

DIALOGUE

**“MY WORK CONSISTS OF
FINDING OPENINGS”**

Dialogue with

PERE JOAN VENTURA

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MANUEL DE LA FUENTE

TRANSLATED BY CLARA ORTIZ PACHÓN

Pere Joan Ventura, a prominent figure in activist cinema in Spain, has been following our social reality and giving visibility with his camera to groups or events absent from the coverage of the hegemonic media outlets for more than forty years. He has been responsible for some of the most outstanding contemporary protest documentaries made in Spain, such as *El efecto Iguazú* [The Iguazú Effect], (2002), *¡Hay motivo!* [There Is a Reason!], (2004) or *No estamos solos* [We Are Not Alone], (2015). His filmmaking is characterized by its emphasis on the social dimension, by a desire to get involved, and by collective stories, where the group becomes the real protagonist of resistance against the excesses of the powerful.

His work came to prominence with *El efecto Iguazú*, a film which documented the so-called *Campamento de la Esperanza* [Camp of Hope], the six-month campout held in the year 2000 by the former workers of Sintel (a subsidiary of the Spanish phone giant Telefónica) right in the middle of the Paseo de la Castellana in Madrid. The documentary *¡Hay motivo!* would be recognized as one of the best chronicles of the right-wing government of José María Aznar and would demonstrate cinema's capacity for participation, a direction that Ventura has pursued throughout his career. We met with him in Madrid, where he is preparing his new documentary and where he offers his views on filmmaking.

Those close to you say that you are always attentive to everything around you and ready to start filming at once. When did you first become interested in films and documentaries?

I have been interested in cameras since childhood. When I was in middle school I used to play-act at shooting films without a camera. You have to keep in mind that the equipment was very expensive back then, not like it is now. Also, I went to the cinema every Sunday, and if I had a chance on a weekday, I'd go too. I watched all kinds of films, of every genre. But I do remember the first strong impression I had, that moment when a film changes you completely: it was during a screening at the Sabadell film club. They were showing *Eva* by Joseph Losey. I came out feeling very moved. I understood then that cinema was a serious thing, that it had enormous potential.

Later and after several failed attempts, I managed to finish an 8mm short film and I showed it to Miquel Porter Moix, the critic for the magazine *Destino*. I went to his house because I was very interested in his opinion. He told me that a film academy was starting up in Barcelona. He was referring to Escola Aixelà. This was in the late sixties; back then the school edited a magazine called *Imagen y sonido*, a rather prestigious publication dedicated to the world of photography and the image. All of this developed around a camera shop called Aixelà, which was located in Las Ramblas and was the most important establishment of its kind in Barcelona. It was run by some committed individuals who set up the school in the basement of the shop. The teaching staff were very interesting people: from Porter Moix himself to Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, as well as Román Gubern, Pere Portabella, José Luis Guarnier and even the Hungarian András Boglár, a follower of Pudovkin's. The whole group was against Franco and they were concerned and wanted to do something about it.

What were the classes like?

We had classes three days a week and we covered everything, from cinematic language to film his-



Pere Joan Ventura during the interview.

tory to editing techniques. Porter had a copy of *Battleship Potemkin* and we analysed the editing. Thanks to Boglár's presence, we watched a lot of Soviet films, like *Mother* by Pudovkin, among others. I lived in Castellar del Vallès and rode my motorbike to Barcelona. There wasn't a lot of money. Friends would lend us equipment, like cameras, which were really expensive back then. I remember that I took a camera to a Raimon concert at the Faculty of Law. Unfortunately, there was a problem and what I filmed – the police attacking the audience – didn't come out. You could say my cinematographic debut was not exactly glorious.

Anyway, we spent two or three years at the school and then it was moved to the Institut del Teatre. That Raimon concert taught me that there was a lot to show people, that people needed to see what was happening. This was why in 1973 a group of people got together to film protests and demonstrations. We shot around fifty films about conflicts like the situation in Nou Barris (a working-class district in Barcelona), ceremonies in support of Salvador Allende, the strike at Motor Ibérica in 1976, etc. But we were always working in very precarious conditions. I will illustrate it with a revealing example: protests in those days were held in the evening, except for the workers'

protests that accompanied strikes, which lasted all day. The political demonstrations in the evenings posed a serious problem in terms of lighting and we looked for solutions like filming near street lights.

Once it had been filmed, the next obstacle would be distributing your material in the context of the dictatorship.

Indeed, added to all these problems were the difficulties in getting this clandestine material out there, which were solved through collaboration with the owners of photo finishing shops and by putting false names on the film reels. We would always put labels of landscapes like “Poppies”, for example, and things like that. Then we would try to get the material shown outside the country, especially in Paris. The International Committee of Solidarity with Spain (*Comité Internacional de Solidaridad con España*) was there, on Rue Saint-Jacques, with Pere Ignasi Fages, [Spanish communist leader] Santiago Carrillo’s secretary, who was also involved in the film world. He and Marcos Ana helped us to promote our films. Swedish television was very open to broadcasting our work as well, so we did have certain ways of ensuring that all those films didn’t just get ignored.

Was your interest in documentaries a conscious decision or did it develop as a result of the circumstances?

I have always tried to look for openings, to see all the issues that need to be addressed in order to expose them. That is what made me organize, for instance, the Castellar del Vallès film club. We showed the banned films that were so hard to find, like *Viridiana*, *The Hour of the Furnaces*, *A Man for Burning*, Llorenç Soler’s films, documentaries about the Spanish Civil War or films from the East.

The years after the dictator’s death were quite uncertain despite the official discourse, which

has tried to present Spain’s transition to democracy as a steady and inevitable process. What was your experience of those years? Was it easy to distance yourself when filming what was going on?

In 1976 we shot a short film called *Primer de maig* [First of May] where we filmed different meetings, people coming together in the countryside on the pretext of an excursion to hold all kinds of speeches and things. I don’t know where that film ended up and, well, it’s better that way because I don’t know how it would make me feel if I saw it today. This has happened to me quite often; when I look back I am surprised because I have always avoided making propaganda, I have tried to make my films *cinematographic*, i.e. fictionalizing reality. But during those years it was difficult to distance oneself from what one was filming.

You have collaborated a lot with Pere Portabella, who in 2015 produced his last full-length film, *No estemos solos*, together with El Gran Wyoming. How has your relationship evolved since those years in Aixelà?

My relationship with Portabella has been very intense over the years, ever since he brought his first films to the school, like *No compteu amb els dits* [Don’t Count with Your Fingers] or *Nocturne 29*. I started by going to several of his films shoots and then I took part in a few of them, like the ones he made with Carles Santos. Later on I worked for [Spanish public broadcaster] Televisión Española (TVE) with his cinematographer, Manel Esteban, who was also an activist filmmaker. We shared a flat in Barcelona and became very close friends: I was his camera assistant for quite a few sports shows like *Sobre el terreno* [On Location] or *Polideportivo* [Sports Centre], mainly on car racing, motorcycling and skiing broadcasts. However, these things don’t always go smoothly: I remember that my first job for Televisión Española was as a sound technician for an interview with Raquel Welch. I had no idea about sound but I was dragged into

the studio and my first experience was horrible, seeing how fast everybody moved around to the pace set by the news director's shouts. At the Catalonia studio there was a rather authoritarian atmosphere that reflected those last years of Franco's regime. Still, we had more room to move than TVE in Madrid. In Catalonia there were programs like *Giravolt*, a kind of weekly news report that dealt with more controversial issues and took a lot more risks.



From left to right: Pere Joan Ventura, Subcomandante Marcos and Georgina Cisquella during the shooting of *Subcomandante Marcos: viaje al sueño zapatista* [Subcomandante Marcos: Voyage to the Zapatista Dream], 1995..

When we review the documentaries from those years we can find a lot of surprises, proving the importance of documentaries beyond their immediate relevance. For instance, in the film released by Pere Portabella in 1977, *Informe general sobre unas cuestiones de interés para una proyección pública* [General Report on Certain Matters of Interest for a Public Screening], politicians of the day are shown expressing their views. And we see Felipe González, before he became prime minister, offering his opinions on the class struggle. And it disproves that discourse – so promi-

nent in the press today – that González shifted to the right over time because his perspective was already very clearly defined.

Felipe González was very clear from the beginning that he had a brand, the Socialist Party. In the film he already explained this openly, that he didn't want a coalition government or a national unity government or any other such experiment, but that each party should compete under their own brand. González came to the shooting in a car with a bodyguard; he already had power. When people tell me that the socialists did a lot, I always answer that they could hardly have done nothing at all after so many years of struggle.

When did you move to Madrid to work?

In the eighties I transferred to the central headquarters of TVE in Madrid as a reporter. After I got there, I left television for ten years and turned totally to filmmaking. Nevertheless, I always worked on the margins and starting from the bottom, with my job as an assistant on Vicente Aranda's *Tiempo de silencio* [Time of Silence]. I kept on working with Portabella and started collaborating with Aranda and Jaime Camino. In 1992 we made a TV series, *Los años vividos* [The Years Lived], which worked really well: we went from the initial 900,000 viewers to three million for the last episode, which was not bad for a series aired on Sunday nights. After that came *El efecto Iguazú*...

Let's stop there for a moment, at *El efecto Iguazú*, your documentary on the struggle of the Sintel workers who camped out on Paseo de la Castellana in the year 2000. Where did the idea to make this documentary come from?

I had already been to the *Campamento de la Esperanza* to shoot some images for a TV news piece. It made an impression on me. I found it remarkable how organized they were, because they had even put names on the streets and squares. It was all really amazing. I decided to accept a proposal the Rodolfo brothers and Nana Montero

had been making me for some time of making a film together. I told them: "Look, there are loads of people camping in El Paseo de la Castellana, a very interesting documentary could come out of that." They accepted and we went right away to the Sintel workers' committee to present our plan to them. We moved into a booth there and there was always one of us there, because we had to earn the trust of the people. After a month and a half of cohabitation they started to get used to our presence and they forgot there was a camera there. They appropriated the project, they made it theirs, and we loved that because we didn't want to be viewed as outsiders. And they helped us to capture every detail of the biggest media days, like when José Saramago came to visit the camp.

The film had a huge impact because it offered a summary of an emblematic event that was a lead story on the news programs for months.

What I like most about the whole experience is the film's ongoing effect, its afterlife. I'm interested in going beyond the mere act of making a documentary because, after the edit, there's always more left out of the film than in it. In this profession I'm especially driven by the possibility of involvement, of participation with my films. *El efecto Iguazú* more than accomplished that goal because when we set ourselves up in El Paseo de la Castellana, you could already see a kind of fatigue among the protestors. The built-up exhaustion was palpable: there had been seven suicides, separations, money was running out and it was getting hard to pay the mortgages. So when the film won an award at the Valladolid International Film Festival, that was a significant boost. It so happened that when the award was announced I was there in Valladolid filming a TV news feature on the festival, so you can imagine how surprised I was. Suddenly a whole bunch of other photographers and camera people turned around, focusing their cameras on me to capture my reaction.

What was unique about that demonstration?

Sintel was a company with highly qualified professionals, with more than four hundred engineers. Furthermore, almost all of them were unionized. When they organized the demonstrations, they were coordinated perfectly and all of the workers were kept in the loop about every decision that was being taken. They were extremely meticulous and transparent about the successive steps. The movement had such a huge impact that the *Partido Popular* [Spain's major right-wing party] worked hard to take it down, they could not allow it.

You showed that same instinct for filming the most conflictive issues when you filmed the 15-M movement, the Spanish anti-austerity protest that started on 15 May 2011.

That day I woke up and as soon as I heard on the radio what was happening, I hurried off to film it. I took a lot of footage and I edited it down to a 12-minute short film called *Volien netejar la plaça* [They Wanted to Clean the Square]. You can watch it on the Internet and it got a lot of views. Actually, it would have had a lot more if I hadn't insisted on giving it such an artistic name. If I had called it *Police Charges in Plaza Cataluña*...

We cannot leave out *¡Hay motivo!*, a collective documentary made with the specific purpose of intervening in the Spanish general election campaign of 2004. That was a year of great tensions in Spanish society, with José María Aznar's government in the middle of serious scandals, such as the Prestige oil spill or the Yak-42 crash, while the public system was stripped of resources.

The inspiration to make that film came at a dinner in the Sahara. I was there with Imanol Uribe, Diego Galán and Georgina Cisquella. When we came back I organized various dinners with José Luis García Sánchez, Vicente Aranda and others to convince them of the need to do something. The *Partido Popular* was out of control and we



Still frame from *No estamos solos* (Pere Joan Ventura, 2015).

had to act. We got El Gran Wyoming involved and started to organize it in earnest by talking to more people in the sector, not only directors, but also technicians. I learnt about dinners in my union years in the world of television in the early eighties. I knew very well that the way to get us better organized was by taking people to dinner. Little by little we organized more dinners and we exchanged points of view. All of this had a multiplying effect and even Pedro Almodóvar agreed to send us a short film, although in the end his schedule didn't allow it. The result was a collective film involving thirty-three directors that was a huge success. An infinite number of copies were made along with a lot of screenings. In Madrid we had a huge public screening scheduled but that day the 11-M terrorist attack occurred and it didn't end up happening.

The Spanish right used the film as an icon to attack the Spanish film industry, one of the few sectors critical of the government of the *Partido Popular*. In those years, they developed a discourse against Spanish cinema to the point that there were people who took pride in never watching Spanish films.

The film made the right really angry. Newspapers like ABC engaged in a fierce campaign against it on the usual pretext that "this is how these movie people waste public funds." The documentary hardened that campaign of the right against Spanish cinema. *El efecto Iguazú* was awarded the Goya and, despite that, TVE has never aired it. It is the only Goya winner that has not merited a screening on public television. TVE management sent us a letter congratulating us for the award because the workers' committee asked them to, but that was all. When José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's Socialist Party formed government, they promised us that they would broadcast it, but they never did either. It was only aired once, on Canal Sur.

As sponsor of the project, did you receive any kind of direct feedback from the ranks of the *Partido Popular*?

I have the advantage of being an unknown. I have always been a little in the shadows. El Gran Wyoming sometimes calls me Captain Spider. Anonymity has its positives and I enjoy it because what I like is filmmaking, working on reality, not giving big speeches or being in the public eye.

Your most recent feature film is *No estamos solos* [We Are Not Alone] (2015), where you take a look at different groups that have launched protests in recent years in response to the handling of the economic crisis. In the film appear groups like the *Solfónica*, the *Comadres de Gijón*, the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* or *Salvem El Cabanyal*. How was the film born?

I started filming a few collectives, like La Solfónica, who were launching protests. At first I thought about repeating the ¡Hay motivo! Experience and make a collective film. But I told myself that sequels are never any good and that that documentary was a success because we were able to read a very specific political context and psychological moment. This time I was not so sure and I did not

think that the project would be able to be reedited ten years later. So once I had gathered enough material, I talked to El Gran Wyoming, who was writing a book called *No estamos solos*. Pere Portabella became involved in the project. It's a small production but it has had a big impact.

It premiered at the San Sebastian Film Festival and that opened up a lot of opportunities to screen it at other festivals, in Nantes, Amsterdam, Havana, Gijón and a lot of other places, always with very big audiences.

The topic of discarded material brings us to the film you are currently working on, about the Coca-Cola company and the protests against the layoffs announced by the company in Spain. How is the production of the film going?

I expect to have it finished soon and it still only has a provisional title: *Somos Coca-Cola en lucha* [We Are Coca-Cola in Battle]. It came out of the preliminary work for *No estamos solos* because it was a story with enough substance for a film of its own, a more conventional one, to explain the whole story. In 2011, Coca-Cola announced a layoff at its factory in Fuenlabrada. The workers called a strike and it went on for months until the courts declared the layoff unlawful. They won in the National High Court and the Supreme Court, and the company was required to pay compensation to the workers. They were given their jobs back. But it's a big scam. The workers are paid every month, they've been given new uniforms, but they don't do anything because Coca-Cola dismantled the factory, thumbing their nose at the court decision. The employees keep protesting against the situation but the company had already decided to shut down the factory. There was a lot of union unity in this case too and no doubt the company decided on the closure on the same day of the approval of the collective agreement, which was quite beneficial to the workers. Coca-Cola was not interested in allowing the example being followed elsewhere, just like what happened with Sintel.

Your films are very interesting because they expose a lot of events and perspectives that have been completely left out of the media coverage.

I remember an exhibition on activism in Barcelona. When I started shooting material for *No estamos solos*, a piece by Itziar González Virós was being exhibited, a scale model of Catalonia called *Catografía de la revolta* [Cartography of the Revolt]. It gave me the focal point for the film. That was what I wanted to tell; I didn't want to show one protest in isolation, but to offer an outline of the different points where there was movement. My purpose was to present a film with no individual protagonists, because I am tired of the styles of American films where the conflicts are resolved by saviour heroes. The key to *No estamos solos* was the social, the collective dimension, the awareness that when we work together we are stronger than we think. ■

"MY WORK CONSISTS OF FINDING OPENINGS". DIALOGUE WITH PERE JOAN VENTURA

Abstract

Pere Joan Ventura (Castellar del Vallés, 1946) has become a key filmmaker of the political documentary in Spain. With films like *El efecto Iguazú* (2002), *¡Hay motivo!* (2004) or *No estamos solos* (2015) he has developed a cinema committed to mobilization in front of abuse of power and social injustice. In the present interview we analyse his career behind the camera.

Key words

Pere Joan Ventura; political documentary; mobilization; Sintel; Spanish cinema.

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Manuel de la Fuente is Associate Professor in Media Studies at the Universitat de València (Spain). He has been researching the political effects of the popular culture while his main teaching interests focus on the documentary film, Spanish film and popular music. He also served as a research fellow and a visiting professor both in Europe and in South America, at the Université de Genève, Paris 12, Virginia, Newcastle, Valdivia, Valparaíso and Temuco. He published many articles dedicated to music and cinema in various international journals and the books *Frank Zappa en el infierno* (Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 2006) and *Madrid. Visiones cinematográficas de los años 1950 a los años 2000* (Neuilly-sur-Seine, Atlante, 2014).

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«MI TRABAJO CONSISTE EN BUSCAR BRECHAS». DÍALOGO CON PERE JOAN VENTURA

Resumen

Pere Joan Ventura (Castellar del Vallés, 1946) se ha convertido en una pieza clave del documental político en España. A través de películas como *El efecto Iguazú* (2002), *¡Hay motivo!* (2004) o *No estamos solos* (2015) ha construido un cine comprometido con la movilización frente a los abusos de poder y la injusticia social. En la presente entrevista exploramos en profundidad su trayectoria detrás de la cámara.

Palabras clave

Pere Joan Ventura; documental político; movilización; Sintel; cine español.

Autor

Manuel de la Fuente es profesor de Comunicación Audiovisual en la Universitat de València. Su investigación se centra en las implicaciones sociopolíticas de la cultura e imparte clases sobre cine documental, cine español y música popular. Ha realizado estancias de investigación y ha sido profesor invitado en universidades europeas y americanas, como Ginebra, París 12, Virginia, Newcastle, Valdivia, Valparaíso y Temuco. Es autor de artículos sobre cine y música en revistas internacionales y de los libros *Frank Zappa en el infierno. El rock como movilización para la disidencia política* (Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 2006) y *Madrid. Visiones cinematográficas de los años 1950 a los años 2000* (Neuilly-sur-Seine, Atlante, 2014).

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