

DIALOGUE

**“WE ARE PAYING
TRIBUTE TO YOU”**

Interview with

BELÉN FUNES

BELÉN FUNES

“WE’RE PAYING TRIBUTE TO YOU”*

SHAILA GARCÍA CATALÁN
AARÓN RODRÍGUEZ SERRANO

Her Twitter profile banner greets you with the boys from Louis Malle’s *Au revoir les enfants* [Goodbye, Children] (1987) looking off frame, along with a photo booth picture from the 1990s of a teenage Belén Funes with adorable shadows under her eyes, hoop earrings, and a high ponytail, staring straight into the camera with an expression of startling self-assurance and conviction. But the most striking feature of this shot is her mouth, which is firmly closed, discreetly holding back a grimace, a smile, a laugh, or a word. This picture, the kind you would normally take in a hurry and without great results for your passport photo or student card, continues to be a strong and intense representation of the Belén Funes we know today. The screenwriter and director cut her teeth on film shoots, experiencing first-hand the emergence of what scholars like Arnau Vilaró (2021) describe as “a new Barcelona school”. Funes was third assistant director to Mar Coll on *Three Days with the Family* (*Tres dies amb la família*, 2009), a film considered to have spearheaded this new wave of female filmmakers. She subsequently worked on Elena Trapé’s crew on *Blog* (2010) and Nely Reguera’s on *María y los demás* (2016). She was also assistant director for Jaume Balagueró’s *Sleep Tight* (*Mientras duermes*, 2011), Paco Plaza’s *Rec 3* (2012) and three films by Isabel Coixet: *Yesterday Never Ends* (*Ayer no termina*

nunca, 2013), *Endless Night* (2015), and *The Bookshop* (2017). Coixet recognised her talent and backed the production of her first short films, *Sara a la fuga* [*Sara on the Run*] (2015) and *La inútil* [*The Useless*] (2016), through her studio, Wasabi Films. A decade after the foundational moment of working on the emblematic *Three Days with the Family*, Funes released *A Thief’s Daughter* (*La hija de un ladrón*, 2019), for which she won the 2020 Goya award for Best New Director, presented to her at the ceremony by Carla Simón and Arantxa Echevarría. Before winning the award, Echevarría had given Funes an amulet in recognition of the fact that she was the only woman nominated for a director’s award that year.

Belén Funes finds writing something of a painful process, but the script she co-wrote with Marçal Cebrian for *A Thief’s Daughter* won a Gaudí Award. She looks at society through a handheld camera that follows the tremors of the human body. Her films latch onto female protagonists who know what it means to be stuck in a rut; they carry wounds but are not fragile. She is never condescending. She needs to learn and to listen, but she never forces anyone to speak. The camera waits for their outbursts, but never provokes them, respecting what is left unsaid. Her characters are alone, somewhat bewildered, hoping or in a hurry, but never with time to think.



Belén during the interview

They can only keep going, move on, and endure the harshness of the moment. They never allow themselves to fall. Her work captures innocence lost, and precarity on social, emotional and subjective levels. Her films are about faces and institutions, processes, protocols, passageways, living spaces (with no home) and journeys (with no way out). Her enunciative voice underpins an emotional ambivalence that cannot be resolved: her characters want to escape from their families, and yet at the same time they refuse to stop believing in the promise of the family bond. Every shot is a work of subtlety: there is rage, silence, sometimes trap music, but it is never overstated, underscored or obvious; instead, there are watery eyes, reactions, and hints pointing to something outside the frame. And there are always details hidden in corners, serving to construct the real.

The first shot in Belén Funes's filmography is of a *Sara* escaping from an institution, while the last (so far) is another *Sara* standing in court. We talk to her about the repetition—the creative thread that runs through all her work—and about the invention—and the burden of being a *promising* Spanish filmmaker. We meet her online on a cold but sunny day in Barcelona, which takes us from that photo booth picture to a lockdown aesthetic characterised by an intense ray of sunlight lining her face while she offers us the most precious gift: time taken out to talk to us. ■

Do you feel that you are part of a generation? We're taking it for granted that there is a generation of female directors but we don't know what it looks like from the inside. Do you consider yourself to be part of a movement, or are you an autonomous creator?

I totally feel that I'm part of a group. I don't know if it's a generation because I think generations are something that are talked about after the fact. It may be too current and too soon to speak of a generation. What I do feel a part of is a group of friends. I think that is the change that we've been able to introduce. All those years of solitude, of women creating on their own because they didn't have a network of contacts, those years are over. Suddenly, a moment of solidarity has begun. Many of the female filmmakers I admire are my mentors and certainly their names could be placed under that heading of a *generation of female directors*: Carla Simón with *Summer 1993* (*Estiu 1993*, 2017), Elena Martín with *Júliat* (2017), Clara Roquet with *Libertad* (2021), and Celia Rico with *Journey to a Mother's Room* (*Viaje al cuarto de una madre*, 2018). For me, these are my most immediate mentor. It's something I am very grateful for and I think it's very important that your mentor shouldn't be someone on the other side of the ocean. It should be someone you can call up on the phone and arrange to meet for coffee so that you can explain to them that you've got problems with a script, or that you're not getting any support to shoot a film and to work out what can be done. I feel that I'm part of a very *powerful*, very interesting group. But I think of them as my friends.

There is a lot of talk about the question of second and third films, about how you will consolidate your work, and what will happen there. Is that something you talk about with other female directors? Is how to keep moving forward and lay-

ing the foundations a concern that exists in your group of creators?

I think we're all working on our second films. Carla (Simón) just finished filming *Alcarrás* (2022), Nelly Reguera just finished filming *El nieto* (2022), Elena Martín is working on her second film, and I'm writing my second film. We're all in this process and I think it's something that concerns us because there was one thing that obsessed us when people talked about this generation of female filmmakers and it was that we didn't want it to turn into a fad; we wanted it to turn into a reality. We wanted to make movies. With your first film you always run the risk that it will stop there, with one film that you made one day. And that's something that we wouldn't want to happen. There's another important issue, apart from the career path, which is the pressure we feel on us. For better or worse we've all made films that have been important or have received support from critics and audiences. They are films that haven't gone unnoticed, that have had a certain degree of attention in the media. And you wonder whether this might never happen again, whether you'll make another film that will make an impact, whether the next film will turn out well or not. That pressure is something I think unites us; we've been able to share it, and, like all fears, when pressure is shared it is neutralised. We know it exists, we have it hanging over our heads, and we try to deal with it every day.

Is the challenge of making a second film harder than making the first?

When you create your first work nobody is expecting anything of you; it's just you at home, writing a film, making it. What really saddens me is that it's very hard to recapture that feeling again. Everybody is waiting to see what story you have to tell now. The other day I read an interview with Lucrecia Martel, an Argentine filmmaker that I admire a lot, who directed *La ciénaga* [The Swamp] (2001), *The Headless Woman* (La mujer sin cabeza, 2008), and *Zama* (2017). She said it was strange that people

should be expected to have a story to tell every year and I totally agree with that. To have something to tell and to find what it is you want to tell people in a film is complicated; it takes time, maybe more than a year. In a way, when you tackle your second film, the audience has already seen your first film and there is an expectation, however small it might be. There's an added pressure.

In an interview with Jara Yáñez you said that you realised that Sara, the woman in your first short film, was very probably the girl in your first feature film. It seems as if you're tracking down this Sara in your writing.

It's curious, because you carry characters around the same way you carry obsessions around. I realised afterwards that I was always working on the same thing. My partner is a screenwriter—he was the screenwriter for *A Thief's Daughter*—and we write together. One day I said to him: "Marçal [Cebrian], we're making a very different film," and he laughed and said no, that we weren't making a film that was very different from what I'd done before [laughs], but that there wasn't anything wrong with not being versatile. Versatility doesn't interest me. Directors don't have to be versatile; they have to be good. But I think that deep down we carry around obsessions, characters, settings, contexts, themes... I'm really interested in how individuals relate to the system and I've realised that my next film will come back to this theme again.

You began your filmography with *Sara a la fuga* (2015), about a girl escaping from an institution. And she escapes out a window... (Figure 1)

Now that you say it I think you're right, but at the time it was irrational. I did it because I thought the film should start with someone climbing out a window. But you have analysed it, you've taken all this and constructed a story and it seems to me to be much more fascinating and interesting.

We get the impression that for the first time, a generation (our generation) is being discussed through a portrait of an individual, a family and a society. Do you all have that impression of being voices for these people on the other side, giving them tools so they can think about their history?

I don't know if we're giving you tools, but what I do know is that we're paying tribute to you. For me that's the most important thing. Lately, I've had doubts about the transformative power of cinema. I used to be very sure of it. Not now. But I do think we make films with very little money and in very precarious conditions but that they're able to pay tribute the people on the other side. I think there is a dialogue going on. I feel that we're really obsessed with reality, which perhaps is something that not all female filmmakers want to do. We like to portray what is going on around us. And I feel that when you talk about what you know, the films take on a much more universal dimension because they are full of details. For example, if you analyse *Summer 1993*, it's a film of details, a story that reaches you because it's true and because it's made with the heart and with the gut. I feel that we're able to communicate with people who perhaps, at a given point, haven't found any films that they can really hold onto. This is really important, finding films that you can cling to and say: "this is something true, there is something valuable here and I want to keep this."

It is nice to see how you use your friends' films as examples rather than your own.

I'm surrounded by very talented women whose work is featured in a multitude of festivals, in scriptwriting workshops ... It makes me tremendously happy.

Can you tell us about how you all work in the scriptwriting workshops?



Figure 1. The opening shot in the short film *Sara a la fuga* by Belén Funés (2015)

They're script consulting sessions while you're writing a project. You apply and if you're lucky they select you, advise you, go over your writing and help you with the script development process. For example, TorinoFilmLab (TFL) and Laboratorio de Guiones del Mediterráneo are European initiatives, where you apply with what you're working on at the time: a treatment, a synopsis, whatever. You send your previous work, and if you're lucky they choose you. It's a lovely place to talk about your film and to continue writing it.

And do you create together? Is there a network of dialogue between your projects?

Yes. We send each other the scripts. When one of us is doing a casting call for a film, we talk about what each actor inspires in us, what they could bring to each character. And we talk about salaries, which is very important. There's a network. It's really lovely because it didn't exist before. When I met Josefina Molina—who directed *Melodrama infernal* [Infernal Melodrama] (1969), *Vera, un cuento cruel* [Vera, a Cruel Story] (1973), and *Esquilache* (1989)—at the International Film Week in Valladolid (SEMINCI) a few years ago, she told me: "You girls make me envious to see you here together, with your network. I wish we'd had that." Pioneering directors like her,



Figure 2. Plaits to disguise the wounds in *Sara a la fuga* and in *A Thief's Daughter*

or Cecilia Bartolomé, who made *Margarita y el lobo* [Margarita and the Wolf] (1969), *Vámonos, Bárbara* [Let's Go, Barbara, 1978), and *Lejos de África* [Far from Africa] (1996), were very much alone.

Are you all in contact with other regions of Spain? Is there any kind of European network?

I feel that I have a very intense relationship with Catalan filmmakers because I see them, because I have them nearby. But one thing that has happened to me doing those script workshops, for example, is that you'll meet an Italian filmmaker who

is trying to get her film off the ground, who gives you her script, and you discuss it, and so the network keeps growing. I have contact with female filmmakers in Galicia, who are mainly involved in making documentaries. But the thing is that there are a lot of us in Catalonia; I don't know why that has happened. I saw Ainhoa Rodríguez's *Mighty Flash* (Destello Bravio, 2021) and it seemed to me to be a film that is right off the map. Rodríguez is a filmmaker with Extremaduran roots who has managed to make a great film. She has received great reviews and I'm keen to learn from her.

Hairstyling seems to be a visual motif that doesn't point directly at a meaning but is there, operating on a subtle level. Brushing hair is present in *The Spirit of the Beehive* (El espíritu de la colmena, Victor Erice, 1973), and in *Cría cuervos* (Carlos Saura, 1976). It is present in *The Innocence* (La innocència, Lucía Alemany, 2019), and in *Schoolgirls* (Las niñas, Pilar Palomero, 2020). And plaits are in your filmography (Figure 2).

It is true that there is something about brushing your hair, about doing plaits, that for me inevitably makes me feel that this is a character who is trying to pretend that things are not as bad as they really are. Plaits convey an idea of wanting to pretend, to tell people that everything is so good that she has had time to plait her hair because it's completely normal and her life is fine. The treatment of hair in *A Thief's Daughter* is crucial. We burn Greta [Fernández]'s hair! Apart from the aesthetic aspect, the bleaching was a very powerful tool to distance the character from Greta Fernández, and so that we were clear that we weren't filming Greta. Because she has nothing to do with Sara: the two of them have lived completely different lives. She probably liked that blonde hair too, to look different, like *someone else* (Figure 3). But it is true that as a character, her hair was the way that Sara had of telling the world: "here I am and I'm fine; everything is working out and everything will work out." That plait is a struggle to be normal.

She plaits her hair when she is going to meet her father.

Of course, to show him that she's fine, and how well everything is going. For example, when she goes to see Dani at the bus station, she does up her hair with some hairpins and puts on eyeliner (Figure 4). Because she is still a twenty-two year-old girl. She had it in her head the whole time: she was a twenty-two year-old girl. A kid with a kid.

You talk about the desire to be normal. Is this a key quality of your characters?

For me it's very important because sometimes I see films where the characters have longings that I can't understand and that disconnects me a little from the story. They have desires that make no sense to me. When I decided to write the film it was very important to understand everything that was happening to Sara on a very deep level. I wanted to know exactly what it was that was happening to her. In the end we found that what the character wanted was a normal life, to be a woman with a job, with a house, with a family. What she was asking for, her demand, was for a middle-class life, but the middle class has become a very difficult place to get into. Here desire was to be a normal person. There are a lot of homages, but for me there's one film that is especially



Figure 3. The bleach in her hair constructed a distance between Greta Fernández and Sara

important and that is *Rosetta* by the Dardenne brothers (1999). *Rosetta* is lying in bed after dinner with a friend and is repeating over and over: "My name is Rosetta, I've got a friend, I'm a normal person" (Figure 5). They seemed to me to be really endearing characters who want something that is so simple but at the same time so difficult.

Figure 4. Hair done up for Dani in *A Thief's Daughter*



How do you approach a film shoot?

When we write a script, we try to test it out in reality, before filming. If there is a girl who has to work cleaning car parks, before filming we find out who cleans car parks. In fact, the women who appear in the opening sequences of *A Thief's Daughter* are real cleaners (Figure 6). What we try to do is invent a story and camouflage it in reality. We contact the cleaners, we find out where they are, we tell them what we want to do and they decide whether



Figure 5. The desire to be normal. In *Rosetta* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne, 1999), the protagonist tells herself: “Your name is Rosetta. My name is Rosetta. You found a job. I found a job. You’ve got a friend. I’ve got a friend. You have a normal life. I have a normal life. You won’t fall in the rut. I won’t fall in the rut. Good night. Good night.” At the end of *A Thief’s Daughter* the judge asks Sara: “What is your brother like?” With tears in her eyes she replies: “Well, he’s a normal person, like me”

they want to be in the film or not. And we camouflage the actors inside this group of cleaners. We play dress-up. Obviously, when people in Spain see the film they see Greta Fernández and they know she’s an actor, but it’s fascinating to see what happens outside Spain because they don’t know her so well. In one talk someone asked me how we had found this cleaner to play the part, and I thought: “Well, we must have got something right!”

Returning to the question, what we do every day on the film shoot, depending on what we’re going to film, we have a basic storyboard, an idea for the camera that we discuss beforehand with the cinematographer. There’s one sequence in particular where someone enters an apartment. The idea of the sequence is that someone is invading the space. We positioned the actors, we asked them to move around the space, and based on that we worked out the camera positions. I don’t work with a very rigid storyboard, especially because in *A Thief’s Daughter* more than half of the cast were not professional actors. It seemed ridiculous for me to

tell them: “this is your mark and you have to stand here because I have this rigid plan.” What we did try to do was to play with the confusion. The sequences come out of that mould. I try not to go in with a very fixed idea; I just have an idea for the sequence and I try to place the camera where I think it will work best.

And how do you approach directing the actors?
Eduard [Fernández] always said to me: “you don’t want us to look like actors, right?” That’s what I

Figure 6. Much of the cast of *A Thief’s Daughter* is made up of non-professional actors



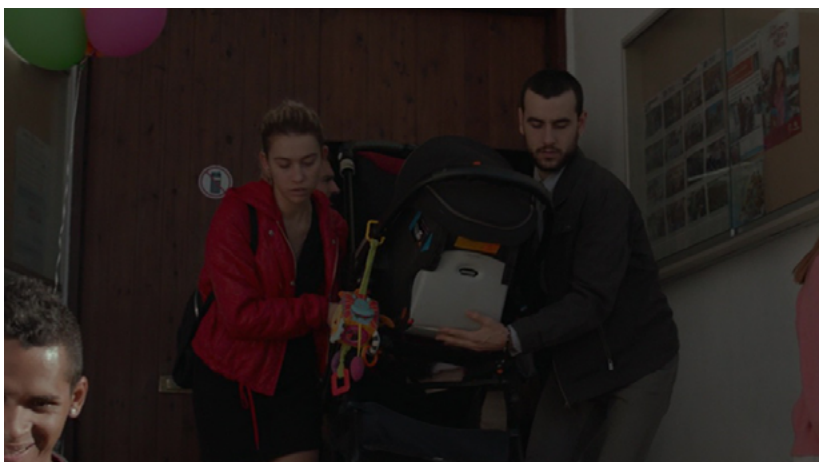


Figure 7. *A Thief's Daughter*

wanted. And when we screened the film outside Spain it was funny because they said that the protagonists looked similar. We would tell them that Eduard and Greta are father and daughter and they would be surprised. It's very different to watch the film without knowing who those two are. Greta

saved my life. She's such an incredible actor that she could take this character who is nothing like her and transform her into something you can really feel.

Sara (Greta Fernández) is always carrying something; every step she takes seems hard for her.

In pre-production there is always a moment when it seems like the film will never get done because everything is a problem. We started asking ourselves what if she didn't have a baby, because having a baby on a film set is a lot of trouble. I was so stressed that I asked myself whether the story would be the same if we took out the baby, but I realised it wouldn't. A shot of a woman carrying a child, bags and a trolley (Figure 7) is not the same as a woman who isn't carrying anything.

And there is a lot of walking around in *A Thief's Daughter*.

Yes, it's true. And a lot of people from Barcelona ask me where we filmed it, and we filmed it in Barcelona! That made us reflect on how unfamiliar cities can be to the people who live in them.

What bothers you about discussions of women's cinema? What do you hate to be asked in interviews? Or what would you ask of critics?

I would love it if critics would stop asking me what it means to be a woman and instead ask me about my film. It's

my personal war. With the best of intentions sometimes we run the risk of talking constantly about how my greatest achievement is being a woman when it's something that doesn't even have to do with me. I would like the chance to answer questions like the ones you've asked me:

how I work on the film set, for example. I want to talk about this because my male counterparts talk about how they make their films, but I only talk about what it means to be a woman. And it's a question that is always asked with good intentions. Women directors have different opinions on this. For example, Clara Roquet once said in an interview that she would never get tired of talking about what it means to be a woman until it is normalised. And she's right, too. It's something we need to normalise, because we're going to talk about it, we're going to say it, so that it's present in the media. But I miss being able to talk about the film's formal approach, among other things.

What limits do you find in your filmmaking? What is a barrier for you?

I find it really hard to get out of my comfort zone. I can't write a film that is totally different from everything I've done just because I'm interested in it. It raises doubts for me, I go round in circles, what am I doing telling this story, what do I have to contribute to a film like this. That's why I don't see versatility as so important. I've found that most filmmakers I like have made the same film over and over. *Éric Rohmer* made the same film thirteen times and I find every one of them enthralling. There are days when I think I wish I was more daring.

Some directors—Guillermo del Toro, for example—say that in reality they're always making the same film, as if they were skirting around something that pushes them away.

It's highly probable that a filmmaker could be a person who constantly skirts around the same idea. I mentioned *Rohmer* because he's very obvious, but *Cassavetes*, the *Dardenne* brothers, and *Ken Loach*, for example, have obsessions and make similar films. Even in the films of *Andrea Arnold* there's a map of places that are very close to each other. It's something that obsesses me every time I write a new film: I believe it's going to work really well and I only think I mustn't get scared on the

day of filming, that I have to go onto the set and believe that it will work out well. And if it doesn't, it won't matter because I will have done it.

What would you say to a student who wants to become a filmmaker?

Anyone in their first year at university, or their second year... who wants to make a film, I would say that I want to see it, I want to see the story they have to tell, because I'm sure it's going to be fantastic. That they should try to learn with humility. You learn how to make films not just by directing; there are a lot of ways to approach it that I think are also really nice, such as being in or working on films by your fellow students to learn things that you want to repeat or that you would never do. They should create a work team and it should serve for everyone to learn together. And very importantly, they should celebrate the successes of their friends. They're not our enemies, they're our friends, and we should be happy when good things happen to them. Filmmaking is a very competitive industry and it has been put in our heads that we have to compete against each other, but in reality there is room for everyone.

NOTES

* This interview was conducted as part of the research project *Emerging Female Voices in 21st Century Spanish Cinema: Intimate Writing* [VOZ-ES-FEMME] (Code UJI-A2021-12), under the direction of *Shaila García Catalán*, funded by *Universitat Jaume I* through its competitive call for research projects for the period 2022-2024. The interview was transcribed by *Jordi Montañana Velilla*, a PhD student and audiovisual technician at *UJI's LabCom*.

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“WE ARE PAYING TRIBUTE TO YOU”. DIALOGUE WITH BELÉN FUNES

Abstract

Interview with Belén Funes, filmmaker. Her first feature film, *A Thief's Daughter* (La hija de un ladrón, 2019), won the Goya Award for Best New Director.

Key words

Filmmaker; Female director; Barcelona School; New director.

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Article reference

García Catalán S., Rodríguez Serrano, A. (2022). “We Are Paying Tribute to You”. *Dialogue with Belén Funes*. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 33, 131-140.

«OS ESTAMOS SALUDANDO». DIÁLOGO CON BELÉN FUNES

Resumen

Entrevista a Belén Funes, cineasta. Con su primer largometraje, *La hija de un ladrón* (2019), ganó el Goya a Mejor Dirección Novel.

Palabras clave

Cineasta; Directora; Escuela de Barcelona; Dirección novel.

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Referencia de este artículo

García Catalán S., Rodríguez Serrano, A. (2022). «Os estamos saludando». *Diálogo con Belén Funes*. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 33, 131-140.

Edita / Published by



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ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com
