborators and crew, part reflection on the changing landscapes of contemporary Europe.

UNTITLED (LETTER FOR SERRA) / SIN TÍTULO (CARTA PARA SERRA) 2011, colour, sound, 23 min

Untitled (Letter for Serra) 2011 was filmed in the province of La Pampa, Argentina. Both films were commissioned as part of a series of six filmed 'letters' between leading international filmmakers initiated by the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona and produced between 2005 and 2011.



Albert Serra *The Lord Worked Wonders in Me / El Senyor ha Fet en mi Meravelles* 2011, production: UFF, Courtesy Andragrau Films

Cover image: Albert Serra *Singularity* 2015, production: UFF, courtesy Andragrau Films

Back cover: Albert Serra *Honour of the Knights / Honor de cavallera* 2013, film still, courtesy Andragrau Films

Press image: Albert Serra *Singularity / Senyal d'unicitat* 2015, courtesy Andragrau Films © Albert Serra / Sundae



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Albert Serra: *Historia de la Meva Mort* / *Story of My Death* 2013, production still courtesy Andriusfilm Films. © Bego Artoos.

STORY OF MY DEATH

Wednesday 11 March 18.30–21.00

I understood the cross between Casanova and Dracula to be a cross between the sophistication of the Enlightenment and the dark and esoteric side of Romanticism.

– Albert Serra, *Film Comment*, March 2014

All movies should come to life only on the screen. Nothing of what we see should have happened in reality before. Each scene should be new, with new dialogues, new turning points. – Albert Serra, *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema*, 2014

STORY OF MY DEATH / HISTÒRIA DE LA MEVA MORT Spain, 2013 35mm, colour, sound, 148 min

Story of My Death is an exploration of pleasure and desire built around an imagined encounter between Casanova and Dracula. A baroque and sensual journey exploring the limits of pleasure and pain in the age of reason. A bejewelled Casanova, played with childish abandon by Vicenç Altaió, is a verbose connoisseur of food, sex and language who finds his counterpart in a mesmeric vampire played by Eliseu Huertas, a violent and mystical romantic.

Followed by a Q&A with Albert Serra

SINGULARITY

Friday 13 March 18.30–21.00

If today Raymond Williams were to decide on more entries for his celebrated text *Keywords* 1976, he surely would include 'Singularity'. The term refers to the moment when artificial intelligences will surpass human capacity and human control. In mathematics, singularity describes a point at which a given mathematical object is not defined or 'well-behaved', for example, infinite or not differentiable.

Albert Serra's cinema makes the statement that being aware of the world is not simply a result of the mind's existence, but rather it is the mind in action. To link cinema with the singularity condition means to foster belief in the notion that thought, will and imagination are not made of the same substance as the world, objects and things, but of images, feelings and ideas. The exhibition is a site that offers both the artist and the curator an opportunity to address this question: how does the cinema-machine create a mind? – Chus Martínez, February 2015

This special evening devised by Albert Serra will preview his in-development project *Singularity*, commissioned by the Institut Ramon Llull as the Catalan participation at the Venice Biennale as a Collateral Event, curated by Chus Martínez. A performance by the legendary Jordi Valls / Vagina Dentata Organ, designed with Serra, will cleanse the auditorium prior to the presentation of his films. Serra will discuss his work and collaborations with Martínez, exploring their various projects for MACBA, Documenta 13 and now *Singularity*. Serra will also present elements from his monumental project *The Three Little Pigs*, built around an imagined interaction between Goethe, Hitler and Fassbinder.



Albert Serra: *Honour of the Knights* / *Honor de Cavalleria* 2005, film still, courtesy Andriusfilm Films.

HONOUR OF THE KNIGHTS

Saturday 14 March 18.30–21.00

I decided to use *Don Quixote* so I could focus on atmosphere, on details, on things I love better than just showing the plot or trying to give information about the characters. With these characters you have more or less all the information and, well, then I can do whatever I want, I am free.

– Albert Serra, *Cinemascope*, September 2013

My attitude towards adaptation is always the same: love without respect.

– Albert Serra, *Mousse*, October 2012

HONOUR OF THE KNIGHTS / HONOR DE CAVALLERIA Spain 2005, 35mm, colour, sound, 95 min

Serra's masterful distillation of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is a mesmerising work conjured out of the raw landscapes and the nonprofessional cast. Enriched by Serra's fascination with the past, the film draws equally on myths and European art to vividly capture the hermetic world of the two wanderers. Filmed in long atmospheric takes that allow us to join Don Quixote and Sancho on their journey, coloured by their defiant nobility and wonder at the world.

Followed by a discussion with Albert Serra and Maria Delgado.

BIRDSONG

Sunday 15 March 17.00–19.00

[I]n the film there is humour but at the same time there is a seriousness. There are some classical, iconic religious images, especially in the shots of the Virgin Mary (Montse Triola) and Joseph (Mark Peranson), which I took quite seriously, but at the same time there are also profane shots. The risk of the film, what I love about it, is the mixture of these two atmospheres.

– Albert Serra, *Senses of Cinema*, April 2009

BIRDSONG / EL CANT DELS OCELLS Spain 2008, 35mm, black and white, sound, 98 min

Albert Serra's *Birdsong* is one of his most visually striking films. Shot in luminous black and white, it is an elemental epic that deftly blends rustic authenticity with humour in the retelling of the biblical legend of The Three Kings. Serra focuses on the paradoxical moments before the birth of Christianity, a time when the Kings are just three men looking for something to follow. Drawing on the legacy of filmmakers such as Carl Theodor Dreyer, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Luis Buñuel, Serra films in masterful long takes in the remarkable otherworldly landscapes of the Canary Islands and Iceland, balancing their majesty with the bodies and material humour of the wandering kings.

CUBA LIBRE Spain 2013, video, colour, sound, 18 min

I like to think it is the other side of the coin of (Hans-Jürgen) Syberberg's film on Hitler (*Hitler: A Film from Germany* 1977). We both look at traces of history as history itself. For me as for Syberberg, these traces are not transparent, they are opaque. They cannot lead you to another place. So we focus on that, on the 'shapes'. We cannot go further through these