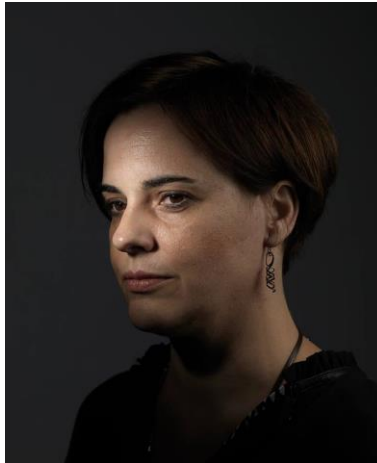


## Interview with Eva Vila



By Tara Karajica  
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*Born in Barcelona in 1975, Eva Vila is well known for developing an innovative and particular language of sound in cinema. She studied Music and Humanistics in Barcelona. She directed "Bajari" (2013), which premiered at IDFA and was distributed in Japan, as well as the documentary "BSide", which premiered at the International Film Festival Rotterdam and screened at the National Gallery in Washington, among other venues. She curates and helps developing projects for the Masters in Creative Documentary at Pompeu Fabra University. In 2010, she founded an independent production company called Araki Films. She is also a member of the Catalan Academy of Cinema. Eva has just directed, written and co-produced, with Monika Derenda of Poland Studio, her latest feature film "Penélope," a revisiting of "The Odyssey" from the point of view of women, supported by Eurimages.*

*Tara Karajica talks to her about this new project and women in film more generally.*

### **How did *Penélope* come about? Why did you choose the myth of Ulysses?**

**Eva Vila:** *Penélope* came about from the need to go back to our origins: a landscape, a place, a way of perceiving time, while ensuring that the film is firmly from a woman's point of view. That's how the idea came about to explore the myth of Odysseus, and more specifically, to make Penelope the central character instead of Ulysses. We were looking for a universal argument that didn't require a lot of explanation, by taking a simple and well-known story like *The Odyssey*, where it was clear that we were changing the male point of view (a story written by a man and passed on from generation to generation) for the female point of view. A few weeks ago, BBC Culture named *The Odyssey* as the most influential story in world literature. But given its importance, it is worth questioning the legacy that continuously reproduced clichés about women up to the present day.

Ulysses is the hero who travels and who conquers the world and Penelope is the woman waiting for him at home. What the BBC didn't mention, but what the British intellectual Mary Beard mentions in her lecture "The Public Voice of Women", is that *The Odyssey* is the first time we read about women's exclusion from the public space. This is when Telemachus, Penelope's son, makes it clear that *mythos* – meaning authoritative public speech – belongs to the realm of men. This scene from Homer's classic still resonates today.

We began the film three years ago when the above opinions hadn't been expressed yet, but it was clear to me that the story was suitable for being turned around and made into a film. The focal point of this film is the woman, Penelope, the one who stays and resists, and not Ulysses. In the myth, Penelope only appears in the last few pages waiting for Ulysses and devises a strategy to keep away a series of suitors who are vying to marry her and replace Ulysses. In the film, Penelope is not waiting for Ulysses but has turned her wait into something more active and constructive, a kind of struggle. In this way, the film reinterprets the universal motif of waiting as one of struggle. The strange thing is that all of this can already be found in the book. Because it is clear that the character of Penelope has been deliberately left on the margins by Homer – almost as though she was out of the frame for the whole book, while Ulysses' adventures are at the

centre, and this is being signalled to us as something unusual, something we will have to revisit in the future, when women have the voice to do so.

**Penelope is the town's dressmaker and she represents the idea of a strong woman who does not wait by the window, but rather by being very connected to reality and what is going on in the world. Her action of weaving is a metaphor for a constructive approach to waiting. Can you talk about Penelope? How do *you* see her?**

**E.V.:** Penelope has traditionally embodied the myth of waiting, but in the film, viewers will see her as the myth of resistance. I think this is the key to the film, and the whole justification for everything. I think that all women feel close to



*Still from Penelope*

this mythological character because it is as though she has always been there. As though she was one of the first women, from whom we all emanate. For me, this isn't somebody who is waiting for a man, but someone who resists and fights. She fights for her rights as a woman, to be respected, to have a public voice, to survive and so on. This model of the woman as a fighter gives us all strength. In this way, "waiting" today, when we reread the myth it becomes something different, not just linked to women, but to absolutely all of us. We all have to wait, which, for me, represents a struggle. The film pulls Penelope out from the shadows and restores her to her rightful place. Penelope is me; she is everyone, my grandmother, yours, the source where we need to ask who we were in the past in order to understand who we are now.

**You have never claimed to appropriate the myth, but merely to reinterpret it and set it in modern times. Would that be right? Would it also be right to assume that the town of Santa María d'Oló in Catalonia is a modern-day Ithaca, a very different setting from your previous more urban films?**

**E.V.:** There are two clear reasons for reinterpreting this myth today. Firstly, it brings us elements of our culture which help us reconsider the past and to see ourselves in it, to better understand who we are today. Secondly, with Penelope this journey is of even greater value, as it's about reclaiming her as a female figure, as an archetype, and interpreting her in a new way.

It's interesting that at the time of the first written evidence about western culture, women's voices were not being heard in the public sphere. That is to say, the "*mythos*", which in Homeric Greek refers to authoritative public speaking, was prohibited for women. This word gives us the key: the myth – as we understand the term today, as a classic tale – brings us a female character without a voice and without any power, who is hidden away in the last pages of the book, whereas the fact of being hidden makes this character more visible so that, all this time later, we can put her back where she belongs, in the centre, give her a voice and at the same time reread the myth and give it new meaning from the perspective of our own time. Therefore, we are not reappropriating the myth, but reinterpreting it in the light of the new myth – Penelope, the myth of resistance. As such, Penelope brings the myth to life with characters from today, and a contemporary landscape. All of this is at the frontier between what exists and what doesn't exist – what is about to disappear.

Penelope is a hundred-year-old dressmaker, Ulysses is a shadow returning after thirty years away from his home town, and the landscape is that of a rural inland area of Catalonia that has not yet been invaded by tourism. I also chose this landscape as it is where my ancestors were from, and I feel that there is something hidden there which for me, as a native of the city, always remains hidden, magical and mysterious. The magic mountain of Montserrat, the village of Santa Maria d'Olo, and the local countryside are the setting for some of the most ancient legends from our culture. Sounds, stories, characters, etc. ... that in my view were perfectly related to the legend of *The Odyssey*. And I also saw this area and this village as Ithaca, the place of our origins but also the place where perhaps we can never return, the place of our roots. The source. The fountain. We needed the film to evoke all of this mythological space that is still part of us in the landscape, and so we tried to find all the best locations.

**In that regard, the visual dimension of the film is based on very poetic cinematography, closely linked to the landscape, with crisp hues and epic shots, while on the sound level, there is a combination of music, verse recital, ambient sounds, bells, and radio sounds all there on purpose. Together, all these audiovisual elements manage to create an enveloping atmosphere in which the viewer loses all notion of time and space. Can you comment on that?**

**E.V.:** The two characters live in suspended time: a time in which past, present and future live simultaneously. This was the challenge from a filmic perspective: managing today to film a "real" space and "real" characters, in which each image and each sound contain echoes of other ancestral images. Because in every image of *Penelope*, there are all of the Penelopes that went before and all of those to come. Just as in each landscape there are those who came before, as well as their future.

For this reason, we had to use all possible means to capture the light of the interior spaces – above all, Penelope's sewing workshop – and the landscapes, in the most powerfully evocative manner. That is why we also used aerial shots filmed with an ultralight to maintain the pulse and human breathing from behind the camera.

We wanted to show the landscape from the sky, but without using techniques which would dehumanise the vision. We weren't interested in perfection, rather in ensuring that the human element was present in every frame. The same went for camera movements and the style of editing. The camera masterfully and calmly follows the real movement of things, without the rush that invades us in cities. And for the editing, we used key elements so that each frame was built on the previous one, leaving time for viewers to construct their own filmic experience, as though watching an hourglass filling up. In that regard, the cinematographer Julián Elizalde had a key role, as did the sound engineers Amanda Villavieja and Eva Valiño in capturing every little sound. In *Penèlope*, the sound anticipates the images and works on two levels, the lived and the imagined, becoming the key element for understanding the story.

In the city we have destroyed most of our hearing and listening abilities. This film surprises the audience both through the beauty of its images, which are constantly evocative and serve as foundations, and through the sound, which reveals a new dimension to us, or at least one that has been forgotten over time. In *Penèlope*, the sound allows us to recover our perception of listening, and through it we remember sensations from our childhood when we still paid attention to listening as the source and driving force of our relationship with the world.

The voice of the Madrid singer Alejandra Barber, as well as extracts from *The Odyssey* recited by the Catalan singer Anna Subirana, assume the power of the "public voice" – the *mythos* – to which Mary Beard referred. Over their voices, we reread the text of the classical tale. They carry this fragment of the past to our present. They also help us, from the perspective of sound, on our journey towards Penelope.

**You capture the passage of time with all these elements that imbue the film until the spectral appearance of Ramón, the absent Ulysses of the film. Any thoughts on that?**

**E.V.:** Nowadays, the word "myth" means a magical narration located outside historical time, with divine or heroic characters as the key protagonists. Or it is a fictional story or a literary or artistic character embodying some aspect of the human condition. The meaning of the word reveals to us afresh the meaning behind the modern interpretation of the classic story, leaving behind – or hiding – the idea that "*mythos*" meant in Homeric Greek "the power of public speaking", a power which was vetoed for women. Today, we have chosen to forget this meaning and we have preferred to stick to the meaning of the word "myth" in relation to the fictional character in the fantastic tale who is at the centre of the story, namely Ulysses. And there is the key! For me, the conclusion is that Penelope was too real a character to be at the centre of the myth, because a female character has not had a voice throughout the history of humanity. For this reason, the fictional character Ulysses was at the centre, a hero entirely constructed from a male point of view.

And this, for me, was the great revelation of the film *Penèlope*: when we understood that Ramon Clotet should play Ulysses as a fictional character, someone who had to appear and disappear physically in the film because it was someone who had always been there as a story, as a tale, but who was physically absent. What accompanies Penelope is Ulysses' absence, not his presence.

On the other hand, Penelope absolutely belongs to the realm of reality, everyday life, sewing, work, making clothes for a whole village as seamstresses used to – women from an entire generation. I remember the emotion I felt when Monika Derenda from Poland Studio, the Polish co-producer of the film, with whom it was a true pleasure to work, told me that her grandmother had been a seamstress, as mine had also, and we could share those childhood memories. Since then,

there have been many other women with whom I have recalled our grandmothers' dressmaking workshop and what this all meant and still means for us: the example of a generation who wove our clothes so that we could wear them today.

For all these reasons – the absence of Ulysses from the whole of Penelope's story, their inability to meet physically because they belong to different dimensions, and the memory of Penelope as a real character that many of us can remember – we would say that *Penèlope* is an "ode to absence", but also to the courage to defend ourselves from it by transforming it into an advantage, making it a reason to survive.

***Penèlope* received Eurimages' support. How did this help the film and how will it, in your view, impact its future on the festival circuit and the promotion of European and Spanish female filmmaking talent?**

**E.V.:** It was a clear sign of the film's importance that Eurimages awarded its support for the film. The support also facilitated the Polish-Spanish co-production, which is an unusual combination. And above all, alongside the support for the film from different film bodies in both countries was the reflection of the need for this film to exist. Women shouldn't feel afraid to innovate in filmic language, to take risks with unusual challenges, because by rereading classic stories in this way through cinema, we are also demonstrating our power to build once again on a tradition which we also can make more feminine. In this regard, I think that for some time now the cinematographic industry has been opening up to our ideas. I think that women are now more present in the film world, of course – as festival programmers, as commissioning editors, as project tutors, but we still need to fill some spaces which women haven't traditionally inhabited.

For this reason, I am very proud to belong to the EWA Network (European Women's Audiovisual Network), and would like to thank Francine Raveney, the co-founder and former director, for her role in this organisation. Through this network, we are starting to create a wider community reaching beyond national borders, for a better understanding of our needs and our priorities and to work together through our struggles as professionals in the film industry.

**Exactly! In fact, there has been a lot of talk about the situation of women in today's film industry. What is your opinion on the matter and how are things in Spain, and more particularly, Catalonia, where a cinematic renaissance is currently under way?**

**E.V.:** It is not an extraordinary fact that women make films. It's entirely normal for women to be filmmakers, producers, writers, politicians or whatever. So I think we must stop being surprised that a woman can enjoy success in cinema. Even more, when a woman is successful as a filmmaker, most of the time people say that this is because she has "great sensitivity". And we are still very surprised that a woman with a child can manage to be a filmmaker. On the contrary, when a man is successful, it is because he is "brilliant" or a "genius". No way. The same is true of economic power.

Mary Beard writes about the voice and power of women, saying that we don't need to copy the power model of the men who have dominated our system for so long. We need to make our own system and build up our power from another point.

In Spain and in Catalonia, women filmmakers have worked together through the associations Dones Visuals and CIMA to support colleagues who have been working for a long time to make the work of women in the film industry more visible. One of the most significant examples is the Mostra Internacional de Films de Dones organised by the Drac Màgic association, which has reached its 26<sup>th</sup> edition this year and has made a huge effort to revive some incredible films, many of which had been forgotten or hidden. The most important thing is to promote films by filmmakers who came before us, who, like good Penelopes, opened the way for us, and also to ensure visibility for films by present-day filmmakers. It is our duty to continue this work.

**What are your next projects?**

**E.V.:** *Penèlope* will be released in cinemas in Spain in the autumn by the distributor Noucinemart. In July, we will launch a platform called "PenelopeS" where different women from the worlds of culture and politics will narrate their own experiences linked to Penelope. What is Penelope for them? A woman they know, or a story about themselves. Through these two-minute narratives on the platform "PenelopeS" – which will be hosted at <http://Penelopefilm.es> and on social media, e.g. Facebook – PenelopeLaEspera – a place will be created for past and present Penelopes to come together. We are very excited about this project and I'm sure it will accompany the film as it travels around the festival circuit and on to its theatre release. We also thought that these short extracts could be screened as an epilogue.

The project that I'm shooting next is *Vela*. A group of twelve teenagers from different nationalities start a course in the Port of Barcelona to learn how to surf. All of them are having a lot of difficulty having a normal life and finding a job. The course gives them the chance to find a way. They can learn to be sailors and work as monitors. Through this meeting and the process of learning how to manage in a boat on the sea, the girls and boys show what it means when someone gives you the opportunity to take charge of your life.

As a short-term project, we plan to continue with the last documentary which I directed in 2013, *Bajarí*. In the first part, which was very successful at international festivals, and was released in cinemas in Japan, the great-niece of Carmen Amaya, the greatest flamenco dancer of all time, came to Barcelona from Mexico to find her roots. Karime Amaya has now become one of the best contemporary dancers, and still lives in Barcelona. The second part of the film begins when her mother, Winy Amaya, the niece of Carmen Amaya, arrives in Barcelona to join her family and start a new flamenco dance school in the same city as Carmen. Again, it's a film about inheritance.