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THE DOCUMENTARY IN SPAIN: POLITICAL SPACES

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Let's begin by putting our cards on the table. We believe that the best way to do this is by referring to an idea posited by Josetxo Cerdán and Josep Maria Català, who suggest that it is not in the format that the guarantee of truth should reside, but in the filmmaker (CERDÁN and CATALÀ, 2007: 17). This assertion clearly points to the need to abandon once and for all the sterile debates over the objectivity of the format, and turn to an examination of the truth that lies in the gaze behind the camera, rather than the formal questions that are presumably inherent to the documentary format in general and to the political documentary in particular. In this respect, Santos Zunzunegui and Imanol Zumalde offer an illuminating perspective when, with reference to the famous footage taken by Abraham Zapruder of John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, they point out the expressive mechanisms within the documentary that aim to create a *truth effect*—or, using the terminology of structural semiotics, a *referential illusion*—whereby “spectators believe that

what they are viewing is a reliable impression or representation, in cultural terms, of something that actually occurred” (ZUMALDE and ZUNZUNEGUI, 2014: 88). As the authors themselves point out, this effect is merely the result of a set of procedures designed to construct this illusion of reality.

We will speak, then, of the political documentary in these terms. The following pages offer a reflection on one aspect of the documentary format that we have not explored in the *Notebook* section of this issue: the Spanish tradition of the political documentary, its activist nature and its direct relationship with events that have defined Spain's recent socio-political history. The recent evolution of the genre in Spain needs to be analysed in direct relation with episodes like the rise of the 15-M Movement in response to public discontent over the political and economic crisis, which various documentary makers have examined from different perspectives. When we hold a microscope up to the different documentary expressions that the

phenomenon has given rise to, we must also inevitably identify the place it occupies in relation to its audience. Far from being viewed exclusively in movie theatres (on the contrary, their presence in cinemas is becoming increasingly marginal), the political documentary has made television its favoured forum, although this has inevitably placed it at an intersection of genres with TV reporting. In short, the documentary's place is becoming increasingly uncertain, and is worthy of an analysis from within that takes these cultural particularities into account. It is for this reason that this discussion could only be begun by experienced voices. The points of view that articulate the analysis belong to four Spanish filmmakers who have cultivated the expressive possibilities of the format from different coordinates, but in all cases with a commitment to political activism. Mercedes Álvarez, Georgina Cisquella, Isadora Guardia and Margarita Ledo are four filmmakers who we believe are leading figures in the field, whose experiences behind the camera can help us shed some light on the current state of the Spanish political documentary. ■

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discussion

I. Perhaps we should begin by setting out a starting point, a definition to work with. What is a political documentary? What elements do you believe a film needs to have to be referred to as such?

Mercedes Álvarez

In general terms, every documentary image is perhaps political, in the sense that Godard suggested that a tracking shot is not just a technical camera movement but a moral question. In the sixties, Chris Marker and his peers had terrible debates over the politics of images. I like this general and precise conception of the documentary image because it suggests that the political lies above all in the way we look at and focus on something, on the very precise presentation of the point of view—however trivial or limited the topic may seem—and perhaps on seeking an unconventional gaze, never trite, but always the gaze of a camera that is aware of what it is doing. In this way, a very limited topic addressed in a documentary can have huge political ramifications.

In a restricted sense or as it is conventionally understood, a political documentary is perhaps a documentary that attempts to delve into the secret heart of the establishment, or at least to point in that direction, to intuit it.

Georgina Cisquella

I find it difficult to delimit a specific territory for the *political documentary*. At the end of the day, any view through a film camera of the world that surrounds us, although we may not always be aware of it, has a political dimension. From the choice of a story, whether intimate or collective, the choice of characters, the location of the camera at a specific time and place and, of course, the construction of the scenes in the editing room, define our point of view on what is happening or could happen to us.

A lot of different terminology has been used to define the level of commitment of a documentary filmmaker: militant cinema, activist cinema, action

cinema, revolutionary cinema, intervention cinema and even picketer cinema. All of these could probably be linked to the concept of the political documentary, where the filmmaker gets directly involved in social issues with the intention of transforming the world.

Of course, it is not a neutral type of cinema; I don't believe in the filmmaker's *objectivity* of the filmmaker, but in exposing and taking a stand against a dishonest official narrative of reality. In this sense, I would agree with the idea of the Chilean academics Salinas and Stange (2009), who suggest that a documentary becomes political when it adopts a stance over a power struggle where a model for society, forms of identity and conflicting nation-state projects are at stake. A documentary is political when, in response to such a struggle, its narrative establishes a commitment, which in turn may be dominant, emerging or residual in relation to the context in which it is presented.

Isadora Guardia

I think that the political documentary has always moved around the edges of the social, at specific historical moments in the domain of propaganda, of activism. It swings across that long spectrum of social conflicts in general and those that we could specifically define as political. But of course, what are these conflicts? My position is that any social conflict has a political origin from which it emerges, just as any political conflict has social repercussions. I think that the question is identifying the battlefield in the public sphere and the action within that sphere.

The relationship between film and politics is constant, and since its origins the difference has been whether you make it the obvious object of

study or analysis, or use an apparently neutral filmic discourse that effects a hegemonising and purely ideological process.

The period of the world wars facilitated the development of a type of documentary that was basically propaganda, with a clearly political intention, but I don't know if we would define it as political documentary given the evolution and the new films which, especially since the fifties and sixties, began to swamp the genre, which clearly state a position, a vision, an opinion on things, and attempt an analysis of them.

A starting point for me is *Drifters* (John Grierson, 1929). Just as Rotha suggests in his critiques of the "father of the British documentary school", Grierson's films were materialistic, reflecting the relationships and modes of production of a capitalist society in growth. He gave an image to the concept of surplus value, and in so doing he made political documentaries, although Grierson himself never would have dared to use such terms.

The defining elements, I think, aren't found so much in a specific theme of political processes or conflicts like *La Pelota Vasca: La piel contra la piedra* (Julio Medem, 2003), which is obviously a political documentary, but rather in films that invade the public sphere or territory and reveal the reality, question it and seek options for change.

Margarita Ledo

Taking a position, point of view, putting what is being described in relation with what is being decried, *being with...* Each of these ideas brings with it the writing of the "I", the most subjective in the most collective. If we go back to that seminal period, the sixties, when the rise of new ideas and expressions was associated with the right to difference, with the multiplication of more diverse practices, how do we separate *La hora de los hornos* (1968), at a political and aesthetic level, from the total commitment of its filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino and their expression of a head-on collision with imperialism? Basically, the political documentary

takes aim at the Establishment. It does not make peace with it. In some cases they are new, collaborative experiences, urgent films that test their powers on a specific situation: *¡Hay motivo!* (2004), *Hai que botarlos* (2005). In others they are more of a compilation of particular symptoms, actions or celebrations (because making and distributing a clandestine image is always a party), films presented as programmatic, with the aim of participating in the development of a specific political situation, like *Informe general sobre unas cuestiones de interés para una proyección pública* (Pere Portabella, 1977). Or because a social class decides to leap into the public sphere, to come into being with the camera as its mediator. It is the direct experience of female workers *without papers* at the Orosa canning factory on the island Illa de Arousa, who organised and filmed a hunger strike;¹ it is Joaquim Jordà as the *anchor* in *Numax Presenta* (1980). The blood tie between all these films is still the identity between the reality to be transformed and a type of film that selects that reality as material, interrogates it and aims to get the viewer to desire it.

***Doli, Doli, Doli...coas conserveiras. Rexistro de traballo* (Uqui Permuy, 2011)**



2. The last few years in Spain have been especially tumultuous, both in political and economic terms, but especially in the social sphere, where the response to the unrest has been a powerful social mobilisation led by the 15-M phenomenon. Do you think that this phenomenon has been effectively tracked by the documentary genre? Have the films directly or indirectly related to it invited a deeper reflection?

Mercedes Álvarez

Although it's true that a lot of documentaries have indeed been made on the topic, I don't think that many have become points of reference for these movements. In my case, I have only been able to see the film made by Martin Patino and one other—very interesting—film titled *50 días de mayo* (*Ensayo para una revolución*) (Alfonso Amador, 2012) on the demonstrations. Our view of it was informed mostly by the television coverage, which was partial, fragmentary, biased and fleeting. I would even say that the way that the “Podemos” political movement and its leaders came together owed a lot to the television discourse and coverage. But I think that the social and generational tide of indignation and renewal that lies behind it is pretty varied and complex. I realised this after seeing, for example, Silvia Munt's extremely important documentary, to which Daniel Lacasa, who worked with me on *Mercado de Futuros* (Mercedes Álvarez, 2011), also contributed: *La Granja del Pas* (2015), a clear, meticulous, expository and illuminating documentary about the anti-eviction movements. When I saw it I understood a lot of things and I wondered why the TV networks couldn't find an hour of thoughtful reflection to address an important topic this way, any topic. Instead, they dedicate hours and hours to informational noise, effectively fogging up our image of the political reality.

Georgina Cisquella

In a quick glance at the pictures of Madrid's Puerta del Sol during the days of the 15-M demonstrations you will see thousands of mobile phones and hundreds of cameras recording that historic event. The occupation of the central squares in numerous Spanish cities in May 2011 turned into a sublime tempta-

tion for filmmakers and citizens who were anxious to disseminate this unprecedented mobilisation with its highly appealing choreographies. The immediate result was a cloud of rushed images whose main function was to go instantly viral and tell the world what was happening. All of this was distilled into numerous documentaries, more than twenty-five, equally rushed, which included testimonies by the leaders and various political assessments, in keeping with the traditional objectives of agitprop cinema. Among these was *Libre te quiero* (2012), directed by the veteran filmmaker Basilio Martín Patino, who decided to join the legion of indignant masses and offer his personal take on it. Almost all of them have been broadcast on alternative stations or online, where a huge visual archive has been compiled which perhaps one day, with the benefit of time and distance, may result in a creative compilation documentary.

The 15-M Movement was *officially* declared dead when the crowds left the main squares; but it wasn't dead; it moved into the suburbs. That was where powerful citizens' movements were consolidated, like the PAH [Platform for People Affected by Mortgages], created a few years earlier, or the “Mareas” demonstrations in defence of public health and education, and from there some more thoughtful documentaries emerged. Among these were *La Granja del Pas*, directed by Silvia Munt, which follows a year in the lives of the victims of mortgage evictions, and *No estamos solos* (2015), by Pere Joan Ventura, which charts the indignation around the country expressed in the creativity of its citizens.

In my opinion, the main function of these films ties in with the same spirit of the 15-M Movement: collective reflection in the discussions that begin after they are screened, the use of the documentary to generate different attitudes and solidarity.

Isadora Guardia

To answer this question, I'm going to cheat a little and quote a very dear friend and colleague. One of the organisers of the 15-M collective in Valencia: Juan Bordera.

Juan Bordera defines 15-M as a multitude of voices, a desperate cry intended to grab the attention of sectors that don't listen; to articulate and develop the absolutely essential idea that *another world is possible*.

Something that defines the articulation of the movement and that is part of this context of technological development is the use of social networks, of mobile phones and cameras. Bordera notes that the number of people in the first few days of 15-M, in just five days, reached five to ten thousand, and here is where social networks are of fundamental importance.

But for Juan Bordera the number of devices, of images, results in what is more a kind of *visual indigestion*, in the saturation of social networks with a multitude of videos being posted constantly and instantaneously, than in an audiovisual space for deeper reflection. The process is shared, but there is a lack of development and more complex analysis. The 15-M Movement has provided *fodder* more for television reporting than for political documentary. The most visible and widely distributed films are relatively small in number, and one that shines brightly among them is Cecilia Barriga's *Tres instantes, un grito* (2013), which connects three moments, three magical but real instants between 15-M in Madrid, Occupy in New York City and the student uprising in Chile.

There is also *Dormíamos, despertamos* (2012) by the indefatigable activist Andrés Linares, who made this documentary together with other directors as a collaborative effort; a work method used by Cecilia as well. The contributions of the *homemade* images and videos that Bordera refers to are developed to different degrees depending on the objectives identified by each filmmaker and the background of that filmmaker. The following web page contains



No estamos solos (Pere Joan Ventura, 2015)

a list of twenty-five documentaries on the 15-M Movement: https://15mpedia.org/wiki/Lista_de_documentales_sobre_el_15M

Underlying this idea posited by Juan Bordera—the production of the image from within the movement—is something that has existed since the sixties and that is a characteristic feature of activist cinema. Its formula: filmmaker-activist/activist-filmmaker. Just as in labour disputes the workers started filming their own battles, just as the picketer movement brought cameras into its group and shared the gaze with a documentary maker who understood *when the RECORD button can be pressed*, in the case of the 15-M movement we again find this activist-filmmaker formula, which is no doubt necessary but which does not always achieve the most analytical gaze or the clearest control of the tools, like what could be offered by a documentary maker who is not an activist and not a proponent of the cause. And this is a prickly, sensitive topic...

Margarita Ledo

Perhaps the phenomenon is not quite exclusive, but it is certainly more extensive. And it is, above all,

more visible. In the years of the *first transition* it was called activist cinema and it produced some masterpieces—from the narration to the production method—like the films of Llorenç Soler. *O monte é noso* (1978) or *Autopista, unha navallada á nosa terra* (1977) bore the features of a working class film tradition like the work of Helena Llumbreras and Mariano Lisa; it documented the conflicts as “lived cinema”, and gave visibility to excluded people, like Carlos Varela did in Galicia. With respect to the 15-M Movement, again there have been films from within, exploring the unfolding of events, like Basilio M. Patino’s *Libre te quiero*. The greatest irony of this documentary is that [Spain’s national TV network] TVE was one of the producers. Or *Informe General II: El nuevo rapto de Europa* (2015), by Pere Portabella, which attempts

to link certain ideological concepts with moments of intersection. And thousands of brilliant lessons, disturbing and innocent in their own uncertainty (a few of my documentary students completed their course practicums at the Praza do Obradoiro). But I think that one of the films that can have the most radical effect on our thinking is *Vers Madrid – The Burning Bright!* (2012) by Sylvain George. Both the use of the device—the exploratory circular camera, hanging from the body, and the speech that brings us into moments of existence—and the formal choices in their various textures; both the sequence shots that explore the margins, the signs of poverty, the confrontations with police, and the poetics of a certain absence, weave together a kind of unrest that brings you back time and again to the causes of the uprising.

3. What importance do you think the political documentary has for Spanish audiences? Do you think it is limited mostly to television programming, or has it found a place in movie theatres? In the first case, to what extent is it diluted by news reporting?

Mercedes Álvarez

I could repeat what I’ve said above. I like to think that our most basic right is the right to the gaze, above all other rights. But television networks can rarely be allowed the luxury of letting you view a topic at leisure; their pace, their concerns with commercial or media competition, and therefore their language, are different. Their whole syntax of images is designed to capture spectators, so that they don’t get up off the couch or change the channel; in other words, to kidnap their attention. But this is the opposite of gazing. Of course, there are exceptions, and among these Jordi Evole’s current affairs program could be an example. Each episode offers a prior reflection on the treatment of and the way of looking at and addressing the topic, the portrayal of the individuals, the political impact of the events, an unconventional approach and of course a slower pace, which allows the images to breathe and leaves room for the viewer. More than one of his programs have even had subsequent useful commentary and

political consequences, like the episode he did on the Valencia Metro train derailment.

Georgina Cisqueña

If Spanish fiction films wage a real battle every day just to get into and stay in movie theatres, the situation is even worse for documentary cinema, which is branded from the outset as a minority genre with a limited, special and select audience; one need only look at the movie listings to see what a desert it is. We all know that the usual distribution of the documentary in general, and the political documentary in particular, is normally limited to alternative theatres, festivals and specific competitions like Docs Barcelona or Documenta Madrid, which fortunately offer spaces like Cineteca del Matadero so that they can be shown on the big screen. I would like to highlight the persistence of a network of film clubs that have committed to initiatives like *Documentary of the Month*, creating a loyal audience for this kind of cinema.



Ciutat morta (Xavier Artigas, Xapo Ortega, 2014)

As far as television networks are concerned, with a few rare exceptions, only the public networks broadcast documentaries with any regularity, like *Documentos TV*, *La noche temática* (TVE), *Sense ficció* (TV3) or *Sala 33* (Canal 33). On Canal 33, for me the paradigmatic case of *Ciutat morta* is extremely significant, as it shows that politically engaged documentary cinema really does have an audience. With this film, Xapo Ortega and Xavier Artigas, who had met each other on the 15-M Movement's audiovisual committee, decided to tell the story of Patricia Heras, falsely charged with involvement in an assault on a police officer during the eviction of squatters with the “okupa” movement. With no official support at all, and with a crowdfunded budget of 4,000 euros, *Ciutat morta* was a huge success at numerous festivals.

However, it had to wait a year and a half, and only after huge pressure on social networks, to be broadcast on Canal 33, the smaller of Catalonia's regional public television networks. The result was an audience share of 20% and 569,000 viewers.

The boundary between documentary and news reporting has always been a topic of debate, especially if the story being examined is associated with a current event. Sometimes the line is blurred, especially now with TV networks like Sexta, for example, which posts some of the reports shown on its news program *Salvados* on its online documentaries page. The reports/documentaries on *Salvados* are always welcome, provided they don't prevent independent productions from getting access to mainstream television screens.

Isadora Guardia

I strongly believe that the instances of political documentaries on television screens are practically null or otherwise respond to quotas, in the case of film documentaries, that the co-funding TV network has to meet, in off-peak timeslots (generally) that undermine and limit the effectiveness of the documentary itself. Also, depending on the government in power, they may be used as a time bomb that can wait months, or even years, in a drawer until the right moment. Moreover, the prevailing formula in television is mainly news reporting, which is neither better nor worse, but simply different.

The space for the political documentary, like any other documentary with a certain degree of complexity and significance, has been and continues to be the cinema, even though cultural policies don't support it at all. The aim should be to reach all spaces, but the mass media, including the cinema, are not the product of a desire to control the institutions, or the State; rather, they are reifying tools used by the institutions, by the State. Based on this idea it doesn't matter much, from my point of view, which channel it is, given that the channel is undermined from the outset. All of the documentaries named, and others that should be, have had much

wider distribution and visibility via channels outside the conventional mass media. Festivals, conferences, community centres, universities... these are the places for meeting and discussion, where the documentary accomplishes its mission, which in the end is to incite dialogue.

Margarita Ledo

I think the question of memory, of exile or of the loss of what appeared to be so secure—full employment, for example—examined in *El efecto Iguazú* (Pere Joan Ventura, 2002), which Georgina and Pere Joan Ventura both worked on, forms part of the most representative offerings which, moreover, are giving us the chance to see documentaries in movie theatres again. With José Luis López-Linares and Javier Rioyo's *Asaltar los Cielos* (1999) and Jaime Camino's *Los niños de Rusia* (2001), the political documentary attained a new status and, for a time, provided general-interest movie theatres with new options. But the waters, to varying degrees, were privatised. And the documentary went

back to the special interest groups, to its parallel circuits, to its specific spaces, to its DVDs passed from hand to hand. It did reappear in film libraries and museums to commemorate certain events, and in a very small number of movie theatres that we could count on one hand: Cineteca in Madrid (which is institutional), the NUMAX cooperative in Santiago de Compostela and Zumzeig in Barcelona. The truth is that we are at a difficult moment for filming inside that reality known as the Establishment and even the forms of the Counter-Establishment; we are a long way from emulating Grosz in *The Face of the Ruling Class*, except in a fragmentary way. And this is the *punctum*, which astonishes me, for example, in a film like Ramiro Ledo's *Vidaextra* (2013), in the liminal conversation of a generation that can't even go on (general) strike because it has no work. On the other hand, in the Spanish case, the political documentary, the kind that takes a stand, could never be confused with the over-formatted news reporting shown on television. Ramón Lluis Bande's *Eiqué y n'otru tiempo* (2014) is a good example.

4. As filmmakers, what difficulties have you faced in pursuing your non-fiction projects? I refer both to the issue of funding and to the ideological level.

Mercedes Álvarez

I haven't had the impression of coming up against ideological barriers, or funding barriers. When we worked on the filming for *Mercado de futuros*, for example, the political and social aspect that concerned me, more than disclosing sensitive or confidential information, was understanding, along with the viewer, how we had reached such a disaster. It was important to point to the responsibility of the credit and financial system, to the con men of the property boom, to the voracity of the sector, but not to ignore the general complicity of everyone as consumers in this game, in the urban development disaster and the mortgage trap. I don't think, in general, that there is an urgent need to be a non-conformist in order to address

a political issue or reveal the truth. Sometimes all that's needed is to eliminate the informational noise and free up our view of the images, to clear away the fog. And to leave the rest to the viewer.

Georgina Cisquella

The obstacle course is endless and the truth is that to produce a documentary you need better morale than a losing football team to keep going. In all the projects that I've worked on the sources of funding have been minimal, and when there have been grants of some kind they've always been allocated to improving the production process and not to the participants' salaries, which are nearly always little more than symbolic. In general, the documentary genre needs time, determination,

persistence and a firm belief that what you're doing is worth it. The production studios are small, the official grants from the ICAA [Spain's Film and Audiovisual Arts Institute] are constantly shrinking, the TV networks have drastically cut their contributions, and it's becoming increasingly common to resort to crowdfunding so that our friends or powerful allies in a cause can contribute via the virtual world.

The problem is that everything may get even more complicated with the reform to Spain's film-making legislation and the new ministerial orders issued by the People's Party (*Partido Popular*, PP) which, unless someone stops it, will come into effect in January 2017. This reform includes requirements as incredible as securing a miracle budget of 700,000 euros for a film, including for documentaries, and having the guarantee of a distributor before the project has even begun. Another shocking aspect of the reform to the legislation of 2007 is that to get access to official grants you'll have to secure the première of the film... in fifteen theatres! A distribution like that is only accessible to large-scale media products in this genre, like Michael Moore. The only positive exception in the new legislation is that it stipulates gender equality on film crews but, honestly, that isn't going to do much to improve the situation for female filmmakers with all the obstacles mentioned above.

On an ideological level, it's clear that most TV networks consider political documentaries to be uncomfortable when the story or condemnation involves their own country, but I think that the most insurmountable barriers are put up when the film comes into conflict with big financial interests, because that will impact not only the distribution, but also the media coverage.

Isadora Guardia

All kinds of difficulties, but you work better that way. The price you pay is not achieving a level of stability that would allow you to organise your

life around what really matters, but then that also keeps you from forgetting what really does matter. And that is to tell the truth about things.

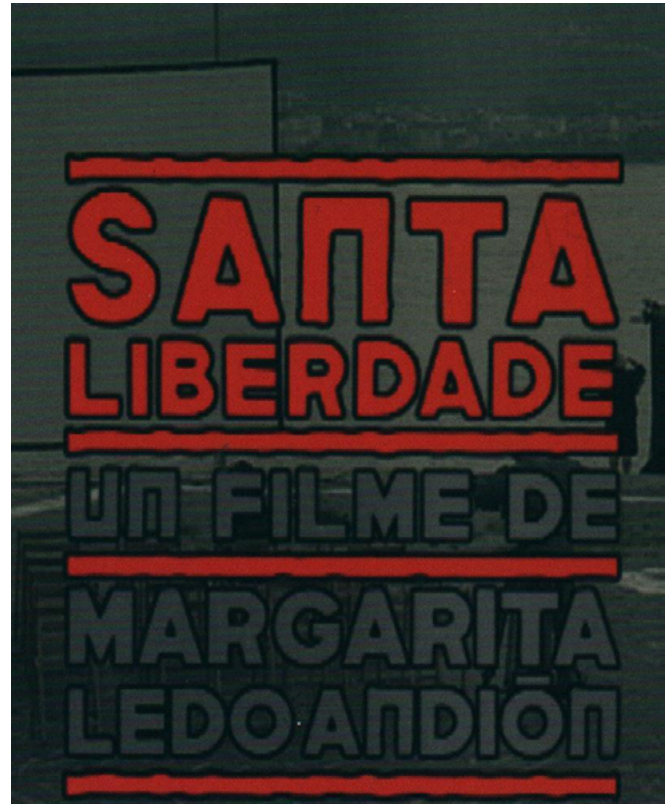
The complexity of the processes in economic terms, in terms of funding, etc., is often related to the circumstances themselves, because reality doesn't care about the deadlines and waiting times involved in pursuing and organising a project. At the same time this makes the work more precarious, but it forces you to keep your attention on everything going on around you at all times. The context we're currently in, of pure *employability*, has proletarianised a certain intellectual class, so that survival has become as important an objective as making or directing a project. That's how it is and you simply have to keep it in mind when you're faced with moments of worry and uncertainty.

On the ideological question, I personally feel as completely free as the system lets you be (haha). Like Rosendo [Spanish rock singer] would say, "they take advantage of your freedom"; but it's true that up to now I've said what I wanted and had to say. And, above all, what the protagonists of the documentaries I've made needed to say.

Margarita Ledo

In my case, my films form part of a personal project; in other words, they are political in the strict sense. And because I know the conditions that I work in, I try to forge that connection between my idea, the reality and the intended audience, the audience that I want to see it, either via standard modes of distribution, like television, or in informal spaces which, in general, are citizen groups. *Santa Liberdade* (2004), which premiered at the Cines Verdi theatres, was included in a wide range of festivals and, above all, was screened for hundreds of cultural associations, in spite of having received support from Ibermedia and from institutional programs run by the Galician government, was never picked up by any public TV networks. Actually, it was broadcast once on Galicia's public network (TVG) under the

region's Socialist-Nationalist coalition government (2005-2009). On the other hand, it was on the Spanish documentary channel Odisea and on Spain's History Channel for a long time. And *Liste*, *pronunciado Lister* (2007), which also received institutional support, was never broadcast on television. It is a well-known practice, these gag orders: contribute to the production, because it's hard to avoid it, and then block the broadcasting. So this documentary on the century of communism was screened at events at universities, museums, festivals or agitprop meetings. Apropos of this discussion, agitprop, without doubt one of my most widely viewed films is the short *Lavacolla, 1939*, which was part of the collective film mentioned earlier, *Hai que botarlos*, calling for the expulsion of the People's Party from the Galician government. And it achieved its aim, albeit only for a short time. And my favourite is *Cienfuegos, 1913* (2007), for the Havana Book Fair, and *Illa* (2008), in tribute to exiled republican women.



Santa Liberdade (Margarita Ledo Andión, 2004)

5. On the international scene it seems pretty clear that the political documentary has received a considerable boost with the success of filmmakers like Michael Moore, Morgan Spurlock or Oliver Stone, whose films combine activism with a lot of media coverage. Do you think that Spanish non-fiction with a political focus could aspire to that kind of prominence?

Mercedes Álvarez

It would be difficult. Filmmakers like Michael Moore or Oliver Stone, aside from the question of the value of their work, benefit from a lot of promotional hype. Their budgets and marketing figures would be inconceivable in Europe. In the documentary film tradition (I find it a little hard to make this distinction between genres) in Spain there are very good examples, from Buñuel to Patino and including Valdelomar. There is also activist cinema in the strict sense: Lorenzo Soler, Jordà, Colectivo de Clase and many others (I'm not as familiar with this era). On the other hand, the forty years of silence [under Franco] weighed heavily... To produce good documentaries we need either that tradition,

with its evolved language and syntax, its system of production, a film culture among viewers and a tradition of criticism, or a huge desire to express ourselves at traumatic moments in history, as is happening just now with filmmakers from China, Korea, Iran, Romania, etc.

Georgina Cisquella

With his first film *Roger and Me* (1989) Michael Moore managed to bring in six million dollars, after it was screened in 250 theatres. In 2002 he won the Oscar for Best Documentary for *Bowling for Columbine*, which earned 25 million dollars, and two years later he received the Palme d'Or at Cannes for *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which

earned just as much. I refer to the figures to point out the stratospheric heights of the American industry, where even more or less critical documentary films, based, admittedly, on media characters and sensationalists like Moore and Spurlock (who also made millions), can find channels for promotion, marketing and box office success worldwide.

I don't think that these three examples have anything to do with what is happening to us in Spain, without disregarding the fact that they have brought millions of viewers to theatres to see a different face of the United States and its relations with the world.

In my opinion, the political documentary film in Europe and in Spain is going in a different direction, both in terms of subject matter and of promotion and distribution methods. We're probably more closely related to the rich tradition of Latin American documentary cinema, which, although not as well known, offers a vast and interesting range of products.

It may be that one day, miraculously, our Michael Moore will appear, a special phenomenon that conquers the box office, but that isn't the way to reinforce the production of documentaries, political or otherwise, or to win over the public. To get the film industry, the administrators of cultural grants and TV networks to believe in, invest in and properly disseminate non-fiction films, films that often confront us with uncomfortable truths, is probably the only way.

Isadora Guardia

Perhaps even above those filmmakers I would highlight Hubert Sauper and his fantastic film *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004), because I think it only appears to move away from specific political questions to fully explore the essential political question. The scene showing the flight of planes loaded with food arriving in Europe and returning to Africa loaded with weapons is as silent as it is true, and if that isn't political then nothing is.

Based on that, I think that the media coverage received by certain filmmakers working in the American industry, which is the film industry *par excellence*, has its equivalent not in Spain, but in Europe in general. Firstly, because the cult of personality doesn't operate in the same way, and secondly because there aren't many cases of filmmakers with a huge media presence, in the Spanish case, who work on non-fiction and specifically on political non-fiction. Major figures are the aforementioned Medem and *La Pelota Vasca*. *La piel contra la piedra*, or even Fernando León with *Caminantes* (2001) or *La espalda del mundo* (Javier Corcuera, 2000), which he wrote the script for; or Elías Querejeta, although I don't even know the extent to which he could be considered to have a media presence outside the world of cinema itself...

In theatres right now is the film *Informe General II: El nuevo rapto de Europa* by the indefatigable Pere Portabella, a heavyweight of political cinema in Spain, but its media coverage has been zero, to offer one example.

At the same time I would not take up a position of being worried about these limitations; there's work to be done that is essential, and that's all.

Margarita Ledo

All the names you mention are from the United States. And that's no accident. So given Spain's place on the geopolitical landscape, no, Spanish non-fiction with a political focus should forget about appealing to the Americans, like the teacher's dream in *Bienvenido, Mister Marshall* (Luis García Berlanga, 1953). Or for fame (the closest case might be Javier Bardem). And there is nothing comparable on the Spanish level with the television formats embraced by some US networks. I think that any appraisal of Spanish films needs to use different indicators. I would look at everything that was left unexplored since the republican era, which is what explains us. I would look at the Buñuel of *Las Hurdes, tierra sin pan* (Luis Buñuel, 1933), or the Carlos Velo of *La ciudad y el campo* (Fernando G. Mantilla and Carlos

Velo, 1934) and not so much at Michael Moore. If we need a model in American documentary making which, like the examples cited, challenges official truths, Errol Morris wouldn't be a bad example. And if we look at the performative documentary, notable for the performances of both the filmmakers and the subjects of the documentary, I would follow Stella Bruzzi's suggestions and look at Nick Broomfield. In any case, success is so tainted by the blandness of the establishment that I would stick with something local. With *El Desencanto* (Jaime Chávarri, 1976), on the disenchantment that we in Spain have still not managed to leave behind. ■

NOTES

- 1 This episode was captured by Uqui Permuy in 1989 and included years later in his documentary *Doli, Doli, Doli... coas conserveiras. Rexistro de traballo* (2011).

conclusion

UNDER ADVERSE CONDITIONS

JORDI REVERT

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN BOYD

The natural way for a political documentary to break through is necessarily abrupt. Activism is inconceivable without something to fight for, just as it is hard to imagine battles being waged through documentary when conditions are favourable. It is obvious, in light of the answers, that the current context raises every possible obstacle to keep this genre from developing discourses with the power to mobilise. But it is also clear that such adversity is the necessary context for inspiring works that will aspire to transform reality through their own truth. At the end of the day, as Isadora Guardia puts it, there are “all kinds of difficulties, but you work better that way.” Hence the difficulties associated with filming, to use the terms of Margarita Ledo, inside that reality known as the Establishment and even the forms of the Counter-Establishment; it is an obstacle course which nevertheless does not necessarily lead to pessimism. The four filmmakers interviewed here point out an abundance of titles of their own and others that remind us that with their efforts documentary makers have defied all the odds to produce films that look where nobody was looking (or where nobody wanted to): the NUMAX factory workers or the cannery workers on Illa de Arousa are voices silenced by reality who act as the leaders of the activist forces when given a megaphone. Llorenç Soler, Basilio Martín Patino, Jaime Camino, Joaquim Jordà and Pere Portabella

have been beacons in the fog—Mercedes Álvarez speaks of the importance of a tradition or the evolution of a consolidated syntax which, in the case of Spain, was blocked for 40 years of silence under Franco—to guide us along the slow and winding path towards film activism. The filmmakers invited to take part in this section express their awareness of all these difficulties, but at the same time their reflections again highlight the importance of political documentaries as a weapon and a tool for inspiring debate and social change.

To assess their impact, however, it is useless to focus on the traditional channels as the terrain for dialogue with viewers. In movie theatre distribution, suggests Georgina Cisquella, they are labelled as a minority genre from the outset and doomed to a marginal presence or to total absence. Meanwhile, television networks either banish independent documentary productions to the exile of off-peak timeslots or limit their content to television reporting which, while having some of the same concerns and themes as the documentary, has different aims and objectives: inciting reflection and dialogue in the case of documentary, compared to providing urgent information to the widest possible audience in the case of reporting. As Cisquella and Guardia suggest, the path to take is not television, but alternative theatres, festivals, certain competitions, film clubs, universities and community centres. Ave-

nues that are more open to dialogue—which is necessary as a basic function for the transformation of our social reality—and that also have a higher degree of freedom from institutional control. This is where the context also becomes more liberating and the text can inspire a free exchange of ideas.

These are the conditions, then, under which the political documentary is progressing—slowly but surely—in Spain today; conditions which clearly have little to do with the circumstances giving rise to the more media-driven international trends that place an emphasis on performativity. Far from the whirlwind that has driven directors like Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock, the Spanish non-fiction film tradition has its own syntax which, for better or for worse, is not based on promotion and sensationalism, and therefore cannot expect the same results. The terrain, however, is just as or even more fertile for wide-reaching debate and opens up a promising horizon in which the genre should continue to play a fundamental role in two ways: 1) as an agent for raising awareness that incites viewers to reaction and to action; 2) as a tool for questioning that can contribute to the development of the counter-narrative that must exist to be contrasted against the official version. This does not mean giving centre stage to who grab our attention (something which television reporting, exemplified by Jordi Evole, has employed with great success). In the case of the independent political documentary, the consolidated model—or the model in the process of consolidation—leaves personal reference aside and uses different techniques and points of view to unpack a reality that is presented as having only one interpretation. Its aim is to be the argument that reminds us of the need to question the official story as an ongoing practice in order to guarantee democracy. Based on the responses of the four filmmakers brought together here, we can be sure that in spite of all the obstacles there are still people engaging in this practice, updating its forms and reinventing it under adverse conditions. ■

THE DOCUMENTARY IN SPAIN: POLITICAL SPACES

Abstract

The development of the political documentary in Spain has been conditioned by a historical trajectory that has ultimately resulted in the near absence of a consolidated tradition of activism in non-fiction filmmaking. However, and in spite of all of the obstacles, the genre has been continuously reinvented under adverse conditions to shape a counternarrative capable of questioning the Establishment. The aim of the discussion here is to analyse the current state of this type of documentary in Spain, to define the relationship such documentaries develop with their viewers, to identify their channels of distribution and to understand their place in relation to international political documentaries.

Key words

Political documentary; Spain; 15-M Movement; film activism.

Authors

Mercedes Álvarez is a film director. *El cielo gira* (2005), her first feature film, won numerous international awards, such as the Tiger Award at the Rotterdam Film Festival, the Cinéma du Réel in Paris, the Infinity Film Festival in Alba, Italy, the FIPRESCI International Film Critics Prize, and the Jury, Public and Best Film prizes at the Buenos Aires Festival of Independent Film, and was also widely recognised in Spain with awards like the Revelation Film and Best Editing prizes from the Círculo de Escritores Cinematográficos, Best New Director and Best Documentary Director from the Asamblea de Directores Cinematográficos Españoles (ADIRCE) and the Premio Ojo Crítico from Spain's national public radio network RNE. The film has been screened in more than 30 countries. Her second feature film, *Mercado de futuros* (2011) won the Prix Regard Neuf at the Visions du Réel Festival (Nyon, Switzerland), the Jury's Special Mention at the Buenos Aires Festival of Independent Film, Best Documentary at the Nantes Festival and the Navaja de Oro from the Spanish television network TVE. In 2013 she participated together with the artist Francesc Torres in the Catalonia pavilion for the Venice Biennale.

Georgina Cisquella is a journalist and documentary scriptwriter who has enjoyed a long career at Spain's national public television service (TVE). She has worked as a diplomatic correspondent and presenter on news programs like *Informe Semanal* (TVE: 1996-), and a specialist in the area of film on *Telediario* (TVE: 1994-). From 2004 to 2008 she was the director and creator of new formats for TVE 2, like the cultural program

EL DOCUMENTAL EN ESPAÑA: ESPACIOS DE LO POLÍTICO

Resumen

El desarrollo del documental político en España ha venido condicionado por un recorrido histórico que ha acabado resultando determinante en la casi ausencia de una tradición consolidada de militancia audiovisual desde la no ficción. Sin embargo, y a pesar de todos los obstáculos, el formato ha seguido reinventándose desde la adversidad para conformar un contrarrelato capaz de cuestionar el Poder. El presente debate busca analizar el estado actual de este tipo de documental en nuestro país, definir la relación que mantiene con los espectadores, detectar sus vías de distribución y entender qué lugar ocupa respecto al documental político internacional.

Palabras clave

Documental político; España; 15-M; activismo cinematográfico.

Autores

Mercedes Álvarez (Aldealseñor, 1966) es directora de cine. *El cielo gira* (2005), su primer largometraje obtuvo numerosos premios internacionales como el Tiger Award en el Festival de Róterdam, Cinéma du Réel de París, Infinity de Alba (Italia) o los de Fipresci de la Crítica Internacional, Jurado, Público y Mejor Película en el Festival de Cine Independiente de Buenos Aires, siendo también ampliamente reconocida en España con premios como Película Revelación y Mejor Montaje del Círculo de Escritores Cinematográficos, Mejor Dirección Novel y Mejor Dirección Documental de la Asamblea de Directores Cinematográficos Españoles (ADIRCE) y el Premio Ojo Crítico de Cine de Radio Nacional de España. La película ha sido exhibida en más de 30 países. Su segundo largometraje, *Mercado de futuros* (2011) obtuvo el premio Miradas Nuevas en el Festival Visions du Réel (Nyon, Suiza), Mención Especial del Jurado en el Festival de Cine Independiente de Buenos Aires, Mejor Documental en el Festival de Nantes y la Navaja de Oro de TVE. En 2013 participa junto al artista Francesc Torres en el pabellón de Cataluña para la Bienal de Venecia.

Georgina Cisquella es periodista y guionista de cine documental, de larga trayectoria en TVE. Ha sido corresponsal diplomática, presentadora de programas informativos como *Informe Semanal* (TVE: 1996-), y especialista en el área de cine de *Telediario* (TVE: 1994-). Entre 2004 y 2008 es directora y creadora de nuevos formatos para La 2 de TVE, como el programa cultural *Miradas 2* (TVE: 2004) y *Cámara abierta 2.0*

Miradas 2 (TVE: 2004) and *Cámara abierta 2.0* (TVE: 2007-). Her work as a scriptwriter has included *El efecto Iguazú* (Pere Joan Ventura, 2002), which won the Goya Award for Best Documentary in 2002 and *Oxígeno para vivir* (2011), which she also directed. Her earlier work includes *Subcomandante Marcos, viaje al sueño zapatista* (Ventura, 1995), *Me estoy quitando* (Ventura, 1999) and *En el mundo a cada rato* (Ventura, 2004). Contacto: gcisquella@gmail.com.

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(TVE: 2007-). En su actividad como guionista, destacan *El efecto Iguazú* (Pere Joan Ventura, 2002) que obtuvo el Goya al Mejor Documental en 2002 y *Oxígeno para vivir* (2011), del que también es directora. Entre sus trabajos anteriores figuran *Subcomandante Marcos, viaje al sueño zapatista* (Ventura, 1995), *Me estoy quitando* (Ventura, 1999) y *En el mundo a cada rato* (Ventura, 2004). Contacto: gcisquella@gmail.com.

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la obra de Bernardo Tejeda”, included in the collection *Imagen, cuerpo y sexualidad*, edited by Francisco Zurian and published by Ocho y Medio (2014). Her book *Cine de fotógrafos* (2005) won the Fundació Espais d'Art Contemporani Prize. In 2013 she released her first fiction film, *A cicatriz blanca*, which, following her documentary features *Santa Liberdade* (2004) and *Liste, pronunciado Líster* (2007), completes her trilogy on the twentieth century. She describes herself as a feminist and cultural agitator. Contact: margarita.ledo@usc.es.

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