# THE ARCHIVE AND THE AGRARIAN DOCUMENTARY MEMORY

## introduction

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## discussion

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## conclusion

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# I introduction

#### FERNANDO LUQUE GUTIÉRREZ

Originally conceived as a primarily functional tool integrated into the agricultural reform and rural modernisation projects and initiatives promoted by the competent authorities since the beginning of the last century, the most basic definition of the agrarian documentary is in fact usually summarised in terms of the informative. propagandistic and above all pedagogical usefulness that would justify the cost and objective of its production by public administrations (Poyato Sánchez, 2018). This practical purpose has resulted in a corpus composed mostly of short or medium-length films subordinated to the transmission of technical, scientific, mechanical. economic, medical, or any other theoretical and practical knowledge disseminated among the rural population—farmers, stockbreeders and other professionals in the sector—screened in a clearly educational context.

However, this causal definition should not lead us to oversimplify the richness of the agrarian documentary understood as a creative movement that transcends national boundaries, where the historical transformations of the modes of production and lifestyles of the peasant societies documented in its images all converge, together with the evolution of the formal, aesthetic and semantic systems it mobilises in the fulfilment of its functions. It is, in short, a filmic form that establi-

shes a productive, intricate network of expressive redirections through contact with the different dominant systems in the general history of documentary film (with which it is primarily intertwined due to its ontological condition), but also with other styles that can be described as belonging to the more canonical codes of narrative fiction cinema or associated with avant-garde formalism and experimentation, in a synthesis that underscores the extraordinary malleability that characterises this apparently humble breed of documentary (Gómez, 2015).

The unquestionable historical, anthropological, sociological and technical value of these filmic documents that form an inalienable part of our heritage, is complemented by other essentially cinematographic values that are not always widely recognised as these films exist in most cases on the fringes of the dominant commercial distribution circuits, doomed to invisibility once their useful life as material for internal consumption or very limited distribution is over, rendering them at constant risk of being consigned to oblivion.

Protecting this accumulated memory of filmic documents against such an existential threat are the institutions responsible for safeguarding it. These are the archives maintained by the ministries of agriculture, recognised historical promoters of agrarian documentary filmmaking, who

are particularly important for their invaluable work in retrieving and storing a cinematic heritage that would otherwise be wiped out by the immediacy and voracity of the medium.

In the case of Spain, this role is fulfilled by the Central Archive attached to the current Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA), the historical guarantor of the conservation of the abundant filmography created over time by the different film services that have formed part of the ministry.

Following the first educational films produced by the General Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry at the end of the 1920s and the subsequent Central Agricultural Cinematography Service of the Spanish Republic, the ministry's collection grew exponentially during the Franco regime, thanks to the prolific activity of the Agricultural Extension Service (SEA) and other agencies operating in the sector, such as the National Institute of Colonisation, the National Institute for the Conservation of Nature and the National Land Consolidation Service. The SEA's various educational projects, advertising campaigns and initiatives to raise awareness about the socioeconomic value of the Spanish countryside essentially constitute the origin of the audiovisual productions made by the technical and creative teams employed by the service, including its most emblematic filmmakers. Notable among these are the pioneers Pascual Carrión and Carlos Velo, as well as the uniquely Francoist examples of Jesús Francisco González de la Riva (better known by his noble title of Marquis of Villa-Alcázar) and José Neches,1 among many others effectively responsible for developing a cinematographic and didactic model of outstanding formal and intertextual value. With the transition to democracy and the first signs of the globalisation and digitalisation processes of recent decades, this canonical model would be forced to readapt once again to new modes of creation and new needs to be met (Camarero Rioja, 2014: 36-38).

Through its "Historical" and "Modern" catalogues, the Archive and Media Library of the Ministry of Agriculture, with the invaluable collaboration of the Filmoteca Española in the restoration, conservation and dissemination of the collection, connects with a crucial sample of the development of this cinematographic mode in Spain throughout the different socio-political and creative stages that shaped its constant evolution over time, thus standing out as a key centre of reference for the retrieval and analysis of film footage that is as specific as it is open to possible disciplinary interests.

Bearing in mind that one of the main objectives of this monograph is to contribute as much as possible to making this type of agrarian and rural cinema visible, it is clear that the first step in this respect would be based on direct contact with the available material. In this sense, the Archive as an institution, in the context of contemporary law, is a key pillar of any structure designed to safeguard our documentary memory.

Thus, following the research presented in the monographic dossier and the interesting panorama it offers of the modes, forms and other parameters of the rural documentary subject to academic study, this (Dis)Agreements section, dedicated to dialogue and critical reflection, focuses on the indispensable archival work that makes access to this filmic and audiovisual legacy possible in the first place, giving a voice to the professionals responsible for its technical and administrative management.

To this end, we met with members of the Archive and Library Area of the Studies and Publications Division at the Ministry of Agriculture: Beatriz Contreras (Head of the Area), Luz Gutiérrez (Head of the Media Library and Photo Library Section) and Rubén Justo (Head of the Technical Section), as well as the Director of the Filmoteca Española (Spanish Film Library), Valeria Camporesi, to discuss the main functions and objectives of archives today, and especially the functioning

and services that these institutions provide to the user, in a historical context in which the potential dehumanisation of electronic administration and the loss of public credibility due to digital simulation, pose important challenges for the immediate future.<sup>2</sup>

#### **NOTES**

- \* This work has been carried out in the context of the research project Agricultural documentaries and nationalities: comparative study of the productions of the Ministries of Agriculture of Spain, France and Italy (1930-1979) of the State Programme for the Promotion of Knowledge Generation and Scientific and Technological Strengthening of the R&D&I System and the State Programme for R&D&I oriented towards the challenges of society of the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (Ref. PID2019-105462GB-I00). Call 2019. PI1: Ana Melendo; PI2: Pedro Poyato.
- 1. The cases of the Marquis of Villa-Alcázar and José Neches are especially significant in terms of the results of the heritage recovery and restoration work carried out by the Archive and the Media Library of the Ministry of Agriculture, in collaboration with the Filmoteca Española and researchers such as Pedro Poyato and Ana Melendo of Universidad de Córdoba and Agustín Gómez of Universidad de Málaga, among others. This joint work facilitated the production of the digital DVD edition of the complete filmographies of these filmmaker-engineers, under the title Obra cinematográfica 1934-1966. El Marqués de Villa Alcázar, Serie Fondo Documental Histórico Cinematográfica, nº 11 (2015) and Obra cinematográfica 1945-1976. José Neches Nicolás. Serie Fondo Documental Histórico Cinematográfica, nº 12 (2016).
- 2. The conversation with Beatriz Contreras, Luz Gutiérrez and Rubén Justo from the Archive and Library Area of the Ministry of Agriculture took place in May 2023 via video conference. The exchange with Valeria Camporesi took place during July 2023. The discussions were transcribed by Fernando Luque Gutiérrez and organised thematically.

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# discussion **PERSPECTIVES**

I. As experienced managers of documentary archives and the heritage they contain, could you summarise the main objectives and functions of the Archive and Library Area of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA)?

## **Beatriz Contreras**

First of all, as a unit integrated into the Archives System of the Spanish national government, we have the responsibilities of a memory centre that has to ensure the transparency of the administration in a democratic system based on the rule of law, so that all its activity is exposed to public scrutiny. This would be the biggest differential feature of archives in the modern contemporary age. In the past, they were restricted to the conservation and safekeeping of documents related exclusively to the activities of the ruling classes, but this would change with the creation of the first public registers during the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, thus beginning the long process that has led us to the current concept, based on the inalienable public function that extends this right to all citizens. In this sense, we always aim to be actively transparent with all the documents we manage, so that users can view

and thus evaluate what the authorities are doing in the fulfilment of their duties.

In the specific context of this department of the Ministry of Agriculture, the archive system is established by a ministerial order that grants it the coordination and management of the documentary material being safeguarded. We also offer technical advice to the rest of the units on the procedures for dealing with the different types of documents that they may handle in the administrative phase, and once this first duty has been fulfilled, we try to ensure the transfer of all these materials to the Central Archive, as it is the guarantor of the conservation and dissemination of this important documentary heritage for the public.

However, sometimes it is difficult to ensure full awareness of the fact that the documents have a much longer journey than the one determined by the administrative management phase, that in fact they are also useful after the ordinary proce-



Los yunteros de Extremadura (Marqués de Villa-Alcázar, 1936)

dure has been completed. We must not forget that pursuant to the Heritage Law, all publicly owned documents are part of the documentary heritage, and as such they are protected according to a meticulously regulated procedure, whereby the possibility of their elimination can only be decided by the Ministry's Higher Qualification Commission (Comisión Superior Calificadora), which is ultimately responsible for the final verdict on such questions. When it is a parchment or other document that may stand out for its age or historical and artistic value, it is usually quite easily accepted that it must be preserved and protected, but this is not always the case with a simple expenditure file, for example, or even with other photographic or audiovisual materials related to an ordinary action. From our perspective, it is important to stress that every public document must be preserved and

protected for present and future public scrutiny, and in this sense the work of raising awareness is of fundamental importance.

2. With regard to the task of communication and dissemination, the process of digitizing archival collections has facilitated public access to a heritage of incalculable value. In this sense, the abundant film and audiovisual material managed by the MAPA has benefited especially from an extraordinary degree of visibility for a type of production whose specific nature usually places it outside the mainstream film distribution circuits. But before delving into more specific aspects, what type of film and audiovisual material does the Ministry's Media Library manage? What are the main forms of action taken by the Archive and Library Area with respect to this material?

#### Luz Gutiérrez

First of all, it is important to mention that this is extremely diverse material, as the Ministry's established tradition of using the graphic media at its disposal as a way of documenting its activity in the different rural sectors under its responsibility has resulted in a collection summarising the actions historically taken by political leaders and experts during the evolution of the different rural sectors under their responsibility.

Thanks to this previous work, today we have more than 500 film documents in various physical formats that include the usual 16 and 35 mm, Betacam, Super-8 and VHS formats. It is material of a markedly agricultural nature, made up of didactic pieces, reports and documentaries on the rural world that are currently kept at the Filmoteca Española's Conservation and Restoration Centre. There are also more recent productions, made in the last few years for the national and in-

ternational campaigns sponsored by the Ministry, which have come to us in different digital formats that are added to the collection.

In addition, together with the film and audiovisual material, we also manage a repository of photographs with more than 100,000 images covering a very long time period, even including examples on glass plates, nearly all of which have been digitized in recent years.

#### **Beatriz Contreras**

As for the means of dissemination, although occasional exhibitions are held in collaboration with other institutions, as well as appearances in the press or in publications like the one where this discussion will be published, our main efforts are currently focused on the exhaustive cataloguing of all the material that we actually have. There is still a lot of raw material that needs to be identified and catalogued in a way that facilitates user searches and orientation. Our work is based on the maxim that to disseminate the available collections effectively, you have to work a lot with them first, and at the moment we are in that phase, developing the means at our disposal to be able to give the right level of visibility to collections that are also quite specific thematically speaking, as they are related to the action of a ministry that is highly specialised in the rural sector, and they constitute a rich heritage that must be preserved and promoted.

#### Rubén Justo

I think that in the cataloguing process that we are currently in the middle of, trying to give more order to the documentary collections, we also face the same problem that Beatriz referred to earlier. As is the case with a simple expenditure file, it is often difficult to make people understand the need to preserve the abundant photographic or audiovisual material that gets used occasionally as part of a ministerial initiative, forming part of some report or activity. This causes it to pile

up rather carelessly until finally we are asked to intervene to save all that documentary material from destruction, which further complicates the process, as we are then faced with a large number of usually unidentified images that we have to locate, label and systematise so that they can be made available to the public.

#### **Beatriz Contreras**

Rubén's point here is especially relevant. At a time when so many audiovisual or other types of productions are being made, forming part of the many media campaigns in ministries, departments or other public institutions and agencies, material is constantly being generated that often ends up forgotten in a box somewhere due to the sense of immediacy that defines information and our lifestyles today. In this sense, one of our main forms of action would be to retrieve all this documentary material, in any format, so that it can be suitably archived and thus continue to feed the collection with the most recent productions.

Our work is also very diverse in this respect, as we are not limited simply to the dissemination of the collections we already have, but also to the continued safeguarding of new documentary material being produced by the Ministry and its partner agencies, whether for advertising, information or training campaigns, events and activities that fall within their purview, and thus ensure that tomorrow we can preserve a complete, functional archive compiling all the stages and materials possible.

As we said, at this time our work is focused mainly on cataloguing the extensive material we have at our disposal and adapting it to an index of subjects and descriptors with the aim of designing a document search and retrieval system that meets the needs of today's users, whose philosophy has changed radically with the technological and digital advances, as is obvious. The traditional physical visit, which facilitated in-person guidance by the experts in their service to users,

has now been replaced by an online visit, where users are sitting in front of a screen, without any human element of mediation to guide them in their search and help them identify the precise pathway in order to find what they're looking for, or to suggest related documents that they may not have been aware of.

This is why the search criteria have to be adjusted as precisely as possible. More foresight is needed than ever before, and the system for labelling and describing the items catalogued has to be adapted so that the archive continues to fulfil the basic function of intermediation with the public.

3. In the film production of the Ministry of Agriculture over its extensive history, agrarian documentaries with a pedagogical aim have traditionally stood out for their practical function, summed up in the transmission of theoretical and technical knowledge promoted by the rural improvement and modernisation plans historically undertaken by the institution. Proof of this is the extensive work related to the different film services attached to the Ministry of Agriculture, whose creative staff has included illustrious names such as the Marquis of Villa-Alcázar and José Neches. Now, in view of the new sociocultural context of digital connectivity, how is this didactic function of audiovisual production being tackled by the MAPA?

#### Rubén Justo

To begin with, the archive's Media Library, with its current name and functions, is something relatively recent. Although initially it did continue to carry out that in-house production work in a way, following in the tradition of the previous film and documentary services historically associated with the Ministry of Agriculture, in reality, it no longer has those exclusive functions in practice. Each unit, according to its specific needs, is directly responsible for hiring an external production company to take care of the production of the graphic and audiovisual material in question.

Although some productions may still have educational or pedagogical objectives, as was the case originally and in the work you mentioned of the Marquis of Villa-Alcázar or José Neches, the most common purposes now are advertising and general dissemination. However, it is true that the context of these films included in the historical collection has changed a lot at all levels. When those filmmakers were active, the Ministry was still the great central agency responsible

for all the agricultural development and training in the country. This pedagogical objective changed completely with the establishment of Spain's autonomous communities, which took over these tasks, thereby decentralising previously national responsibilities: and on the other hand, there was the professionalisation of farming and stockbreeding itself. Today it is the professional training courses or agricultural education centres that are responsible for offering regulated studies for these fields, with an integrated teaching system that no longer has so much need of the audiovisual productions that were once essential for conveying information and knowledge to a rural population that would not have had access to it by any other means.

#### **Beatriz Contreras**

Indeed, technological advances have rendered the methods used in the past obsolete. In those days, agricultural extension agents would travel with their teaching material, made up of photographs, slides, films and other resources, to provide on-site

training to farmers and stockbreeders, who would benefit from the practical application of the techniques and knowledge they learned. Today, this is no longer necessary thanks to digital media and platforms that can transfer the techniques and knowledge previously taught in practical training exclusively by the central administration. As a result, ministerial management now targets other needs, although it may still carry out part of its

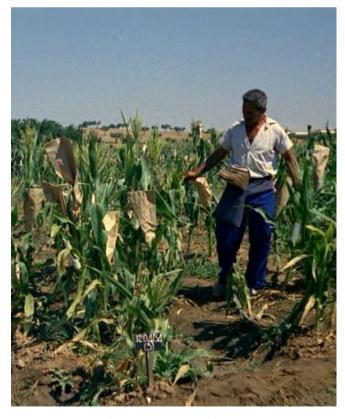
former role through institutional campaigns; for example, to cite a more or less current case, the *Alimentos de España* Spanish food campaign, and other initiatives with significant media impact.

Unfortunately, due to the complications mentioned above, we don't always have immediate documentation of all the materials that are being made by the ministry's different units and departments.

4. The evaluation of this audiovisual heritage can shed light on a type of film production that has traditionally been left out of the proposed inventories and outlines of film historiographies. In this specific case, I am referring to agrarian documentaries produced for practical purposes by a ministry, but this could be extended to other types of films created for scientific, pedagogical, advertising, propagandistic or any other kind of purposes. What place can or should this vast cinematic tradition occupy in the constant rewriting of what we generally call film history?

## Valeria Camporesi

As a social historian of visual culture, I have always thought that attention to works inspired by different criteria crucially enriches the narrative we construct of the past. In any given historical period, there are many more points of dialogue between different types of cinema (industrial, auteur, documentary, propaganda, etc.) than is usually recognised. But this can be taken further: the fact that in this case, for example, we are dealing with films with no artistic intention designed for a practical purpose does not imply that they cannot be subjected to a formal analysis that could help us understand their meaning and how they have been constructed. On the contrary, it may even be easier to understand in what sense a film is a construction, and that what is conveyed in images is a discourse about the world, as demonstrated by the articles published in this journal, as well as the many academic publications that have been analysed the materials of the Ministry of Agriculture in recent years.



El cultivo del maíz (José Neches, 1962)

5. From a formal point of view, in the fulfilment of this didactic purpose, agrarian documentaries produced under the auspices of the ministry have evolved in contact with the history of documentary and fiction cinema itself, resulting in an interesting variety of formats and styles. Considering this complexity in terms of its exact definition, what are the main criteria for cataloguing and ordering this type of documentary material? How does the differentiation between the historical and modern contexts affect this?

#### Rubén Justo

As Beatriz said, what is not described is not found, so our work is focused on preserving the documents, cataloguing them according to their optimal description and ordering them so that they can later be retrieved by the public through this archival service. In this sense, it is important to submit them to a basic and general description that facilitates user searches and access to the archived materials, but it must be borne in mind that users who are ultimately free to study them as they see fit, according to their objectives and particular perspective, whether that be an artistic, historical, sociological or any other kind of perspective.

Archives, libraries, museums and other institutions that perform similar functions, such as film libraries in this case, tend to adopt standardised cataloguing models, with international criteria that establish common guidelines. However, in the specific example of archives, the standard functions as a multilevel descriptor, with groups of works that are organised into collections, sub-collections, series, etc. Normally, the upper level or levels of the collection are described, while the photographic or audiovisual documents that it contains are only differentiated by the references that allow them to be catalogued as part of the set. These are hierarchical classifications that are not necessarily described in great detail at all levels. unlike museums or libraries, which work on the specific object, the book or work of art in question.

In practice, the ideal might be a combination of both methodologies, focusing on the co-

llection as a whole and on the final document, trying to cover all the levels and sublevels that archival collections are organised into, especially graphic and audiovisual collections, where a more detailed description may be more important. It is something that is being corrected little by little, and in recent revisions it has been decided to include more descriptors and subjects to improve this identification and retrieval process. This should help enhance the existing collections, make them much more visible to the public in general, and to the potential analyst and researcher in particular.

#### **Beatriz Contreras**

We must not forget that unlike museums or libraries, in archives we understand documentation in basic terms, whereby things have their contextualisation, a serialised nature. What we analyse or study in the first instance is not individual pieces, but documentary series related to the same function or activity, this being the set to be catalogued according to a basic structure. In other words, although there is an increasing number of search criteria, or a greater number of points of access to the information, we as a management unit cannot consider individual criteria, since they fall outside our purview. We simply try to systematise descriptions to make them as functional and objective as possible, in order to ensure access to the users who want to work with the available documentary collections, as ultimately it is their task to contextualise them in a specific field of study or interest.

6. The commendable work of the Archive and Library Area to highlight this heritage and make it accessible has facilitated a remarkable increase in academic studies that focus on agrarian and rural documentaries, as this monographic issue demonstrates. In addition to the traditional media, what other possibilities and services are offered to potential researchers with an interest in this subject? On the other hand, considering the connections that the Ministry's audiovisual production establishes with productions by its European and international counterparts, are there any collaboration and exchange programs with other similar institutions responsible for the management of this cinematic material related to rural documentaries?

#### Luz Gutiérrez

Currently, all the available material can be viewed both in person and through online platforms, such as YouTube, where several videos and audiovisual materials have been uploaded for internal and external viewers. We are aware of our shortcomings in this regard, and we are working to improve a generic online search system for the two catalogues that can be consulted: documentaries made up to 1981 and those made since, which constitute the historical and modern catalogues under our management. As we have been saying, that would be the main objective for the near future, to be able to provide access to all the digitised collections.

As for the collaborations carried out by area, we have worked with the Reina Sofía Museum and the ICO Foundation Museum, in both cases

with exclusively photographic material. This is in addition to our collaboration with the Filmoteca Española for a possible Spanish film platform with a specific section on these rural productions.

#### **Beatriz Contreras**

Within our limitations, this unit is always happy to collaborate on activities that pursue our ultimate function of disseminating a documentary heritage that belongs to all Spaniards, and as such we must try to make people aware of it. We rely on this project together with the Filmoteca Española, with whom we have an agreement for the conservation of delicate material that is beyond our capacity to maintain, and which is now deposited with them. It is important to remember that this collection keeps expanding as we add both newly created productions and material recovered from the past.

7. This very important agreement between the Archive and Library Area of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Filmoteca Española has played a key role in the process of preserving, restoring and promoting the agrarian audiovisual heritage of its documentary collections. From the perspective of the film institution, how is this collaboration valued? What have been the main lines of action of the Film Library in the management of this documentary material?

#### Valeria Camporesi

The most important point to stress is that this type of collaboration is essential for the effective preservation and promotion of our cinematic and audiovisual heritage. On the one hand, the

Filmoteca Española has facilities, procedures and personnel specialising in everything related to the inspection, cataloguing, and conservation of audiovisual works in any type of photochemical, electronic or digital format. The participation of

a film library that operates according to the criteria and values of the International Federation of Film Archives is essential to guarantee the future of this film heritage. On the other hand, the collaborating institutions, in this case the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, provide the specific knowledge, network of contacts, and the general context that makes the materials meaningful, while also providing the keys to interpreting

them in a way that allows, guides and promotes their dissemination.

In this sense, the example of these documentaries is quite emblematic, although due to the characteristics of the works themselves, the interaction between the two institutions has been defined more by respect for each area of specialisation than by the construction of spaces for joint work.

# 8. In your opinion, what would be the biggest challenges that archives and their managers have to and will have to face in these times when so-called post-truth, deepfakes and AI are gaining ground?

#### **Beatriz Contreras**

Broadly speaking, we identify three major challenges that we will have to keep tackling in the coming years. First, as mentioned earlier, many of our efforts are aimed at enforcing the law, so that all that documentary material to which we do not yet have access is ultimately added to the rich heritage available to the public. A lot of our work is aimed at this, to convey and consolidate the idea that this reuse must be an indisputable fact, as it is aimed at fulfilling an essential right of citizens in a democracy.

Secondly, and no less important, another of the main points of attention is the process of implementing electronic administration. However, this is governed by very strict basic rules that clearly indicate its operation with respect to the case we're discussing here, as well as the inalienable values of respect for the document that ensures its reliability beyond any doubt, in a system of guarantees. Until now, the archives have been considered reliable due to their credibility and guarantees, and these factors must be maintained in this new digital era, so that we can keep trying to ensure the continuity of this reliability.

To achieve this goal, as the ones responsible for safeguarding the documents after their administrative life, we must track them back to their original production to ensure the required traceability and reliability.

Finally, although it may seem contrary to the purpose and interests of this interview, it is necessary to stress another key issue related to the objectives and general operations of archives, and that is that the safeguarded documents are



La intervención del técnico de la Agencia de Extensión Agraria en Las horas de la tierra (José Neches, 1965)

not merely cultural objects. Their value transcends this concept, as they form an essential part of a democratic State governed by the rule of law, where administrations are obliged to be accountable to citizens. The Archive is an essential institution in this sense, and it has an obligation to play an important role in the principle of transpa-

rency on which it is founded. However, in reality we achieve a very limited influence, so the limitation to the purely cultural factor can act to the detriment of this other function, or at least overshadow it. From our perspective, both functions must be conscientiously complied with, since they constitute our raison d'être as an institution.

9. Returning to the case of agrarian documentaries, the work of the Filmoteca Española has been essential for the revaluation of truly creative figures such as the Marquis of Villa-Alcázar and José Neches, who are emblematic of the extraordinary formal richness that these films have been able to achieve over the course of their historical evolution. Thanks to the combined efforts with the Archive team of the Ministry of Agriculture, and the researchers, analysts, historians and others involved in this object of study for the purposes of research and dissemination, today we can access complete filmographies, restored and interpreted according to their historical, political, social and cinematic contexts. Considering the long way there is still to go, what would be the major themes or filmmakers that still require in-depth study?

#### Valeria Camporesi

Precisely taking into account that the road ahead is long and wide, I think that the most interesting approach might be not so much to identify great figures, although obviously it can be an effective

starting point, but to aim instead to broaden our view of film history, and based on this very specific, productive field, to propose a revision of canons and narratives that may in fact be concealing fundamental aspects of the history of culture.



# **I** clausura

FERNANDO LUQUE GUTIÉRREZ

There is no doubt that the arduous task carried out in recent years to digitise the documentary collections kept by ministries of agriculture and other institutions involved in the sector has contributed decisively to the dissemination and recognition of a cinematic heritage that is practically unknown outside its traditional circles of direct influence. Thanks to this effort, we find at our disposal a remarkable quantity of audiovisual resources and materials hosted on online platforms, ready to be viewed, downloaded and shared by users who, with the click of a button, can quickly and easily access the essential filmographies associated with the historical and formal development of this particular type of agrarian cinema.

However, none of this would be possible without the active work carried out by the Archive, as an institution designed to ensure the survival of the documentary memory to which the film production discussed here belongs. The fact that today we have access to productions made under the auspices of the Spanish Agricultural Extension Service, the French SCMA (Service Cinématographique du Ministère de l'Agriculture) or the Italian

Istituto Luce (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa), to cite particularly outstanding examples both in quantitative and qualitative terms, is a direct consequence of the commitment of the respective archives responsible for protecting, preserving and organising them, and making them available to the public. They thus stand out as centres of indisputable importance for research on the object of study that is the focus of this issue of L'Atalante.

Through our dialogue with Beatriz Contreras, Luz Gutiérrez and Rubén Justo, professionals responsible for the management of the Archive and Library Area of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and with Valeria Camporesi from the Filmoteca Española, we have sought to acquire a first-hand perspective on the functions of and challenges affecting archival practice today, with special attention to the repercussions this has on its role as an intermediary for users or researchers.

Their contributions point towards a series of ideas and reflections that are invariably based on one inalienable principle, which is reflected in the exercise of their public vocation and their vital

importance to the functioning of a fully-fledged democratic system. The true objective is not merely to amass the documentary material generated in the course of the government's ordinary activity, but ultimately to place it at the disposal of the public as a guarantee of transparency in management and the possibility of rigorous scrutiny, which applies to all documents that fall under its authority for whatever reason.

The participants' conclusions highlight an important point in this respect, since the exhaustiveness required in the effective fulfilment of this vital purpose entails the safekeeping and management of all registered documentation, without the application of any other circumstance or subjective consideration to screen the material, for example, in view of a possible added technical or artistic value. The Archive thus fulfils a universal objective that would explain the physical survival of film productions that had no commercial release, no mention in the press or attention from film critics, and (theoretically) no apparent narrative or aesthetic value. Its activity therefore has the merit of preserving the memory of an agrarian, industrial, scientific, urban, educational or promotional kind of filmmaking-in short, subordinated to another profession or field of knowledge and therefore relegated by traditional historiography to a corner of minimal significance. The intention here is to correct this by recognising these films within the historical processes of cinema and of the image in general (Sánchez Noriega, 2021: 9).

In response to this intention and favoured by the advent of digital connectivity referred to at the beginning of this closing section, there has been a recent proliferation of research on agrarian documentary film, and with it of arguments and conclusions confirming the cinematic and interdisciplinary richness of this audiovisual heritage throughout its extensive and productive history. Little by little, a specific bibliography is growing, resulting from the individual and collective efforts organised by different R&D projects that since 2013 have been focusing on the particular cases of the aforementioned Marquis of Villa-Alcázar and José Neches, as well as the intersections of this possible Spanish model with those of other national film traditions. 1 We are gradually gaining greater knowledge about the documentary forms that structure the agrarian documentary, its narrative and semantic systems, its staging, editing, music, propagandistic and pedagogical components, and other parameters that define its identity and its historical and cinematic contextualisation. However, there is still much to be done in a field of study as open and relatively unexplored as this one.

In this context, the Archive is joining the film library in its essential role as an intermediary between researchers and the primary sources that make up this documentary legacy. This is demonstrated by the outstanding example of the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, which has been the focus of this section, and the keen sense of public duty shown by the professionals of the Archive and Library Area who have participated in this discussion. We sincerely thank them for their invaluable contributions, and above all for their commitment as managers of the agrarian documentary memory to ensure the survival of all the human knowledge housed in their archival collections—of course including the film collections. We have sought to showcase their efforts in this issue of L'Atalante, participating in the dissemination and recognition of an audiovisual heritage that is essential to a comprehensive vision of the cinematographic image, documentary or otherwise, of the 20th century.  $\blacksquare$ 

#### **NOTES**

 The R&D research projects referred to here are those directed by Pedro Poyato and Ana Melendo: La obra del marqués de Villa-Alcázar (1934-1966): Un eslabón necesario en la historia del documental cinematográfico en España, active from 2013 to 2016; La contribución de José Neches al documental agrario español del Franquismo (1945-1976), from 2017 to 2019; and Documentales agrarios y nacionalidades: estudio comparado de las producciones de los Ministerios de Agricultura de España, Francia e Italia (1930-1979), currently active.

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# THE ARCHIVE AND THE AGRARIAN DOCUMENTARY MEMORY

#### **Abstract**

The (Dis)Agreements section proposes an approach to the role played by public archives in the management and diffusion of film heritage linked to agricultural and rural documentary. For that purpose, we have met with Beatriz Contreras, Luz Gutiérrez and Rubén Justo, professionals responsible for the Archive and Library Area of the Spanish Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación, and Valeria Camporesi, current director of the Filmoteca Española, with the aim of establishing a dialogue that sheds light on the main functions and challenges faced by the institution in the current context.

#### Key words

Agrarian documentary; Rural Cinema; Archive; Ministerio de Agricultura.

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### EL ARCHIVO Y LA MEMORIA DOCUMENTAL AGRARIA

#### Resumen

La sección de (Des)encuentros propone una aproximación al papel que desempeñan los archivos públicos en la gestión y difusión del patrimonio fílmico y audiovisual, especialmente el vinculado al documental agrario y rural. Para este fin, nos hemos reunido con Beatriz Contreras, Luz Gutiérrez y Rubén Justo, responsables del Área de Archivo y Biblioteca del Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación, y con Valeria Camporesi, actual directora de la Filmoteca Española, con el objetivo de establecer un diálogo que arroje luz sobre las principales funciones y desafíos afrontados por las instituciones archivísticas en el contexto actual.

#### Palabras clave

Documental agrario; cine rural; Archivo; Ministerio de Agricultura.

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#### Article reference

Contreras Gómez, B., Gutiérrez Porras, L., Justo Álvarez, R., Camporesi, V., Luque Gutiérrez, F. (2024). The Archive and the Agrarian Documentary Memory. L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos, 38, 105-124.

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#### Referencia de este artículo

Contreras Gómez, B., Gutiérrez Porras, L., Justo Álvarez, R., Camporesi, V., Luque Gutiérrez, F. (2024). El Archivo y la memoria documental agraria. L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos, 38, 105-124.

Edita / Published by



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ISSN 1885-3730 (print) /2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com