

Barcelona: local mobilisation or global desperation?

Charlotte Vorms

Reviewed: *Squat. La ville est à nous*, a film by Christophe Coello, 1 h 34 min, produced by Annie Gonzalez, C-P Productions, distributed by Parasite Distribution, 2011.

What is the history behind today's protest movements involving the occupation of urban public spaces? In the film Squat. La ville est à nous, Charlotte Vorms finds a secular anarchist heritage combined with a tradition of Spanish urban struggles of the type that have fuelled the 15-M Movement¹ in Barcelona.

Close-up on the young people, harnessed, scaling the facade of a building and entering by a window: this is the opening sequence to *Squat. La ville est à nous*. (“Squat. The City is Ours.”). These are not members of a mountaineering club, nor are they firemen or construction workers; these are members of *Miles de Viviendas* (literally “Thousands of Dwellings”), a Barcelona-based collective of squatters whose know-how and organisation leaves the viewer astounded. They are in contact with various politically engaged professional collectives, with whom they share their skills. Squatting is no easy endeavour – as the start of the film clearly shows – and although these young Barcelonans have deliberately chosen to live on the margins of the accepted norms of the society in which they have grown up, it is a positive choice that requires a considerable and permanent investment on their part. Although they refuse to enter into paid employment, as one of the squatters declares in a particular scene, they nevertheless continue to work, and to work hard.

Living on the margins: a political commitment?

Like *En Construcción*, released in 2001, the film begins as a documentary on the unauthorised renovation of the old neighbourhoods of Barcelona, this time seen through the actions of a militant collective. But, very quickly, the film surprises the viewer by showing its protagonists invading the head office of an arms manufacturer and stripping the building of its IT equipment after a public reading of the charges against the company. We then see them occupy what seems to be a bank, in the middle of a May Day march, and then partially removed by police armed with batons. *Miles de Viviendas*, and more particularly around 10 of its members, are the real subject of this film which, we gradually discover, is shot “from the inside” by a director who over a five-year period shared the day-to-day life and commitment of its characters. Christophe Coello – who, together with Pierre Carles and Stéphane Goxe, co-directed two documentaries on our relationship with work (*Attention danger travail* in 2003 and *Volem rien foutre al país* in 2007) – is something of a specialist in filming social movements, in Latin America and in Europe. In *Squat*, he films the actions,

¹ See: Adrián Pina Fernández, “La toma de la Puerta del Sol en Madrid: crónica del movimiento social 15-M”, *Metropolitiques*, 15 June 2011. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/La-toma-de-la-Puerta-del-Sol-en.html>.

discussions and day-to-day life of his comrades, typically with the camera handheld, without any intervention as a director, except as a participant in the scene being filmed. Indeed, he is addressed directly on a number of occasions by members of the group, as well as by some of their targets.

Squat therefore documents the internal life of *Miles de Viviendas*, a small group of people who are engaged in a combat, the universality and radicalness of which gradually become apparent to the viewer. This combat is also a lifestyle choice, just as radical, as it involves sharing a communal existence on the margins of social norms. This way of life is, by definition, always a minority choice; it cannot result in a project that can be generalised to the whole of society. The film also shows the reality of such a way of life, which the viewer assumes must be entered into for better and for worse, the better without a shadow of a doubt being the shared joy of successful collective action. The scenes of buildings being appropriated – public events that are both spectacular and celebratory – are intensely jubilant moments for both the audience on screen and the audience in the cinema. But what is even rarer for a documentary on a militant group is the fact that the film also shows the practical day-to-day organisation, such as obtaining provisions in the form of leftovers from markets. The film also evokes the theft of books or materials as means of supplying a free clothes shop, for which a group member displays a bag made specially. It invites the viewer to observe the formal debates and private conversations between members of the group, going as far as to reveal, in a seemingly light-hearted scene that is in fact quite poignant, certain aspects of the public and private lives of these people who have chosen a radically collectivist way of life within a highly individualist society. Little by little, diverse and endearing characters emerge from the group, especially women – one of the specificities of *Miles de Viviendas* is precisely the strong presence of women, an unusual feature of squats.

Barcelona in the 2000s: renewal vs eviction

As *Miles de Viviendas* was set up in the context of the last property boom, one of its key areas of action is denouncing property speculation and the scandals arising from the urban renewal of old neighbourhoods that had suddenly become highly profitable. The film begins in El Poblenou, a former industrial district fronting the sea in the east of the city, developed in the 19th century and today in the process of gentrification – its old industrial sites are being turned into loft apartments or offices for high-tech firms. Most of the film's action, however, takes place in La Barceloneta, a much older neighbourhood, historically home to the city's fishermen. The nature and history of the housing in La Barceloneta has meant that its population has remained working-class (Tatjer 1988). The film decries the scandal whereby collusion between the city administration and developers, in return for a share of profits resulting from property deals,² led to the decision to expropriate co-owned apartment buildings in the area that were in a poor state of repair. As home ownership is by far the dominant occupancy status in Spain (96% of Spaniards are homeowners), there are many buildings that belong to landlords on modest incomes who cannot afford the necessary upkeep. The problem of dilapidated apartment buildings is therefore a common one all over Spain. And yet in the past, in a different political and economic climate, the city council had actually chosen to provide financial support for the maintenance of these very same buildings in La Barceloneta. Where once local inhabitants, represented by neighbourhood associations, fought to obtain municipal subsidies, they are now having to fight against their expropriation, which would also mean their eviction. If the film is to be believed, the cracks in the “Barcelona Model” – if indeed such a model ever really existed – are definitely showing (Capel 2009).

It is the context of the property bubble that made urban renewal profitable in Spanish cities – whereas, previously, developers had always preferred new building projects in the suburbs. But different contexts mean different outcomes: in Spain, exemplary experiences of concerted urban

² For more on the corruption of public authorities, and particularly of Spanish municipal councils in the context of the last property boom, see Anon. 2007. *Urbanismo y democracia. Alternativas para evitar la corrupción*, Madrid: Fundación Alternativas.

renewal, where public authorities, committed experts and inhabitants work hand in hand, were spearheaded by the first democratically elected left-wing councils in the 1980s. However, the scenes in *Squat*, showing La Barceloneta in the 2000s, are reminiscent of the worst of 1960s Parisian renovation, which Marxist sociologists at the time qualified as “renovation-deportation” (Castells 1970).

The 15-M Movement: at the turning point of a secular anarchism and a tradition of local urban mobilisation?

The film spells nothing out explicitly, as the angle adopted by the director is that of a discreet camera that is a witness to, not a participant in, actions that are left for the viewer to analyse. However, the development of *Miles de Viviendas* is clearly marked by the history of Spanish political movements. Its members met in 2003, during the Iraq War, which garnered much opposition in Spain, and particularly in Barcelona. At a time when rising house prices was a prime topic of conversation and the property scandals involving public bodies were hitting the headlines,³ it was naturally this theme that brought these young people together in order to sustain the movement. The group disbanded in 2008, at the start of the economic downturn, when they were evicted from their squat in La Barceloneta, where they had lived together for five years. At this time, the property market was all but dead, the banks were recovering their loans in the form of unsold new-builds, numbers of which had achieved unprecedented levels. The group finally got together again three years later, in May 2011, in the context of the major collective mobilisations of the 15-M Movement – at this point, the economic crisis had well and truly hit home and was ravaging Spanish society. The rhythm of the film, in turn, is determined by these mobilisations: it fluctuates with the economic climate.

Should we see these young people as the heirs to a form of Spanish – or even Barcelonan – secular anarchism that resurfaced in the 1980s with the *okupa* (squat) movement, the vitality of which is writ large in every scene of the film and which, in the context of the brutal crisis that is today affecting the country, appears to have enabled a mass movement to flourish? Although *Miles de Viviendas* is certainly not at the very origin of the 15-M Movement, this movement has revived some of the democratic practices, organisational methods and terminology (“assembly”) of the *okupa* movement.

So is the film’s ending – depicting the 15-M events as a generalisation of the commitment shown by *Miles de Viviendas* to the whole of Spanish society – somewhat misleading? Perhaps not. It underlines the links between forms of political mobilisation that are specific to Spain and which have a long history. In this context, the meeting between *Miles de Viviendas* and the old ladies coordinating the resistance among residents of La Barceloneta makes perfect sense. The film shows how the young squatters gradually win the sympathy of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, whom they actively support in their fight against their imminent eviction. Moments of shared sociability and exchanges of skills culminate in a common mobilisation and establish personal relationships between the two groups. Without doubt one of the most remarkable characteristics of these Barcelonan squatters is their ability not only to integrate into the neighbourhood they moved into, but also to make their appropriation of buildings an integral part of the causes being fought for locally. Here, they encounter another Spanish political tradition: neighbourhood associations or neighbours’ associations, depending on how one chooses to translate this very Spanish and very real concept (*asociación de vecinos*). These associations, created at the end of Francoism to respond to pressing urban issues (the need to renovate facilities in old, run-down working-class neighbourhoods and to provide facilities in new, under-equipped outlying neighbourhoods), were a refuge for militants from outlawed political parties – communists, first and foremost – and also a place for meetings that dealt with general political issues. They provided the political frameworks

³ So much so that national daily newspaper *El País* even created a new section specially: a double-page spread was devoted to property scandals.

for the Spanish transition to democracy and were essential political players in terms of urban policy in the 1980s.

The convergence of these two movements, each with their own traditions and history and embodied by two different generations in the film, perhaps anticipated what happened on a larger scale within the 15-M Movement.⁴ Of course, 15-M clearly had no link with neighbourhood associations at the outset: the movement developed on the basis of global (and not at all local) issues, and occupied key central spaces in cities such as Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona – spaces which, by definition, do not embody a particular neighbourhood or indeed any form of local sociability. However, the subsequent stages of the movement, in particular the way it spread to different neighbourhoods,⁵ meant that, locally, it came into contact with neighbourhood associations. As a result, it gave new force to local campaigns and supported efforts to improve conditions in individual districts – in other words, to rediscover this form of mobilisation that has marked the urban and political history of Spain since at least the 1960s, and which has its roots even further back, in the movements of the late 19th century relating to urban living conditions, which became politicised in the 1920s (Vorms 2011). Accordingly, the film highlights the link between these two political traditions which coexist in the 15-M Movement, which has proved to be the largest mobilisation of its kind for several decades in what is a largely non-unionised society sustainably dismantled by 35 years of Francoism.

The fact remains that the catalyst that enabled these two movements to come together – something which *Squat* also illustrates very well – is the brutality of the crisis affecting Spain. More generally, it is the violence of a society where young people in their twenties feel they have nothing to lose, as indeed many of them declare throughout the film. It is this same violence that leads an old inhabitant of a working-class neighbourhood of Barcelona to feel so unwanted in the society in which he lives that he suggests that he and his neighbours, whose existence is so inconvenient for developers and the city council, should all be put on a boat and sunk out at sea next to the beach that borders their historic neighbourhood that is now so coveted. Despite the optimism of the film's ending, it is difficult to forget these expressions of profound despair.

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⁴ See: Adrián Pina Fernández, “La toma de la Puerta del Sol en Madrid: crónica del movimiento social 15-M”, *Metropolitiques*, 15 June 2011. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/La-toma-de-la-Puerta-del-Sol-en.html>.

⁵ See: Héloïse Nez, “Le mouvement des indignés s’ancre dans les quartiers de Madrid”, *Métropolitiques*, 29 June 2011. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Le-mouvement-des-indignes-s-ancre.html>.

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