The border, despite it all

Landscapes of the current Catalan narrative: the value of the border in the work of Vicenç Pagès, Joan Todó and Francesc Serés.

We live in a world in which it seems impossible to look upon landscape in the same way that we used to. These days, what we find is a landscape marked by hybridization, fragmentation and imprecision. The dispersed landscapes known as urban sprawl are the result of a number of factors: the rapid expansion in tertiary industries and tourism; the technological revolution; the boom in real estate and even the effects of a certain crisis in public space (Nogué 2009: 120). Our society is defined by movement, intermixing, globalism and speed. Thus, we have landscapes that are ever changing, discontinuous, artificial, cloned and repeated everywhere. It seems, therefore, that it no longer makes sense to speak of the purity of landscapes and that a certain amount of tact is now required when associating a landscape with a narrative of identity in which the individual and society are rooted.

The economic foundation of our society has changed and destroyed many of our landscapes and erased and undervalued the emotional and identitary value of place, as well as its natural essence Although modern states and power structures were founded on territories, and although the sensitivity that arose from romanticism made reference to the transcendent communion between man and nature, now, power is virtual, intangible and global; now, the environmental crisis has made plain the unhappy relationship between man and nature and unsettled or erased the collective imagination and culture upon which it had been based. In the contemporary world, place is globalised; a raw material. Each territory accommodates many waves of identities and each identity, many territories, or none at all. Now, individuals realize that they have no place. The bond with the landscape has mutated completely and slips like sand through our fingers.

In this context, Western art and thought turn once again to landscape. Modernization and economic growth appeared to have led us to lose sight of it; in recent decades, however, one can observe a growing environmental awareness and a marked interest in the emotional and identitary charge of place. In this regard, Michel Collot talks of a shift in civilisation towards landscape and in terms of landscape (Collot 2011: 11); he also analyzes the current sensibility toward landscape as a need for a new rationality that brings contemporary man closer to the sense of place and the sensory experience of the world (Collot 2011: 12).
1. **Landscape in Contemporary Catalan Literature**

Within this social and aesthetic interest in landscape, we can include the case of Catalan literature, which serves as the basis for this article. Romanticism gave to Catalonia, as it did to many European countries, fundamental works on the sensibilities and social ideologies of the time that were based on mythologizing certain landscapes and the link between the individual and place. Later, texts such as *Solitud* (1905), by Víctor Catalá, or the work of one of the most widely-recognised authors of Catalan literature, Josep Pla, made landscape a fundamental element in Catalan culture.

After something of a hiatus in the treatment of landscape – exemplified by the work of Quim Monzó, who focuses on urban settings or, even on non-defined or annulled spatial references – Catalan literature, along with a great deal of European literature has, in the early decades of this century, experienced a renewal and reinvigoration of spatial sensitivity (Nogué, 2015: 27). Within the Catalan literary scene, there are a number of young writers who, throughout this time, have published works based on the observation and exploration of landscape, producing a human and up-to-date analysis of place and its meanings. Examples of this trend include Edgar Illas (*Ball de bastons*, 2014), Vicenç Pagès (*Dies de frontera*, 2014), Adrià Pujol (*Escafarlata d’Empordà*, 2011), Marta Rojals (*Primavera, estiu, etcètera*, 2011), Toni Sala (*Rodalies*, 2004; *Marina*, 2010 and *Els nois*, 2014), Francesc Serés (*De fèms i de marbres*, 2013 and *La pell de la frontera*, 2014) and Joan Todó (*L’horitzó primer*, 2014). These are works that speak of the landscape with a human and universal sensitivity: they speak of the loss of space, of the loss of everything that space represents for the individual and the community (memory, home, stability and even harmony) and a consequent feeling of anguish. They are bold texts, linking tradition with modernity, biography and documentary with fiction, and essays with lyricism.

2. **The Border in Contemporary Catalan Narrative**

It is interesting to observe that, in the work of these authors, there is not only a renewal of narrative forms and attention to landscape, but there are also changes in the choice of landscapes. They look upon destroyed landscapes, their own landscapes and new landscapes. And, for the first time and in a noteworthy way, they look upon the landscapes of the Catalan border areas.

In contemporary Catalan fiction, the border has never been a specifically recreated literary element. Although a few works have been located in these areas – *La punyalada* (1904), by Marià Vayreda, *Terres de l’Ebre* (1932), by Sebastià J. Arbó or even *Camí de sirga* (1989), by Jesús Moncada – the border area was never more than a location, with little elaboration for any aesthetic reasons. In contrast, in the current context, there are works that do look at the border and that do recreate it as a literary element full of its own aesthetic and ideological content. I refer to three of the aforementioned books, published in 2014: *Dies de frontera*, by Vicenç Pagès; *La pell de la frontera*, by Francesc Serés and *L’horitzó primer*, by Joan Todó. It is the significance and aesthetic of the border area, as part of the new Catalan landscape narrative, which I intend to analyze in this article, based on these three novels.
Dies de frontera [Frontier Days], a work that earned its author the 2013 Premi Sant Jordi [Saint George Prize], one of the most prestigious Catalan language literary prizes, is set in Figueres (a small town in the north of Catalonia) and in the border area between Catalonia - or Spain - and France. It is a story of love and heartbreak between Teresa and Pau, a couple approaching their forties, whose steady, ten-year relationship is shaken by Pau’s affair. Thus, we are witness to this couple’s crisis and, indeed, to an existential crisis for both characters. One day, returning by train from Girona, Teresa meets a man called Cosme, a Colombian who is heading to the coastal town of Roses to start working in his parents’ business. He is a quite a bit younger than she is; attractive and seductive. Abruptly, the pair of impromptu lovers arrive in Portbou and we all end up spending the weekend at the border. We wander the village of Els Límits and stroll through La Jonquera where the protagonist spends a few days with the young man and, above all, walks, observes and takes stock. Her reflections on life emerge and grow at the border. It is here that this woman can face up to the dehumanized landscape that leaves her unprotected; here she can feel the desolation of a world which to her eyes is undone and, also, face her own limits and scrutinise them. Later, it will all end, it will all continue; the same but different.

While Dies de frontera is set in the area of the major border to the north of Catalonia, the state border, the other two novels are located along regional frontiers, on the lines that separate Catalan-speaking communities at a cultural, historical and political level; a separation that is, perhaps weaker, not as sharp, but which all the same exists. L'horitzó primer [The first horizon] by Joan Todó takes place on the border between Catalonia and Valencia. Meanwhile, in La pell de la frontera [The Skin of the frontier] Francesc Serés focuses on the territory on the border between Catalonia and Aragon, which is known as la Franja [the Fringe].

L'horitzó primer tells the story of a young man’s return to his village, La Senia. The protagonist goes there because he has been asked to give the opening speech of the village festival, a task which is entrusted to villagers who have left La Senia and triumphed in the wider world. But he, despite having published several books and having lived in Barcelona for many years, does not see himself as a great success or as having left at all; approaching forty and unemployed, he has already decided that he will stay at his parents’ home, in the village. There, he will have time to find work and allow himself to enjoy the village, the peace and quiet, the landscape, and even, he thinks, to write a novel about the village. Thus, the author describes an individual, social and human crisis based on an analysis of the first horizon experienced. Despite the romanticism of this small realm that moves him, and he does not hide it, the man confronts the ghosts of the town, the history of the place, the feeling of strangeness and foreignness he now feels and the tedium that resides there, and includes it all in the story of the village.

La pell de la frontera [The skin of the border] is a narrative work that, despite the literaturization of the texts, is written in a documentary prose which is lyrical but totally realistic, biographical and experiential. Francesc Serés puts together fourteen stories in this volume about his visits and understanding of the Catalan-Aragon border. He deals with themes such as immigration, the modernization of the countryside and the land, economic and trade globalization and social polarization. To all of this analysis of today’s world, he adds his personal reflections and sensibility, setting down intimate details and
his own memory into texts that speak of the contemporary identity of the self. At his border, reality goes beyond the established limits. The numerous and immense waves of immigrants who have wandered around Spain and have passed on or have becomes established in la Franja, working in the fruit farms and eking out a living in the worker’s camps, portray, face to face, the fragility of a world which is one and the same, which reaches everywhere and can make all men equal. The mirror is hard but clear, at the border.

Evidently, these three books set in border areas are very different from one another; they do, however, share three basic elements. First, they all have an experiential and realistic basis; they all connect the author's biographical background with the fiction and the literaturization of the experience, the focus of each being some midway point between realism, biography and fiction. Second, all three put forward unconventional and very personal forms of expression. While Serés brings together fourteen tales (one of which is based entirely on images) in one volume to create a unified whole, Pagès creates, for his border, an array of very short chapters in a variety of narrative styles that, together, create their own world. From these fragments, the narrative voice and style of Pagès fashions a galaxy that is cohesive, brilliant and intense. Meanwhile, Todó wrote L’horitzó primer in a more classic mould but decided to divide the roles of narrator and protagonist, with one talking directly - raw and up close - to the other. I believe that these innovative, quite personal and creative narrative forms correspond exactly to a new landscape in Catalan tradition: the border landscape. By focussing on a contemporary literary motif, such as the border, Catalan writers have crafted narratives that are modern, current and of high quality.

The third element shared by these three novels is what concerns us here: the border. It is the engine that creates their content and style and it is, of course, significant that all three titles refer to the border explicitly or, in the case of L’horitzó primer, metaphorically. This space provides the structure and shape of each work. As I have attempted to make plain in the brief plot summaries given above, the stories told in these novels are not set by chance at the border, nor are they developed in isolation of it. The protagonists are, in all cases, crossing life and social boundaries, that is, they are at crucial points in their lives and so are their societies, a time of crisis and change. They go through these experiences on the border, they live them and think of them there. They are at limits; they live in landscapes that limit, and vice versa.

This experience of the border has several facets which, in fact, come together and form part of a whole. The individuals who look upon the border see landscape which has been undone and they realize that the established patterns in the world – those of their inner world and those of society – have changed. The physical appearance, the social changes and the intimate aspect are the three areas of analysis that I will explain below.

3. PERIPHERY AND EMPTINESS

The border appears in all three books as a peripheral, marginal, landscape. In appearance, it is a hybrid space where nature merges with traces of human activity in a dispersed, fragmented, even chaotic manner, dotted with shapes that are neglected, always degraded
and often depersonalized. The physical description of the landscape is common to all three books whose authors, notwithstanding their different styles, consistently emphasize fragmentary and complex views of landscapes. Serés says, for example:

The construction cranes stand out like stakes that mark out the new slice of conquered country land; they are weather vanes indicating the new direction to be taken by the expanding town, the houses and the streets. [...] Along the path to the river, the dimensions diminish little by little and reappear where you least expect it. The barn, the wall or the farmhouse are transformed into semi-detached houses or apartment blocks. There are derelict old buildings that had housed dozens of immigrants and are now piles of rubble. (Serés 2014: 60)

Joan Todó, further south, sees the same kind of scene:

The bus crosses a vast extension of olive groves, all the same, all different, hypnotic; there are abandoned farms, soil rankled by weeds and other pieces of land ploughed clean as a ballroom dance floor. There are houses abandoned along the road and, in the distance, you can just make out the farmhouse, *Mas de Barberans*, a light smudge on the dry treeless slope. [...] The bus is suddenly surrounded by factories, furniture showrooms, and then past the hotel, you are there. [...] it is as if you come into the town by the back door. (Todó 2014: 18)

But the ugliness of the landscape, the sense of chaos these views exude, is not, as we soon surmise, a fact outside the experience of the individual: the narrator does not remain unaffected and the impact of the ugliness and degradation of the place brings a sense of desolation and anguish. All the experiences at the border describe this uneasy emptiness resulting from the deteriorating landscape. Vincent Pagès, through walks between the Pyrenees and the commercial warehouses of La Jonquera, is the one who expresses this most directly. At the border, the characters created by Pagès perceive everything as extraordinary: the roundabout, the brothels, the supermarkets full of alcohol and tobacco, the shopping centres and car parks. While all around, the Pyrenees pass almost unnoticed but for the trees burned black by the great fire that raged through the area in the summer of 2012.¹ In this place, the characters, and the narrative voice itself, cannot help exclaiming "But, what is all this?" (Pagès 2014: 123-124), with astonishment, repulsion and a profound unease.

The peripheral landscape reaches its maximum expression at the border. In a place that is fractured and arid in every way, the characters who, like us, pass through it, feel cast out. The place is unwelcoming. The landscape is ugly and uncomfortable. And going a little further, we understand that it is also a dehumanized landscape. This explains the feeling of excess and superficiality expressed by Pagès' characters. The place is seen as alien to human nature. This also explains the shocking story told by Serés among the paths and fields in his own particular periphery which is full of immigrants who scrape by, forgotten by everyone. Their makeshift shacks are unfit for humans; their stories should not be human stories; the authorities that move them around the territory like defective merchandise are not human either. Existence is inhumane in these places, because in such a degraded and wasted landscape no one can have a good life and an emptiness is felt there, an interior emptiness and at the same time exterior, because the landscape explains

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¹ The description given gathers together the elements that Vicenç Pagès explains in his book, in the various pages of the chapter entitled ‘Publicitat dadà’ (p. 120-124).
the people and the people make and explain the landscape. The anguish and emptiness can be seen in this damaged place and can be felt within oneself; it is all one and the same.

4. THE TALE OF THE LIMITS

Approaching the border, we find a desolate empty landscape and feel the same desolation and emptiness. And this emptiness forms the basis of these border stories. Everything emerges from this emptiness. From this physical perception of the border landscape and the impact that this view of the periphery has on the individual, ideas and feelings emerge which are highly intense and, individual nuances aside, are common to the three novels under discussion here.

At the border, there is often the feeling of being on the social periphery. That is, not only is the neglect confined to the physical appearance but, as all three authors point out, these territories are largely forgotten by the centres of society and power. The inhabitants of these regions are aware of being in a kind of no man’s land, of not belonging to any of the states that the border separates, of living lives ignored by one or the other. Serés describes, for example, the reality of immigrants, who are treated in completely different ways depending on where they are registered:

And so they [the immigrants] ended up here, it’s the only place where no-one gets upset. In Barcelona, they are a nuisance; they make the place dirty, ugly. It happened to them two years ago, in July and August 2001, at the Black Corner of the Plaça de Cataluña, the corner closest to the Portal de l’Angel. In Alcarràs their presence is seen as normal these days. It is normal to go down the river path, to go into the fruit plantations and find campgrounds with shacks all made with sail cloth and sacks of fertilizer, plastic and wooden pallets.. It seems that here, this all makes sense, but in Barcelona everything is decontextualized (Serés 2014: 65)

Todó expresses a similar feeling regarding his territory. The setting for his novel lies south of the River Ebro, but to the north of the limit of the Valencia. It is, therefore, still part of Catalonia even though Catalans generally tend to equate the Ebro with their border, leaving out this portion of their territory. La Sénia, the village in this novel, and its environs is thus a no man’s land in its fullest sense. The inhabitants feel themselves to be in a limbo between the two communities. So when, in a village bar, the current political situation is discussed and the possibility of Catalan independence weighed, the locals make jokes about how, if Catalonia became an independent state, they would end up being forgotten. (Todó 2014: 96).

The discourse emerging from the borders therefore has a social dimension which, although based on the situation in Catalonia, is extrapolated to the situation in the rest of Europe and the contemporary world, because they speak of economic globalization, of macro-politics, of social polarization and a ferocious economism that crushes all. They speak of the loss of a sense of humanity in present-day, first-world societies, of consumerism and of the superficiality of our habits. The observations of the border landscapes make the writers feel the obligation to record this shift in civilization and to analyze a capitalist economic system of the masses which, moreover, has reached a crisis point.
In addition to the impact of the physical experience and the analysis of globalization and its social reality in a time of crisis, there is the third facet of the experience of the border I mentioned above: the intimate aspect. The border gives rise to accounts of the more intimate, human and therefore more universal experiences, expressed in courageous and profound ways. The border areas in our modern world are places of insecurity in our lives, of a search for meaning and awareness; a house that is renovated or one that falls, roads to limits that are unknown or newly discovered, locations of memory or of oblivion, places where one can look upon others and get to know oneself.

The house. As I said above, the characters in these three novels are in a time of crisis in their lives. They have been taken to the brink, or have gone through moments of extreme emotion and thus the landscapes in which they find themselves are also extreme and on the brink. The way a landscape is viewed is affected by the observer, but also vice versa: the deteriorated, marginal landscapes of the border place the individual in a situation of distress and desolation. In this place of loss, these people search the landscape for the stability it used to give them; they seek the reference points they used to know. Thus, the jobless man who is sick of a city that is too much for him returns to his hometown. Thus, a narrator, restless but boldly curious about the world around him, wanders the lands he has known since childhood to tell the new story of a world that he feels is his and knows is forgotten. And he also tells us of the work being done to the old house of his grandparents: he talks of the house, his first landscape, and explains that the house moves with time, it grows and changes and hides so many things. Even Teresa, the main character of Dies de frontera, goes through a similar process. We cannot consider her as someone returning to her original landscape, since, as she says, the border itself is nearby and yet, never having been there, is far away because it is unknown. That said, this duality attracts her and she needs to explore, in this frontier, what we all have close to our centre; she needs to look for answers there, for guidelines. She says to herself, "But you can't just hitchhike home from Els Límits like it was nothing. How far is it back to Figueres? Fifteen kilometres? Maybe somewhere along the way you'll find some clue, a sign that will show you the way to the future." (Pagès 2014: 289) The search for a meaning in the landscape, the need to explain personal identity with the place itself and find security, stability and reference points there, is evident throughout contemporary landscape narrative and, more than anywhere else, in books set in borderlands. There is, however, a catch, of course. Because if, as we have seen, the landscape is destroyed then so, too, are the points of reference. There is no human stability or secure identity in such an empty and dehumanized place. This why both Serés and Todó are constantly saying how they feel like strangers in their own town. But we need to look at this carefully.

I think the border is a more complicated place. I believe that the duality is not as clear-cut, nor as radical, as imagining answers are there and then not finding them there. The endings of these books do not give answers and are perturbing but, despite it all, they give us the border. Take, for example, Vincent Pagès: like the others, he cannot get his protagonist to find many actual guidelines, perhaps none at all, but despite it all, he takes her to the border and makes her walk with her eyes wide open. After a few kilometres at the border, this place does not send any signals to her (Pagès 2014: 296). The border, this book and others tell us, is not a result; nor is it a certainty; it is an experience, an awareness. An exploration. Courage and fragility at the same time. The individual sees the
fissures and the continuities there. She finishes and continues. The experience of the border – carried out directly, alone, attentively and on foot – is seen by the protagonist “as a sacrifice, an offering, a test you have to pass” (Pages 2014: 295). But the reward will never be, in these extreme landscapes, in these desolate places, in these deep and realistic observations, an absolute triumph or any pure certainty: the only certainty is that of the border, of the limit, of the existence of everything and the instability of everything, of the duality of the horizon, of the fissure and the continuity. This is the value and the beauty of the border.

**The Time and the Other.** If we define this experience of the border a little more, we see that all the characters there understand time, which has diverse values. On the one hand, seeing the landscape in its current state –this landscape physically undone and socially in crisis – brings forth a reflection on the modern treatment of the past, of collective time or historical memory. The hunger of the migrants in *La pell de la frontera* is the hunger that many Spaniards endured during the Franco regime, but which now almost no one remembers. We had thought all that belonged now to another world, but it has returned. But then, who sees it? It is seen by the people who are at this border, not those who think of themselves forever established in a first world city, and certainly not the ruling elite who lead a cruel and fictitious world, built on so much that has been forgotten. The same happens on the border of northern Catalonia. In Portbou, Walter Benjamin died, persecuted by the Nazis. Nearby, in Cottiliure, Antonio Machado died in exile. Thousands of Republicans crossed the Pyrenees, fleeing a dictatorship as ruthless as any we still have today. But the narrators of these three books point this out amid the discovery of a huge obliviousness. Over the territory, few signs remain to remind us of these facts. Very little education and culture is dedicated to keeping these sites as places of memory and, instead, they become places of careless consumerism and tourism or abandoned industries and shanty towns. Thus, the landscape we see is that of a society disposed to continue with the starvation, while forgetting the philosophy, the poems and all of their parents.

Moreover, without a clear cut-off point, there is personal time, the intimate memory I referred to above that focuses on the origins of the house and the need to have one’s own reference points and stability. There is a look towards the past life of the “I”, which is in crisis and a kind of balance or analysis is proposed and, for the same reasons, there is a look from that same “I” towards its own future. The individuals wonder about their existence, searching for meaning, and try to guess its nature and will. The border is self-awareness, an introspection into one’s own limits.

This process of self knowledge means that, inevitably, the individual has to take notice of others, because we are all part of one community and one project. Serês has close-hand knowledge of the reality of the immigrants who have ended up in the area of Alcarràs and Saidí. Through the story of their experiences, the narrator can begin to understand – and make others understand – a feeling that is as simple as is it forgotten and uncomfortable: the fact that we are all the same. The waves of immigrants coming into Europe and all those who live as best they can in the neighbourhoods and areas on the margins of the first world, remind us that we are part of the same world, that we are like them and we might go through the same experience. The immigrants, the exiled, the drifters are our mirror. The world is one; place is continuous and we could well be them. Seeing others from this perspective, with more profound reflections than I have space for here, is what leads Serês
to speak about the instability of the self, of the precariousness of man and of change and fragility as being the sole basis of the individual. And in this way, he also speaks of honesty, simplicity and proximity as the only possible realities in the human landscape.

Todó takes another path to talk about 'others' but, in a similar vein to the one followed by Pagès, speaks of the 'other' that we all carry within us. The self is complex and fragmented; there is a tension in us between various forces, as if each one of them were a different person, with a different will and a different way of being, all in the same body. Todó on the border, expresses himself with all these different voices and tries to make them fit together, as if they were two countries that share a borderline. But he does not quite manage it, perhaps because it is simply impossible and the person is always one and many:

Maybe it's a simplification, counting yourself as one person when, in fact, you can be two, three, a thousand people. [...] There was a time you were someone else, there will be a day when you will be a third, you will be yourself, you'll no longer be “I”, "I" will only ever be him, that one, some indefinite thing [...] None of the cells of your body lasts longer than ten years, but you all dream that you are a single entity, a person (Todó 2014: 175)

At the border, the "I" and the other come together, and there are several and they are one, shock and continuity. This is what happens to the contemporary individual, as well as to the landscape. I believe the contemporary border landscape is the landscape that tells the story of man and the modern world in the most direct, raw and profound way. These three novels are extraordinarily vivid examples of this. The border is the experience of a landscape, of a being and a world where everything teeters on the edge but where, at the same time, life goes on; it is the brink, but despite it all, it is continuity, because the experience of the border is the most profound awareness; it is man exposed and the landscape of our world stripped bare. A landscape where we either pass through unaware and dehumanized, or else where we read new stories; brave readers we, raw stories they.

This is an approach to the value of the border that I should like to detail, complete and illustrate much more. I cannot do so in this piece, but I will continue to do so in other work. I would like to add as a final remark, a reflection drawn from the recent works of Joan Nogué. 2 If we look at the contemporary landscape, we soon realise that it is all a peripheral landscape and therefore complex, hybrid and fragmentary. And therefore full of limits. And therefore, a landscape that we could describe as a border landscape. Nogué says, then, that modern man no longer lives in a landscape, but between landscapes, on the limits. (Nogué 2009: 103). I would say we all live on borders. What today's Catalan narrative proposes is that we be brave and read them.

**Bibliography**


2 I refer especially to the book, *Entre paisajes* (Barcelona, Àmbit, 2009) but also to other articles in the press or in collective work such as *Franges. Els paisatges de la perifèria* (Olot: Observatori del Paisatge de Catalunya, 2012).


