

DIALOGUE

**FROM SOCIAL
REALISM TO FILMIC
FABLE: NEW
APPROACHES TO
SPANISH AGRARIAN
DOCUMENTARIES**

Dialogue with

**FERNANDO
GÓMEZ LUNA**

FROM SOCIAL REALISM TO FILMIC FABLE: NEW APPROACHES TO SPANISH AGRARIAN DOCUMENTARIES*

DIALOGUE WITH FERNANDO GÓMEZ LUNA

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Fernando Gómez Luna (b. Córdoba, 1981) is one of the most promising young artists on the Andalusian art scene today. Although his work as a filmmaker is the main reason for this interview, it is important to note that his creative output has not been limited exclusively to audiovisual productions. In addition to participating in the production and direction of numerous feature films, over the course of his career his personal interests have led him to explore other forms of artistic expression, such as poetry. This has allowed him to engage in a complex process of experimentation that has resulted in works such as *Mi rostro es de brea, mi alma es viscosa* [My Face is Made of Tar, My Soul Is Viscous], a fascinating videopoem whose extraordinary aesthetic qualities earned it the prize in the local category at the 1st Cosmopoeítica International Videopoetry Competition in Córdoba in 2010. Moreover, his striking artistic sensibility has led him to combine his career as a creator with the development and coordination of cultural projects such as Suroscopia (2011-2018) and UCOpoética (2012-2018).

While taking into account his long career as an artist and cultural manager, this interview is concerned with the interest aroused by his latest work as a filmmaker, *El rastro firme* [The Firm Trail] (2022). In this film, which can be described as what is popularly known as an agrarian documentary, Fernando Gómez Luna tells a story with a clear message aimed at highlighting the value of the flora and fauna of the Andalusian countryside. The film's homodiegetic narrator recounts the tale of the Marquis of Altarriva's obsessive interest in an Iberian lynx that has been given the name of Larus. In this way, the empirical reality of the documentary footage merges with a different reality that is completely fictionalized. Making use of various aesthetic and formal strategies, the director presents the spectator with his view of the dire conditions of Andalusia's rural environment resulting from the overexploitation of its farmland, among many other issues.

Given the scholarly interest that the depiction of the rural world has stirred up in recent years, *El rastro firme* stands as a particularly relevant film of recent times as it effectively connects with the

tradition of the agrarian documentary, which is an extensively developed genre in Spain. It is worth noting that the intertextual references to the filmography of the Marquis of Villa-Alcázar in part of the film attest to this fact, as does the aesthetic relationship that some of its images maintain specifically with his documentary *España se prepara* [Spain Gets Ready] (1949). However, by shifting back and forth between reality and fiction, Fernando Gómez Luna's film constitutes a substantial departure from the usually propagandistic and even indoctrinating nature of the de Villa-Alcázar documentaries promoted by the Franco regime. Therefore, although it never loses the pedagogical component also present in much of the documentary production of the Marquis, *El rastro firme* offers us an open window which, by using formal and dis-

cursive mechanisms typical of fiction, invites us to reflect on the problems resulting from the *latifundia* in Andalusia. In the following interview, intended as a starting point for an exploration of his filmography, we attempt to unpack the narrative and formal procedures used by Fernando Gómez Luna in this agrarian documentary that makes the motif of the Iberian lynx its true protagonist. ■

NOTES

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Figure 1. Fernando Gómez Luna, filmmaker of *El rastro firme* (2022)



Figure 2. The use of drawings as a formal aesthetic strategy in the documentary



Figure 3. The archive as a means of research on the lynx

We would like to begin by discussing some aspects of your academic training and career. We know that in addition to having studied audiovisual communication, you hold a master's degree in creative documentary filmmaking from Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, and that since you completed your studies, you have participated in numerous projects that have usually been based on the use of documentary footage. However, we wondered what led you to make a film like *El rastro firme*. Had you been interested in the rural environment before embarking on the production of this documentary?

I have never really had a specific interest in this subject, but the context I live in is markedly rural. When you live in a place, you try to get to know it better. The province of Córdoba, and the autonomous community of Andalusia, is a place whose economy and society depend hugely on agriculture and livestock breeding. My interest in making this film was to try to understand the phenomenon of *latifundismo* in Andalusia and its impact on the landscape. I have always been aware of *latifundia*, as my grandmother had a small field near La Carlota. When I used to go there with my family, I would look at the mounds and the wide-open spaces of those fields. From the car, driving along the Cuesta del Espino, I would imagine myself walking across those places.

As you yourself indicate, one of the main objectives of this documentary is to portray the problem of *latifundismo* in Andalusia, but from a different perspective, without turning it into a story of the peasant struggle. With this in mind, what were your motivations for making this film about the rural world?

When I started working on the project, I was curious about some questions related to Andalusian identity, based on an interest in how Andalusia differentiates itself from the rest of Spain. However, once I got working and researching, this changed, as it was no longer a question of being attracted to

Andalusia as a political concept, but of getting to know the region better from a geographical point of view, based on the relationship I have had with the landscape since I was a child. When I started studying the phenomenon of *latifundismo*, I saw that there were conflicting positions on the subject. In the geography I sensed a more objective way forward that was also consistent with my way of understanding life. *Latifundismo* is an issue that has been resolved politically in a way that is not very satisfactory for the defence of workers' rights, but I think it is a very complex issue and one that not even the political left, which has been in government in Andalusia for forty years, has been able to tackle. I could identify my perspective in the books by the geographer Antonio López Ontiveros on the colonisation of the land, or in his monumental *Geografía de Andalucía* (1998). López Ontiveros had a conservationist vision that was not linked to the traditional advocacy for the rural world.

We would also like to explore how this supposed neutrality of the discourse fits in with the tale of the Marquis, which is told by a peasant woman. We find a certain contradiction there because we see a discourse that seeks to lay blame for what is happening in rural Andalusia, but it is formulated from a particular point of view, i.e., the landowner's. Thus, on the one hand, there is one part that is more tied to reality, while on the other is the fictional part of the story. In other words, there is a proposition of objectivity, but there is also criticism.

The criticism is there because of the conservationist discourse, which is the *political* stance of the film. In his quest to return to the origins, the Marquis goes against his own interests and those of his class. He blames his own people for the excessive presence of olive trees. It is a fact that the entire Andalusian countryside is plagued by olive trees, which are destroying the region's biodiversity and influencing existing crops that used to enrich the

landscape. This also affects animal species that inhabit this region. This is the political discourse of the film. I understand that there is a contradiction in this, although perhaps it is a consequence of how I feel about it, as I tend to associate politics with matters related to political parties or trade unions, and because I didn't approach this project with an activist intention in the traditional sense of rural workers' protest. The idea has more to do with showing the different uses that can be made of the countryside.

We would like to emphasise this precise detail of the narrative voice used in the film, as it belongs to a peasant woman, and so she is the one who presents the story to the spectator, making her an indisputable protagonist. Does the fact that the story is told by a peasant woman influence the construction and perception of the film? Why did you make this choice? What could she contribute?

From the beginning I had the idea that the film would be told by a storyteller, because she was a metaphor for the land, for Andalusia. We didn't want to give her the quality of a storyteller; instead, we wanted to integrate her into the story as a character who has lived what she is telling. As another layer of the landscape. The estate where the story is set is dominated by men. A female presence creates a contrast that fits in with the singular nature of the story of the Marquis himself, whose existence is a contradiction in terms of the functioning of aristocratic houses, which seek to preserve what they hold. What this man proposes, however, is the suicide of his human lineage, which is replaced by the lineage of the lynx. In the context of this singularity, as I have pointed out, the presence of a female narrator heightened the sensation of witnessing a different narrative about the countryside.

On this point, although you point out that you were always seeking to avoid the typical story

of the peasant struggle, several moments in the documentary bring to light the historical problem of the Andalusian *latifundium* and the overexploitation of the land. Among many others, there is one particularly striking shot that serves as a visual metaphor, showing olives falling into the back of a lorry while we hear the sound a slot machine. Do you think it would have been necessary to focus more on this type of issue and to disassociate yourself from the mythical story you present through the figure of the lynx?

I don't think that taking a view based on a dichotomy of good guys and bad guys would have served the creative purpose of the film. My approach to this rural reality is similar to a geographer's. Geography takes confirmed facts into account. This does not conflict with the fact that as a filmmaker I avoid filming with preconceived ideas or with the aim of validating a particular ideology. Indeed, the shot of the olives has an ironic touch because of the use of music composed by Juan López López. No one can deny that the Andalusian countryside is becoming a reticulated landscape of olive groves, in the interests of maximum economic profitability. The film sets up the extractive and the eulogistic relationships with nature in opposition to one another. It is conservationist with regard to the landscape, as there is a tendency to return to the origin of everything, to purity, to the fable. The mythical story is the consequence in my imagination of any knowledge I have been able to acquire by studying and relating to that environment.

We would also like to delve into the mythical vein of your film. In Spanish cinema, thanks to directors such as Víctor Erice, we have examples that show a marked interest in the construction of metaphor, in symbolism and even in the act of narrating, i.e., in the existence of an awareness of the narration itself. Is this true of you, and do you think your film is connected to this vein?

Ever since I was a child, I have had an interest in fantasy and fable. And, at the same time, I think of cinema as a means of exploring reality. With varying degrees of success, *El rastreo firme* brings these two elements together. I like to feel that what I'm watching may refer to something else, that what I'm looking at contains meanings that go beyond the literal. This is the basis of the mythical vein because when I decided to construct a fable to tell the story of a rural estate today, I researched the mythical dimension of the lynx. To do this, I drew on Caballero Bonald's vision of the lynx, not so much in his novel *Ágata ojo de gato* (1974) as in a poem titled *Tótem*, in which he describes the magical qualities of the lynx. One of these is the ability to travel in time, hence the inclusion of this idea.

Continuing with the mythical vein of the film, embodied in the figure of the lynx, why did you choose time travel, when you could have explored other aspects in all the literature and symbolism constructed around this emblematic species? Do you think it is a way of expressing the changes that have been taking place to the climate and the landscape for several decades now?

The lynx's time travelling and its return to the origins is the way of finding the pure state of the *Cotomonte* before humans changed the landscape. I think the film speaks of these changes in its own way. On another level, time travel is what allows us to learn, through the Marquis of Alarriva's writing, about the events that took place in the Guadalquivir Valley, and therefore in Andalusia. In the process of creating the story, after my numerous visits to the estate, I learned that pre-historic caves have been found there, as well as coins from Roman times (the Via Augusta passed through there) and the ruins of Kant-Hisn Castle, which appear on several occasions in the film. Knowing the space, knowing about the presence of the lynx in the place and studying its symbolism, helped me to construct a fable of genealogy

where time is diluted through the many holes that populate the area, be they caves, bunkers, burrows or water channels.

We see that the film includes the song *España se prepara* by the composer Jesús García Leoz, taken from the documentary of the same name by the Marquis of Villa-Alcázar (1949). To what extent do you think that his agrarian documentaries informed the whole creative process of *El rastreo firme*?

There is a clear identification with the Marquis of Villa-Alcázar. He made films, while in the case of the Marquis in the film they are photographs, but the reference is obvious. The dance of the tractors and the song used comes from the Marquis of Villa-Alcázar's film *España se prepara* (1949). In fact, some sequences of the documentary, when the trees are uprooted, or the images of the tractors themselves, evoke his films. The Marquis of Villa-Alcázar's filmography was important because it allowed me to get to know an aristocrat and agricultural engineer's way of looking at the countryside. He is someone who represents the human profile of a *latifundium* manager. The testimony he left in his films on agricultural work was very valuable and certainly original, and it inspired me to record what happened on the estate. The inclusion of Jesús García Leoz's song is therefore a small tribute to his work.

On the other hand, regarding the creative process of the film, we would like to know whether you had planned to film a particular species of flora or fauna, one that had special relevance or that you wanted to pay more attention to, when you decided to make this film.

I started filming in the summer of 2016 and finished in May 2019. When I decided to make the film, I didn't begin with a clear intention to film olive trees or the wildlife. I had a permit to work on that estate. The people in charge of it allowed me access, and from there I began a process of ge-

ting to know the estate. The process consisted of immersing myself in the space little by little, and getting to know the crops that were there, among other things. In fact, the apricot trees that are uprooted at the end of the film were in all their splendour in 2016, and in August 2017 they decided to remove them to plant olive trees. In a way, I allowed myself to be carried away by what was happening as I worked to construct the fictional plot of the film.

We can see a lot of images of the estate in the film, of the different crops and of the fauna there, but we believe that there must have been many more that could not be included due to the limitations of the filming or the story. In this regard, what was the editing process like?

I started editing with a co-editor. She edited some sequences, and I edited others. Later, I worked with another editor from the production company who worked with me in the final stage of the film. It was a laborious process because there was a lot of footage that was left out. When I shot them and saw them in the editing room, there were a lot of shots that seemed to be essential, but in the editing, it doesn't always fit what you would like it to. The narrative of the film has its demands, and you have to make compromises.



Figure 4. Inclusion of native fauna

Turning now to other aesthetic questions, throughout the documentary, there is a notable interest in prioritising a time-image, i.e., in thickening the story through the use of formal mechanisms such as static shots (many of which are full shots) so that life—in this case rural life—can unfold in front of the camera and reveal a truth, in one way or another. Moreover, this is clearly associated with tedium, since the pace of the film slows down. What were you aiming to achieve with this? To recreate the cadence of rural life through the slowness of the passage of time?

The pacing of the film is subject to the spaces; it has a spatial logic. That is why I have pointed out that the approach is geographical. It is obvious that in the rural world time is less regulated than it is in the urban world, and this perhaps explains the slowness conveyed by the film, which requires unhurried viewing, surrendering to the poetic expression of each shot. The time of the film is the time of Aion, not of Chronos.

As you say, in this unhurried viewing, we are struck by the technical quality of the shots of the animals. How were they made? Were they all shot for the film or were some of them recycled shots?

The close-up shots of the fauna were taken by Daniel, who plays the role of the Marquis. Daniel is a *bichero*, a person who goes to the countryside to take shots of wild animals. He provided me with footage of animals in that region and we selected the most interesting. I also accompanied him, and we spent many hours waiting, even in the early hours of the morning, in keeping with the time when the animals usually come out. On the other hand, the black-and-white images are from camera traps in the region and were provided to us by the Lynx Recovery Plan.

Another point of interest, in our opinion, is the sound. In the film, almost everything is ambient sound, except for the scene where we hear the song taken from *España se prepara*. However,

we find the incorporation of electronic music in some scenes particularly interesting.

I am not meticulous when it comes to deciding on music or how to use it. If you know how to integrate it well, I think you can get good results. Except for *España se prepara*, which is more extradiegetic, I think the electronic music is well integrated. It gives you something that physical instruments don't, and these could make the music clash with what you're seeing. Juan—whose artistic and musical career I'm familiar with—came with me to the filming of some sequences, and as we had discussed that he was going to do the post-production sound, I proposed that he compose something. He sent me some cuts, I made some changes, like drawing out the melody more, and we worked on that material and composed the soundtrack. One of the aspects of the film I am most satisfied with is how the soundtrack came out.

In relation to the previous question, we read in an interview with the sound editor Juan López López, who commented on the use of this music: "It works as an allegory of the relentless and inevitable passing of time, moving between nostalgia and optimism. A soundtrack to stop being a slave to time." But to what extent do you think it is possible to speak of optimism with the ending offered?

The optimism is that life goes on and nature will continue, with or without us. Like when at the end of the film the lynxes appear above the bunker. The cycle of the year shows us that things are born, grow, die... and are born again. This is how nature works and therein lies its mystery.

Leaving aside the creative issues of the film now and focusing on the logistics, from the point of view of financing and subsidies, how does a first-time director get going? Do they have any kind of support?

I applied three times for grants offered by the Andalusian regional government. In the first two,

due to my inexperience, I made some administrative errors. The third year I got the grant, but claiming the expenses is complicated. You make an investment before the call for applications, but you can only claim expenses you incurred immediately before the determination, so that money is not recovered. It is a bureaucratic process that can force you to redo the budget several times to meet the administration's requirements. The budget I presented to the Andalusian government was much lower than what the film actually cost. As the grant was given in 2019, I could only claim expenses from that year until 2022. And work on the film, as happens with this kind of project, started much earlier, in 2016. Apart from that, I haven't had any other sponsors; everything has been financed with my own funds and the grant from the Andalusian government.

Regarding distribution, when the documentary is released on the circuits where it is going to be screened, do you recover any costs?

It always depends on the festival. Of the festivals we've been at, only one has paid us for the screening rights. You could say that I've done everything out of love for art, and I understand that few people can afford to make a living from filmmaking. The interesting thing is to be able to create. Afterwards, if some kind of compensation comes your way, that's great.

Figure 5. Social realism in the documentary





Figure 6. Conversations between livestock breeders in the documentary

Making films is a truly complex task in Spain, but making a documentary with such a markedly rural thematic focus is even more so. Could you explain what the process was to obtain funding? Do you think that the boom in rural cinema in the last two years, with such outstanding examples as *Alcarràs*, *As Bestas* and *Libertad*, has helped producers take a greater interest in these projects? Do you think that these themes about the situation in rural areas in Spain help viewers empathize with a situation which, although it may seem far away, really has devastating consequences in their daily lives?

The film was self-produced—with the support of Omen Cinema—and the financing came from my personal savings and a small grant of just over 3,000 euros that I obtained from the Andalusian government. My impression is that anyone starting out will find it difficult to get funding. In Andalusia, moreover, the system of grants for film production is not as developed as in other autonomous communities such as Galicia or Catalonia. My presence in this context is very recent, with two self-produced films, the first one co-directed with the Galician filmmaker César Souto. Fortu-

nately, both had premieres at festivals (*Interregno* at the Jihlava Festival and *El rastro firme* at the Alcances Festival). I don't know if producers tend to be more interested in these projects. If it is profitable for them, they certainly would.

The documentary shows a rural estate that only a few decades ago enjoyed an age of splendour based on a variety of crops (cereals, tubers, fruit trees, etc.) and livestock of all kinds, as well as hunting and the exploitation of a quarry. Today, its survival is dependent on a mechanised production model that is gradually dispensing with manual labour. *El rastro firme* contains footage that conveys the sensation of bearing witness to a world in decline. I'm thinking of shots like the high-speed train running down a track that crosses the estate, sequences like the harvesting of maize, the repairing of the roofs of the old houses where the workers live, the uprooting of the apricot trees, the burning of the remains of the olive trees... I haven't sought to raise awareness about current issues. What seems clear is that changes are occurring on the planet and that requires us to get involved because we need to leave behind something valuable for the next generations.

Your film seems to effectively reconnect with that old dream of social realism that Spanish cinema has been aspiring to for a long time. It is also a realism that can be appreciated in the camera itself, which privileges the selection of material shots that reveals the farmland through its textures. Do you think that your film opens up a new space for conceiving of the rural world? Do you feel that you have managed to expose a reality that does not usually have a place in the commercial circuits of our country?

My intention was to get away from the typical vision of the land problem in Andalusia. To explain this issue from a different place—in this case, the controversial *latifundium*. The idea was to tell the story of an aristocrat and reveal to the viewer a new way of looking at and understanding the Andalusian countryside with the mythical tale as a guide. This can prompt us to ask ourselves whether what we take for granted actually contains another meaning.

With respect to the rural reality and its exposure on commercial circuits, in a way, I think so. I have the satisfaction of having been able to make the film I wanted, with the limitations of my experience and my budget, on a subject that I have studied.

Considering the enormous commercial success that rural cinema has been having in recent years, what do you think the future holds for agrarian documentaries in Spain?

There is a growing interest in returning to the rural environment in my generation and in later generations. The idea of returning to our origins and *resetting* is part of the spirit of the times. It is an idea that has been reinforced since the COVID-19 pandemic. This represents an interesting foundation for a greater interest in creating works that address this theme.

To conclude, do you plan to continue exploring this aspect of the rural world?

Just now, I have made what seems to be a short film in Cabra (a municipality in Córdoba province), but focusing more on the urban than the rural world. In addition, I am working on another feature film project that does have a link with the rural world, which is set in a place affected by mining. ■

Figure 7. Importance of the landscape as a protagonist in the documentary



**FROM SOCIAL REALISM TO FILMIC FABLE:
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DOCUMENTARIES. DIALOGUE WITH
FERNANDO GÓMEZ LUNA**

Abstract

The Spanish agrarian documentary, represented by directors as important as José Neches or the Marquis of Villa Alcázar, far from being exhausted, is a way of creation for directors today. This is the case of the documentary *El rastro firme* (Fernando Gómez Luna, 2022) in which the aesthetic-narrative approaches of the agrarian documentary tradition are brought into play, although at the same time they are updated through the introduction of greater social realism or the path of myth, so present in Erice's filmography. Thus, through the interview with the director, the aim is to address the way the film is made, along with the approach to the context of production and post-production of it.

Key words

Social Realism; Agrarian Documentary; *El rastro firme*; Fernando Gómez Luna; Spanish Cinema.

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Alberto Añón Lara holds a PhD in heritage and a degree in art history from Universidad de Córdoba. He is the author of the monograph *La metáfora zombi en el cine y la ficción televisiva* (UCOPress, 2023). His research focuses on the critical reception of classic horror cinema in US and Spanish film magazines in the 1930s, and most recently on the rural/urban dialectic in films of the genre, as a member of the HITEAC (History, Theory and Analysis of Cinema) research group. Contact: l92anlaa@uco.es

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**DEL REALISMO SOCIAL A LA FÁBULA FÍLMICA.
NUEVOS PLANTEAMIENTOS DEL DOCUMENTAL
AGRARIO ESPAÑOL. DIÁLOGO CON
FERNANDO GÓMEZ LUNA**

Resumen

El documental agrario español, representado por directores de la talla de José Neches o el Marqués de Villa-Alcázar, lejos de agotarse, supone una vía de creación para los directores en la actualidad. Es el caso del documental *El rastro firme* (Fernando Gómez Luna, 2022) en el que se ponen en juego los planteamientos estético-narrativos de la tradición documentalista agraria, aunque a su vez se actualizan mediante la introducción de un mayor realismo social o de la vía del mito tan presente en la filmografía ericiana. Así, mediante la entrevista al director, se pretende abordar la *forma de hacer* la película, junto con el acercamiento al contexto de producción y posproducción de esta.

Palabras clave

Realismo social; documental agrario; *El rastro firme*; Fernando Gómez Luna; cine español.

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