QUAN EL PATRIMONI RESPIRA...
CUANDO EL PATRIMONIO RESPIRA...
WHEN HERITAGE BREATHE...
Roman Circus (Tarragona)  
‘De pel·lícula’ by Pep Escoda

Some years ago on Tarragona’s Rambla Vella there were five cinemas in the space of a few metres. Their names all began with a C: Catalunya, Capitol, Comèdia, Coliseum and César. Within a short distance we could see all the best films. Now we need to travel a good few kilometres to do the same...

Of the Rambla Vella cinemas, one is now a car park and two house an Irish pub. The other two, the Coliseum and the César, partially obscured some of the most important remains we have in Tarragona... Yes, the Tarraco! where the stars were real Romans!

I still remember Sant Hermenegild Street; we climbed the hill to the Cèsar, an "avant-garde cinema", although we didn’t really know what that meant. What we did know was that it was “18 and over” and that we had to look big...

Pep Escoda

The Dialogue

In 1986 the Tarragona Municipal bulletin announced that the City Council had purchased the site of the Coliseum Cinema on the Rambla Vella and that it would shortly be demolishing the building. The nearby Cèsar Cinema, in Sant Hermenegild Street, was also scheduled for later demolition. The removal of these buildings revealed part of the head of the Roman circus and ancient remains that have since become an emblem of the city.

For Pep Escoda, like many Tarragonans, the image of the Coliseum, and above all the history of the Cèsar, the avant-garde cinema that offered “different” films for twenty years, are still fresh in his mind. If a cinema is already an emotional experience, one like the Cèsar –innovative, free, eccentric– was a salutary cultural lesson and left its mark on the imagination of generations.

In this respect, maybe you now have an idea of where the dialogue of De pel·lícula will be taking you. Both the spectacles the Romans experienced in the Circus and the films the people of Tarragona saw in those cinemas, which were physically superimposed on the stones of ancient Tarraco, have a very human and universal factor in common. We can imagine that the main action took place in front of the eyes of the spectators, but in reality the true passion was in the stalls, in the seats, in the midst of the uproar or in the darkness...
and silence... Secrets whispered in ears, hands that touched “without meaning to”, negotiations, material and immaterial exchanges..., milestones less obvious than the “triumphs” of the chariot racers or the film stars, but events that moved humanity.

The piece Pep Escoda proposes is exceptional because it embodies the subtlety of those layers of reality, but also introduces two interesting concepts. With his videographic work, on the one hand, he shows us how the transit (the space that seeks to circumvent time) is sometimes not only a parenthesis, but also the film set on which the spotlights are really focused. On the other hand, he questions the stereotype of the tourist and the discourse of the “official history”. Look at Escoda’s images and you will discover that the presence of the letter I is repeated in the architecture and the elements of the site and you will understand that, like a conjunction, the photographer’s dialogue unavoidably links everything.

Rosa Comes

The Creators

Pep Escoda. Tarragona, 1958

Born in Santa Tecla Hospital weighing five kilos, which have been added to over the years. In his schooldays he wasn’t a great success at exams. Son of a seafaring family, he was formed and forged on the Mediterranean, working on a light-fishing boat. At the age of eighteen he enlisted in the Spanish Navy; in summer, dressed in white, and in winter, in blue, he discovered fashion. Later he studied painting at the Tarragona Provincial Government School of Art and Design (EADT) under the master Josep Icart. A self-taught photographer, in 1990 he opened a studio in Tarragona. Traveller, nomad and thief of pictures, he has worked for the best international publishers, publishing approximately 150 books between individual and collective works. His Mediterranean spirit makes him continue to learn every day with the taste of salt and the sea.

Marta Richardson. Tarragona, 1993
A Tarragonina from the Part Baixa (Lower Part), she studied at the EADT.

When she was little she wanted to be a singer, an astronaut and a superheroine. Unfortunately, neither her vocal cords, nor her mathematical skills, nor her superpowers were up to the task. She discovered photography looking at the covers of the LPs and magazines that lay around the house. She borrowed her first camera from her mother and discovered that photography made it possible to give visibility to things that cannot be explained in words. You can often find her on her bicycle or ranging the streets of the lower part of Tarragona dressed as Spiderman, looking for somebody to photograph. Over time she has grown, but, as her grandfather says, she’ll never grow up.
Abelardo Castellet. Tarragona 1971 dC

A bipedal primate of the hominid family with a tranquil, unsocial nature who has managed to live from photography, without great difficulty, for the past twenty years.

The Place

- The Roman Circus

The circus was by far the most popular mass entertainment venue in Roman times. This was where chariots, normally pulled by two or four horses (bigae or quadrigae), were raced.

Tarragona’s circus was built at the end of the 1st century AD, during the reign of Domitian, and it was part of the large provincial monumental complex, of which it occupied the lower terrace. It was approximately 325 metres long and between 100 and 115 metres wide and its remains are exceptionally well preserved. It was built on sturdy cement vaults that served a twin purpose: on the one hand, they were the foundations on which the seating, stairs and upper platforms were built, and on the other, they served as internal corridors to allow the spectators to move about the building.

The seating was separated from the arena by a wall more than two metres high –the podium– and roughly in the centre of one of its longer sides (the northern) was the pulvinar where the authorities sat. One of the shorter sides, where the town hall stands today, was the site of the carceres or starting gates, of which there were normally twelve, six on each side of a main gate. The organiser of the games, who had the honour of giving the starting signal, had a reserved place on the terrace above the starting gates. The magistrates who controlled the race, the conduct of the charioteers and the finishing order were seated in a special reserved tribune.