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**DIALOGUE** · PERE JOAN VENTURA

**(DIS)AGREEMENTS** · THE DOCUMENTARY IN SPAIN:  
POLITICAL SPACES

# BREACHES IN REALITY

INTERVENTION  
STRATEGIES IN THE  
DOCUMENTARY  
FILM



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# BREACHES IN REALITY: INTERVENTION STRATEGIES IN THE DOCUMENTARY FILM

MANUEL DE LA FUENTE

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN BOYD

In recent times the documentary film has come back to life. This is certainly not to suggest that it was ever dead, but merely that it had been excluded from mainstream production and distribution networks, relegated largely to television or restricted to specific genres, such as music documentaries. However, the exhaustion of the Hollywood fiction formula and the collapse of the welfare state has resulted in a demand to see films in the movie theatres that prompt the viewer to reflect on certain issues. And here the documentary film has reclaimed its place, conquering the territory it lost after the Second World War. While in the post-war period mainstream audiences turned to sheer entertainment in the context of the leisure culture, now a certain trend in the opposite direction is observable.

Obviously, public interest is focused on documentaries with a political dimension, activist and interventionist films that clearly address certain issues to question our prosperity in a time of cri-

sis. It is now widely assumed that the starting point for this new trend came shortly after 9-11 with the box-office hit *Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore, 2002), whose success established a model that has found its way regularly into major theatres. It is a model for a type of mainstream political documentary that has turned its directors into stars – and not only in the case of Michael Moore – in contrast with the sniper style that has traditionally characterized the genre.

And in view of the proliferation of studies on the question, we address the need to explore the strategies and traditions of the activist documentary in this monograph, which begins in the present – with Moore's latest film, released just a few months ago – and then looks back in time, returning to the silent film era (Donna Kornhaber's article) and the years when Hollywood made use of the documentary as a key tool for mobilizing the people (as explored by Jaume Antuñano), without forgetting documentary-making in Europe (the

contributions of Ignacio Ramos, Lourdes Monterrubio, Ricardo Jimeno and the final article by Sergi Sánchez and Ana Aitana Fernández). Complementing all these articles is a four-way debate between four filmmakers with extensive experience in the field of activist or militant documentary-making, and an interview with Pere Joan Ventura, one of the major exponents of the genre in Spain. Throughout this issue, and going beyond the US-Europe axis, questions are explored in an effort to explain why political documentary films have always been important and why this importance is now propelling them into a prominent position that they never should have lost. ■

### BREACHES IN REALITY. INTERVENTION STRATEGIES IN DOCUMENTARY FILM

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#### Abstract

Introduction to the contents of issue 22, about political documentary film.

#### Key words

Political documentary; militant cinema; crisis; mainstream.

#### Author

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 has 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 has 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). Contact: manuel.delafuente@uv.es.

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### BRECHAS DE REALIDAD. ESTRATEGIAS DE INTERVENCIÓN EN EL CINE DOCUMENTAL

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#### Resumen

Introducción a los contenidos del número 22, dedicado al documental político.

#### Palabras clave

Documental político; cine militante; crisis; *mainstream*.

#### 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). Contacto: manuel.delafuente@uv.es.

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# NOTEBOOK

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## BREACHES IN REALITY. INTERVENTION STRATEGIES IN THE DOCUMENTARY FILM

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### **WHAT DO WE FILM NOW? FEATURES OF THE DOCUMENTARY FILM. A STUDY THROUGH MICHAEL MOORE'S WORK**

Manuel de la Fuente [FULL TEXT IN SPANISH ONLY]

### **OF MEN AND MOVIE CAMERAS: BUSTER KEATON, DZIGA VERTOV, AND THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY**

Donna Kornhaber

### **HOLLYWOOD AND THE SHAPING OF THE OFFICIAL STORY: THE SECOND WORLD WAR ACCORDING TO THE DOCUMENTARY SERIES WHY WE FIGHT (FRANK CAPRA, 1942-1945)**

Jaume Antuñano San Luis [FULL TEXT IN SPANISH ONLY]

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### **FROM MILITANT CINEMA TO ESSAY FILM. LETTER TO JANE BY JEAN-LUC GODARD AND JEAN-PIERRE GORIN**

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Ricardo Jimeno Aranda

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Sergi Sánchez, Ana Aitana Fernández





# ¿QUÉ FILMAMOS AHORA? CARACTERÍSTICAS DEL DOCUMENTAL POLÍTICO Y SU ESTUDIO A TRAVÉS DE MICHAEL MOORE

MANUEL DE LA FUENTE

El sonido de un helicóptero nos introduce unos planos aéreos de la Casa Blanca, el Capitolio, el Monumento a Thomas Jefferson y el Pentágono, seguidos de una voz en off que dice lo siguiente: «El 2 de enero me convocaron a una reunión secreta en el Pentágono con los Jefes del Estado Mayor. Había representantes de cada sección: el Ejército, la fuerza aérea, la marina y los marines. Me dijeron: “Michael, no sabemos qué cojones estamos haciendo”. Así arranca el último documental de Michael Moore, ¿Qué invadimos ahora? (Where to Invade Next), estrenado en 2015. En la película, Moore emprende un viaje por distintos países europeos para explorar los servicios públicos que ofrecen (sanitarios, educativos, judiciales, etc.) y presentárselos al público norteamericano. Así, por ejemplo, la primera escala del viaje se produce en Italia, donde Moore entrevista a una pareja de clase media. Él es policía y ella, responsable de la sección de ropa de unos grandes almacenes.

En su conversación con el cineasta, le cuentan que disfrutaban de un total de dos meses de vacaciones pagadas al año y añaden, para sorpresa de Moore, que las empresas también les pagan un permiso a las parejas recién casadas para la luna de miel.

Evidentemente, Moore no se conforma con recoger el testimonio sin más, sino que interpela a sus entrevistados para que la conversación refleje el objetivo último de su film: mostrar el contraste del modo de vida europeo con el norteamericano, en que el primero aparece mucho más sensato que el segundo. A lo largo de la charla con la pareja italiana, e incluso en la voz en off, recalca en diversas ocasiones que los estadounidenses no disfrutaban de vacaciones ni de lunas de miel pagadas y les insiste en que lo que le están contando le parece un relato de ciencia ficción. Será el discurso que llevará Moore a lo largo de todo el largometraje, explicitando la diferencia abismal entre lo que contempla en Europa y lo que conoce de su país.

Ya desde el principio de la película, Moore plantea algunas de las claves que han definido no sólo su cine sino el documental contemporáneo. Su carrera en los últimos quince años es bien conocida. En 2002, estrenó *Bowling for Columbine*, una película que partía de la matanza en un instituto para analizar la posesión de armas y la cultura de la violencia y el miedo en Estados Unidos. El film tuvo una entusiasta acogida en el Festival de Cannes, ganó el premio César a la mejor película extranjera y el Oscar al mejor documental. En la ceremonia de entrega en Los Ángeles, al recibir el premio, Moore denunció la invasión de Iraq acometida por el gobierno de George W. Bush. Su discurso provocó la reacción airada de varios miembros de la industria en la misma ceremonia, seguida de una intensa campaña difamatoria por parte del gobierno y numerosas amenazas de muerte a cargo de particulares (Moore, 2012).

No obstante, la gota que colmó el vaso llegaría con su siguiente producción, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, estrenada en 2004 y ganadora de la Palma de Oro en Cannes ese año. En ella Moore desmontaba las falacias del gobierno de Bush con las que se había justificado la invasión de Iraq al tiempo que mostraba los vínculos empresariales entre las familias Bush y Bin Laden. Basándose en imágenes de archivo de los programas informativos de televisión, se ridiculizaban las políticas de los republicanos como mecanismo de desvelamiento de las mentiras denunciadas en el documental. Ambas cintas, *Bowling for Columbine* y *Fahrenheit 9/11*, desencadenaron una ola de producción y estreno de películas documentales en las salas comerciales, rescatando al documental del ostracismo al que estaba condenado en los circuitos de distribución mayoritarios.

Percibido como la cabeza visible del documental contemporáneo, la carrera de Moore ha proseguido por ese cine de denuncia e intervención con títulos como *Sicko* (2007), sobre el sistema sanitario estadounidense, *Capitalismo: una historia de amor* (Capitalism: A Love Story, 2009), sobre las

causas de la crisis financiera de 2008, o la cinta a la que nos hemos referido, ¿Qué invadimos ahora? En todas estas producciones, Moore apuesta por la explicitación constante de su subjetividad: su presencia es recurrente en las películas como un personaje más y el espectador sabe de antemano que no va a asistir a un contraste de puntos de vista sino a la verdad subjetiva del realizador, cuestionando de raíz la supuesta objetividad que determinadas instancias le han intentado conferir al cine documental.

Moore siempre ha estado al tanto de las críticas a sus películas. Así, en su página web dedica una sección a responder a la acusación de haber manipulado la entrevista con Charlton Heston en *Bowling for Columbine* y niega que el diagnóstico de Alzheimer del actor se produjese antes de la grabación de la entrevista con la que llega al clímax narrativo de la película. Ello demuestra que el punto de partida del cineasta es plenamente consciente del territorio en el que se mueve y de los efectos que persigue. Por eso la secuencia inicial de ¿Qué invadimos ahora? compendia su asunción de la eliminación de barreras entre el documental y la ficción (al presentar una situación ficticia en que el documentalista es enviado por el ejército norteamericano a Europa) y la voluntad de intervención de su cine. Se trata de dos elementos que sitúan a Moore en el seno de la tradición de documental político cuyos principales rasgos veremos a continuación.

## **I. EL DOCUMENTAL EN LA SALA DE PROYECCIÓN**

El cine de Moore ha merecido en los últimos años el rechazo de los republicanos estadounidenses que han calificado sus films de «propaganda izquierdista camuflada de cine documental», lo que se suele tomar como una muestra del escaso alcance de sus películas al dirigirse a un público previamente convencido de las tesis defendidas en ellas (Sachleben, 2014: 25). En esta oposición

entre «propaganda» y «documental» que se establece como una estrategia de camuflaje subyacen dos ideas: en primer lugar, el documental como una instancia que debería aspirar a la neutralidad o la objetividad, es decir, a la consideración de que el cineasta podría renunciar a la adopción de un punto de vista tanto en la filmación como en la sala de montaje. Por otro lado, se asume que el documental es un género susceptible de vulnerar este principio de objetividad en cuanto el cineasta rompe el principio neutral y «camufla» o traiciona la labor que le estaría encomendada.

Ésta es una lucha que se viene dirimiendo desde el principio del cine y que Costa-Gavras ha resumido a la perfección: «Las películas pueden tener un efecto político, quizá no para cambiar la mentalidad de la gente con las ideas ya asentadas sino más bien para reforzar principios como la justicia [...] Muchas películas son peligrosas. Vemos constantemente films sobre individualistas que resuelven los problemas con armas. En estas películas siempre salen armas y un hombre que salva al mundo. Creo que es una idea muy negativa para los jóvenes porque cada vez aprendemos más a partir de las imágenes<sup>1</sup>» (en Oumano, 2011: 210-211).

Estas instancias objetivistas se corresponderían a las instituciones políticas, industriales y económicas interesadas en implantar un modelo hegemónico de documental que Albert Maysles ha definido como «McDocumental» (*McDocumentaries*) y caracterizado por ser productos estandarizados con pocas innovaciones estéticas, escasa implicación política y dirigidos principalmente al mercado televisivo (Hogarth, 2006: 1). El cine de Moore se sitúa en las antípodas de esta homogeneización y de ahí la importancia de recuperar el cauce comercial en el circuito de las salas, los festivales y los certámenes cinematográficos, lo que significa el éxito de una obra que desde sus orígenes denuncia las políticas económicas del reaganismo, esto es, el rearme ideológico emprendido por el partido republicano en los años 80: ahí que-

da la prueba de la ópera prima de Moore, *Roger & Me* (1989), en que retrataba el impacto del cierre de la planta de General Motors en la población de Flint, ciudad natal del cineasta (Waugh, 2011: 147).

En la clasificación del documental establecida por Bill Nichols, el cine de Moore se ubica en el «modo performativo», es decir, aquél que «enfatisa el aspecto subjetivo o expresivo del compromiso del cineasta con el tema tratado y la reacción del público a este compromiso<sup>2</sup>» (Nichols, 2001: 34). Se establece, en definitiva, un compromiso a partir del contacto directo entre el cineasta y su público: «Estas películas no apelan tanto a unas directrices u órdenes retóricas cuanto a una sensación de reacciones compartidas. El cineasta busca que el espectador se apropie de sus reacciones. Nos apropiamos de su representación del mundo pero de una manera indirecta a través de las cargas afectivas inyectadas para conseguir tal fin<sup>3</sup>» (Nichols, 2001: 132). Así pues, frente al objetivismo desapasionado dirigido a la recepción pasiva del medio televisivo propio del documental institucional, las películas de Moore buscan llegar a la sala oscura donde el espectador tenga que enfrentarse a una recepción activa y poner en funcionamiento su diálogo de reacciones compartidas. Sus películas no pretenden descubrir, de este modo, hechos que los espectadores norteamericanos desconocieran sino articularlos en un relato que ha de ser exhibido en una sala para que el cúmulo de noticias televisivas adquieran una nueva dimensión: no forman parte ya del ruido cotidiano de la sociedad capitalista sino que conforman el núcleo de un texto que, al presentar esas mismas imágenes, despierta la atención adormecida del espectador.

Pensemos en *Bowling for Columbine*. Aquí Moore debate uno de los asuntos con presencia constante en la agenda mediática estadounidense como es la posesión de armas merced al derecho reconocido por la segunda enmienda de la Constitución del país. El hecho que sirve de hilo conductor (la matanza en un instituto cometida por dos estudiantes) no resulta un suceso extraño, y

el cineasta trabaja con un material de partida que sus conciudadanos conocen de sobra por su tratamiento extenuante en los medios. Tampoco recurre Moore a personalidades extravagantes para un público que conoce la condición de Charlton Heston de defensor de las armas en su cargo como presidente de la Asociación del Rifle (National Rifle Association, NRA). El ciudadano medio norteamericano conoce perfectamente el posicionamiento de Heston al respecto porque es una voz a la que los medios le han conferido una notoria autoridad. En el momento de estrenar la película, el receptor está habituado previamente al consumo de noticias sobre masacres con armas y a oír las opiniones de Heston, la NRA y los republicanos en contra de las restricciones gubernamentales hacia la posesión de armamento. Sin embargo, al articular un relato cinematográfico, Moore busca la toma de conciencia y, para ello, desvela los mecanismos ideológicos supuestamente neutros del discurso mediático: así, cuando acude a entrevistar a Heston a su casa, el anciano actor se sorprende por tener que enfrentarse a una charla incómoda en la que el entrevistador va cuestionando las respuestas.

Pero la intervención que persigue Moore no se dirige únicamente hacia la crítica de las noticias televisivas sino que también se dedica a recontextualizar aquellos hechos que pueden resultarle ajenos al receptor para que se apropie de los mismos y los reconozca como propios. Esto sucede a lo largo de ¿Qué invadimos ahora? En este film, el objetivo último del cineasta no es tanto mostrar las políticas públicas de los países europeos como si fueran rarezas cuanto desvelar al final que tales fueron ideadas y puestas en funcionamiento por primera vez en Estados Unidos. En los minutos finales del documental, la voz en off de Moore recapitula todo lo mostrado tras visitar con un amigo suyo los restos del muro de Berlín:

Hablamos de todas las cosas que me había llevado de Europa y empecé a lamentar que el sueño ame-

ricano gozaba de muy buena salud en todas partes excepto en Norteamérica. Entonces mi amigo Rod me recordó que nosotros y nuestra generación fuimos a la universidad prácticamente gratis. Me recordó que el responsable de Educación de Finlandia había dicho que sus ideas provenían de Estados Unidos y que la conmemoración del día de los trabajadores no surgió en Moscú o Lisboa sino en Chicago en 1886. Allí surgió la lucha por la jornada de ocho horas y las vacaciones pagadas de los sindicatos norteamericanos. La lucha por la igualdad sexual empezó ocho años antes de que Islandia eligiera por primera vez a una mujer para la presidencia. El alcaide de la prisión de Noruega me había dicho que también era nuestra la idea de que el castigo penitenciario no tenía que ser cruel. Y fue nuestro estado de Michigan el primer gobierno anglosajón en eliminar la pena de muerte. Y el juez instructor de Islandia había basado toda su investigación y procesamiento de los banqueros en nuestro escándalo de los préstamos de los años 80. Incluso había contratado a un asesor norteamericano para que le ayudara. No eran ideas europeas. No eran ideas nuevas. Eran nuestras ideas. No teníamos que invadir otros países para robarles las ideas porque ya eran nuestras.

A Moore no le interesa entrar en matices sino en provocar efectos de empatía, en apelar a la «fuerza de la emoción» para «evocar sentimientos de enfado, tristeza o angustia que perduren una vez concluida la proyección» (Parry-Giles y Parry-Giles, 2008: 45). Se trata de uno de los rasgos fundamentales que el cine de Moore ha impuesto en el documental contemporáneo (Benson, Snee et al., 2008; Benson y Snee, 2015) recogiendo esa práctica del documental visto como una obra de «francotiradores», es decir, cineastas con un discurso de abierta intervención política que ha relegado las películas a los márgenes de la industria. El triunfo de Moore no se limita, además, a proyectar sus películas en las salas sino a construir un modelo que ha tenido una destacada proliferación en los últimos años.

## 2. LA INCOMODIDAD DEL DOCUMENTAL

Ya en sus orígenes como largometraje, el documental expresa una incomodidad con la industria. Como ha señalado Nichols (1997: 66), los documentales expositivos de Robert Flaherty surgieron «del desencanto con las molestas cualidades de divertimento del cine de ficción». Al tiempo que Flaherty asumía, con todo, las prácticas de la ficción para llevarlas al terreno documental —en aspectos como el *last minute rescue* de *Nanook el esquimal* (*Nanook of the North*, 1922)—, los documentalistas empezaron a explorar territorios distintos a los de la narrativa de Hollywood. A modo de ejemplo, la confianza en el progreso y el desarrollo de las ciudades a principios del siglo XX provocó que las mismas urbes dejaran de ser paisajes para erigirse en grandes protagonistas de los relatos narrativos. Es lo que sucedía con *Manhattan Transfer*, la novela de John Dos Passos de 1925 con Nueva York como protagonista o, en el cine, con documentales como *Berlín, sinfonía de una ciudad* (*Berlin, Die Symphonie der Großstadt*, Walter Ruttmann, 1927) o *El hombre con la cámara* (*Chelovek s kino-apparatom*, Dziga Vertov, 1929). Recordemos en este punto las palabras de Vertov sobre su eje programático: «El cine-ojo es un movimiento que se intensifica incesantemente a favor de la acción por los hechos contra la acción por la ficción, por muy fuerte que sea la impresión producida por esta última» (en Romaguera y Alsina, 1993: 33). En definitiva, la apuesta por el documental comporta desde el principio una postura radical que se ubica, ya sea desde una perspectiva más cercana como la de Flaherty o más alejada como la de Vertov, en el extremo opuesto al modelo de cine de ficción que se está fraguando a principios del siglo XX en Hollywood como esquema único.

Junto a estas perspectivas, resulta relevante en aquellos años la figura de una de las principales influencias del modelo de Moore, el documentalista escocés Jack Grierson. Según señala Day (2011: 109-110), fue Walter Lippmann quien le recomen-

dó a Grierson que expresase sus ideas políticas en el cine en lugar de la prensa escrita. Durante sus estudios en la Universidad de Chicago en los años 20, Grierson descubrió los problemas de los inmigrantes en Estados Unidos y decidió que el cine debería recoger de modo enfático la situación de las clases desfavorecidas. Sus películas apostarían por el realismo social con fines didácticos y propagandísticos y mostraría una preocupación creciente: sus films tenían que llegar al mayor número de espectadores posible. De hecho, el documental tendría un notable predicamento en aquellos años, hasta el punto de que en la década de 1930, el género acabaría percibiéndose como una peligrosa herramienta que incide en el momento político al explorar la vía del retrato de la colectividad que habían expresado cineastas como Ruttmann o Vertov. En este sentido, tal y como hemos señalado (De la Fuente, 2014), se podría establecer una división entre dos modelos antagónicos de documental político en esa década. Por un lado, tendríamos el de un documental institucional, con una cuidada puesta en escena cuyo fin es transmitir el peso de las instituciones como garantes de la paz y la seguridad. Aunque pueda resultar paradójico, uno de los films que mejor representan este modelo es *El triunfo de la voluntad* (*Triumpf des Willens*, Leni Riefenstahl, 1935). Los avances tecnológicos introducidos por Riefenstahl trataban de crear una imagen estable del régimen nazi, donde el orden era lo más importante y los movimientos de cámara con suaves travellings reforzaban esta idea. En el extremo ideológico opuesto estaría *Tierra de España* (*The Spanish Earth*, Joris Ivens, 1937). Frente al poder estatal de Riefenstahl, el documental de Ivens sobre la defensa de Madrid en la Guerra Civil Española expresa la urgencia de la lucha contra el fascismo. El efecto retórico del film (en elementos como la sincronización de los efectos de sonido, el medido desorden en la aparición de títulos superpuestos o el intento de retratar la vida de un miliciano llamado Julián) resalta que el interés general no viene dictado por la colectivi-

dad del ejército retratado por Riefenstahl sino por el pueblo español que se ve obligado a tomar las armas para parar el avance de esos ejércitos. Este retrato de la urgencia resulta deliberado puesto que, para Ivens, «el sentido de un documentalista es participar directamente en los asuntos internacionales más importantes<sup>4</sup>» (Ivens, 1969: 138).

Durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, diversos cineastas de Hollywood (como John Ford, John Huston o Frank Capra) filmaron batallas del conflicto como herramienta de concienciación y alistamiento. La implicación de los cineastas con el documental de guerra era elevada: así, en algunos de los créditos de las películas de Ford, el cineasta aparece firmando con su graduación militar (Brodey, 2014: 292) y directores como John Huston recurrían a la voz en off para situarse como auténticos corresponsales de guerra que ofrecían su testimonio (Bronfen, 2012: 153). Una vez acabada la guerra, el auge de la cultura del ocio en Occidente relegó a un segundo plano aquellas propuestas culturales que se alejaban de la concepción de la cultura como mero entretenimiento. En este contexto, el cine documental se vio progresivamente apartado del circuito de producción y distribución. Ambos modelos —el de Riefenstahl y el de Ivens— resultaban incómodos no sólo por recordar una época que convenía olvidar sino porque habían mostrado la capacidad de influencia del cine documental en la alineación o movilización de la ciudadanía.

No obstante, la proliferación de los medios de comunicación como válvula de escape introdujo un nuevo elemento que resultaría también clave para la obra de Michael Moore: la sátira política. Nos referimos a la crítica abierta que exhibían en los medios estadounidenses cómicos como Lenny Bruce o George Carlin y que recogerían las películas documentales musicales de Frank Zappa (De la Fuente, 2012), films que guardan multitud de similitudes con los de Moore, principalmente la expresión de la subjetividad —son cintas que hablan en primer término de las peripecias e ideas de sus res-

pectivos realizadores—, la sátira implacable contra las políticas de derechas del partido republicano estadounidense y la apelación al espectador para que se implique social y políticamente una vez haya terminado el visionado de la película.

Tomando esta doble influencia (los documentales de los años 20 y 30 y la escena cómica contracultural de los años 60 y 70), Michael Moore elabora una obra que muestra rasgos reconocibles. En primer lugar, utiliza material de archivo de informativos televisivos y breves fragmentos de películas que actúan como contrapunto humorístico a lo que va narrando en la pantalla a través de las entrevistas y acciones que emprende Moore, que suele aparecer como personaje entrevistador y provocador de tales acciones (concentraciones, solicitudes frustradas de entrevistas con líderes empresariales, etc.). En segundo lugar, su posicionamiento es idéntico al de Bruce, Carlin o Zappa: un auténtico patriota norteamericano (en este caso, el propio Moore ataviado con su gorra y exhibiendo en ocasiones la bandera) es aquél que denuncia los atropellos de la clase política en general y de los republicanos en particular. Y por último, sus películas terminan siempre con una apelación a la emotividad del receptor para que éste sepa que puede contribuir a cambiar la situación que acaba de ver en el largometraje. Lo hemos visto en el texto de la voz en off de *¿Qué invadimos ahora?*, donde se llama al orgullo de ser norteamericano en la reivindicación de las políticas públicas que parecen invento europeo. El triunfo de esta estrategia se puede ver en el eco que han tenido sus películas en diversos cineastas que han adoptado los mismos recursos expresivos.

### **3. LECCIONES PARA EL CINE DOCUMENTAL**

Siguiendo la estela del *late night* norteamericano de Johnny Carson o David Letterman, Bill Maher es uno de los presentadores de televisión más conocidos en Estados Unidos. Sin embargo, a diferencia de Carson y Letterman, Maher inició su ca-



rrera en los circuitos de la comedia de monólogos (la *stand-up comedy*), tal y como se ve en el film *Religulous* (Larry Charles, 2008), un documental en el que, al modo de Moore, Maher recorre Estados Unidos de arriba abajo para constatar y ridiculizar el auge del extremismo religioso en el país. Al igual que Moore, Maher muestra en el film imágenes de su infancia y juventud (incluso se entrevista en una secuencia con su madre y su hermana) como parte de esa estrategia de conexión emotiva con el espectador. *Religulous* se une a la estela de films documentales de denuncia surgidos a raíz de *Bowling for Columbine* y *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Uno de los más conocidos es *Super Size Me* (2004) en el que su realizador, Morgan Spurlock, se somete a una dieta peculiar: consumir durante un mes sólo comida de McDonald's. El reto no es gratuito ya que Spurlock pretende con su experimento denunciar la política educativa del gobierno de Bush en un aspecto muy concreto como es la implantación en los comedores escolares de alimentos provenientes de empresas de comida rápida (dirigidas por empresarios vinculados al partido republicano). En un polo más institucional, *Una verdad incómoda* (An Inconvenient Truth, Davis Guggenheim, 2006) mostraba las conferencias que impartió el exvicepresidente de Estados Unidos Al Gore para alertar de la gravedad del cambio climático.

Posteriormente, como fases más evolucionadas del modelo, han ido surgiendo documentales políticos en los que está presente el reclamo de la personalidad que encabeza la denuncia pero con menor presencia ante la cámara, como *Inside Job* (Charles Ferguson, 2010), con la voz en off de Matt Damon, o *Ten Billion* (Peter Webber, 2015), con el científico Stephen Emmott ofreciendo un panorama desalentador del futuro por la sobrepoblación y el calentamiento global del planeta. Todo ello nos lleva a realizar una reflexión sobre las estrategias de intervención del cine documental político, es decir, el documental que trata abiertamente asuntos de la agenda política internacional con el expreso deseo no sólo de reflejar sino de interve-

nir en el entorno. Los diferentes textos que conforman este dossier pretenden, a través del estudio de varios casos sintomáticos a lo largo de la historia del cine, ofrecer un panorama amplio de la variedad de recursos y conflictos que expresa el documental, género que, como demuestra Moore, se resiste a caer en los abismos de la despolitización emprendida por las entidades culturales hegemónicas. ■

## NOTAS

1. «Films can have a political effect, probably not to change the ideas of people who definitely believe something but perhaps to reinforce people's belief in something like justice [...] Lots of films are dangerous. We often see movies about the individualist who solves all his problems with a big gun. You see huge guns everywhere in these movies, and that one man saves the world. I think that's very negative for young people because we learn through those images more and more».
2. «[It] emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own engagement with the subject and an audience's responsiveness to this engagement».
3. «These films engage us less with rhetorical commands or imperatives than with a sense of their own vivid responsiveness. The filmmaker's responsiveness seeks to animate our own. We engage with their representation of the historical world but do so obliquely, via the affective charge they apply to it and seek to make our own».
4. «A documentary film maker has the sense of participating directly in the world's most fundamental issues».

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## WHAT DO WE FILM NOW? FEATURES OF THE DOCUMENTARY FILM. A STUDY THROUGH MICHAEL MOORE'S WORK

### Abstract

Michael Moore's films are a paradigmatic case of the contemporary documentary. They are a form of political action refusing the fallacy of objectivity in the documentary genre, by explicitly expressing the opinion and goals of the filmmaker, who has become the main character. In his films, Moore uses a range of sources, from images and recordings from his personal archive to TV news programmes, in order to bring out the emotion of the audience and make the spectator search his/her own responsiveness at the end of the screening. Moore's films are highly influenced by the documentary films of Jack Grierson and Joris Ivens, on the one hand, and the satire of the American Comedians of the 60s, on the other. The result is a filmography standing against the American political right-wing, creating a model still in force.

### Key words

Documentary; Satire; Michael Moore; Jack Grierson; McDocumentary.

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## ¿QUÉ FILMAMOS AHORA? CARACTERÍSTICAS DEL DOCUMENTAL POLÍTICO Y SU ESTUDIO A TRAVÉS DE MICHAEL MOORE

### Resumen

Las películas de Michael Moore resultan paradigmáticas del documental contemporáneo. Se trata de un cine de intervención política que niega abiertamente la falacia de la objetividad del género documental al expresar de manera explícita la opinión y objetivos del cineasta, convertido en personaje principal. En ellas, Moore recurre a fuentes variadas, desde imágenes y filmaciones de su propio archivo personal a informativos televisivos, con el fin de apelar a la emotividad del espectador para que éste busque su propia capacidad de respuesta al acabar la proyección. Sus influencias parten del documental político de Jack Grierson y Joris Ivens por un lado y de la sátira de los cómicos norteamericanos de los años sesenta por otro. El resultado es una filmografía que se posiciona en contra de la derecha estadounidense y que ha generado un modelo que se mantiene vigente en la actualidad.

### Palabras clave

Documental; sátira; Michael Moore; Jack Grierson; McDocumental.

### Autor

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# OF MEN AND MOVIE CAMERAS: BUSTER KEATON, DZIGA VERTOV, AND THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY

DONNA KORNHABER

Of all of Buster Keaton's films, *The Cameraman* (1928), the last picture over which he had true creative control, is arguably the most transparent regarding his views on the filmmaking process. Keaton plays a character known simply as "Buster", an aspiring newsreel cameraman who just can't seem to master his chosen profession. Attempting to land a job with the MGM Newsreel Company, he disastrously mangles his audition reel, turning a series of simple street scenes – a boat coming into harbor, a view of the traffic at a busy intersection – into an inadvertent work of avant-garde art by double-exposing his film stock and layering the images disconcertingly atop one another. The seemingly simple act of filming the world as it unfolds in front of him – the act of creating the most basic form of documentary – proves to be a far more challenging pursuit than it at first appears, and Buster despairs that he will ever actually learn his trade. Of course, he eventually manages to make a proper film. "They'll buy any

good film [...] so photograph anything that's interesting", his sweetheart instructs him in an intertitle. Buster simply must keep shooting until he gets it right, avoiding any distracting technical errors in the process. Sure enough, at the film's climax he suddenly finds himself in a position to save the day and save his career at the same time, rescuing his sweetheart from drowning while he is in the middle of filming a boat race. The resulting newsreel roll is a hit and Buster is at last granted a job. "That's the best camerawork I've seen in years!", the head of the newsreel company declares. From the proper practice of simple cinematic technique, great rewards will inevitably ensue.

Or so it initially seems. Yet *The Cameraman* is a film laced with an irony so caustic that it borders on cynicism. Keaton made the film after his fateful and ill-advised move to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, trading in the autonomy that came with running his own production house for the greater resources and apparent economic stability that

was supposed to come with working for a major studio. It would prove to be the undoing of his career, as MGM studio executives tried to curtail his improvisatory working methods and to force him to conform to the studio's exacting production standards. *The Cameraman* would effectively be the last film Keaton could call his own, and the narrative of the film would reflect his struggles to conform to studio standards and expectations. It's no coincidence, in other words, that he set the film at a company called MGM and named his main character Buster, developing a story in which his alter ego desperately tried to impress his superiors at the studio.

Given this background, we must not take too seriously the rejection of that initial newsreel audition footage within the diegesis of the film. The great irony here is that Buster's audition reel, which is explicitly viewed as a grievous failure by the characters, is actually an extremely sophisticated filmic artifact. The reverse motion, superimposition, and split screen effects seen in that short are not actually matters of accident and incompetence; they are instead complicated forms of artistic construction, supposed diegetic mistakes that actually serve as metafilmic testimony to Keaton's cinematic craftsmanship. The newsreel audition footage is a work of innovation, ingenuity, and even beauty – evidence of an active cinematic intelligence confronting and reinterpreting the world rather than simply presenting it unadorned. And that final reel that wins Buster so much acclaim within the world of the film – the one that's called "the best camerawork I've seen in years" by the studio head? It is literally the work of a monkey. The classic Bell and Howell camera that Buster uses within the film required constant hand-cranking in order to operate – an action Buster himself cannot perform as he dives into the water to save the drowning heroine. That task instead falls to a pet primate that Buster acquired earlier in the film, who dutifully cranks the camera as his owner saves the day. The technically correct but ultimately bare-bones

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**THROUGH KEATON, I MEAN TO ARGUE, WE CAN BEGIN TO BETTER UNDERSTAND WHAT WAS AT STAKE IN VERTOV'S HIGHLY UNCONVENTIONAL APPROACH TO POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY AND ASCERTAIN THE REASONS BEHIND THE RUSSIAN FILMMAKER'S MARRIAGE OF AVANT-GARDE CINEMATOGRAPHY AND MAN-ON-THE-STREET REALISM**

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recording of the world before us may be cause for celebration and acclaim within the diegetic world of the film, but it is in itself no great feat. It requires no special technical knowledge, no great cinematic skill, and no real organizing consciousness. There is no need for an actual camera-*man* at all in such a case – a camera-monkey will do just as well.

The fictional conflict around the fictional newsreel documentaries presented in *The Cameraman* would prove remarkably prescient to the actual ideological conflicts and material struggles that lay behind an actual work of urban documentary – Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kino-apparatom*), released one year after Keaton's film, in 1929. To view the two films alongside one another is illuminating. Through Keaton's fictional newsreel and fictional struggles, I mean to argue, we can begin to better understand what was at stake in Vertov's highly unconventional approach to political documentary, and we can begin to ascertain the ideological reasons behind the Russian filmmaker's marriage of avant-garde cinematography and man-on-the-street realism. That is, we can begin to understand just why Vertov took so seriously the kind of highly experimental documentary form dismissed as ludicrous by the characters within Keaton's film. Vertov undoubtedly knew Keaton's work well. As the slapstick comedian once remarked in an interview, "I was a box-office draw in the darnd-

est country in the world.... Russia. I was a bigger box-office attraction than Chaplin in Russia" (BISHOP, 2007: 57). Vertov's brother, cameraman, and close collaborator Mikhail Kaufman – literally the man with the movie camera in Vertov's film – even once described himself as "the Buster Keaton of documentary filmmaking" (NORTH, 2009: 32). So far as we can know, Keaton had little or no awareness of Vertov's struggles within the nascent Soviet film industry or of the ideological debates among the new nation's most prominent filmmakers, Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein most especially. Yet *The Cameraman* and *Man with a Movie Camera* would share far more than just a similar name; they would share an outlook on the process of cinematic construction – and specifically documentarian construction – that set them at odds in their respective film industries with those who favored a more uninflected manner of film recording, a direct presentation of diegetic material rather than an interpretation of that material via the specialized techniques and unique capacities of the camera. For Keaton and Vertov both, the medium of film held far greater promise than that.

## MAKING FILMS "INTELLIGIBLE TO THE MILLIONS"

For these views, both Keaton and Vertov found themselves embroiled in conflict relatively late in their careers, beset by powerful figures who questioned their methods despite the directors' many years of successful filmmaking. For Keaton, the fictional conflict in *The Cameraman* was made all too real in his struggles against the MGM executives who sought to control his filmmaking, the famous producer Irving Thalberg most especially. "Like any man who must concern himself with mass production, he was seeking a pattern, a format". Keaton later wrote of Thalberg. "Brilliant though he was, Irving Thalberg could not accept the way a comedian like me built his stories... Our way of operating would have seemed hopelessly mad to

him" (KEATON, 1960: 207). For Vertov, his conflict would lie not with the capitalist executives of a major motion picture studio but with the communist ideologues of the Soviet state. A year before Vertov's film was released – in the same year that *The Cameraman* debuted – the Communist Party Conference on Cinema produced a statement of artistic purpose with ominous overtones for Vertov's work. Officially, the party committed itself to an open artistic position on questions of filmic construction, declaring, "In questions of artistic form the Party cannot support one particular current, tendency or grouping: it permits [...] the opportunity for experimentation so that the most perfect possible film in artistic terms can be achieved". Yet in the very next paragraph, the statement also declares, "The main criterion for evaluating the formal and artistic qualities of films is the requirement that cinema furnish a 'form that is intelligible to the millions'" (TAYLOR, 1988: 212). Stripped of its particular ideological and revolutionary purposes, it is a statement with which Thalberg and any other Hollywood executive would surely agree – that the purpose of film is to "furnish a form that is intelligible to the millions".

Like Keaton in his pre-MGM days, Vertov had no small measure of success within the Soviet film industry before making *Man with a Movie Camera* and falling under official criticism and scrutiny. From 1922 to 1925, he was the leading force behind the *Kino-Pravda* newsreels, which served an important role in helping Soviet cinemas to meet the dictates of the so-called "Leninist proportion", the party rule requiring cinemas to show at least twenty-five percent documentary subjects (LENIN, 1988: 56). During the early 1920s, it was difficult to go to a cinema in the Soviet Union and *not* see an issue of the *Kino-Pravda* newsreel along with the other shorts and features. Yet even despite this nationwide prominence, Vertov remained a figure of some suspicion among certain members of the political and cultural elite for his aestheticizing tendencies. As Vertov writes of the reception



of the fourteenth issue of *Kino-Pravda*, in which he first started to employ avant-garde techniques: “Friends didn’t understand and shook their heads. Enemies raged. Cameramen announced that they wouldn’t film for *Kinopravda*, and the censors wouldn’t pass *Kinopravda* at all (or rather they passed it, but cut exactly half, which was equivalent to destroying it)” (VERTOV, 1984: 44). Tricks of process photography, elements of rapid and suggestive analytical editing – the very tactics of filmic composition highlighted in Keaton’s supposedly failed newsreel in *The Cameraman* – were all regular features in the *Kino-Pravda* newsreel shorts. And they would be the defining cinematic features of *Man with a Movie Camera* as well, features that have since become iconic in the memory of that film – in the canted-angle, split-screen depiction of street cars moving in opposite directions, for instance, or the apparent bending in half of the Bolshoi Ballet building via a similar split-screen inversion. Such aspects of Vertov’s filmmaking were inexcusable according to Eisenstein, childish instances of what he called “newsreel follies” and certainly not in keeping with the idea of furnishing “a form that is intelligible to the millions” (TSIVIAN, 2004: 11).

Yet Vertov fervently believed in the documentary mission as he conceived it; more than that, he believed he was fulfilling the party’s directive to craft films “intelligible to the millions.” Vertov utterly rejected the idea that the carefully staged, reenactment-based documentaries then prevalent among other Soviet filmmakers made anything truly intelligible to the masses: “The viewers – illiterate and uneducated peasants – don’t read the titles. They can’t grasp the plot... These still unspoiled viewers don’t understand artificial theatricality” (VERTOV, 1984: 64). It was documentary grounded in the lived realities of everyday life that the workers and peasants most desperately needed, he said. Whenever “real peasants appear on the screen, they all perk up and stare at the screen”, he observes. “On the screen are their own

kind, real people. There isn’t a single false, theatrical movement to unmask the screen” (VERTOV, 1984: 64). Documentary’s true mandate, he said, was simply to “show us life” (VERTOV, 1984: 62).

Yet at the same time, Vertov did not believe that this imperative eliminated the need for an interpretive rendering of the documentary material captured on camera. Just the opposite: the very fact that the filmmaker was obligated to record the actual happenings of the world in front of him meant that he had a duty to then interpret that material for his viewers via the techniques of cinematography and editing. In Vertov’s words, the true documentarian regards editing “as the *organization of the visible world*” (VERTOV, 1978: 118). Or, to frame the debate in the terms set out in Keaton’s film: the very need to “photograph anything that’s interesting”, as Buster’s sweetheart tells him to do *means* that the specialized techniques of cinematic arrangement he mistakenly deploys are so essential. Those techniques are what make the material meaningful, presenting us with an interpretation of the world: in the words of the Party Conference on Cinema, they are what make that interesting material *intelligible*. Everything else might have just as well been shot by a monkey – a being with the physical dexterity to record a film but not the mental dexterity to arrange it.

## GERMAN IDEOLOGY AND RUSSIAN DOCUMENTARY

In taking this approach, Vertov had on his side an alibi of far greater renown than Buster Keaton and his pet monkey. He had Karl Marx himself. As a number of commentators have noted in passing, Vertov’s views on filmmaking seem to derive at least in part from the doctrines of *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engel’s manuscript on history and human nature from 1846<sup>1</sup>. The connections deserve to be mined in greater depth, as in many ways Marx’s text offers an intellectual blueprint to the mechanics of Vertov’s method of documen-

tary filmmaking. In fact, the emergence of *The German Ideology* as a major text of Communist literature is almost entirely contemporaneous to the heyday of Vertov's documentarian career in the 1920s. For nearly a hundred years, *The German Ideology* was considered a relatively minor work in the Marxist canon until around the time that Vertov began actively making films. As Charles Barbour has argued, "It was the Soviets [...] who first began to treat *The German Ideology* as a pivotal text" (2012: 49).

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**THE VERY FACT THAT THE FILMMAKER WAS OBLIGATED TO RECORD THE ACTUAL HAPPENINGS OF THE WORLD IN FRONT OF HIM MEANT THAT HE HAD A DUTY TO THEN INTERPRET THAT MATERIAL FOR HIS VIEWERS VIA THE TECHNIQUES OF CINEMATOGRAPHY AND EDITING AVAILABLE TO HIM**

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Marx's main concern in *The German Ideology* is with the manner by which Communists should best understand and present questions of history and society in their writings, and it is easy to see how his remarks as to how one should textually represent the world might be readily adapted to questions of representation in the age of cinema. "The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas", Marx writes. "They are the real individuals, their activity, and the material conditions under which they live" (MARX, 2004: 42). The Communist observer must focus his eye on the actualities of lived experience and nothing else, according to Marx. "We do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh", he writes. "We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real-life process we demonstrate the devel-

opment of the ideological reflexes" (MARX, 2004: 47). Yet this focus on the real does not mean it is the Communist's mandate to simply record the material facts before him without substantial interpretation. Marx actively chides the idea of history as "a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists" (2004: 47). Neither should the Marxist interpreter allow himself to spin off into a realm of airy abstractions and ideological impositions that are not grounded in the actual facts of material life – for Marx is equally critical of history as "an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists" (2004: 47). The perfect point of Communist representation is the point between the two extremes of unadorned factuality and ideological fantasy, the point "where speculation ends" and gives way to "the representation of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men" (MARX, 2004: 48). In fact, although Marx's essay was written and published nearly half a century before the advent of modern film technology, his text does in one moment actually anticipate the cinematic adaptation of his ideas that Vertov would undertake. Describing the work of non-Communist ideology, Marx writes that "men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*" (2004: 47). It is the work of the Communist interpreter to set the world right-side up again, to take the material transmitted in the *camera obscura* and arrange it for us properly – in Marx's words, to "facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata" (2004: 48).

This is the mission that Vertov undertakes for himself in *Man with a Movie Camera*, a film that is self-consciously set at the point of equipoise that Marx identifies between the polarities of "a collection of dead facts" and "an imagined activity of imagined subjects". Vertov's documentary is not so much a presentation of the world as a highly self-conscious arrangement of it. This is true even in the most literal sense. While Vertov's film is often compared to city symphony films like Walther

Ruttman's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt, 1927) or Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921), the film actually presents no single city at all. The footage used in the film, which gives the impression of presenting a unified urban location, is combined from reels taken in Kiev, Kharkov, Moscow, and Odessa. The same act of compositing can be seen even with regards to the people depicted on screen. Per Vertov's own imperatives to "show us life", most of the figures shown in the film are actual city-dwellers going about their daily lives. Many are entirely unaware that they are being filmed: through telephoto lenses, Vertov's camera often surreptitiously captured from far away scenes of great intimacy – the scenes of mourners in a graveyard, for instance, or of vagrants sleeping on the street. Others are all too aware that they are on camera, as with the couples at the city clerk's office who smile for the camera as they sign their marriage papers or try to hide their faces as they fill out their divorce paperwork.

In what seems like a contradiction to Vertov's own prescriptions, however, the film also includes select moments of staged action, most notably in the early scenes where a young woman (Vertov's wife and editor, Elizaveta Svilova) awakens in the morning, washes herself, and gets dressed. Yet Svilova's presence in the film can be read as another interpretive tool deployed by Vertov in arranging and presenting the documentarian footage that is the film's core, another attempt to set right the material that Marx says is initially shown upside down in the *camera obscura*. She models for the viewer a process of awakening from slumber and confronting the world in daylight, the self-same processes that the film itself will ask its spectators to metaphorically undergo. She is, in this sense, a human version of the superimpositions and frame speed changes that will accent other moments in the film; in other words, she positions and contextualizes the material just as surely as any camera trick.

Ultimately, Vertov's film is about the process of breaking one's apparent consciousness of the world and radically reformulating it – of waking from the dream world of prior ideologies and confronting the actual material conditions of experience in revelatory daylight. Hence the distancing effects of so many of Vertov's visual techniques, the making strange of what might otherwise seem overly familiar. The filmmaker asks us constantly to look again at what we see before us, to catch ourselves falling into easy patterns of viewing and understanding and instead to try to see the world anew. What we recognize when we do so is a realm that has been very carefully rearranged for us into a universe of labor and leisure and of ultimately little else. There are the workers in the textile factory, and there are the bathers on the beach. There are the women rolling cigarettes, and there are the men relaxing and playing chess. There are the workers at the telephone station and there are the children watching the magician. These are not contrasting groups, a laboring class and a leisured class. The figures on the beach and the figures in the factory are all one, engaging in the basic pursuits of life.

There are elements besides labor and leisure shown on screen, of course. These elements are made up mostly of the great milestones and traumas of human existence: the couples preparing to get married and the couples preparing to get divorced, a scene of childbirth, a scene of mourning, firemen racing to a fire. But what is missing from the film is even more striking than what is present. There are no politicians depicted in this world. Aside from the fire brigade and the civil clerk at the marriage office, there are in fact no government officials of any kind. Neither are there soldiers, nor police. There are no leaders, no speech-makers, not even any foremen in the factories. We are, it seems, already in the realm of the worker's paradise, the condition that comes after the demise of the state. Or rather, Vertov has uncovered from within the datum of his countrymen's daily lives the conditions of this place. The apparatus of gov-

ernment and the operations of the state beyond the level of its basic civil functions are ultimately all superfluous, he shows. Through the process of cinematic arrangement and visual estrangement, Vertov reveals a world that belongs first and foremost to the people themselves, an inheritance that is already right there before them for the taking if only they would recognize it.

Even the cinema itself belongs to them as part of this inheritance, Vertov says. Hence his insistence throughout the film on foregrounding the methods of its own production: not just in the constant appearance of the titular man with a movie camera (Kaufman) throughout the film but also in the depiction of the film's actual editor (Svilova) and in the direct presentation of the actual process by which film stock used in the final picture was edited by her hands. Film itself is hereby demystified and revealed to be a product of human labor, in deference to Marx's famous warning in *Capital* against "the fetishism of commodities" and the processes by which "the products of labor become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible" (1936: 83). In Vertov's vision, the whole of modernity – the skyscrapers, the trains, the trollies, the cinema itself – belongs fundamentally to the people, and his film is offered as a declaration of that inheritance. It is potentially the most political of gestures. Vertov makes a point of showing to his viewers a world that goes beyond politics, a world that they have every right to demand as wholly their own and in which, in truth, they actually already live.

## **CAPTURING MODERNITY**

Vertov bequeaths to his viewers, in other words, a vision of modernity as the product of their own labor, a creation of their making, and an inheritance that's theirs for the taking. It is a revelation that can only be made in and through the so-called "newsreel follies" that Eisenstein and other Soviets so despised in his work. It is here that Ver-

tov reconnects to Keaton, who was no Marxist but who shared with Vertov a perspective on the profound ability of film to capture and in some sense tame the forces of modernity. Keaton's films fundamentally concern a struggle with the industrial and mechanized forces of modernity, which literally threaten to overcome or destroy Keaton's character in nearly every one of his films. Yet Keaton the filmmaker shows a remarkable command of modernity at its most epic scale, harnessing trains and ocean-liners to his will. As a director, the industrial products of modernity are his playthings to control, even if as an actor he must mime fear and submission to these elements. It is this dynamic that is so pivotally at play within the narrative of *The Cameraman*. Buster's newsreel bosses want their cameraman only to obsequiously capture the modern world as it unfolds around him. Their ideal newsreel is nothing more than some aspect of the modern world directly depicted on film. But Keaton aims for something else in his filmmaking: to arrange, to interpret, and to control the forces of that world. The true intent of that vision is illegible to the newsroom bosses in *The Cameraman*; they are only able to view his early newsreel attempt as a series of accidents and mistakes. It is in truth a clearer expression of Keaton's actual cinematic vision than anything else in the film, for although Keaton rarely engaged in the specific manner of cinematographic expressionism there depicted – double exposures and superimpositions and the like – they represent an approach to cinematic construction that is active rather than passive, interpretive rather than reactive, and wholly in control of the modern world there shown.

For Vertov, his techniques and his intentions in *Man with a Movie Camera* were just as illegible to the Soviet elites as were Keaton's newsreels to his bosses in *The Cameraman*. Seeking to publish a cinematic manifesto that explained the visuality of that film and was timed to coincide with its release, Vertov found his submission rejected by *Pravda*, the main

party newspaper. It was quite a blow to the former editor of *Kino-Pravda*, which was meant to be the newsreel analogue to the print publication. Reaction to the film itself would be similarly hostile – “in the Soviet Union”, Jeremy Hicks writes, “it would long be criticized as the way not to make a film” (HICKS, 2007: 70). Ostensibly, the film was too experimental, too visually baroque. Its meaning was not overtly and immediately “intelligible”. Yet the film was also, in another sense, too assuming, too convinced of the power of cinema, too presumptuous in making film the chosen vehicle for the delivery of Marx’s vision of a world properly interpreted. From the documentary cinema, Vertov had written, would come “the greatest experiments in the direct organization of the thoughts (and consequently of the actions) of all humanity” (TSIVIAN, 2004: 13). Film undoubtedly had an important place in the revolutionary vision of the Soviets. It was even, as Lenin once said, “the most important of all arts” (KENEZ, 1992: 29). But it was a tool only, and not the singular instrument of ideological revelation that Vertov dreamed it to be.

In fact, when *Man with a Movie Camera* opened in Moscow, its run was cut short after only a week. It was replaced in the cinemas where it had been playing by Harold Lloyd’s *Grandma’s Boy* (Fred C. Newmeyer) – a slapstick film from 1922 that features at its climax a long chase in which the hero, riding in a car, pursues a villain traveling on foot down a country road, following him to the point at which he finally collapses of exhaustion, overwhelmed by this unstoppable new machine. There could be perhaps nothing farther from the idea of the workers claiming ownership and control over the forces of modernity that was so much a part of Vertov’s vision of political documentary. Yet Lloyd’s was a film that, without a doubt, was “intelligible to the masses”. ■

## NOTES

- 1 See MICHELSON, Annette (1984). Introduction, *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley: University of California Press; BELLER, Jonathan (2006). *The Cine-*

*matic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. Dartmouth: Dartmouth College Press; and BEN-SHAUL, Nitzan (2007). *Film: The Key Concepts*. London: Bloomsbury.

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## OF MEN AND MOVIE CAMERAS: BUSTER KEATON, DZIGA VERTOV, AND THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY

### Abstract

As cinematic stylists, contemporaries Dziga Vertov and Buster Keaton had little in common, yet they shared a remarkably homologous vision of the cinema's unique role in interpreting the sometimes overwhelming condition of modernity. This article offers a comparison of Keaton's *The Cameraman* and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, released within one year of one another, as complimentary testaments to the active interpretive power of the cinema in the face of modern social and industrial forces. Through this comparison, the article aims to illuminate the artistic and ideological motivations behind Vertov's unique combination of documentarian footage and avant-garde cinematographic technique and link his filmmaking to Keaton's efforts in the United States. Composed in the face of strenuous resistance and criticism from Hollywood executives and Soviet elites, respectively, and fortified by a commitment to the camera's powers of analysis and arrangement (derived, in Vertov's case, from his engagement with Marx's *The German Ideology*), both *The Cameraman* and *Man with a Movie Camera* make a lasting case for the documentary power of the cinema as an instrument of interpretation uniquely conditioned to the social and political challenges of the modern age.

### Key words

Dziga Vertov; *Man with a Movie Camera*; Buster Keaton; *The Cameraman*; documentary; Karl Marx; *The German Ideology*.

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## DE HOMBRES Y CÁMARAS DE CINE: BUSTER KEATON, DZIGA VERTOV Y LA ESTÉTICA DEL DOCUMENTAL POLÍTICO

### Resumen

Como estilistas cinematográficos, los contemporáneos Dziga Vertov y Buster Keaton no tenían mucho en común, pero compartían una notable visión homóloga del exclusivo papel que desempeña el cine a la hora de interpretar la condición en ocasiones abrumadora de la modernidad. Este artículo ofrece una comparación de *The Cameraman*, de Keaton, y *El hombre de la cámara*, de Vertov, estrenadas con un año de diferencia, como testimonios complementarios del poder interpretativo activo del cine de cara a las fuerzas sociales e industriales modernas. A través de la misma, se pretende dilucidar las motivaciones artísticas e ideológicas tras la combinación única de metraje documental y técnicas cinematográficas vanguardistas de Vertov y relacionarla con los esfuerzos de Keaton en Estados Unidos. Compuestas ante la extenuante resistencia y crítica por parte de ejecutivos de Hollywood y miembros de la élite soviética, respectivamente, y afianzadas gracias al compromiso con los poderes de análisis y reordenación de la cámara (derivados, en el caso de Vertov, de su afinidad con *La ideología alemana* de Marx), tanto *The Cameraman* como *El hombre de la cámara* constituyen ejemplos duraderos del poder documental del cine como instrumento de interpretación especialmente acondicionado para los desafíos sociales y políticos de la era moderna.

### Palabras clave

Dziga Vertov; *El hombre de la cámara*; Buster Keaton; *The Cameraman*; documental; Karl Marx; *La ideología alemana*.

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# HOLLYWOOD AND THE SHAPING OF THE OFFICIAL STORY: THE SECOND WORLD WAR ACCORDING TO THE DOCUMENTARY SERIES *WHY WE FIGHT* (FRANK CAPRA, 1942-1945)

JAUME ANTUÑANO SAN LUIS

On December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941, the Japanese fighter planes attacked Pearl Harbor in two waves, unleashing a storm of projectiles over the Hawaiian base with devastating results. This incursion, the first one of the Axis powers on American soil, led the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration to rethink the isolationist posture adopted after the outbreak of World War II. The President mobilized the Armed Forces, and on December 8<sup>th</sup>, only one day after the Japanese attack, the US Congress declared war against the Empire of Japan, a resolution that was almost unanimous. Three days later the Congress also declared war against Germany and Italy. The involvement of the United States in the war was imminent.

The barrage also had consequences on Hollywood's representations of the conflict. Since the 1930s, different productions that had served as means of raising social consciousness had already been challenging the neutral position of the major film studios regarding the events linked to global

upheaval. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (Anatole Litvak, 1939) was the first film that openly defied the neutrality of the industry, and even though it was released four months before the beginning of the war, it already reflected one of the biggest fears of the interventionists: the Nazi presence in the United States. Other films, such as *The Great Dictator* (Charles Chaplin, 1940), *Foreign Correspondent* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *The Mortal Storm* (Frank Borzage, 1940), *Escape* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1940), and *Man Hunt* (Fritz Lang, 1941), also warned the population of the dangers of Nazism through a combination of entertainment and ideology<sup>1</sup>. However, after Pearl Harbor the role of Hollywood as a mass media device became much more active when some of the most important filmmakers of the time decided to put their successful careers on hold to enroll in the Army as volunteers. There, they would put their cinematographic experience and their notoriety at the service of the propagandistic demands of the Pentagon.

## THE WAR AS A NARRATIVE

With the irruption of the war in the United States, the American government developed a propaganda program, a term generally camouflaged under other, less polemic words such as *information* or *orientation*. It relied on a number of great filmmakers capable of presenting war as a narrative in order to justify the intervention before to the population and the members of the Armed Forces (HARRIS, 2014: 9). Before entering the war, the Pentagon implemented a series of fifteen lectures delivered by Army officers to new recruits. These lectures focused on global history since World War I and were usually accompanied by instructive short films created by the US Signal Corps<sup>2</sup>. But like David Culbert has noted (1983: 175), the lectures were ineffective and the short films failed to spark interest among the troops, demonstrating the futility of an obsolete morale project.

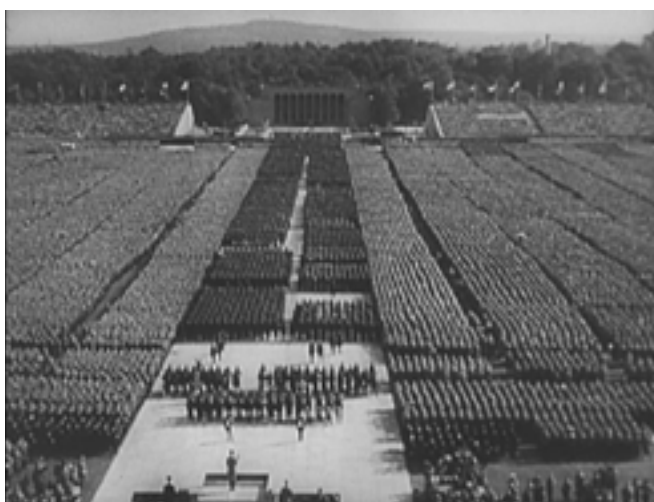
The new strategy, propelled by Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, aspired to substitute these inefficient indoctrination tools for documentaries that captured the attention of the recruits. In order to do so, the Pentagon commissioned some of the most important Hollywood filmmakers, such as John Ford, William Wyler, John Huston, George Stevens, or Frank Capra<sup>3</sup>. During the war, different productions, such as Academy Award winner *The Battle of Midway* (John Ford, 1942), or Wyler's *The Memphis Belle* (1944), allowed the American audience to see the Army in action, victorious before the Japanese and German attacks, through the use of footage recorded on the battlefield<sup>4</sup>. In Italy, John Huston filmed *San Pietro* (1945), a deliberate fictionalization of a campaign – already finished before the arrival of the cameras, as Bertelsen explains (1989: 254) – in which the filmmaker recreated the battle, the liberation of the small town of San Pietro Infine, and the exultant reception of their inhabitants to the American troops, played by extras (HARRIS, 2014: 280-281). For his part, after a long journey

through Northern Africa recreating the battle of Tunisia for Frank Capra – another conflict that was over before the arrival of the crew – George Stevens captured the liberation of Paris and the horror of the Nazi concentration camps on location, footage that would be later used as incriminatory evidence at the Nuremberg trials (Moss, 2004: 118)<sup>5</sup>.

The most prolific of all these filmmakers was the Italian-American Frank Capra who, leading the 834<sup>th</sup> Photo Signal Detachment, participated as a director, scriptwriter, producer, and supervisor in several projects, such as *Know Your Ally* (1944), *The Negro Soldier* (1944), *Tunisian Victory* (1944), *Know Your Enemy* (1945), or the documentary series that launched his foray with the Army: *Why We Fight* (1942 – 1945).

## WHY WE FIGHT: THE WAR THROUGH CAPRA'S LENS

When Capra received Marshall's call, he was at the most successful point in his career. He had already received three Academy Awards for the blockbusters *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and *You Can't Take It With You* (1938). When he was commissioned by the Chief of Staff, Capra was finalizing the shooting of *Arsenic and the Old Lace* (1944), one of his most known comedies starring Cary Grant and Priscilla Lane. Even though this notorious filmmaker did not have any experience filming documentaries, Marshall decided to keep him as lead of the project. According to what Capra wrote in his rather questionable biography, Marshall justified his decision with these words: "I have never been Chief of Staff before. Thousands of young Americans have never had their legs shot off. Boys are commanding ships today, who a year ago had never seen the ocean before" (CAPRA, 1971: 361-362). Capra had no other choice than to apologize and accept the challenge proposed by his superior.



Figures 1, 2 y 3. Shots from *Triumph of the Will* employed in *The Nazis Strike* (Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak, 1943)

To create the series, Capra set his gaze on Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, a powerful demonstration of what the solid Nazi propaganda machinery was able to do. This German super-production was Hitler's personal request and captured the Sixth Nazi Party Congress, which took place in Nuremberg in 1934. Riefenstahl's documentary was an ode to the values and symbols of the Third Reich, a glorification of war, an exaltation of Hitler's control of the German mass as colossal as the sinister shadow of the dictator, soon to threaten the whole of Europe (figures 1, 2, and 3)<sup>6</sup>. After watching Riefenstahl's documentary, Capra found the key to the elaboration of his series: the systematic inclusion of excerpts of different propaganda films of the Axis and the transformation of their triumphalist images into representations of the totalitarian brutality and the delirium of their leaders through a new narration<sup>7</sup>. The rest of the images, with the exception of a few scenes filmed by Capra's crew and the different animations created by the Disney Factory, were also taken from other sources such as newsreels, fiction films, and footage appropriated from the enemy (BOHN, 1977: 106). Through the compilation of all these images, *Why We Fight* – designed specifically for military instruction, although some of the films were released theatrically – insisted on the importance of the American participation in the war, highlighting the threat of losing all freedom as the main reason to go to war and offering a revealing view of the enemy's power<sup>8</sup>.

Seven documentaries compose this series following a circular structure, an organization that sought to explain the need to disembark to European battlefields at a time when American soldiers were already fighting in the Pacific against the Japanese (GIRONA, 2007: 43). The first of these films, *Prelude to War* (Frank Capra, 1942), begins with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and establishes the causes that, according to the script of the documentary, led to the intervention of the Unit-



Figure 4. Disney animation that represents the world under the Axis' yoke. *Prelude to War* (Frank Capra, 1942)

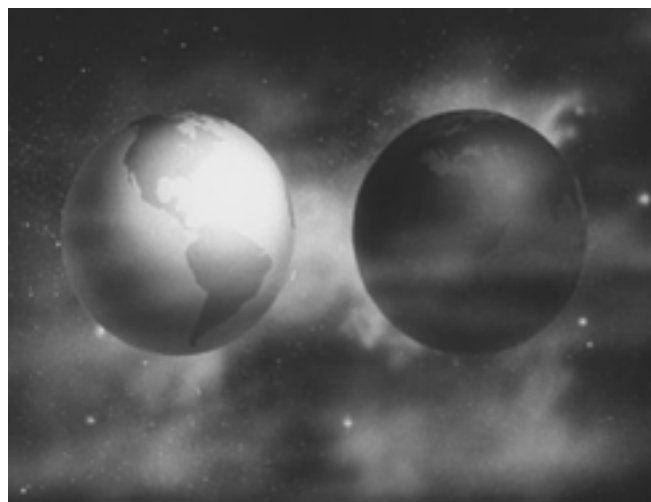


Figure 5. Disney animation that represents the division between the free world (bright) and the slave world (dark). *Prelude to War* (Frank Capra, 1942)

ed States in the war. *The Nazis Strike* (Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak, 1943) is the second documentary of the series and it focuses on explaining Hitler's expansionist politics, especially the annexation of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The main topic of the third film, *Divide and Conquer* (Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak, 1943) is the fall of France under Nazi power. *The Battle of Britain* (Anthony Veller, 1943), *The Battle of Russia* (Anatole Litvak, 1943), and *The Battle of China* (Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak, 1944) depict the glorification of the Allies's resistance during a time when the United States was not at war. Lastly, *War Comes to America* (Anatole Litvak, 1945) examines the history of the United States from the foundation of Jamestown in 1607 to the attack of Pearl Harbor and the resulting shift in public and political opinion about military intervention. This last film constantly reinforces the idea of American intervention as a defensive and inevitable action sparked by the sectarianism of three <<gangsters>> ready to subdue the United States under a rigid control once they conquered the rest of the world (figure 4).

Therefore, the United States occupies the center of history in *Why We Fight*, presenting it-

self as the guardian of a badly wounded system: democracy. In *Prelude to War*, Capra echoes a famous speech by Vice President Henry Wallace to present the war as a conflict between "the free world", represented by the countries of the United Nations (with the United States leading them), and the "slave world" of the Axis powers (figure 5). In reference to the "the free world", *Why We Fight* praises the cultural and political pillars of the United States: Lincoln, the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, patriotism, freedom, and national security, among others. The series addresses these pillars through a strong sense of sentimentality that is amplified by the affable tone that the narrators, Walter Huston and Anthony Veiller, employ to describe these images. On the other side of the spectrum, the Axis powers embody violence, repression, loss of individualism, and tyranny. In other words, they represent the Axis dogmas – imposed by the expansionist desires of their ruthless leaders – that, according to the series, clashed with the fundamental principles of the free world (figures 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11). However, *Why We Fight* establishes the dichotomy democracy-dictatorship through a number of purposeful non-representations and historical

simplifications that blur the boundaries between the two concepts.

In the proposed dual division of the world, *Prelude to War* situates every single country of the United Nations in the democratic block, ignoring that among these countries were brutal regimes like Rafael Trujillo's (Dominican Republic), Anastasio Somoza's (Nicaragua), or one of the strongest allies of the United States at the time, Stalin's Soviet Union (Koppes y Black, 1987: 68). Regarding the Soviet Union, Litvak directed *The Battle of Russia*, a documentary in which the filmmaker praises its people and the Red Army, never mentioning the term communism – the fundamental cause of the later demonization of the country on the part of successive American governments. The documentary also obliterates the multiple political purges carried on since the 1930s in the Soviet Union. Therefore, the film erases the systematic executions and the confinement of thousands of political opponents in concentration camps from the official history as a mechanism to eulogize the (illusory) strength of the soviet national unity.

*The Battle of China* uses a similar strategy. The documentary exalts the pacific nature of the Chinese people, underlining that <<in four thousand years of continuous history, China has never fought a war of aggression>>. With this statement, the director establishes a comparison between

China and the United States, pointing out that both countries "hate war", but have been dragged into the conflict as a result of an external aggression. What the documentary does not include, as an effort to represent the Chinese national unity before the Japanese Empire, is the violent repression of dictator Chiang Kai-shek against Mao Tse-tung's communist side. Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Nationalist Party whom *Why We Fight* describes as the unifier of the country, led an operation in which he purged hundreds of members of his party to consolidate his power. However, the series disguises once again the dictatorial

Figures 6,7 y 8. Childhood in the Axis powers. *Prelude to War* (Frank Capra, 1942)







Figures 9, 10 y 11. Childhood in the Axis powers. *Prelude to War* (Frank Capra, 1942)

practices of a country under the wide umbrella of the term “free world”, focusing in this case on the representation of Hirohito’s imperialist plans in China, represented as the first step towards the conquest of the rest of Asia. The documentary first narrates the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, an event presented in *The Nazis Strike* as one of the most significant examples of historical license in the series. According to the narrator, it was this Japanese attack that marked the beginning of World War II, and not Germany’s invasion of Poland in 1939. This temporal alteration meets two functions: on one hand, it serves to contrast the apparent pacifism of China with the war tradition of Japan, now fueled by sadistic leaders that have the enslavement of American citizens as their ultimate goal. On the other, it is a critique of the isolationism of the League of the Nations before the first signs of Japanese violence, a fact that according to the documentary led to Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia, the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi advancement through Europe, and eventually, to the bombing of Pearl Harbor (figure 12). By referencing all of these events through the concatenation of press headlines projected over columns of smoke and fire, the film sought to demonstrate that isolationism should not be considered an option. To reinforce this position, *The Battle of China* also represents the bombing of Shanghai in 1937, which the film de-

scribes as the attack in which the Japanese introduced a new kind of war to the world: the indiscriminate bombing of civilians<sup>9</sup>. The gory images of the massacre counteract non-interventionism: if the Japanese were unified under the veneration of the Emperor, the United States should be united in the name of freedom.

However, the reality in American soil was not as idyllic as projected in the series. The free land of opportunities was actually the land of racial segregation and the unequal distribution of civil rights, social conflicts that remain hidden in *Why We Fight* under constant allusions to the Constitution and the freedom it provided to all. Additionally, the representation of African-American citizens is practically non-existent during the series. Only some of the documentaries, like *War Comes to America*, allow brief shots that depict the lives of black citizens. One of these shots illustrates a young, black man enrolling in the Army. Another one depicts an African-American soldier defending Pearl Harbor. Another shot, during which the narrator names the nationalities of immigrants who helped build the country, depicts black men and women picking cotton under the “the burning sun of the South”. The use of the term “Negros” and the location of this shot allow for a brief and convenient simplification of slavery. *Why We Fight* eliminates the representation of all racial conflict in an attempt to offer a unified view of the

United States. In *The Negro Soldier*, a documentary that does not belong to this series but that also was supervised by Capra and served to persuade young, black men to enlist in the Army and to educate the white audience (DOHERTY, 1993: 213), a critique of inequality and racial oppression is also absent. Far from denouncing this situation, the narrator in *The Negro Soldier* states “this time it is a fight not between man and man, but between nation and nation”. Like *Why We Fight*, the film calls for national unity to fight against the totalitarian danger.

Capra’s series also severs another piece of American history, one that is less known in other countries: the existence of concentration camps during the Roosevelt Administration, located for the most part in the western states. As Bodnar argues (2010: 189-190), the President declared the reclusion of 120,000 Japanese immigrants and Japanese-American citizens in concentration camps in the name of national security after the attack in Pearl Harbor. The erasing of this historical event echoes the same intention of *The Battle of Russia*, *The Battle of China*, and even *War Comes to America*. To show the deprivation of rights and the forced confinement of American citizens by the hand of their own government would obstruct the attainment of a national unity, one which was already compromised by the disagreements between the interventionist and isolationist wings. The strategy of the series sought to protect the image of the United States as the greatest exponent of freedom and democracy of the world. Therefore, the series blocks the depiction of the camps – a repression tool more suitable in the enemy regimes than in a



Figure 12. Disney animation that represents the attack in Pearl Harbor. *War Comes to America* (Anatole Litvak, 1945)

superpower of the “free world” – in order to avoid its infiltration in the collective memory of the American citizens. *Prelude to War*, and especially *War Comes to America*, focus on building a view of the United States as an advocate against the totalitarian oppression. These films depict all the goodness and kindness of the American way of life, in contrast with the enemy’s way of life [or “way of death”, as the narrator proclaims in a clumsy analogy], which consisted of the dissemination of terror inside and outside their borders. There are multiple references to the foreign policies of the Axis powers. The series alludes to and almost mystifies Mussolini’s plans to bring the Roman Empire back from its ashes, the Tanaka Report that would put Japan in the lead of the world, and Hitler’s crushing power that would burn it down, in order to prepare and motivate American soldiers to go to war. However, the representation of the repression of these leaders toward political opponents inside their own territories is minimal. In *Prelude to War*, the director employs a quote from Hitler’s

## ANTISEMITISM, A KEY ASPECT OF HITLER'S CRUSADE, BECOMES DILUTED IN THE SERIES, MINIMIZED BY THE MAGNITUDE OF THE AXIS ATTACKS IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE WORLD

*Mein Kampf* to refer to brute force as a mechanism to silence the voice of "the few that still believed in freedom and said so". In the same way, in *The Nazis Strike*, the second documentary of the series, there is another fleeting allusion. After a voice-over pronounces a speech with a dramatized German accent referring to the subjugation of all the German workers to the "Nazi secret mission" [the conquest of the world], Walter Huston retakes the narration of the documentary to describe the consequences that await those who oppose Hitler. The narrator says, "For those who don't like it, you don't eat. Or you disappear into a concentration camp. Or you get this [cuts to a dramatization of four civilians being shot]". One can see how these two documentaries allude to the internal repression through a generalization of the victims. The narration tells us that every opponent will be confined or executed, but it does not specifically refer to the persecution and extermination of the Jewish people across the whole of Europe. Antisemitism, a key aspect of Hitler's crusade, becomes diluted in the series, minimized by the magnitude of the Axis attacks in different parts of the world. *Why We Fight* shapes, through all of these strategies, the historical reality to embrace the propagandistic needs promoted from Washington, prioritizing depictions of the danger that the United States faced over an accurate representation of the violent reality that the world was suffering.

## A FEW LAST CONSIDERATIONS

Although more than fifty million viewers had seen the film by the end of the war (Rollins, 1996:

84), the indoctrination documentary model that *Why We Fight* proposed became practically obsolete after the war. According to Harris (2014: 330), by the time of the release of *The Battle of China*, the sixth documentary of the series, this kind of project had already been exhausted, even among the soldiers. Thus, the use of this kind of film began to ebb before the new war documentaries, which were increasingly mobilizing a crew to war fronts and filming the conflicts on location. Claudia Springer (1986: 151) points out that during the Vietnam war (1955-1975), the US War Department sponsored the development of different propaganda documentaries. Only one, *Why Vietnam?* (1965), followed the guidelines established in Capra's series. The rest of the films relied on a subtler and more sophisticated style, describing from an alleged ethnographic point of view the daily life of the Vietnamese people and the supposed benevolence of the American military intervention in the country. At the same time, this new kind of documentary also tried to justify the simplified representation of the Vietnamese people and culture through the use of pseudoscientific standpoints. Unlike what happened with some of the *Why We Fight* films, none of the new indoctrination documentaries were released theatrically. What is more, the strong sense of repudiation that the Vietnam war provoked among the American population triggered the filming of documentaries that refuted the need to fight that the military propaganda hoped to instil in civilians and soldiers alike. Among these antagonistic yet pacifist works, in which the voice of the Vietnamese people could finally be heard, stand out a few that were filmed during the war, like *In the Year of the Pig* (Emile de Antonio, 1968), a self-critical documentary produced by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War entitled *Winter Soldier* (1972), and Academy Award winner *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1975). Drifting away from the polarized idea of the world that Capra employed to warn America about the possibility of having



the enemy march down Pennsylvania Avenue, the new documentaries approached critically the military intervention. This shift not only reflected the pacifist standpoint of a great percentage of the population. It also established a new kind of documentary whose strategy, unlike Capra's, has prevailed.

## NOTES

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- 1. The increasing insertion of political messages supporting the mobilization of the troops in Hollywood productions encountered a strong resistance in the isolationist sectors of the American Senate. The industry moguls, whom were mostly Jewish exiled from Europe, were closely investigated after being accused of corrupting industry and turning it into a propaganda tool (KOPPEL y Black, 1987: 40)
- 2. The Signal Corps started filming instructional short films in 1929. These productions described how to use weaponry or how to act before the different situations presented at the battlefield through tedious explanations. No argument, characters, humor, animations, or non-military music was employed in these films. (HARRIS, 2014: 113).
- 3. Ford was the first of these filmmakers in taking an active part in the Army. He enrolled a few months before the attack in Pearl Harbor, when he officially joined the Naval Reserve. Once enlisted, Ford created the Field Photographic Branch, a section of the Marine that filmed propaganda documentaries, among other projects (LEVY, 1998: 23).
- 4. Ford would also contribute with other documentaries, like *Sex Hygiene* (1942), an instructive short film that explained soldiers the consequences of contracting venereal diseases, or *December 7<sup>th</sup>* (1943), a film

about the bombing of Pearl Harbor that received another Academy Award.

- 5. George Stevens was eventually replaced by John Huston in this project, later entitled *Victory in Tunisia*. Huston filmed the footage thousands of miles away from the battlefield, concretely in Orlando, Florida, a fact that further demonstrates the fictional nature of this project (GUNTER, 2012: 132).
- 6. Riefenstahl's documentary had nothing to do with the productions of the Signal Corps. First, the German filmmaker managed a large crew and counted with extensive technical resources during the week of the Nazi convention. More than 170 people worked for Riefenstahl, who also counted with thirty cameras, four sound trucks, an airship and a plane that allowed her to capture aerial images of the rally, and an elevator-like system, attached to one of the massive swastika flag masts that allowed to capture in motion wide-shots of the perfectly aligned crowd (BARSAM, 1975: 23-25).
- 7. Like McBride noted (2011:467), this was not a new idea. In 1940, British documentaries such as Alberto Cavalcanti's satire of Mussolini *Yellow Caesar* or *The Curse of the Swastika*, which focuses on the increasing power of the Nazi Party, had already used similar techniques. In the same way, and in the same year, *The Ramparts We Watch* was released in the United States. Taking a verse of the American national anthem as its title, this film also turns a Nazi production against its initial purpose. In this case, the chosen film is *Feuertafe* [Baptism of Fire, 1940].
- 8. The documentaries released theatrically in the United States and abroad were *Prelude to War*, *The Battle of Russia* and *War Comes to America*. The first two won Academy Awards for Best Documentary Feature.
- 9. Like Patterson noticed (2007: 2), this war strategy had been already used months before the attack over Shanghai. It happened during the Spanish Civil War, when the Condor Legion destroyed the city of Guernica.

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## HOLLYWOOD AND THE SHAPING OF THE OFFICIAL STORY: THE SECOND WORLD WAR ACCORDING TO THE DOCUMENTARY SERIES WHY WE FIGHT (FRANK CAPRA, 1942-1945)

### Abstract

After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, the United States government implemented a new system of propaganda that sought to convince American soldiers and average citizens alike of the necessity to enter World War II. This system counted on the participation of top Hollywood filmmakers, who filmed documentaries that shaped war as a narrative. Among these distinguished filmmakers, Frank Capra, author of the *Why We Fight* series, emerged as the most prolific propaganda cineaste of his time. This article analyzes how, through the use of documentary cinema, the US government and Frank Capra created a narration of World War II in the *Why We Fight* documentary series by careful manipulation, omission, and simplification of historical events in order to shape the official story of the conflict.

### Key words

Frank Capra; Hollywood; Second World War; Documentary; Propaganda; Official Story.

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## HOLLYWOOD Y LA CONFIGURACIÓN DE LA HISTORIA OFICIAL: LA SEGUNDA GUERRA MUNDIAL SEGÚN LA SERIE DOCUMENTAL WHY WE FIGHT (FRANK CAPRA, 1942-1945)

### Resumen

Tras el bombardeo de Pearl Harbor por parte de la Armada Imperial Japonesa, el gobierno de los Estados Unidos implementó un programa de propaganda que buscaba convencer a los soldados y a la población norteamericanos de la necesidad de entrar en la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Este programa contó con la participación de cineastas de Hollywood de primer nivel, los cuales realizaron producciones documentales en las que otorgaban un sentido narrativo al conflicto bélico. De entre estos directores destaca, por su gran producción, el italoamericano Frank Capra, autor de la serie *Why We Fight*. El presente artículo se centra en mostrar cómo, a través del uso del cine documental, el gobierno de Estados Unidos y Capra crearon en esta serie una narración de la Segunda Guerra Mundial que, mediante olvidos premeditados, manipulaciones y simplificaciones históricas, estableció la versión oficial del conflicto.

### Palabras clave

Frank Capra; Hollywood; Segunda Guerra Mundial; cine documental; propaganda; historia oficial.

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# STAGING ABSENCE: *SHOAH* BY CLAUDE LANZMANN (1985)

IGNACIO RAMOS

One of the most breath-taking scenes from the documentary filmed by Claude Lanzmann about the Holocaust, *Shoah* (1985), occurs during the second part of the film inside a barbershop. In this scene, during questions to Abraham Bomba, a survivor of Treblinka, Lanzmann, assuming the role of interviewer, repeatedly insists on asking Bomba to remember the most minute details of his traumatic experience as a “barber” for all of the women who, minutes before facing death in the gas chamber, had to have their heads completely shaven. Far from undeterred by the emotional burden of the interviewee’s traumatic memory, the director pushes him to a full remembrance of the past. The interviewee, after initially seeming coy and reserved during the simple description of the events that occurred, is pressed to exactly repeat the gestures and actions he performed during the minutes before the annihilation of hundreds of people. Accurate, detailed, in some cases even banal but always insistent, Lanzmann’s questions

attempt to break the chain of the memories established, tamed by the witness in his memory, not so much to recreate, using the expression of Ora Gelley, the “scene of the crime” (1998: 831), but instead to return to a certain time in the past, to resuscitate the past for the viewer through gestural mimicry that enables Bomba to see himself again in the concentration camp and relive the forgotten moments, translated into his linguistic inarticulateness and inconsolable crying.

Although it is impossible to translate into words the vulnerability and psychic collapse to which Bomba succumbs, revealed by the long pause that occurs in his speech, the classification of “sadistic insistence” by critics such as Dominick LaCapra (1997: 257) to describe the director’s perseverance in extracting Bomba’s memory – “we watch something like torture”, Inga Clendinnen (1999: 178) would say – shows his inquisitive interview practice and the trauma produced in the subject through remembrance. In a clear example

## THE IMMERSION OF THE INTERVIEWEE IN THE PAST THROUGH OBJECTS THAT ACT IN A PROUSTIAN MANNER AS TEMPORARY CATALYSTS SHOWS A DEEPLY THEATRICAL SENSE OF ROTE EXERCISE

of the transfer of the documentary to the clinical universe, the interviewer and interviewee take the roles of doctor and patient, with the difference that the discursive emergence of Bomba's traumatic past is not intended to heal through the reincarnation of the past but rather intends to perpetuate the past in the director and the viewer. The director seeks not so much to remove the past pain but instead to resuscitate it before the present viewer to show its accuracy and to demonstrate its durability over time, contributing through its visualization to what Sánchez-Biosca (2009) calls the "pedagogy of horror" [pedagogía del horror]. In the words of Lanzmann, collected in Bernard Cuau and Michel Deguy's edited volume of interviews and articles on the documentary, *Au sujet de la Shoah*, it is exactly when the interviewee relives the scene when, finally, "la vérité s'incarne" [the truth is incarnated] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 298).

This notion of "incarnation" as access to a hidden truth in the individual psyche is interesting to observe in the spatial and discursive adjustment carried out by the director in his strategy to recover and perform memory. After following Bomba from New York to Tel Aviv for more than two years prior to filming the scene, Lanzmann rented a barbershop that would serve as the setting for the interview and hired "extras" who would act as anonymous subjects, not even able to understand the language – English – in which the exchange would occur, on whom Bomba would simulate cutting hair. The adequacy of the situational space to the survivor's testimony – also evident

in the locomotive rented to serve as a Polish train to contextualize the oral account of another witness, Henryk Gawkowski, who was formerly in charge of driving the trains in which Jews were deported to concentration camps during the war, a function it undertakes once again during the interview – exemplifies the director's willingness to stage memory. The immersion of the interviewee in the past through objects that act in a Proustian manner as temporary catalysts shows a deeply theatrical sense of rote exercise. Rather than a simple description of what occurred, Lanzmann looks for a real experience of the past, emerging not from a faithful, historiographical stage of it – archival material and the use of historical objects are completely discarded during filming – but instead through situations that trigger memories in the subject being interviewed. To unleash the *re-lived* memory, the director places the witness in a familiar but uncomfortable space – Bomba is (re) contextualized in a barbershop in Tel Aviv, just as Simon Skrebnick, one of only two survivors of a massacre of 400,000 Polish Jews between December 1941 and January 1945, is transferred to the place where it occurred, Chelmno. The physical movement does not seek historical reconstruction but rather the recovery of the experience, the return to *places of memory*, in the meaning of Pierre Nora (1984-1992), housed in the individual's psyche, whose recovery and performance are the only source and mode of access to the objective truth of the traumatic experience of the Holocaust. Lanzmann himself explains this point with clarity, as he proclaims in an interview with Shoshana Felman in 1986: "*Shoah* is not a historical documentary [...], the film is an incarnation, a resurrection" (FELMAN, 2000: 112).

To the extent that the director's personal experience is more important than historicity and that feelings are more important than facts – the former being precisely the authentic historiographical foundation of the second – it is not a surprise to submit the witnesses and survivors interviewed

in the documentary to this high degree of theatricality. Robert Skloot states that “Lanzmann wants to put the perpetrators, victims, and bystanders in his film ‘on stage’” (2012: 266). The director himself recognized this point in 1985, in an interview titled “Le lieu et la parole” collected in the volume edited by Cuau and Deguy, in which he explained the need to fictionalize witnesses and survivors, turning them into “characters” on “stage” (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 301). The simple description of what occurred is not enough for Lanzmann; it is necessary to relive it: “[...] Il fallait qu’ils la jouent, c’est à dire qu’ils irréalisent. C’est ce qui définit l’imaginaire: irréaliser. C’est toute l’histoire du paradoxe sur le comédien. Il fallait les metre non seulement dans une certaine disposition d’âme mais dans une certaine disposition physique. Non pas pour les faire parler mais pour que la parole soudain devienne transmissible et se charge elle-même d’une autre dimension” [They must act it, or undo it. That is what defines the imaginary: undoing. It is the central theme of the actor’s paradox. We had to put them in a certain physical position. Not to make them speak, but so that the word would suddenly become transmissible and charged with another dimension] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 301). His allusion to the “actor’s paradox” unfailingly refers to a pioneering eponymous text from French performance theory written during the Enlightenment by Denis Diderot from 1773 to 1777, and it reveals a concern for the fundamentals of the actor’s mimicry and reproduction of reality. Synthesized in the displacement that Diderot raises between “acting with the soul” – that is, feeling the emotions interpreted – and “acting with intelligence” – accurately reproducing without feeling what is interpreted – Lanzmann relied on the former of these two possibilities, advocating a total reliving of the past that publicly bares the subject, identified with the sentiment expressed.

Precisely this will to incarnate, to revive the memory, forces the director to relinquish all images from the archive. Although *Night and Fog*, by

Alain Resnais (*Nuit et Brouillard*, 1955), has passed to posterity through what Thomas Doherty calls “the imagic equilibrium between the archival and the creative material” (1987: 4), *Shoah* has absolutely rejected the inclusion of any image that does not refer to the *present* of the survivors and the camps. Unlike the cohort of documentaries about the Holocaust that preceded and followed *Shoah*, Lanzmann conceived a completely bare film, exclusively consisting of current oral history provided by the witness, the survivor, or the criminal – the minutes that gather, through a hidden camera, statements by the Nazis themselves about what occurred are a distinctive landmark of the documentary – and a camera that tracks the existing scenarios of the genocide.

Such austerity in the iconographic use of archival material appears to be explained by the director’s interest in resurrecting a memory and reincarnation through the survivor’s speech, rather than confining it to the stasis of the photographic image. Lanzmann’s narrative stance, focused on the mental images that assail the viewer based on narration rather than images that could be displayed “as a docudrama”, seeks greater freedom and imaginative depth. Faced with the imposition of the visualization based on what is perceived solely in the displayed image, the director chooses the conceptual opening of the story, organically renewed in the imagination of each of the recipients. For Lanzmann, archival material is nothing more than fixed testimony, devoid of all vitality, and fictitious because it is partial. The archival image seals the memory, devitalizes it, and neutralizes its survival; the memory is mummified, and it is reduced to that particular image, anchored in the past. By contrast, through the oral, live story, the director tells us that memory is renewed and perpetuated and is reincarnated in a *performative* speech act (SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA, 2009: 132) by which the action is *recreated*, recollected, thereby fading its anachronistic historicism, directly interrogating us as the recipients thereof.

The rejection of all archival documents, in addition to the resurrection of the lived moment, inexorably anchors the image and the story in this narrative and the viewer's present, fusing conventional temporary regimes. The past and the present are diluted, overlapping through a story and an image whose goal is to create an aesthetic and a moral effect. Thus, the denial of keeping the Holocaust in the past and its update to the present are essential for understanding the ultimate goal of the documentary. "Le pire crime, en meme temps moral et artistique qui puisse être commis lorsqu'il s'agit de réaliser une oeuvre consacrée à l'Holocauste, est de considerer celui-ci comme passé", says Lanzmann [The worst moral and artistic crime that can be committed in a drama about the Holocaust is considering it an act from the past] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 316). Therefore, the film can only be an "enquête sur le présent de l'Holocauste" [investigation into the present of the Holocaust], an inquiry into the wounds and scars left by those who experienced it and that persist today, plunging them into what he calls a "hallucinante intemporalité" [hallucinatory timelessness] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 316). To the extent that, for the director, the Holocaust is not embedded in the past but in the present, the strategies to recover memories seek to confirm the inevitable circularity of the traumatic experience, the need to revive and pass it on into the present, recreating what Gabriele Spiegel called the metaphysical and theatrical *presence of the now* (2002: 150).

It is inevitable to note the similarity between Lanzmann's practice and the principles articulated in the Jewish liturgical commemoration. In this sense, the documentary has been conceived as a testament not only of cultural solidarity but also of religious faith. In the words of Doherty, "Lanzmann is interested in the Holocaust not only as a serious scholar but also as a 'Jew'" (1987: 3). The consideration of historical experience as a perpetual reincarnation of the main events of one's culture through oral recitation is based on

an attempt to revive, in the present, through the sacred rite, past events that articulate one's identity. The ultimate goal of the event is identical to that of the director: to fuse two time frames into one – Lanzmann would speak of "l'abolition de toute distance entre le passé et le présent" [the abolition of all distance between past and present] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 301) – combining in a single transmitting and receiving entity a type of unique collective umbrella of shared and transmitted experience that makes a concept immersed in the cycle of the liturgical memory from the absence of a present element and history (SPIEGEL, 2002).

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**THE FILM OSCILLATES CONSTANTLY BETWEEN THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE, BETWEEN ABSENCE AND ITS SIGN, A PROBLEM SUMMARIZED IN THE CONSISTENT OXYMORON IN THE NEED TO BEAR WITNESS A FACT WHOSE TELOS WAS NONE OTHER THAN THE ANNIHILATION OF THE PRESENCE OF ALL WITNESSES**

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The sacramental tone of the staging of absence conducted by Lanzmann exactly fits the classical theatrical ritual as a space for viewing the prohibited image. The film oscillates constantly between the visible and the invisible, between absence and its sign, a problem summarized in the consistent oxymoron in the need to bear witness a fact whose *telos* was none other than the annihilation of the presence of all witnesses. The director himself acknowledges the difficulty of making visible the invisible when explaining that the greatest difficulty in the film was confronting the "disparition des traces: il n'y a plus rien, c'est le néant, et il fallait faire un film à partir de ce néant" [disappearance of the remnants: there is nothing,



it is nothing, and I had to make a film from that nothing] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 295). It is this vacillation between the known and the impossibility of knowing – what Maurice Blanchot, in *L'écriture du desastre* (1980), summarizes in the paradox of never forgetting what one will never know – that confirms the most significant theatrical essence of the film.

As with religious ritual and Lanzmann's documentary, the theatrical event is based on an incarnate word, uttered and received, resulting in collective and community participation in the act, whose most visible demonstrations are the Dionysian festivals originating in Greek theatre. As in classical Greece, the theatrical event represents an epiphany: a revelation of the image of divinity, hitherto sheltered and protected from the viewer until its placement on the altar or *thymele*. The classical *skéné*, a term from which the contemporary *scene* derives, acquires a symbolic significance on the border between what is shown and what is hidden. Behind this, the divine is hidden and invisible, manifested on the *proskenion* and *orchestra* through the actor and representation (SURGERS, 2007: 24-25). The etymology of the theatrical space – *theatron*, derived from the verb *theaomai* – shows exactly this place where the viewer goes not only to see but also to contemplate a spectacle, to be a victim of a reverie, of a *vision* (SURGERS, 2007: 24). Lanzmann himself alludes to the visionary potential inherent in the incarnate word by claiming to have received a letter from a viewer who claimed to have seen and heard for the first time through the documentary the cry of a child entering the gas chamber: "Il m'arrive de rencontrer des gens qui sont convaincus d'avoir vu des documents dans le film: qui les ont hallucinés" [I happen to find myself with people who are convinced they have seen documents in the film: they are hallucinations]. He concludes: "Le film fait travailler l'imagination" [the film activates the imagination] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 297). As theatrical text, *Shoah* acquires its force through

its incarnation rather than by reading: the film is the materialization of the staged word, brought to life through acting, one that overcomes the merely read, narrated, or shown.

The theatricality of the documentary is further reinforced by its rigorous compliance with the classical triple unity of spatial, temporal and actantial coordinates of the compositional parameters prescriptively established in Aristotelian poetics. Despite the wide variety of scenery, the unit of symbolic meaning of the film gives it a clustered and confined spatiality and chronology. Largely with the transposition of the enclosure and impenetrability, characteristic of the time and concentration camps and trains – the latter leitmotiv widely repeated throughout the film as a symbol not only of the movement of the deported individual but also of the mobility of memories recovered in the present – the documentary is the product of multiple spaces that only refer to one and the same universe: the enclosure of the *lager* and of the prison of mental memory. The drama emerges precisely from the fact that, despite the variety of geographical locations, all flow together in a single reference – the camp – which causes significant condensation, thus intensifying the pathos of what is told.

This spatial condensation, metonymically locked in the uniqueness of personal experience, is a chronology in line with the synthesis of the broad into the concrete. *Shoah* rejects building the story around a linear, chronological progression, in line with the evolution of historical events. The division of the documentary into two parts, titled "First Era" and "Second Era", is not as much temporal as it is moral and political: as noted by Jay Geller, this partition responds to the initial process of acquiring knowledge about what occurred, while in a second moment, the need for action regarding that knowledge is evoked – which the author summarizes in the opposition "getting knowledge" vs. "what to do with knowledge" (1985: 31). Thus, although the oral testimony

of witnesses can trace the Jewish genocide during World War II, the beginning and end of the film do not coincide with the emergence of the “final solution” and the end of the war. Similarly, the privacy of witnesses is not revealed to the viewer: their identity is exclusively subject to the recreation of what occurred, ignoring their previous or subsequent fate. Therefore, the temporary score is always uneven, as arbitrary as the selection of the survivors whose testimonies go back and forth in time. It is not so much a fact as an experience that Lanzmann wants to capture. Thus, compared to conventional chronological distribution, the director emphasizes disordered, random, live memories, identical in their (dis)organization to the random reminiscence of the trauma suffered and the psychological and moral reactions it triggers.

Perhaps the reason for this mode of expression of this temporality is precisely the symbolism associated with the documentary itself. One of the main hallmarks of *Shoah* in relation to its film counterparts is its long duration, both in the period of its preparation, execution, and editing and in the case of its viewing. On multiple occasions, the director has specified the laborious process of preparing the documentary – more than one decade elapsed between its inception in 1974 and its release to the public in 1985. This period consists of six years of searching for survivors by Lanzmann, four years of interviews summarized in 350 hours of dialogue filmed, a laborious editing process by Ziva Postec and Anna Ruiz, and a final length of 563 minutes, or approximately nine and a half hours. Even the physical conditions required for screening show the magnitude of the project. *Shoah* was released in cinemas through marathon sessions of almost ten hours condensed in one day or segmented into two halves of almost five hours that could be watched over two days of the week. The printed version published by Gallimard, composed of a condensed volume of

approximately 200 pages, is thus no more than a pale reflection of the filmed original.

Undoubtedly, this temporary prolonging shows in the sense of ennui that many critics have perceived in some viewers, but it is highly effective from the perspective of the emotion and intellectual commitment sought in them. Through the continuous juxtaposition of descriptive accounts of the murder of the Jewish people, Lanzmann attempts to reproduce the cyclical, oppressive reiteration of the actions. The full extent of the Nazi bureaucracy of mass destruction appears before our eyes through a rhetoric of repetition (of trains ghostly returning, again and again, transporting thousands of deported Jews and of the cleaning operations of the ramps and gas chambers). The long duration of *Shoah* is above all a material embodiment of its epic nature, a corollary to the magnitude of the devastation of a people and the huge exercise required in the viewer to not be able to understand it or even to imagine it. The expression of time in the documentary becomes a narrator and a character. The gigantic temporal proportion of the film allegorizes the lasting extermination. Form and essence are joined, and the insistence on the leitmotiv of repetition becomes the verbal and imaginary expression of the repetition of death, reincarnated again and again in the testimonies, spaces, and silences that punctuate the film’s nearly 600 minutes.

Because of its duration, Fred Camper says the film produces among its viewers an “ineffable sadness” (2007: 104). The extensive duration of the documentary becomes an organic testament to the weight of time in the concentration camps. The repetition of spaces, stories, survivors, mem-

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#### THE EXTENSIVE DURATION OF THE DOCUMENTARY BECOMES AN ORGANIC TESTAMENT TO THE WEIGHT OF TIME IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS

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ories, long shots, theatrical pauses, and silences for approximately 10 hours contribute to this dilation of time, the expression of the infinite time lived in the camp. Due to the repeated accumulation, time, in *Shoah* as in the camps, seems to stop. The actions are repeated, one after another, and it is the reiteration that negates the individuality of all, making them uniform, converting them into one and the same. Lanzmann uses repetitive syntax to create the density of the camp, the difficulty of escaping the deadly cycle of the concentration camp, to the systematic nature of human destruction. These mechanisms are materializing and make palpable the weight of ossified time before death, imposing, in the words of Liebman, “an uncommon burden on the spectators” (2007: 17). Thus, the viewer appears locked in a space and time that he or she cannot escape, condemned as a prisoner of the camp and train, and as an individual who recalls his memories, the traumatic Sisyphean repetition of experiences. In the words of Timothy Garton Ash, Lanzmann “deliberately uses the dictatorial powers of the director to lock you up in a cattle wagon and send you for nine and a half hours down the line to Auschwitz” (1985: 28).

The dilation of time is also endorsed by the multiplicity of languages quoted in the documentary, a symbolic example of the Tower of Babel that was the camps themselves. Juxtaposing a linguistic melting pot that mixes English, French, German, Polish, Hebrew, Greek, Italian, and Yiddish, the exercise of translation conducted by Lanzmann and an interpreter and transferred to the viewer with the help of subtitles contributes to the pause and the extension of the discursive periods. Through the numerous testimonies in different languages, the viewer witnesses the transfer from one language to another, causing inevitable communication delays to the viewer. If the flow of the exchange is affected, the comprehension of the scene is not. The spectators’ need to follow the subtitles, by not knowing the lan-

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guages used by the director and his interviewees, allows us to focus on the visuals, which are not initially noticed. The slowdown in the communication process allows for greater detention in the suprasegments and in the actors’ gestures – what Moser called “disturbing corporal language” (2010: 76) with regard to gestures such as those of the Polish peasant Gawkowski, horizontally sliding his finger over his neck – facilitating introspection and assimilation of what is reported.

Therefore, Lanzmann shows a reflection of time in which the weight of the pauses serves as a turning point, a change of scenery and scene, though only illusorily, because they only give way again to testimony that is to that which preceded it. The multiple narratives create a false sense of relief, breaking with what was reported earlier, resulting in a type of hope that never materializes and the frustration of repetition. Although dramatic, the silences have a pedagogical aspect. They are necessary for the viewer to commit, assume, and internalize the story, to breathe and catch one’s breath before continuing on in the immersion into barbarism. Perhaps the pause is also necessary because the only response to what is reported by both the director and the viewer is none other than silence.

The end result is a stage in which the absence – of places, victims, or words broken in aseptic euphemisms – is revealed to the viewer through a projection into the past and back to the present time. The indicative manipulation of memories by Lanzmann is evident in the large number of

omissions in the story of trauma. There are no traces of survivors, witnesses, or even the French accomplices who survived or contributed to the slaughter. Nor do women have an overwhelming presence in the narrative, making the film, as Ferzina Banaji noted, “a largely male text” (2010: 127). The film has a much smaller presence of members of other cultures, religions and sexual orientations who were dissidents of Nazi ideology. Lanzmann does not seek a historiographical narrative that attempts to answer the why of the crime because any response defies understanding and, what is worse, would banalize the experience through its adaptation to a false argument – “Hier ist kein Warum” [here there is no why], says Primo Levi in *Se questo è un uomo* (1947), recalling the major rule of Auschwitz. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann also presents an end to the debate over the possibility of an image to represent trauma. Such an image does not have to be shown but *resuscitated*, in the words of Stuart Liebman, to “wound his audience” (2007: 9). The film thus becomes the only valid visual document that acts as a witness to a historical moment whose truth lies in its transposition into the present and its call to knowledge as a source of action – Lanzmann was not the *protégé* of Jean-Paul Sartre and his successor at the head of the magazine *Les Temps Modernes* in vain – as well as in frustration – given the impossibility of precisely performing all actions. Perhaps the only conclusion is a commitment to the transmission of knowledge, responsibility, and commitment to memory. “Oral testimony”, says Lawrence Langer, “is a form of endless remembering” (1991: 159). The inherent theatricality of the documentary endows it with strength from living testimony, which is renewed and reincarnated in the present – “j’ai revécu cette histoire au présent” [I relived this history in the present], Lanzmann would later say (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 301) – such as the dramatic text, in every action and every viewing, overcoming the natural setting of the film and making *Shoah* an historic event in itself. ■

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## STAGING ABSENCE: SHOAH BY CLAUDE LANZMANN (1985)

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the elements of theatricality employed in Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah* (1985), so as to stage the concept of absence. First, I will analyse the performative and discursive procedures used in order to resuscitate the witness' past experience. Secondly, I will examine the director's symbolism of concentrationary time and space as agents enabling the visualization of the trauma.

### Key words

Holocaust; Trauma; Memory; Concentrationary space; Theatre.

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## ESCENIFICAR LA AUSENCIA: SHOAH, DE CLAUDE LANZMANN (1985)

### Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es rastrear los parámetros de teatralidad presentes en el film de Claude Lanzmann *Shoah* (1985) con el fin de escenificar el concepto de ausencia. Atenderemos, en primer lugar, a los procesos discursivos y actoriales empleados para resucitar la experiencia vivida por el testigo para, en un segundo momento, analizar la simbología del espacio y tiempos concentracionarios empleados por el director como agentes de visibilización del trauma.

### Palabras clave

Holocausto; trauma; memoria; espacio concentracionario; teatro.

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# FROM MILITANT CINEMA TO ESSAY FILM. *LETTER TO JANE* BY JEAN-LUC GODARD AND JEAN-PIERRE GORIN

LOURDES MONTERRUBIO

## CINÉMA MILITANT

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The ultimate expression of political documentary in the French space is undoubtedly the so-called *cinéma militant* produced between 1968 and 1981. A film practice born from the political and social circumstances that led to May '68 and extended to the seventies, when it also died. Militant cinema, extensively studied in various volumes – Gauthier et alii (ed.) (2004); Biet and Neveux (ed.) (2007) –, is described by Sebastien Layerle as follows: 'The film commitments in the spring of 1968 transformed the boundaries that separated the professional from the non-professional, the system from its margins, the creative act from activism. The life of the militant film takes place outside the traditional circuits, thereby challenging corporatism and institutions. Its moral and legal paternity was subverted by new work divisions among "teams", founded on collective and anonymous practice' (LAYERLE, 2008: 15-16). This cine-

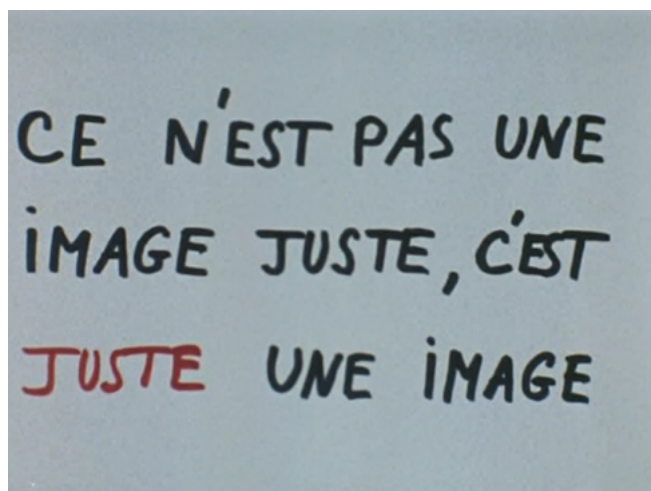
matographic commitment implied the abandon of the notion of *auteur* by various filmmakers, a concept inherent to modern cinema, in order to carry out a collective and anonymous filmic practice that becomes a political weapon, as promulgated by the manifesto *For a militant cinema* of the *États Généraux du Cinéma* (General States of the Cinema): 'for this reason we defend: the use of films as a weapon of political struggle [...] on which all militants involved exercise political control both in their making and in their dissemination'<sup>1</sup>. Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard will be the most representative authors of this break. The first one organizes the collective film making of *Far from Vietnam* (Loin de Vietnam, 1967) in which the second one takes part, and both direct the production of *Cinétracts* in 1968. The first one creates the SLON group, later called ISKRA, and the second one the Dziga Vertov Group. This militant cinema, which is initially associated with *direct cinema*, evolves later into other spaces. Within this

evolution, Raymond Lecler analyses how the hybridization of direct cinema with fiction causes the rehabilitation of the *auteur* notion: '[...] it is due to the involvement in militant cinema of already recognized authors like Godard or Marker, and by drifting towards staging and fiction, that the notion of author is tacitly and progressively re-introduced' (LECLER, 2010: 60). This article aims to show how the consolidation of the cinematic form of the essay film in Jean-Luc Godard's work is the consequence of the evolution in his militant cinema experience. This relationship between *cinéma militant* and *ciné-essai* also occurs, albeit with different parameters, in Marker's filmic practice.

### THE DZIGA VERTOV GROUP

In 1969 Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin founded the Dziga Vertov Group with the firm purpose of creating a revolutionary cinema, within the Maoist ideology in which both militated. Although their collaboration begins in the montage of *East wind* (*Vent d'Est*, 1969), the group will claim the authorship of the three films that Godard had made before, since the beginning of May '68 – *A film like any other* (*Un film comme les autres*, 1968), *British sounds* (1969) and *Pravda* [Truth] (1969) –, when he was already immersed in this revolutionary turn of his filmic work. Godard himself described what the purpose of the group was, differing from the militant practice of the moment: '[...] try to build a new cell that did not make cinema, but try to make political cinema politically, which was quite different from what the other militant filmmakers did'<sup>2</sup> (LEFÈVRE, 1983: 87). After nearly a decade as one of the established authors of the New Wave and more than a dozen films under the principles of the *jeunes turcs*, Godard announced the events of May '68 in *La Chinoise* (1967), a work that already evidences the change in the cinematic priorities of the filmmaker.

The production dynamics of the group's work is always the same: a European television commis-



Top. *A film like any other* (*Un film comme les autres*, Grupo Dziga Vertov, 1968)

Centre. *East wind* (*Vent d'Est*, Grupo Dziga Vertov, 1969)

Bottom. *Struggle in Italy* (*Lotte en Italia*, Grupo Dziga Vertov, 1970)



sions a film from the filmmaker par excellence of the New Wave to finally reject the result and refuse to broadcast it. Godard and Gorin, convinced that the production is the most important action and that their works are aimed at militant revolutionaries and not at the general public, continue with this form of production while the television channels provide them with the necessary funding. After *East wind*, the group accomplishes *Struggle in Italy* (Lotte in Italia, 1970) and *Vladimir and Rosa* (Vladimir et Rosa, 1970). Between these two works, Godard and Gorin travel to Jordan to shoot a film entitled *Jusqu'à la victoire* [To victory] (1970) about the struggle for Palestinian liberation, funded by the Arab League. Various kinds of difficulties and the events of the Black September delayed the film montage. During this trip, the *Al Fatah* newspaper published a text signed by Godard in July 1970<sup>3</sup>, which became a kind of manifesto for the group, in which the keys of this new filmic practice were established: 'Make a film politically. Show it politically. Distribute it politically' (GODARD, 2006: 138). The text vindicates the secondary task of the revolution, which they carry out in the cinematic field, and explains the need for implement the dialectical materialism in the audiovisual work through a montage practice that summarise the theories of the Bolshevik filmmaker Dziga Vertov, from whom the group takes its name. Daniel Faroult analyses the primacy of montage in the conception of this revolutionary cinema:

The primacy of the 'relations between images' over the images themselves is affirmed [...] Breaking with an ontologistic or immanentistic relation with the image, Godard reaffirms and develops the *vertovian* principle of the primacy given to the montage [...] Through the relations between images that it imposes or proposes, the montage establishes a causal, logical development of comparison. Thus, the filmmaker elaborates a conception of the world able to question representations. This montage then becomes the materialisation of thinking in film. (FAROULT, 2006: 134)

This embodiment of cinematic thinking already reveals the horizon of the essay film, where the montage must be established as the methodology of dialectical materialism, of the confrontation and questioning of images and sounds: 'It is imperialism that taught us to consider images in themselves, making us believe that an image is real. While common sense shows us that an image can't be anything but imaginary, precisely because it is an image. A reflection. Like your reflection in the mirror. What is real, is first of all you, and then the relation between you and this imaginary reflection' (GODARD, 2006: 139-140). Hence, revolutionary action involves destroying this imperialist practice to create new images and sounds, new relationships between those elements that shape the revolutionary cinema of the class struggle. Under this new prism, Althusserian theories about the concept of *ideology* as a set of small daily practices (developed in *Struggle in Italy*) are claimed in the cinematic field. The act of seeing a film implies also an ideological practice: if the spectator *consumes* the images as *real*, without questioning their construction, he will be performing an imperialist ideology. If, instead, he receives the images as manipulated reflections of reality, he questions himself on the relations between them and, so indispensable, between images and himself; then the spectator will be performing a revolutionary practice in the viewing of the film. Therefore, the filmmaker's revolutionary task is twofold: to disable the logic of the chain of images imposed by imperialism – *destroy their images* – and to create new ones that show the contradictions of the revolutionary movement and of the class struggle in order to be able to solve them through their analysis.

*Jusqu'à la victoire* was never completed as a film by the group. It was in 1974 when Godard and his new partner, Anne-Marie Miéville, took up this material to create *Here and elsewhere* (Ici et ailleurs, 1974). Finally, *Tout va bien* [Everything's all right] (1972) and *Letter to Jane: an investigation*



*Tout va bien* (Jean-Luc Godard y Jean-Pierre Godard, 1972)

*about a still* (1972) were the last two works by the Godard-Gorin couple, no longer belonged to the group. These two inextricably linked films inaugurated a procedure later widely used by Godard: the revisitation of a fiction for the creation of an essayistic work that explores the spaces of the former from the point of view of the latter.

## TOUT VA BIEN

Once the production system funded by television companies from different European countries is no longer possible, Godard and Gorin decide to get a new film off the ground, *Tout va bien*, which means the return to the established film industry thanks to the inclusion of two stars in the project: Jane Fonda and Yves Montand. This choice does not respond to a mere commercial strategy. The directors' interest for both actors lies in the public image of militant leftist intellectuals that they have. What the filmmakers want to tackle in this film is the dialectics between the representation of the intellectual and his public image and political commitment. With the participation of both performers the film gets the necessary funding for its filming within a framework of imperialist production, the first of the contradictions shown in the work. Godard defines the film as a new offensive in the field of film industry, against those who want to see in *Tout va bien* a break with his revolutionary career: 'Being on the offensive today means making *Love Story*, but in a different way. It means to say: you are going to see a love film with your favourite stars. They love and fight each other as in all films. But what separates or joins them, we name it: it is the class struggle'<sup>4</sup> (GODARD, 1998: 367). As for the choice of the actors, Gorin explains its motivation as follows: 'The important thing is to find which is here the role of the actor behind the term "star", and to make that this social function can be operational within the analysis of a given social situation'<sup>5</sup> (GODARD, 1998: 370). By producing *Tout va bien* within the

film industry establishment, the project represents the most ambitious proposal of Godard-Gorin. The dialectical cinematic work of the couple is then settled in relation to a clear and inevitable question. After four years of *revolutionary experience*, a political assessment is demonstrated as essential. Gorin claims: 'If there is a question that *Tout va bien* poses, it is the following: "What do the advanced elements of the working class ask intellectuals, certain advanced elements of intellectuals?"' (GODARD, 1998: 374).

MAI 1968

MAI 1972

FRANCE 1972

TOUT VA BIEN

The film begins with these intertitles on the black screen. After them, the credits appear and we hear the clapperboard of different takes. Once historically and *revolutionarily* situated – the political struggle within the cinematic field –, the creators' voiceovers – a male and a female one – talk about the requirements for making a film: you need money and to create a story for the protagonists. Four years after the May 68 shown in the initial intertitles, it is time to take stock of the dreamt and rehearsed revolution: *tout va bien*. Suzanne is an American journalist working for the *American Broadcasting System* in Paris, in charge of the political chronicles. Jacques, his partner, is a film director dedicated to the advertising industry after May '68. Their relationship was forged then, and four years later it needs to be redefined by a materialist analysis, as well as the historical reality in which they live.

LUTTE DE CLASSES

1968 – FRANCE – 1972

The *today* of the couple must be built as a new synthesis based on the contradictions that these two Mays, separated by four years of struggle, cast. The demiurgic voices intervene again in the epilogue-synthesis of the work:

- And we will just say that he and she have started to think of themselves historically.



*Letter to Jane: an investigation about a still (1972)*

- Each his own historian.
- Me. France. 1972.
- France. 1972. History. Me.
- Me. You.
- Me. You.
- France. 1972.
- Each his own historian. We would be more careful and demanding about the way we live.
- Me, you, him, her, us, all of you.



The work synthesises a political and cinematic assessment. A political *tout va bien* with two opposing perspectives, the reactionary and the revolutionary one. A filmic *tout va bien* about the social function of cinema – commercial or political, imperialist or revolutionary – and about the individual responsibility of filmmakers in the future of the cinematic art. Continuing the revolutionary struggle means the acceptance of a constant recycling, in this case, the re-education of intellectuals in favour of the class struggle. *Thinking of oneself historically*, being one's own historian, as indicated by the creators' voices in the epilogue of the story, means to perform ideology in every personal and quotidian act, under one's own responsibility and revolutionary commitment, in order to put the *Self* at the same level as *History*.

## LETTER TO JANE

On July 31<sup>st</sup> 1972, months after the release of *Tout va bien* in France – negatively received by critics and audiences –, the magazine *L'Express* published a report on Jane Fonda's visit to Hanoi in support of the North Vietnamese government and against the U.S. intervention. The main photograph of the report represented for Godard and Gorin the synthesis of the contradiction that they aimed to show in *Tout va bien*. For this reason, they decided to include it in the brochure that accompanies the presentation of the film in the Venice, New York and San Francisco Festivals. Besides, in the month of September, and in a single day of filming, they accomplished *Letter to Jane*: a fifty-minute long essay film born from the famous photograph. The intention of its directors was that this work accompanies *Tout va bien* in its premiere and tour around the United States<sup>6</sup>.

The title of the film defines the cinematic object created, an audiovisual letter to Jane Fonda – protagonist actress of *Tout va bien* and militant actress object of the report published by *L'Express* – about the already famous photo-testimony of her visit



*Letter to Jane: an investigation about a still (1972)*

to Hanoi. The letter aims to reveal the contradiction contained in this image, the contradiction the filmmakers wanted to tackle in *Tout va bien*, a film that they themselves consider as a failed attempt. They set out in their letter:

Today one often hears people say that cinema should serve the people. Fine. Rather than talk theoretically about the force and the virtue of *Tout va bien*, we are going to Vietnam. But we are going there by and with the means of *Tout va bien*. We are going to see if one may use the expression that way, how *Tout va bien* is working in Vietnam. And then, from this practical example we eventually will be able to draw a few conclusions about what to do and what not to do; each of us like how he is, with his life, his boss, his money, his desires, etc.

The letter, enunciated alternatively by the voices of Godard and Gorin, is then revealed as the most appropriate device, in the dialectical spirit of its authors, to create a speech addressed to different audiences: Jane Fonda, the spectators, the critics, the militants and the empire. Through the semiotic analysis of the photograph and its dialectical confrontation with frames of *Tout va bien* and other still materials, the filmmakers want to face the same question posed by their previous work in the fictional territory, but now from the field of the essay film: 'What part should intellectuals play in the revolution?' In doing so, they aim to reveal the contradiction of its implementation: Does Jane Fonda contribute to the cause of the Vietnamese people with the publication of this photo or does she contribute to the political manipulation of the situation on the part of the U.S. government? While the cinematic fiction has remained in the realm of theory, the photographic reality has imposed its practical response. Thus, *Letter to Jane* proposes the dialectics between the photographic imperialist image and the cinematic revolutionary one, through the presence of Jane Fonda in both materials, playing the same social function.

Through the semiotic analysis, the photo is revealed as a built reflection of reality that directs its interpretation and conditions the proposed question. The photo is not a reality that each observer can evaluate, but a previous and built response of the questions that it should raise. The question is no longer 'what can we see in this photo?' but 'what does this photo make us see?' The message the Vietnamese people want to convey is manipulated by the American capitalism. The *photographic letter* is therefore intervened and rewritten, which in turn destroys the actress work in other spaces, such as the cinematic one in *Tout va bien*. The individual responsibility of the revolutionary struggle in all areas is then stressed, showing the dialectics between the role that the Vietnamese people ask the actress to play and

the one that she finally carries out, performing the imperialist manipulation of the revolutionary message through the social function of a militant actress.

After the analysis of the photographic image, it is time to perform the consequent political practice. Faced with the photo already taken, and despite its manipulation, revolutionary political action is possible through its publication, by means of a different way to make it known. That other method is the one *tried* in *Tout va bien* – facing the hegemonic capitalist way represented by Fonda's photograph –, which finally achieved its successful materialisation in *Letter to Jane*. The comprehension of the relation between the filmic construction and really, not considering the former as a reflection of the latter but as spaces for the implementation of an ideology, is the political conception of the filmic work of Godard and Gorin, that of putting cinematic thinking at the service of political reflection. In the written text published in *Tel Quel*, which extends beyond the sound text of the film, the words of Godard and Gorin conclude: 'That is the reality, two sounds, two images, the old and the new, and their combinations. Because the imperialist capital says that two merge into one (and only shows a photo of you) and social and scientific revolution says that one divides into two (and shows how the new fights the old in you)' (GODARD, GORIN, 1972: 90).

## **FROM MILITANT CINEMA TO ESSAY FILM**

The evolution towards the essay film in Godard's work is the result of his intention to make revolutionary cinema. It is the cinematic activism what pushes the filmmaker to the practice of cinematic thinking. While it is true that we find essayistic elements in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, 1966) and *The Joy of Learning* (*Le gai savoir*, 1968), the first work of the filmmaker that responds to the characterization of the essay film as we understand it



Short-film *Camera-eye* by Jean-Luc Godard included in the film *Far from Vietnam* (*Loin du Vietnam*, 1968)

today is *Camera-eye*, his contribution to the collective feature film *Far from Vietnam*. However, the collective and anonymous experience of militant cinema, immediately after, vetoed the expression of subjectivity that Godard had carried out in that film. The works of the group nevertheless allowed him to experiment with different elements of this cinematic form. Thus, when the group disbanded, Godard and Gorin recovered the first person of the filmic enunciation to make *Letter to Jane*, which means the consolidation of the essay film after the first attempt of *Camera-eye*. The perceptible evolution between the two films can only be explained by the militant cinema experience that separates them. Before and after the revolutionary experience, they share their theme. In the first film we find the same reflection on the intellectuals' social role in the revolutionary struggle – in this case regarding Godard himself as a filmmaker – that we have already analysed about *Letter to Jane*.

The essay film is defined as an expression of the thinking process and the self-reflection of a subjective identity by the hybridization of fiction, non-fiction, and experimental cinema. A filmic form studied by different authors whose contributions have generated a broad theoretical itinerary thoroughly described and analyzed by Antonio Weinrichter (2007). Among them, Philip Lopate (1996) defends the need for the presence of a text (spoken or written) that represents a unique perspective trying to draw a reasoned discourse about a problem: a text expressing a personal view and containing a style intention. Josep Maria Català, for his part, places the essence of the essay film in its self-reflective characteristic, defining it as a filmic reflection through the dialectics between visual and sound materials 'in whose structure visible traces of the thinking process remain' (CATALÀ, 2000: 84). Later, José Moure (2004: 36-37) stresses the hybridization between fiction and non-fiction as the natural territory of essay film, and he points out the border

between the work accomplished and the work to be accomplished as its temporality. *Letter to Jane* responds to this characterization materialising a self-reflection that slips into the area of indeterminacy arisen between the fiction of *Tout va bien* and the non-fiction of the photograph published in *L'Express*, in order to develop itself in the historical temporality between the finished work and the one in progress. This essential concept of the *present of the essayistic creation* is largely generated by the epistolary device. In addition, Laura Rascaroli stresses the importance of the dialogical aspect and that of the spectator: 'The structure of the essay film [...] is that of a constant interpellation; each spectator, as an individual and not as a member of an anonymous, collective audience, is called upon to engage in a dialogical relationship with the enunciator, hence to become active, intellectually and emotionally, and interact with the text. The spectatorial position is in the singular, because the genuine essay film raises problems and asks questions, and does not offer clear-cut answers' (RASCAROLI, 2009: 35-36). More recently, Timothy Corrigan adds the relevance of the *public experience* of the subjectivity, understood as the meeting of the latter with the *everyday*. Places, people and events demonstrate the multiplicity and variability of the daily spatial and temporal experience (CORRIGAN, 2011: 32). In Moure's aforementioned article, he lists five characteristics of the essay film that encompass and synthesise those designated by the authors cited. Once again, in the letter by Godard and Gorin we find a perfect exemplification of all of them: relational operation of different cultural materials; revelation of a *thinking in progress*; simultaneity of the discourse and the reflection on it; presence of the author himself, *the essayist*; and dialogic communication with the spectator (MOURE, 2004: 37-38). If Moure thus delimits the essay film space, Alain Ménil provides it with two polarities: attempt-temptation and objectivity-subjectivity (MÉNIL, 2004: 98-99). *Letter to Jane*

is generated as an *attempt* of political practice from the *temptation* to the photograph published, in order to confront the alleged photographic objectivity with its perception, analysis and subjective interpretation, its investigation: 'There is no essay that is not, somehow, the experience of its own adventure, that is not at the same time a search, an investigation or an inquiry *concerning* or *on the occasion of*, the occasion of an invention, an invention of its own method and of its own process. There is no essay that does not include the wandering of thinking [...] what we call digression and which is the first and last condition of thinking' (MÉNIL, 2004: 101). *Investigation* and *digression* find in the epistolary speech of *Letter to Jane* an effective tool to develop what Ménil calls «meta function» (MÉNIL, 2004: 102). In addition to the analysis of the photograph, which means the metalinguistic research on the photographic language, the film carries out a metalinguistic reflection on the fiction cinema thanks to the presence of *Tout va bien* and on the essayistic form that the letter generates as it develops. All of this in order to materialise digression, to *practise thinking* as Alain Bergala defines it (2000: 14), which constitutes a fundamental concept of the essay film. Finally, it must be noticed that the works analysed also materialise the idea proposed by Jean-Louis Leutrat about the relation between the essay film and the form of diptych: 'I think the form of the diptych is perfectly suited to the essay "about" cinema. Why? Because it reveals something about the functioning of cinema, at least as we project it imaginatively: the principle of communicating vessels (one reel empties while the other fills, the vampirism of cinema...)' (LEUTRAT, 2004: 242). A formula started with the couple *Tout va bien*-*Letter to Jane* and developed extensively in Godard's later career, once the revolutionary struggle had been abandoned: *Every Man for Himself* (*Sauve qui peut* (la vie), 1979) and *A Few Remarks on the Direction and the Production of the Film Sauve qui peut* (la vie) (*Quel-*



ques remarques sur la réalisation et la production du film *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, 1979); *Godard's Passion* (*Passion*, 1982) and *Scénario du film Passion* [Script of the film *Passion*] (1982); *Hail Mary* (*Je vous salue, Marie*, 1983) and *Petites notes à propos du film Je vous salue, Marie* [Small notes regarding the film *Je vous salue, Marie*] (1983). We should not ignore here the relation between the essayistic works and their discursive proposals – the letter, the script and the notes are enunciative devices of subjectivity through which self-reflection can be achieved. In all of them, as Leutrat indicates, there is a discourse about the cinematic fact, which in the case of *Tout va bien*-*Letter to Jane* revolves around the question of how to bring revolutionary practice into the audiovisual field. *Tout va bien* does it with Brechtian staging principles and *Letter to Jane* with the analysis and the questioning of every audiovisual element and its construction, both to enable a representation that is always the consequence and the proof of a political practice.

Considering all the above, we confirm that the essayistic method enunciated in *In Praise of Love* (*Éloge de l'amour*, 2001) had already its first materialisations in *Camera-eye* and *Letter to Jane*. This law of the essay is synthesised by Cyril Neyrat as follows: '[...] to compare, from one's own experience, to invent the comparison. When a new experience is placed on the balance, thinking emerges from the comparison with another one, recovered from the past and deposited on the other plate. Merleau-Ponty wrote it regarding Montaigne: "be aware means be elsewhere". "We always think elsewhere"' (NEYRAT, 2004: 168). Godard's essay films build on the experience gained from the *cinéma militant*, since the latter develops and experiments with the elements that are defining features of the former: the reflection; the montage as a tool for the confrontation of images and sounds, trying to banish his immanentistic perception; and the spectator as an active part of a dialogical practice.

The essay film arises then from the emergence of subjectivity in the revolutionary cinematic experience, turning reflection into self-reflection and ideological practice into digression, into thinking process. It is the reflection on how to perform a political action through the cinematic practice what generates the need for creating *a form that thinks*. The essay film thus reaches its autonomy to leave the territory of militant cinema from which it emerged. ■

## NOTES

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- 1 *Le cinéma au service de la révolution*, Bulletins des États Généraux du Cinéma n° 3, December 1968. Paris: Éditions du Terrain Vague.
- 2 Godard's statements for the film magazine *Cinéma 70* n° 151, quoted by Raymond Lefèvre in *Jean-Luc Godard*, Paris Edilig, 1983.
- 3 The text was reprinted in *La Palestine et le cinéma* (1977), edited Guy Hennebelle and Khemaïs Khayati. Paris: Éditions du Centenaire, pp. 205-211. Included in *Jean-Luc Godard. Documents*, from which we take it.
- 4 Interview realized by Ivonne Baby and Martin Even for *Le Monde*, 27 april 1972, p. 17. Reprinted in *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard Tome I 1950-1984*. Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma.
- 5 Interview realized by Michel Boujut, Jean-Claude Deschamps and Pierre-Henri Soller for *Politique Hebdo* n° 26, 27 April 1972. Reprinted in *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard Tome I 1950-1984*. Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, pp. 367-375.
- 6 At the end of that same year the text enunciated in English by Godard and Gorin was published in French, *Enquête sur une image*, in the magazine *Tel Quel* n° 52, pp.74-90.



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## FROM MILITANT CINEMA TO ESSAY FILM. LETTER TO JANE BY JEAN-LUC GODARD AND JEAN-PIERRE GORIN

### Abstract

The present article aims to show how the consolidation of the cinematic form of the essay film in Jean-Luc Godard's work is a consequence of the evolution of his experience in the *cinéma militant*, which emerges from the political and social circumstances that caused May 68. In the case of the filmmaker it is materialised through his participation in the Dziga Vertov Group. The defining elements of the group's filmic experience – the supremacy of montage, the dialectics between images and sounds and the relevance of the spectator as an active part of a dialogic practice – are the same that bring about the essayistic form when the film is enunciated from the author's subjectivity. With the analysis of *Letter to Jane* this paper tries to demonstrate how the emergence of subjectivity in the revolutionary cinematic practice allows the appearance of self-reflexivity and the thinking process that define the essay film.

### Key words

Militant cinema; Essay film; Dziga Vertov Group; Jean-Luc Godard; Jean-Pierre Gorin.

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## DEL CINÉMA MILITANT AL CINÉ-ESSAI. LETTER TO JANE DE JEAN-LUC GODARD Y JEAN-PIERRE GORIN

### Resumen

El presente artículo pretende mostrar cómo la consolidación de la forma cinematográfica del film-ensayo en la obra de Jean-Luc Godard es consecuencia de la evolución de su experiencia en el *cinéma militant*. Un cine militante que surge de las circunstancias político-sociales que dieron lugar a mayo del 68 y que en el caso del cineasta se materializa mediante su participación en el Grupo Dziga Vertov. Los elementos definitorios de la experiencia fílmica del grupo –la primacía del montaje, la dialéctica entre imágenes y sonidos y la relevancia del espectador como parte activa de una práctica dialogística– son los mismos que propician la forma ensayística cuando la obra se enuncia desde la subjetividad del autor. Con el análisis de *Letter to Jane* pretendemos mostrar cómo la irrupción de la subjetividad en la práctica cinematográfica revolucionaria posibilita la aparición de la auto-reflexión y del proceso de pensamiento definitorios del ensayo cinematográfico.

### Palabras clave

Cine militante; film-ensayo; Grupo Dziga Vertov; Jean-Luc Godard; Jean-Pierre Gorin.

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# MILITANT CINEMA AND THE POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY IN ITALY: THE CASE OF MARCO BELLOCCHIO AS AN EXAMPLE OF ITS EVOLUTION

RICARDO JIMENO ARANDA

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN BOYD

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF ITALIAN POLITICAL CINEMA

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Italian cinema in the 1960s has certain particular features that differentiate it from the film production of other European countries in the same period, due largely to its social, economic and political context.

One of these is its high level of production in quantitative terms, with more than two hundred titles a year (including co-productions) constituting a fairly cohesive amalgam of films that include, among other examples, the work of the most renowned auteurs (Fellini, Visconti, Rossellini, Antonioni, etc.), movies produced for mass consumption (the *commedia all'italiana* genre), new talents emerging out of the *Nuovo Cinema* movement (Bertolucci, Bellocchio, etc.), and popular local genres (the Spaghetti Western, *giallo*, *peplum*, *poliziottesco*). Overall, the Italian industry was the most productive in the Western hemisphere after

the United States: "In the early sixties, Italy became the biggest hotbed for filmmakers in history. By mid-decade, Italy's domestic film industry had captured 60% of the market, while American production had fallen to only 35%" (Font, 2005: 81).

A second feature is the notable politicisation, or, at least, social consciousness of Italian cinema in this period, which extended to almost all the genres mentioned above, albeit with different levels of intensity, ranging from the most personal films or new offerings that would make it possible to speak specifically of a political *Nuovo Cinema* (particularly in opposition to or at least in comparison with the French New Wave), to more commercial movies, in which it is quite easy to find numerous actively ideological elements. For example, they can be found in the Spaghetti Western and in the *peplum* or "sword-and-sandal" film, where they are more obvious, but also in a genre as apparently apolitical as the *giallo* or horror film, in which their appearance may be rather more superficial

and opportunistic; for example, in *Hanno cambiato faccia* [They Have Changed Their Face] (Corrado Farina, 1971), which presents a curious symbolic connection between vampirism and capitalism. In this sense, Italian political cinema would undergo an intense evolution between the early 1960s and the late 1970s. As the filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo himself explains: "It would be fair to say that nine out of every ten of the most serious Italian filmmakers belonged to left-wing political parties. This is why most of the films that are not specifically political still contain a reflection of the Italian social reality" (CAPARRÓS LERA, 1978: 21). The specifically political nature of the Italian case is thus underpinned by the strength of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) as a major opposition force, but also by a social context that acted as a breeding ground especially conducive to the development of social awareness among filmmakers. This situation would be further accentuated in 1968 with the influence of the events in France in May of that year on the intensification of student protests and workers' strikes in Italy, and with the subsequent rise of terrorism and violence on both extremes of the political spectrum.

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### **THE ITALIAN MILITANT FILM TRADITION HAS ITS ROOTS IN THE AVANT-GARDE NEOREALIST MOVEMENT**

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Moreover, Italian cinema had a background of politicisation that was much more deep-rooted and developed than comparable film traditions of other European nations. In this respect, political issues, often observed from a comic and local perspective, had a noticeable presence in Italian post-war cinema. The natural evolution of this presence, to which of course should be added the importance of the influence of neorealism, can be found in the foundations for the development of a film tradition – in both art-house and commer-

cial films – with a significant political-ideological charge in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, Farassino, referring specifically to the films of the late 1950s and early 1960s, speaks of a "second neorealism", explaining that "the cautious political shift to the left made room for critical and sometimes opposition films, which at the level of language didn't experiment or take chances and which accepted comfortable compromises (rather than obscure influences, as in historical neorealism) with more popular genres" (FARASSINO, 1996: 128).

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### **MILITANT CINEMA AND THE POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY IN ITALY**

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One of the essential precedents that explain the increasingly intense politicisation of Italian cinema is the importance that militant cinema acquired as both a political and cinematographic mode of expression after the end of the Second World War, ultimately developing into a more diverse phenomenon in the 1960s, and forming hybrids with other documentary narrative formulas with a propagandistic aim.

The Italian militant film tradition has its roots in the avant-garde neorealist movement. Militant cinema shares with this movement a certain, often technical stylistic quality, and also frequently the same structural ideological origin, in spite of the fact that these films received limited attention due to their natural, clandestine and unconventional distribution methods. Italian militant films are historically linked to the communist tradition, and many were produced by Unitel, the PCI's propaganda service.

The earliest examples of militant cinema after the war (compiled in the historical archives of the PCI) date back to the end of the 1940s, and, with a spirit very close to the cult of personality developed in the USSR, were dedicated to portraying the PCI's historic leader, Palmiro Togliatti, on the occasion of the Fascist attack that almost took his life in 1948. These films included *14 luglio* [14

July] (Glauco Pellegrini, 1948), *Togliatti è ritornato* [Togliatti Has Returned] (Basilio Franchina, Carlo Lizzani, 1948), and the censored film by Lizzani *I fatti di Modena* [The Facts about Modena] (1950), which charges the police with responsibility for the death of some workers. Meanwhile, the Taviani brothers began their film career with a few works aimed at publicising the PCI's electoral platform, while in 1952 Gillo Pontecorvo made *La missione del Timiaizev* [The Timiaizev Mission] (1952), reporting on a trip by a Soviet delegation to Palestine. In this sense, one of the clear pieces of evidence of the causal relationship between the development of militant cinema and the subsequent politicisation of cinema is precisely the fact that many of its most important filmmakers, like the aforementioned Paolo and Vittorio Taviani or Pontecorvo, were the creators of propaganda films in the previous period, always associated with the work of the Communist Party.

While the Communist Party was a major sponsor of militant cinema, examples also exist of films produced within the orbit of the Christian Democracy (DC) party, such as the anonymous and undated short film (made in the 1950s) *È tornato un fratello* [A Brother Has Returned], which recounts the return home of an Italian emigrant to the USSR who describes his time there as a terrible experience (the film, like many of those cited here, can be found in audiovisual archive of the "Cinema di Propaganda. La comunicazione politica attraverso il cinema. 1946-1975" project sponsored by the Cineteca di Bologna).

From the early 1960s on, the number of militant films increased dramatically, reaching an extraordinary production volume from 1967 to 1976. The themes addressed by these hundreds of films, which generally adopt a didactic and simplistically dualistic approach, cover a diverse range of issues, from unambiguous positions on different international conflicts (the military coups in Greece, Chile and Uruguay, the African decolonisation processes, the Vietnam War, the

Portuguese dictatorship or the Palestinian problem) to the general struggles for certain collective rights, the promotion of pacifism, raising awareness about the problems in Italy's south, workers' strikes and student movements, exposure of police violence and fascist activity (in the context of the so-called "strategy of tension"), ideological issues inherent to the communist struggle, or commemorations of significance to the Party (for example, the documentary on Togliatti's funeral, *L'Italia con Togliatti* [Italy with Togliatti] (Gianni Amico, Elio Petri, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, Valerio Zurlini, 1964), put together by various filmmakers now widely acclaimed for their work on fiction films and in the political film genre). Of these hundreds of works, it is worth highlighting two films that had a significant impact, due both to the serious nature of the topics they addressed and the notoriety of their directors. These two films are *12 dicembre* [12 December] (Giovanni Bonfanti and Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1972), dealing with the first terrorist attack by the Red Brigades, and *Tre ipotesi sulla morte di Giuseppe Pinelli* [Three Theories about the Death of Giuseppe Pinelli] (Elio Petri, 1972), a docudrama starring Gian Maria Volonté – a major figure in the Italian political cinema of the period – which reconstructs the death of an anarchist who fell out of the window of a police station, and constitutes a prime example of the gradual hybridisation of militant cinema, pure propaganda, the more analytical (although just as ideologically oriented) documentary formats and certain fiction film structures.

In this sense, moving beyond the structures of militant cinema that are more comparable with news bulletins and reporting, the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s offers various examples with a more cinematic quality in terms of their production style, which address political issues with a rather different if not outright experimental approach. Some filmmakers chose to develop models that replace the urgency of the direct militant film with historical essays that analyse

different political issues, such as the evolution of fascism – *La pista nera* [The Black Trail] (Giuseppe Ferrara, 1972); the story of the workers' struggles of the period – *Il contratto* [The Contract] (Ugo Gregoretti, 1969); or introducing a certain kind of intimate existentialism in their explorations of certain ideological questions – *Lettera aperta a un giornale della sera* [Open Letter to an Evening Newspaper] (Francesco Maselli, 1970). One of the last examples of hybridising between regular militant cinema and historical documentary is none other than *Il mondo degli ultimi* [The World of the Last] (Gian Butturini, 1980), tracing the activity of the workers' movement in Italy during the 1950s, which, curiously, received an award at the Festival de San Sebastián from a jury chaired by Elio Petri. In any case, from the mid-1970s, the number of militant films being produced declined with the change of the socio-political context, with the loss of influence of the PCI on Italian society, and with political disillusionment and generational change.

### **BELLOCCHIO'S CAREER AS A DOCUMENTARY MAKER: AN EVOLUTION REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ITALIAN CASE**

Marco Bellocchio is, together with Bernardo Bertolucci, one of the main representatives of Italy's *Nuovo Cinema*, which first emerged in the mid-60s. His filmography begins, after a handful of short films, with the controversial *Fists in the Pocket* (*I Pugni in tasca*, 1965), an extreme story of family breakdown that could be interpreted ambivalently as a metaphor for the origins of fascism, and as a cry of generational rage, and which placed him at the forefront of the Italian film scene. His career spans fifty years, moving through various periods. The first was marked by his political activism and criticism of traditional institutions; the second by his disillusionment with politics and his obsession with psychoanalysis; and the third, in which he is still immersed

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### **BELLOCCHIO'S DOCUMENTARY WORK, APART FROM A FEW EARLY PROJECTS FOR THE CENTRO SPERIMENTALE IN ROME, BEGAN CLEARLY WITHIN THE PARAMETERS OF MILITANT CINEMA**

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today, by his sober and reflective exploration of Italy's past and present.

However, in addition to his long career as a fiction filmmaker, Bellocchio has worked regularly in the documentary genre, in most cases on films with political or ideological dimensions. This specific and lesser known trajectory of the Italian director not only offers a concrete expression of his personal evolution as a socially committed filmmaker, but can also be considered representative of the development of the Italian political documentary in general, from its original nature as propaganda, associated with various extreme left political movements, through to a more elaborate type of documentary with an underlying ideological protest, and finally to the historical documentary that reflects on particular political issues and processes.

Bellocchio's documentary work, apart from a few early projects for the Centro Sperimentale in Rome, began clearly within the parameters of militant cinema, as a result of his membership of a political group with Maoist leanings, l'Unione dei Comunisti Italiani. Bellocchio, hailing from a bourgeois intellectual family from northern Italy, had laid bare his interest in politics and his ideological leanings (and, especially, aversions) in his previous films: the aforementioned *Fists in the Pocket*; *China Is Near* (*La Cina è vicina*, 1967), a satirical comedy that mercilessly attacks the collusion between the Christian Democracy party and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI); and his contribution to the collective film *Love and Anger* (*Amore e rabbia*, Marco Bellocchio, Bernardo Bertolucci,

Jean-Luc Godard, Carlo Lizzani and Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1969), which revealed his experiences as a participant in the student uprisings of the period, with a satirical, Brechtian touch. In this sense, his decision to join the radical Maoist UCI movement constitutes the definitive confirmation of his interest in taking an active role in the political dynamism that characterised Italy at the time, and also (as explained in his biography) “his private need to erase his identity, his bourgeois past” (LEGGI, 2005: 232).

Thus, in 1968 and 1969, Bellocchio, leading a filmmakers’ collective for the UCI, shot two films: *Paola*, with the subtitle *Il popolo calabrese ha rialzato la testa* [The Calabrian People Have Raised Their Heads] (1969), and *Viva il primo maggio rosso e proletario* [Long Live the Red and Proletariat First of May] (1969). The first, in its almost inscrutable propagandistic tone, has an interesting ethnographic value due to its exploration, occasionally with a news reporting style alternating with a *cinéma vérité* filming technique, of the squalid living conditions in Paola, a town in Calabria. The second falls into the category of pieces commemorating the activities of the workers’ movement, and being a much shorter film it is limited to documenting (as its title explicitly indicates) the May Day demonstrations in Milan in 1969.

In spite of its limitations and its explicitly propagandistic nature, *Paola* is a film of interest as an exponent of the concerns of its creator, and of his ability to use the force of a few isolated images to construct an anti-establishment discourse. Bellocchio is always attentive to the appearance of incongruous elements that seep through the cracks of a rigid, dualistic structure, originally intended to celebrate the actions of the communist group with the inhabitants of the Sicilian town, whom they are trying to convince of the need to occupy certain houses. Along with the mechanical delivery of political speeches (at the end of one of these we see a timid adolescent cry out “Viva Stalin”), the truth of the underlying discourse (and in this Bel-

locchio’s admiration for his favourite filmmakers, like Buñuel or Vigo, can be seen) is revealed when the camera sweeps through the streets of Paola showing its dispossessed inhabitants, or the children hanging on the metal bars of the school. Two characteristic qualities of arthouse cinema stand out in the production. On the one hand, the filmmaker’s predilection for satire and for exploring the boundaries between rationality and irrationality can be gleaned (albeit indirectly) in the special attention given to the folk portraits of some of the real-life characters who pose for the camera (like a resident who claims to have an extremely valuable painting in his home, or a peculiar, bearded old lady). In these details can be detected the evident seed of the director’s later successes in the documentary genre, which will be cited below. The other feature, related more to the superstructure, is his almost childlike non-conformism, his opposition to any symbol of authority, even that of the political group to which the filmmaker himself belongs. This idea is expressed in the unmistakable zoom-in shots used by the filmmaker on children yawning during the interminable meetings of his party comrades, when in theory the substance of the film should be the insightful content of these meetings. Exploring this idea further, there is one isolated image that evokes the whole *Bellocchian* universe, rising up almost like an epiphany in a cinematic sense above the propaganda: one of these children, compelled to watch the meeting, falls asleep on his mother’s lap in a natural reconstruction of the *Madonna* figure, a recurring symbol in Bellocchio’s fiction work that can be identified in practically all of his films. In short, Bellocchio’s constant probing with the camera – its curiosity, it could be called – allows him to reconstruct the official discourse and to situate it in its contradictions, to offer, in a documentary form that draws from reality, the same criticism of the dogmatic operation of extreme left parties and groups that the filmmaker posited in his fiction films, specifically in one mimetic scene (two

youths playing with a dog while a comrade instructs them) in *China Is Near*. Put simply, Bellocchio uses the *mise en scène* of the documentary to filter reality, shifting the discourse towards more critical spaces. This is an idea suggested by Núria Bou with respect to *China Is Near*, but which could equally apply to *Paola*, in the realm of the documentary: “Bellocchio fragments the *mise en scène* to concentrate on the little details: he observes the faces of the children who are constantly laughing or pushing and shoving [...]” (Bou, 2005: 176).

Bellocchio’s next documentary film, *Fit to Be Untied* (Matti da slegare, 1975) co-directed with his editor, Silvano Agosti, and with two film students, Sandro Petraglia and Stefano Rulli, is already pushing at the rather constrictive boundaries of the militant cinema he had made previously, although it maintains some of the same filming techniques (hand-held camera; 16mm film, collective direction), to become an emblematic work in his filmography. Bellocchio explores the world of the insane through the unique experiences of four individuals suffering from schizophrenia, and the collective experiences of the residents of a mental institution where new psychological treatments are being applied. Beyond the clinical aspect, the documentary (originally more than four hours long, although its duration was cut in half for commercial distribution) examines the differences between the former patient treatment methods, which had always been directed by religious communities, and the new formulas implemented by the socialist government of Parma, to posit, based on a Bertolt Brecht poem that opens the film, a kind of vindication of the rights of a forgotten and marginalised group. The filmmaker thus offers a direct documentary that projects onto reality a combination of his chief thematic obsessions: the exploration of the boundaries of the rational, political criticism of institutions, and his increasing interest in psychoanalysis and its therapeutic possibilities. In an interview, the director himself underscores the ideological nature

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**THE WORK OF MARCO BELLOCCHIO  
CONSTITUTES A PRIVILEGED REFLECTION  
OF THE EVOLUTION OF ITALIAN POLITICAL  
CINEMA IN ITS WINDING COURSE  
FROM ENRAGED, MILITANT OUTCRY TO  
ANALYTICAL, REFLECTIVE STUDY**

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of the work, both in terms of its narration and its creation process, as “a political, participatory film [...], a direct representation of a reality but, at the same time, interpreted politically” (TASSONE, 1980: 33). The film is also framed within a highly politicised context of vindication of the rights of patients on the basis of the new clinical theories of the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, contained in a bill passed around the time of the film (Law 180), and reflects the filmmaker’s ongoing interest in the borderline between sanity and madness, often tinged with political implications, parallel with the blurry line between the political activism and political violence that can be found in other films by Bellocchio.

The same team of Agosti, Petraglia and Rulli, with Bellocchio at the helm, would make another documentary together three years later, in 1978, this time for television and comprising four episodes, *The Cinema Machine* (La macchina cinema), with the same spirit as *Fit to Be Untied*, also anticipated in some of the director’s earlier works. The premise is a study of different real-life individuals pushed to the margins of Italian cinema (basically, actors who have fallen out of favour), to posit a criticism of the system, in this case the system of the film industry. However, the natural approach to the social issue explored in the previous documentary in *The Cinema Machine* takes on a certain air of artifice and manipulation that undermines the clarity of the political protest. In a way, the film’s criticism of the exploitation of these film industry workers and the depiction of their troubles results in a reproduction, in terms of the pathos



evoked, of the exploitation that is supposedly being exposed.

At the end of the 1970s, just at the time of a notable decline in film production in Italy (both documentaries and fiction films), Bellocchio abandoned the documentary genre for more than a decade. During this period, his films were limited to explorations of psychology and existential intimacy that only touched on political questions indirectly through their recognition of the failure of certain ideological aspirations, or occasionally more directly through an expression of disillusionment.

After this political moratorium of some fifteen years, Bellocchio returned to the front-line, albeit through the back door, with *Sogni infranti. Ragionamenti e deliri* [Broken Dreams: Reason and Delirium] (1992). This work was a television documentary of little value in creative or cinematic terms, but of key importance in terms of what it reveals about the evolution of the political thought of its creator, and also as an example of the transformations that Italian cinema underwent in the 1980s and 1990s. Having left militancy and critical hostility behind, and overcome the period of disillusionment, Bellocchio returns to political discourse with a thoughtful reflection on recent Italian history, focusing on the wounds left by the political terrorism of the Red Brigades, and trying to analyse – once again, along the dividing line between rationality and delirium, as the title suggests – the personal motivations of two former terrorists, one of them indirectly involved in the kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro. Essentially, and notwithstanding the distance from the events addressed in the documentary, Bellocchio also explores the “broken dreams” of an ideological vision in which he also implicates himself, revealing that this film is basically a kind of psychoanalytical self-exorcism, underscored by the appearance in this film of fragments from his old militant film *Viva il primo maggio rosso e proletario*. Indeed, the filmmaker himself hints at the almost “specular”

nature of his interviews with the terrorists: “in *Sogni infranti* there are three characters that in a certain way reflect the radical or terrorist past and it is clear that it opens up an interest not so much in conducting a general political analysis of terrorism, but in seeing these phenomena through the human characters involved. In the end, there are always human beings” (JIMENO, 2014).

After *Sogni infranti*, Bellocchio returns to Italian political history in his fiction films, particularly in one of his most representative works, *Good Morning, Night* (Buongiorno, notte, 2003), focusing on the assassination of Aldo Moro, for which the earlier documentary served as a kind of notebook. This film marks the beginning of a peculiar methodology involving the occasional integration of documentary elements into the fiction narrative, to serve various aesthetic and formal functions. While in *Good Morning, Night* the inclusion of archive footage on the actual historical event (using old Russian news bulletins, or Italian news programs of the period) serves ambivalently to describe the subconscious and daydreams of the terrorist who is the film’s protagonist, or to contextualise the action, in *Vincere* [To Win] (2009), his film about Mussolini and Ida Dalser, this archive footage plays a much more powerful role, as it stands in for the physical presence of Il Duce after the end of his relationship with his former lover, who will then only see him on the movie screen, in a highly original metaphor (through this combination of fiction and non-fiction images) for the character’s transformation from private individual to public figure. In the same way, in *Dormant Beauty* (Bella addormentata, 2012), the non-fiction images (of Berlusconi himself on the news, or of sessions of the Italian parliament) combined with fiction images (the Expressionist-styled political meetings in a Turkish bath, for example) create a paradoxical estrangement through their almost indistinguishable intertwining to compose a story that points to the unreal and delirious nature of the Italian political class today.

## CONCLUSION

The history of Italian political cinema has taken a circular path since its post-war precedents, drawing on neorealism, commercial films and militant cinema, and enjoying its most intense development from the early 1960s through to the late 1970s, fostered by a favourable social and political context and supported by the consolidation of the new directions opened up by modern cinematography.

In this respect, the documentary format that grew out of the profuse Italian tradition of militant cinema evolved towards hybrid forms in their direct treatment of reality, which left behind its openly propagandistic nature to offer a new perspective on the political processes, establishing ideological discourses through reflective, historical and indirect examinations of society.

Following this line, the work of Marco Bellocchio, a key exponent of Italy's *Nuovo Cinema*, with a long and fruitful career, constitutes a privileged reflection of the evolution of Italian political cinema in its winding course from enraged, militant outcry to analytical, reflective study that engages in criticism with a less brutally stark approach.

In this way, Bellocchio's revealing and generally ignored work as a documentary maker committed to seeking out the irrational and borderline elements of the social and political reality qualify him as a major figure, and as a paradigmatic example of the evolution and development of the Italian political documentary over the last five decades.

While in his militant films, very much devoted to the aesthetic and ideological principles of their day, we can find occasional traces of his critical and non-conformist universe, his key work in the documentary genre, *Fit to Be Untied* (1975), constitutes the real turning point from informational militant cinema to the search for an ideological discourse in metaphorical form, devoted to humanism and to offering a direct reflection of social conflict through the direct expression of the testimonies of those involved.

His subsequent quests, even his periods of silence in terms of direct explorations of reality, are also an absolute expression of the same mood in an Italian film industry in decline, turned in on itself where the examination of political issues was concerned. Indeed, his subsequent return to political reflection by testing out mixed, asymmetrical formulas, between the use of resources taken from fiction and integrating archive footage, not only reflect the eclecticism of tendencies typical of post-modernity, but also open up a possible route for the transmission of socio-political discourses that are not limited to being pigeon-holed in one particular genre (fiction or documentary), ultimately constituting a metaphor for the unstable balance maintained by Bellocchio himself in his exploration of certain irrational realities. ■

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## MILITANT CINEMA AND THE POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY IN ITALY: THE CASE OF MARCO BELLOCCHIO AS AN EXAMPLE OF ITS EVOLUTION

### Abstract

This article presents the evolution of the Italian political documentary in the politicised context of the 60s and 70s, moving from the rich tradition of militant cinema linked to the neorealist cinema heritage, to the emergence of new approaches to historical and political documentary or explorations in ideological terms of different social realities. This development is illustrated through the unique case of Marco Bellocchio (1939), a key Italian filmmaker of the past five decades, whose little-known documentary work reflects the shift from a pure militant cinema albeit with personal nuances (*Paola*, 1969), to a personal documentary style that explores extreme social situations in ideological terms, as in the case of his most emblematic documentary *Matti da slegare* [Fit to Be Untied] (1975), and finally to the positing of reflections on Italian political history using conventional documentary forms (*Sogni Infranti*, 1995) and new explorations in the combination of fiction and documentary with a political dimension, as in three of his most recent films: *Buongiorno notte* [Good morning, night] (2003), *Vincere* [To Win] (2009) and *Bella addormentata* [Sleeping Beauty] (2012).

### Key words

Political cinema; political documentary; militant cinema; Italian cinema; Marco Bellocchio.

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## EL CINE MILITANTE Y EL DOCUMENTAL POLÍTICO EN ITALIA. EL CASO DE MARCO BELLOCCHIO COMO EJEMPLO DE UNA EVOLUCIÓN

### Resumen

El artículo plantea la evolución del documental político italiano, en el politizado contexto cinematográfico de los años 60 y 70, partiendo de la rica tradición del cine militante ligado a la herencia neorrealista hasta el surgimiento de nuevos enfoques de documental histórico y político o de aproximaciones en términos ideológicos a realidades sociales diversas. Este desarrollo se ilustra a partir del caso singular de Marco Bellocchio (1939), cineasta italiano fundamental de las últimas décadas, cuya obra documental, poco conocida, refleja el paso desde un cine militante puro aunque con matices personales (*Paola*, 1969), pasando por un cine documental personal que indaga sobre situaciones sociales extremas planteadas en términos ideológicos, como es el caso de su obra documental más representativa *Locos de desatar* (*Matti da slegare*, 1975), hasta plantear reflexiones sobre la historia política italiana utilizando formas de documental convencional (*Sogni infranti*, 1995) y nuevas exploraciones en la combinación de ficción y documental con un sentido político como sucede en tres de sus últimas obras: *Buenos días, noche* (*Buongiorno notte*, 2003), *Vincere* (2009) y *Bella addormentata* [*Bella durmiente*] (2012).

### Palabras clave

Cine político; documental político; cine militante; cine italiano; Marco Bellocchio.

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# INTIMACY AS A POLITICAL ACT: ABOUT GREY GARDENS AND CHANTAL AKERMAN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CINEMA

SERGI SÁNCHEZ

ANA AITANA FERNÁNDEZ

## **POLITICS OF THE INTIMATE, HISTORY AS A SYMPTOM**

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Can intimacy be considered a political act? We here approach personal history as a realization of the collective experience. "The truth of history does not lie in intimacy, it is rather the way – today privileged – of understanding history as a symptom" (CATELLI, 2007:9). Intimacy, as Nora Catelli states, is the autobiographical space that transgresses the opposition between the public and the private (2007). It is an interstice where the remnants of the historical transformations are traced. We approach here the symptom following Georges Didi-Huberman's terms. The symptom as the core of those tensions that convulse in the filmed intimacy: "The unceasing convulsion of layers that always act upon each other, in tension and polarity: impressions of movement, latencies with crisis, plastic processes with non-plastic processes, oblivion with reminiscences, repetitions with

reversals... I suggest to call the dynamic of these structural convulsions a symptom [...] The symptom will designate the heart of the tense processes that, after Warburg, we attempt to understand in the images: heart of the body and the time" (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2009:248).

This paper aims to show how the symptom of history can be materialized in an intimate field, and be developed within as the account, more or less successful or frustrated, of a political gesture. The object of study are films linked by the thread of traumatic maternal-filial relationships. What does that trauma consist on? In 1942, Edith Bouvier Bale, Grey Garden's matriarch, was disinherited by her father for having an eccentric behaviour. She was condemned as a pariah between the aristocrats, as a marginal figure who dragged her own daughter to the void of confinement. Meanwhile, her niece was getting married to John Fitzgerald Kennedy and would become the first lady of the president whose murder would mark,

with fire, the United States political history until the late seventies, time when the Maysles brothers decided to film the Bouviers in their decadent mansion almost in ruins. In January 1945, Nelly Akerman was one of the Auschwitz survivors liberated by the Soviet troops. Five years later her daughter Chantal was born. She literally grew up bewitched by her mother's silenced wounds of the Holocaust, until committing suicide the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 2015.

The aim, therefore, is to analyse the filmmakers' political gesture when history is filmed as a traumatic symptom gangrened in the body of a maternal-filial relationship, whether it is done from the presumed objectivity of The Maysles' *direct cinema*, leading an external perspective which penetrates until the depth of intimacy both alien and exhibitionist; or from the internal and withdrawn perspective of a filmmaker such as Akerman, who works within the limits of the autobiographical essay, proposing herself as the object of analysis.

## DOMESTIC ISOLATION AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

When David and Albert received the proposal of making a documentary about her childhood in East Hampton by Lee Radziwill in 1972, Jacqueline Onassis's youngest sister, they never imagined they would get to know the dark side of the Bouvier family – Lee and Jacqueline's maiden name. Edith Bouvier Beale and her daughter Edie Bouvier Bale (known as Big Edith and Little Edie), aunt and cousin of the former first lady respectively, lived entrenched in a decrepit 28-room mansion, full of garbage, fleas, cats, and at least two raccoons. That same year they received an eviction order because of unsanitary living conditions and it was Jackie who avoided it by paying the cleaning expenses. Against Radziwill's refusal to make a film exclusively about the Beale with the footage that was shot in *Grey Gardens*, the Maysles decided to wait. They started shooting in 1974.



*Grey Gardens* (Ellen Hovde, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Muffie Meyer, 1975)

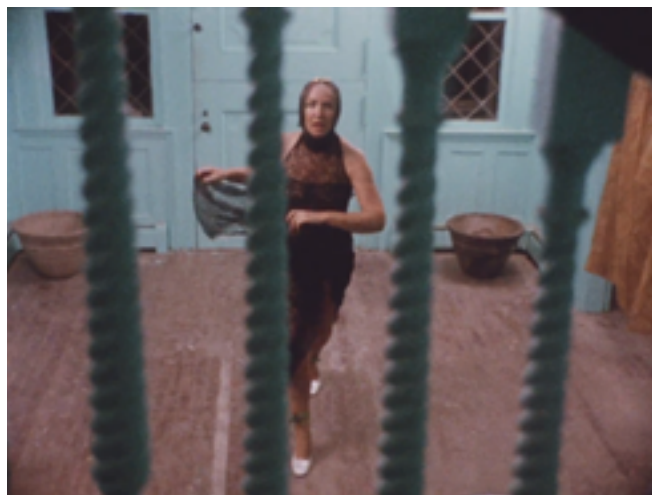
*Grey Gardens* (1975) ascertains that the evident decadency of the two women, both descendants of the American aristocracy, and their apparent insanity, is displaced by an unwavering artistic spirit<sup>1</sup> and their resistance to leave the house, their family insignia, fortress and at the same time jail of their own story – the only property owned by Edith Bouvier Beale. It is, precisely, in the absolute exposure of their intimacy where the political nature of history revisited from the margins is revealed, because its consequences are manifested in the field of intimacy. "It's very difficult to keep the line between the past and the present", Eddie confesses at the beginning of the documentary. A precept that, in a certain way, warns the spectator about the terrain in which the documentary is framed. Here, the temporal continuity disappears<sup>2</sup> and the film swings between two types of truth: the one that is filmed and the one that comes in 'extracting and juxtaposing the raw material into a more meaningful and coherent storytelling form' (LEVIN in BRUZZI, 2000: 277), as Albert Maysles sates. But the film also introduces the way in which both women are related and complement each other, constructing their identity within their lineage. The resistance to abandon the *belle époque* arises among the constant nostalgic references and leads them to avoid



*Grey Gardens* (Ellen Hovde, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Muffie Meyer, 1975)

the filthiness of their present. Paula Rabinowitz, regarding the concept of history as an excess of documentary coined by Bill Nichols, states: "Film's relationship to historical meaning and history's dependence upon, yet refusal of, film's form leave a space for active viewing. Both construct political subjects, whose self-consciousness about their positions lends itself to an analysis of the past and of the present" (RABINOWITZ, 1993: 128).

One of the first moments of nostalgia arises with the family photos, where the splendour of the past is revealed. The scenery is one of the rooms of the house, turned into their headquarters (living room, kitchen and bedroom), presided by two twin beds where mother and daughter sleep. "I wanted to be a singer, you know, a professional singer", regrets Edith Bouvier, while the camera zooms-in to allow a detailed observation of the portrait of her wedding day. "Remember this?" Her daughter asks off-camera. "The villain of the piece", Edie mutters while a close-up of a framed picture of her father and the dedicatory to his wife is showed. The excessive interest of Edith to show to the camera the beauty of her young mother and the distinguished origin of her family in one of the pictures, is stopped by her mother's denial to show it, which results in a fight between them. Edie ends up tearing apart a piece of the pa-



*Grey Gardens* (Ellen Hovde, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Muffie Meyer, 1975)

per frame that protected the image. She holds the picture in front of the camera, showing the damage it has suffered in the struggle as well: the bite in the thin cardboard that covers it, as the hole that reveals the symptom of their history. Once again, the difficulty to articulate past and present with the eternal question 'How did we get here?' that remains underneath every reproach made to one another. The constant references to social restrictions over the artistic aspirations of both of them, or the impossibility of the daughter to freely choose between her suitors accomplishes its climax in a sentence: "The seal of aristocracy is responsibility, isn't it?" The reverse shot of the mother in absolute silence confirms an unquestionable truth.

Initially, the Maysles brothers appear as mere observers who keep a distance and do not judge the main characters in their arguments. Their intimacy seems not to be committed. Nevertheless, the presence of the camera substitutes any question they want to formulate; they are integrated through the camera, they take a side<sup>3</sup>. Because their intention is not to create a simple portrait, but rather to show "aspects of our world that in other times would have been obscured from view; in this there is a gain. In the gain perhaps a loss" (ROSENTHAL, CORNER, 2005: 194). The unavoidable

loss of the objectivity established by the *direct cinema* they are based upon.

In this point it is important to highlight the acknowledgment of the two editors, Elen Hovde and Muffie Meyer, as co-directors in the credits of the film. Because if the place of the Maysles when filming the two women in their intimate space captures a latent and constant tension between them, the editing work by Hovde and Meyer translate this tension into a *between-the-images* where the political aspect of their resistance is intuited. "We think the story has very much to do with the society, and the place, and the contrast of the way they lived with the way people live around them, the class they come from and how they derivate from that. We think it's critical" (ROSENTHAL, HOVDE, 1978-79: 7). Hence, the transition from the dark interior of the house, where we discover Big Edith complaining about the raccoon who broke her new wall, to the perfectly neat mansions and corners of East Hampton in the prologue of the film, until arriving to the façade of the dilapidated Grey Gardens – where the tittle in big letters is superimposed. The daughter's voice is added to the dissolve of those idyllic postcards: "You know, they can get you in East Hampton for wearing red shoes on a Thursday [...] they can get you for almost anything". The exterior remains silenced by the main character's voice-off, an evidence of the political tone that was essential for the editors. For Hovde, it is a political documentary "in the sense that it is dealing with human relationships, a very modern situation, where people were living in intimate contact with maybe only one other person [...]. Intimate relationships are very complicated that way, they are power transactions." (ROSENTHAL, HOVDE, 1978-79: 16).

The relationship of intimacy in *Grey Gardens* is not exclusively a result of the mother-daughter relationship. It is also a result of the level of integration of the Maysels in the house. The principle of no intervention that characterizes *Cinéma Vérité* is broken as much with the commentaries of

the filmmakers as with the women's self-awareness about their place in the story and their way of self-representation. "The Maysles forsake any attempt to separate the person from the persona. Instead of feigning an impossible objectivity, the Maysles acknowledge their complicity in the performance. They celebrate the subjectivity of the filmmaker without permitting it to become intrusive or self-indulgent." (ROBSON, 1983: 53). Thus, two of their constant fights stand out because the presence of the filmmakers becomes evident not only through their voice but also through their image, aware of their impossibility to be simple spectators and of their transformation as political actors. In one of the fights, Albert films the mirror where he is reflected. Edith is behind him in her usual place in the bed, he asks: "Who is the man that took care of you for 25 years?" The question tiggers Edie's rage and she starts yelling at the filmmaker. Maysles decides then to reframe the image in the mirror and focuses on the face of the mother who, puzzled, tries to soothe the emotion of her daughter. This moment is interrupted by the unfocused face of Albert reflected in the mirror. Once Edie is calmed, the filmmaker opens the shot until having again the reflection of all three. But, the image of both the subject that films, and is filmed, is brutally cut with the insertion of a frontal close-up of Edie, who suggests the repetition of the scene in order to shoot it again. The complicity of the performance is not only demonstrated in the inclusion of the filmmaker in the frame, but in the editing as well, in the creation of that second truth where the filmed subject becomes aware of their representation for the camera<sup>4</sup>.

Postulated as an observational documentary, *Grey Gardens* overcomes the barrier between the exterior and the interior, the public and the private. It shatters the paradigmatic image of the conservative society, paladin of appearances and conventionalisms. The harmony between the work of the four directors has its paradigm in the final sequence, which reinforces the cyclic character of



the whole footage. At the beginning, a succession of newspapers clippings explained the eviction due to health standards and Jackie Onassis' help, with the soundtrack of Cole Porter's theme *Night and Day* as a symbol of the exterior world. The reverse-shot is the final sequence where the interior of the house is shown with the same music playing (this time in a diegetic fashion). The raccoons take over the rackety parts of the mansion, while Edith hums Porter's theme, almost dozing, surrounded by cats and waste. Edith's great painted portrait<sup>5</sup> also stands there looking from the past – the representation of what she was and what she is. The music plays and Edie dances in the entrance of the house. She is filmed from the stairs. The camera clumsily tries to follow her steps while she sings "the magic of dreams come true". Thus, the exterior is silenced. Inside, time is blurred whilst the distance between them and the world only seems to be shortened by cinema. Art is the vanishing point of the resistance of the women of *Grey Gardens*, of the reconstruction of their own identity and their projection as active actors of the society that marginalizes them.

## POLITICS IS A MATTER OF PHANTOMS

What happens when one's own intimacy is that which is filmed? Worried about the tensions that are raised in the domestic space, Chantal Akerman transgresses the everyday life through her self-representation and thus displaces the political act to her own body. In a crucial moment of *No Home Movie* (2015), the last film by Chantal Akerman, the Belgian director speaks with her mother's carer. The woman asks her about her roots, and Akerman tells her about her Polish grandparents and parents, their Belgian exile, their later internment in Auschwitz. "That's why my mother is the way she is", she comments towards the smile of the woman. Nevertheless, Auschwitz never appears in the moving conversations that she maintains with Nelly Akerman in



*No Home Movie* (Chantal Akerman, 2015)

the same table where she speaks with the carer. Only the *surroundings* appear. It is relevant that the devastating effects of the Holocaust gravitate over Akerman's filmography, and specially in her autobiographical essays: that void invoked by the silence of her mother, so verbal and loving in the relationship with her daughter, is the trigger for a whole filmography which obstinately looks for its political position in the confinement, in the violent dialectic of the interior and the exterior that results from it, and in the rejection of the conventions of the shot/reverse-shot. This political position consists on denouncing the absences of history in the construction of the self, and therefore, in the constitutive discourse of the present.

Mostly filmed in her mother's house in Brussels, *No Home Movie* is not a domestic film as its title points out. It is in the look of its format, in the formal roughness of its images and in its will to be placed in the family field. It is not in the sense that it is a denial of the ontology of domestic films, which attempt to perpetuate an idealized image of the family. (ODIN, 2010). "No home" is a word game to designate, as well, the feeling of exile, not of refuge, that Akerman pursued in great part of her life, especially after that day in 1984 when she was given by her mother, the diary of her grandmother who died in Auschwitz: "She said: 'it will protect you'. She gave it to me when I was in need



*No Home Movie* (Chantal Akerman, 2015)

of being protected and she felt me powerless. She gave it to me instead of talking" (POLLOCK, 2010). That operation of transference between mother and daughter is translated, according to Griselda Pollock, into a process of transposition, which subverts completely the ordinary notions of time and space between parent and child. In words of the psychoanalyst Judith Kestenberg "Since the parent's past occupies the psychological space that would ordinarily belong to the current life of the child, the child must give up his right of existing in its own present"<sup>6</sup>. It is the opposite of what happens to Edie Bouvier regarding her mother, with whom she lived in Grey Gardens since 1952. Both Akerman and Edie see a mirror in their mothers, but in the second case the operations of *transposition* or transference has transformed into possession and substitution. In Akerman there is a distance in between, a security distance, which only becomes shortened in *No Home Movie*; instead, in the daily life of the Bouvier, who share a malodorous bedroom in a 28-bedroom mansion, there are no distances.

On the occasion of the presentation of the film in Locarno's Festival, two months before her suicidal, Akerman confessed to the critic Daniel Kasman that *No Home Movie* was originated in the necessity to accept her mother's silences regarding Auschwitz. In this sense, it is interesting

to compare this film and *News From Home* (1976), the meditative elegy that Akerman shot during her second stay in New York, reading the letters from her mother over long shots of the streets, the diners, the port and the subway of New York with a monotonous voice, allowing the ambience sound of the images devour intermittently the maternal words. In that time, strongly influenced by the cinema of Michael Snow, Yvonne Rainer and Stan Brakhage, Akerman had not realize until what point her work was going to be perceived filtered by the personality of her mother by *refraction*, like a ray of light that changes direction when penetrating water<sup>7</sup>.

In *News from home* the dissociation between voice and space is absolute, inasmuch as the image and the voice-off are independent vectors until touching; and they touch in the disembodiment of exile, longing and alienation. In one of her letters, Nelly Akerman recriminates her daughter for always writing the same letter: "And I get the impression –she says- that you say nothing". The images of New York are that 'same letter' which can be read as the desire of separation of a daughter who does not know how – or does not want – to decipher the petition of a mother who is anxious for belonging and possessing; of a survivor of the Holocaust, at last, who considers home as the only possible world. We could then state, following Bellour, that in *News From Home*, that home is rejected, "releasing the words of the absent mother only to return them more efficiently, with a kind of calculated sadism, to solitude" (BELLOUR, 2009: 145). Hence, there is a rebellion against silence which is transformed in *No Home Movie* into comprehension and bond.

The conversations that Akerman and her mother keep in the film, whether in her apartment or on skype, have two reverse-shots: on the one hand, the empty images of the rooms of the house that are also divided in frames according to the usual static and symmetric compositions of Akerman's cinema; on the other hand, images of

the Israeli desert, long shots of windswept trees, and dunes and mounds seen from the car. Still impregnated with the structuralist spirit that goes through a big part of her filmography, and which the Belgian filmmaker acknowledges to the precision of the rituals of her Jewish education, the film set the background of the maternal-filial relationship in a *between-the-images* where Ackerman keeps denying to herself to be the reverse-shot of the maternal image – The camera films her, relegating the director to a voice-off or a figure that slips, careless, into the frame – but where distances are abbreviated, almost against her will, by deed and grace of the digital. “Why do you film me in that way?” the mother asks in the computer screen. “Because I want to show that in this world there are no distances”, answers Akerman. The operation of transposition that Kestenberg referred is finished. In his elaborated theorization of the construction of selfhood as narration, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur explains this process of transference as the unfolding of the enunciator: ‘One-self as another suggests, from the beginning, that ipseity of oneself implies the alterity in such an intimate level, that one cannot be thought without the other’ (RICOEUR, 2001, 250). Akerman, who had always claimed herself as a member of the

*second generation* (“The generation of my parents narrated itself: we are going to hide you what happened to us. And as they did not transmitted their stories, I looked for a fake memory, a kind of an imaginary, reconstructed memory rather than the truth” [POLLOCK, 2010]), eliminates the distance that separates her from her mother, which is also the one separating her from her legacy, the world and History itself. In the moment in which she brings her digital camera near the screen of the computer and turns the image of her mother into a formless tide of pixels, she knows that the intimate act of filming is the only possible way of turning silence into a cry against the illegibility of the present.

Between *News From Home* and *No Home Movie* an interval, occupied with the forcefulness of a question, is opened with *Là-bas* (2006). Between the image that concludes the first, the Twin Towers and the last, the image of the empty apartment of Akerman’s mother, the Belgian filmmaker invokes her internal demons without naming them. One gets the impression that the film is, secretly, the dialogue between those two final shots, as if in a strange exercise of clairvoyance, there was a common thread between that monumental relic, which in 1976 was a symbol of American Imperialism, and the death of a survivor of the Holocaust and the future suicidal of her daughter.

In an excellent article, Greg Youmans exposes his doubts about Akerman’s political position regarding the project. How to make a documentary about contemporary Israel without talking about Palestine? How can the presence of the Jews be reduced to cut shadows through the window blinds of the apartment where the filmmaker is confined in Tel-Aviv or to some figures in the beach shot during her brief walks to the exterior? The producer Xavier Carniaux was the one who suggested Akerman the idea of making a film about Israel. She resisted at the beginning. She was afraid of the obstacles that her own subjectivity could bring to her. “I do not feel I belong”, she says. “I am disconnected. Partially deaf, partially blind. Some-

*No Home Movie* (Chantal Akerman, 2015)



times I sink, but not completely". And, nevertheless, filming that paralysis which, as she affirms in off, makes her look and withdraw into herself to turn the exterior into the interior, is a way of politically redeeming her broken and contradictory identity, inasmuch as politics is not debated in a collective or militant way but rather in a negotiation between the construction of the self and the historical path. "I survive to the yellow star, it is engraved in myself", Akerman states. To which she adds: "Suicides are like exiles". In her mother's absence, in absence of her own image, *Là-bas* shows that, for Akerman, all politics, are in fact, a matter of phantoms. The past that remains in the reign of the shadows can only dialogue with silence, with the out-of-field, with the empty field.

## CONCLUSIONS

The silenced ghosts of a traumatic past lay both beneath *Grey Gardens* and Akerman's autobiographical cinema. Definitively, the irruption of the camera in the domestic field – someone else's in the case of the Maysels and oneself's in that of the Belgian filmmaker – constitute a tool to understand the historical transformations that Catelli refers when reflecting on intimacy (2007). The difference and the common threat between the two cases consist on how cinema transgresses that intimacy. If the trauma of Holocaust, buried by Nelly Akerman, is demonstrated – among other moments – in the security distance that her daughter settles while filming her, in the case of the Bouvier, their wound arise as a result of the Maysels' apparent attitude of mere observers while registering both women. Nevertheless, it is with the rupture of those spatial barriers – during the Skype conversation between Akerman and her mother, or in the participation of the Maysles in the Bouvier discussions – that the filmmakers get awareness of their position in history, thus inviting the spectator to enter this space too, thus turning the intimate into a political matter. ■

## NOTES

- \* The images illustrating this article have been contributed voluntarily by the authors of the text, who were liable for locating and requesting the proprietary rights of reproduction. In any event, the inclusion of images in the texts of *L'Atalante* is always done by way of citation, for their analysis, commentary and critical assessment. (Editor's note).
- 1 Besides the constant demonstrations of singing and dancing, there are two posters where «The Great singer Big Edith Bouvier Beale» and «The great dancer Little Edie Bouvier Beale» can be read.
- 2 The shooting took six weeks, but any temporal reference is avoided in the film and the editing, where there is no temporal *raccord*.
- 3 Their presence is exposed from the beginning: in the newspaper clipping about the shooting of the film and in the portrait of the two filmmakers. Over this picture we hear the voice of Edie shouting "It's the Maysles!", which corresponds to the following sequence of the Maysles arriving to the house.
- 4 Ellen Hoyde also states in an interview that, even if the Maysles did not direct the gestures or dialogues, they did ask sometimes, both mother and daughter, to reproduce exactly the same dialogues that they had said before to better register the moment.
- 5 A *leit-motif* throughout the footage. The portrait, symbol of the magnificence and social position of the Bouvier Bale family, turns into the cats' toilet.
- 6. This paper, because of evident limits of extension, does not contemplate the large and fructiferous artistic work by Akerman, which includes several video installations based on the maternal-filial relationship.
- 7 The importance of the maternal figure and her experience in the camps is not limited to the documentary and essayistic work by Akerman. The Belgian filmmaker considered her *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), as a love letter to her mother, who, after surviving to the Holocaust "turned her home into a jail".

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## INTIMACY AS A POLITICAL ACT. ABOUT GREY GARDENS AND CHANTAL AKERMAN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CINEMA

### Abstract

Can the documentary filming of intimacy become a political gesture? If in the intimate, as Nora Catelli states, lies the way to understand history as a symptom, this article aims to show how this gesture is translated into images from seemingly opposite methods: the Maysles brothers' gesture affiliated to the exteriority of direct cinema in *Grey Gardens*; and Chantal Akerman's interiority in her autobiographical essays, being the filmmaker herself an object of study. What is the connection between these two examples? They are both based on the traumatic experiences of history, manifested in the singularity of troubled maternal-filial relationships.

### Key words

Intimacy; Symptom; History; *Grey Gardens*; Chantal Akerman; Auschwitz.

### Author

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## LA INTIMIDAD COMO ACTO POLÍTICO. SOBRE GREY GARDENS Y EL CINE AUTOBIOGRÁFICO DE CHANTAL AKERMAN

### Resumen

La filmación documental de la intimidad, ¿puede convertirse en un gesto político? Si en lo íntimo, como dice Nora Catelli, reside la vía para comprender la Historia como síntoma, este artículo pretende demostrar cómo se traduce ese gesto en imágenes a partir de métodos aparentemente opuestos: el de los hermanos Maysles, afiliado a la exterioridad del cine directo, en *Grey Gardens*; y el de Chantal Akerman, afín a la interioridad del ensayo autobiográfico, con la propia directora como objeto de estudio. ¿Qué une a ambos ejemplos? Partir de la experiencia traumática de la Historia, manifestada en la singularidad de conflictivas relaciones materno-filiales.

### Palabras clave

Intimidad; síntoma; historia; *Grey Gardens*; Chantal Akerman; Auschwitz.

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DIALOGUE

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

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Dialogue with

**PERE JOAN VENTURA**





## “MY WORK CONSISTS OF FINDING OPENINGS”

# DIALOGUE WITH PERE JOAN VENTURA

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 Guarner 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**

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### **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.

### **Author**

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**

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### **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**

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(DIS)AGREEMENTS

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# THE DOCUMENTARY IN SPAIN: POLITICAL SPACES

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introduction

**THE DOCUMENTARY IN SPAIN:  
POLITICAL SPACES**

discussion

conclusion

**UNDER ADVERSE CONDITIONS**



introduction

# THE DOCUMENTARY IN SPAIN: POLITICAL SPACES

JORDI REVERT

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN BOYD

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?**

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### 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 Odosa canning factory on the island Illa de Arousa, who organised and filmed a hunger strike;<sup>1</sup> 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 Permy, 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?**

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**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 Martín 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](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?**

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**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 Lluís 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.**

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### **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

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- 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

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### 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

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### 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.

Isadora Guardia holds a Doctorate in Audiovisual Communications from the Universitat de València. She was Associate Professor of Audiovisual Fiction, Documentary Practice and a researcher for the Audiovisual Communications degree program at the same university from 2002 and 2014. Since 2012, she has been working as a professor and researcher in Audiovisual and Multimedia Communications at the Escola Universitària ERAM (an institution attached to the Universitat de Girona), where she delivers courses in Image Theory and Analysis and Audiovisual Direction, among others. As a professional she has written and directed the documentary productions *El cielo que perdimos*, (2002), *Así en la Tierra como en el cielo* (2002), *La Mano Invisible* (2003), *Ispiluan* (2004), *La ciudad de los muertos* (2007-08), *Lo que el gato supo y no quiso contar* (2007) and *Y así es...* (2008). She currently has two titles in production: *Helena, la dignidad primero* and *El Macroproyecto*. In addition, as a scriptwriter, she is currently writing a feature film project produced by Buen Paso Films and directed by Silvia Munt. Silvia Munt. Contact: isadora.guardia@eram.cat.

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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.

Jordi Revert is PhD student in Communication at the Universitat de València and completed the Master in Interculturality, Communication and European Studies. Since 2008 he has been working as film critic and writer for online media (*LaButaca.net*, *Détour*, *Efe Eme*) and has published numerous articles in scientific journals. Since 2009 he has been part of the Editorial Board of *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos* and between 2015 and 2016 he has been the editor of the journal. In 2016 he published his first book, a case study about the filmmaker Paul Verhoeven (Cátedra). He has taught several courses and university seminars on aspects related to cinema and journalism. Contact: revert.jordi@gmail.com.

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*Cine de fotógrafos* (2005) recibió el Premio Fundació Espais d'Art Contemporani. En 2013 estrenó su primera ficción, *A cicatriz blanca*, que junto a sus largometrajes documentales *Santa Liberdade* (2004) y *Liste, pronunciado Líster* (2007) completan su trilogía sobre el siglo XX. Se declara feminista y agitadora cultural. Contacto: margarita.ledo@usc.es.

Jordi Revert es doctorando en Comunicación en la Universitat de València y completó el Máster en Interculturalidad, Comunicación y Estudios Europeos del mismo centro. Desde 2008 ejerce su labor profesional como crítico y escritor cinematográfico en medios online (*LaButaca.net*, *Détour*, *Efe Eme*) y ha publicado numerosos artículos en revistas científicas. Desde 2009 forma parte del Consejo de Redacción de *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos* y entre 2015 y 2016 ha dirigido la publicación. En 2016 ha publicado su primer libro, un estudio sobre el director Paul Verhoeven (Cátedra). Ha impartido diversos cursos y seminarios universitarios sobre aspectos relacionados con el cine y el periodismo. Contacto: revert.jordi@gmail.com.

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# VANISHING POINTS

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**AN EXPLORATION OF MAYA DEREN'S  
HAITIAN FOOTAGE AND JEAN ROUCH'S  
LES MAÎTRES FOUS**

Carolina Martínez López

**THE STATUARY CONDITION IN  
CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE CINEMA**

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**ANDRÉ BAZIN ON MARS: THE  
EXASPERATION OF ONTOLOGICAL  
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**MAPPING WINGS OF DESIRE: BERLIN AND  
THE CITY OF FORGOTTEN PLACES**

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# AN EXPLORATION OF MAYA DEREN'S HAITIAN FOOTAGE AND JEAN ROUCH'S *LES MAÎTRES FOUS*

CAROLINA MARTÍNEZ LÓPEZ

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN BOYD

The objective of this article is to explore the relationship between Maya Deren's Haitian film footage<sup>1</sup> and Jean Rouch's short film *Les maîtres fous* (1955), two film projects that are practically contemporaneous. Although the connection between the two filmmakers has previously been explored in different articles and studies, including the emblematic *Ecstatic Ethnography: Filming Possession Rituals* (RUSSELL, 1999: 193-237), it is my intention in this article, in addition to addressing the cinematographic and anthropological aspects, to focus specifically on the choreographic and, above all, political aspects of these two projects.

Throughout this article, "Deren's Haitian footage" refers to her film project and to all the unedited footage that Maya Deren filmed from 1947 to 1954 on three trips she made to Haiti. The Haitian footage that has been made public is the product of the editing work completed posthumously by Deren's last husband, Teiji Ito, and his second wife Cherel Ito, which was presented in 1985 under the

title *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, after the book of the same name published by Deren in 1953 with a prologue by the anthropologist Joseph Campbell (DEREN, 2004). For this film, the editors selected what they considered to be the best parts of the footage, to which they then added sound, using the audio from the recordings made by Teiji Ito and Deren in Haiti, together with a voice-over reading extracts from the aforementioned book.

## ORIGINS

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The Haitian project undertaken by Maya Deren, a prominent representative of the New York avant-garde of her day, had its genesis in the studies that she began thanks to grant to study religious dance awarded to her before making her first film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, 1943), and in her work with the anthropologist and choreographer Katheri-



Pictured, Maya Deren in Haiti (no date). © Tavia Ito

ne Dunham in the 1940s. These two experiences would constitute the foundation for the structure she would use in an effort to combine art and ethnography, further enriched by her study of the footage on Bali edited in 1952 with the title *Trance and Dance in Bali*, shot by the anthropologist couple Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, which would give her a more expansive vision of film as meditation, leaving a profound mark on her work.

The origin of Jean Rouch's film was quite different from the genesis of Deren's project. During the French colonial period Rouch arrived in the capital of Niger, where he would attend his first *Songhay*<sup>2</sup> possession ritual, an experience that awakened his interest in ethnography and his desire to document what he witnessed, first in the form of articles and subsequently on camera. In 1947, he released the short film *Au pays des mages noirs*, and in 1949 his *Initiation à la danse de possédés* won first prize at the Festival du Film Maudit, judged by a jury chaired by Jean Cocteau. In 1954 while he continued alternating between his work as an engineer and his ethnographic research in Africa with his teaching work in France, he travelled to Ghana and resumed his studies of Nigerien emigrants and their social organisation. His experience in Ghana resulted in the short film *Les maîtres fous*, which would win first prize in its

category at the Venice International Film Festival in 1957.

The original cinematic objective pursued by Deren with her unfinished project is documented in the application to renew the Guggenheim grant she received in 1946 (DEREN, 2007: 109-121), in which she proposed a film that would bring together the rituals of Haiti and Bali with children's games, and which would be based on the idea of "equivalent parallelism" (DEREN, 2007: 112). However, according to Moira Sullivan (2001: 212-213), shortly after arriving in Haiti for the first time in 1947, the filmmaker changed this initial idea and proposed as her main objective the authentic documentation of the rituals she was observing. By that time, Deren had already made four short films and had developed her ideas related to the manipulation of time and space through editing and the use of the camera (McPHERSON, 2005). She had also started to formulate the beginnings of her idea of *choreocinema*<sup>3</sup> and to play with the concept of ritual from a formal perspective with her film *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), as well as from a theoretical perspective (DEREN, 2005: 35-109).

## **POLITICAL INTENTION**

What both projects did have in common from the beginning was a clear political intention, which is explained below.

Maya Deren shared with Rouch what for its time was an innovative use of lightweight filming equipment, as she arrived in Haiti with three cameras, various tripods and sound recording devices to become the first person to film ceremonies of the Voudoun<sup>4</sup> religion popular among the Haitian rural class. With *Les maîtres fous*, Rouch would be the first to film the possession ritual of the Hauka movement, a religious sect that spread throughout West Africa from 1920 to 1950, whose members were largely rural emigrants from Niger who came to cities like Accra, in Ghana, where they found work as labourers. The Hauka profes-



sed a type of cult which, in spite of being repeatedly repressed by the French authorities, spread with such force that an agreement ultimately permitted its practice in certain places and on certain days of the week. This was the situation when in 1954 Rouch, at the request of a group of practitioners, shot the film in question, showing the ritual of the Hauka going into a trance and becoming possessed by different spirits associated with the Western colonial authorities in what constituted a form of subversion of and opposition to their power: the governor general, the engine driver, the doctor's wife, the commander, the corporal, etc. The oppressed Haitians would also use possession dances, and the representation and embodiment of their oppressors in ceremonies as a form of rebellion against enslavement and to increase their moral strength and organisation. It is important to note that in these cultures, myth provides a model of moral values, sociological experiences and magical beliefs, and that religion fulfils a stabilising psychological function in an adverse world.

With their work, both Deren and Rouch sought to capture the reality of the side of the oppressed rather than the oppressors. In Deren's case this is made explicit in her book *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (DEREN, 2004, 6), and in both projects we can discern the implicit intention of the political documentary genre to give a voice to the oppressed and recover their history; these are works, as Bill Nichols suggests, where "textual authority shifts toward the social actors recruited" (NICHOLS, 1991: 44). This objective would tie in directly with the political ideas of both filmmakers: Trotskyist in Deren's case, anarchist in Rouch's. Thus, from a Marxist perspective, it could be argued that this form of rebellion of the oppressed against the colonial power is equivalent to the idea of rebellion and dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., Gramsci's idea of hegemony: "[t]he proletariat can become the leading and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of alliances which allows it



**Pictured, a Haitian possessed. Still frame from Maya Deren's Haitian footage (1947-54)**

to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State" (GRAMSCI, 2006: 192). From Rouch's anarchist perspective, however, the objective would be "to destroy the power, not to take the power. I think we are opening all the boundaries, and that with this tool, this media [the documentary film], people, without writing, can transmit their fantasies to some other people and to share that with them. And it was maybe the aim of the first anthropologists" (JOHNSON, 1978). Rouch's objective also ties in with Noam Chomsky's ideas related to the questioning of authority and of imperial systems: "the burden of proof for anyone in a position of power and authority lies on them. Their authority is not self-justifying. They have to give a reason for it, a justification. And if they can't justify that authority and power and control, which is the usual case, then the authority ought to be dismantled and replaced by something more free and just" (WILSON, 2013: 31).

In the case of Rouch's film, the subversive potential was so obvious that it was initially banned by the colonial regime, as it was taken as an insult to the British Empire. In the very beginning of the film, the producer, Pierre Baraunberger, warns us of the "violence and cruelty of some

scenes”, suggesting that what we are about to see is “a ritual which is the solution to a problem of readaptation”, which “shows indirectly how certain Africans represent our Western civilisation.”<sup>5</sup> Jean Rouch also introduces us to the history of the Hauka, explaining that they are the product of the “clash” of young emigrants from the savannah “with the mechanical civilisation” of the big cities. He then underscores the same points made by the producer: “[n]one of the scenes is forbidden, but all are open to those who want to play the game. This violent game is merely the reflection of our civilization.”<sup>6</sup> To soften this violence, from the beginning to the end of *Les maîtres fous*, Rouch’s voice-over is positioned physically between the images and the spectator, creating a kind of Brechtian distancing effect that helps the viewer to deal with the sometimes brutal force of the images, and that allows the filmmaker to show his active participation in the ritual. Interspersed with the possession sequences in *Les maîtres fous* are a series of images related to the Day of Assembly, an official festivity where we see the actual imperial authorities, whose characters and protocols serve as a model of representation for the Hauka’s ceremonies.

In terms of the questioning by the directors of the authenticity of these ceremonies, Rouch exp-



Pictured, a Hauka possessed. Still frame from *Les maîtres fous* (Jean Rouch, 1955)

lains in his comments on the film that this is not important; what really matters is that the ritual, in which for one day the Hauka are the ones in power, fosters a psychological liberation and vests them with the capacity necessary to endure a degrading situation with dignity. It could be argued that these possession dances, as rituals arising out of the world views of these peoples, constituted the alliance that would harbour the hope for social change, a social change supported by Deren’s and Rouch’s artistic and political acts of exposure and criticism, and which conceptually, both in terms of the filmmakers and of the groups filmed, can be linked with Gramsci’s idea of the philosophy of praxis. This philosophy of praxis would serve these communities to establish a new hegemony through action and, according to the philosopher, would allow them “to work out [their] own conception of the world consciously and critically, and [...] to participate actively in making the history of the world, and not simply to accept passively and without care the imprint of [their] own personality from outside” (GRAMSCI, 1971: 58). From this point of view, both projects could also be linked to Hanna Harendt’s idea of *vita activa* (2009: 21-30), as both the directors and protagonists of both projects combine observation and action to make a political statement.

On each trip she took to Haiti, Deren immersed herself more and more in the Haitian religion; she was even ordained as a Voudoun priestess and claimed to have been possessed on numerous occasions by the goddess Erzulie. At a certain point she stopped directly questioning the authenticity of the process she was filming to become a firm believer in what she was witnessing.

## THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC PROCESS AND ITS RESULTS

In Deren’s case it is not possible to conduct an analysis of the editing process because, as noted above, her project never reached this stage. Four

years and three trips after her first stay in Haiti she completed her book *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, “a tribute to the irrefutable reality and impact of Voudoun mythology” (DEREN, 2004: 6). In the prologue to the book, Deren expresses her dismay over the unfinished footage that she would never edit herself (DEREN, 2004: 5) and which, as she herself explains, forced her to abandon her ideas about the manipulation of reality through film: “I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art [...]; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations” (DEREN, 2004: 6). Deren, who until that time had postulated in her films a manipulation of space and time using the resources offered by the camera and the editing room (DEREN, 2005: 110-128), was faced when working in the documentary genre with certain problems that she did not know how to resolve, either theoretically or practically, added to which was the fact of her personal involvement in the Haitian religion. It could be said that Maya Deren suffered the opposite fate of Leni Riefenstahl, who, as Àngel Quintana (2003: 20-21) recalls, never at any moment doubted the veracity of her films, always asserting that they were documentaries, when in reality what she was making were artistic propaganda films without ever questioning what reality she was filming or how she was filming it.

What can be asserted is that the Haitian project played an indisputable role in Deren’s subsequent development as a theorist and avant-garde filmmaker. For Catrina Neiman it was the most provocative project that Deren undertook and through it “she moved away from an intense self-exploration, from a kind of psychological to a mythological reading of the world. In regard to the films, she ceases to be the central figure and becomes more purely the medium” (CAMERA OBSCURA COLLECTIVE, 1979: 183). In the Haitians’ holistic

conception of the world, Deren would also discover a continuity to her ideas about Gestalt theory and its application to filmmaking. While in her previous films she was concerned with the meaning and form of ritual, in Haiti she would complement the ideas she outlined in her 1946 essay *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (DEREN, 2005: 35-109), in a sense closing the circle.

In the absence of a final edit of the Haitian footage, we can only analyse how the filmmaker undertook the process. Deren approached the filming in a way that would require minimal editing (“shoot to cut”, as she called it) (DEREN, 2005: 139), representing something of a break with her other work, which was characterised by a meticulous editing process and for never having to shoot the same take over, as this would entail the risk that what she had filmed would not be repeated (Sullivan, 2001: 212). In Haiti she also used a technique she called “planning by eye” (DEREN, 2005: 152), a kind of visual shorthand of what she was going to film. In a first stage, she concentrated on recording the ceremonies from different perspectives, including drawings, animal sacrifices, and numerous possessions; in the second stage she would concentrate on the dance, the ritual movements and the drums. In this second stage, she worked with a series of photographs taken at short intervals; while the individual images do not capture the movement themselves, when they were projected the eye would *read* the movement (SULLIVAN, 2001: 221). It is this stage that Deren felt resulted in something decontextualised and incomprehensible because the image was reduced to the shape of the body and of the movement (SULLIVAN, 2001: 214). On this point it could be suggested that the work method Deren was trying to use was the one she proposed in her *Anagram* (DEREN, 2005: 40), where she encourages the artist to work like a scientist, isolating one element from its context in order to manipulate it and produce a new result. Except for these stages in which she used still photos, she almost always makes use of long and

medium takes that move from the general to the specific. Normally the long takes show the ceremonial context and are followed by medium takes of the *servant* or the devout, so that we can see how the individual is absorbed by the collective, thereby producing a depersonalisation that we can also associate with Deren's Marxist ideas and which are related to her subsequent development as a filmmaker, as described above by Neiman.

For his part, Jean Rouch achieved with *Les maîtres fous* and with his other ethnographic films the perfect communion between cinema and ethnography that Deren did not, thereby becoming the creator of *ethnofiction*. It could be argued that before the official birth of the genre of Direct Cinema, Jean Rouch had already begun to practice it, given that he used a 16mm camera and he filmed without a script, surrendering to the adventure of the shoot, allowing for improvisation and seeking to capture reality in all its immediacy and to transmit the truth; however, he promptly realised that it was impossible to capture reality without taking part in it and without changing it, and so he decided to include himself and the camera as another character in his films, acknowledging his intervention. Unlike Deren, Rouch acknowledged his participation in the rituals he filmed and, in spite of being directly involved in them, he was able to maintain a fictitious distance that helped him produce films that were totally innovative and equally interesting for their form as for their value as documents. Rouch was aware that a true masterpiece is achieved when there is a conjunction between all the participants in each film, revealing the collective intuition, but he also knew that this rarely occurred and that, therefore, it was the director who had to create the right circumstances and shape the project so that the reality that he wanted to represent would be revealed. Colleyn (2004: 537) quotes Rouch as follows: "[w]hen the filmmaker stages reality, he explained, when he improvises its scenes, its movements, its shoo-

ting times, he is doing subjective things whose only code is his own inspiration."

In terms of the technical aspects of the editing of *Les maîtres fous*, the beginning of the film is dynamic, swift and musical, with quite short shots and sequences, leading us from the general to the specific, to the ritual that Rouch wishes to portray. Before exploring the religious ceremony and in order to begin to understand the situation of its protagonists, we are first shown a sample of city life, followed by the different professions practised by the immigrants, and then the different ceremonies and demonstrations that take place in the city on the weekends; after this, we



**Pictured, the crossroads, symbol of the Voudoun. Still frame from Maya Deren's Haitian footage (1947-54)**

are guided through the suburbs where the immigrants live and the centre where the Hauka meet: the Salt Market, where they read the newspaper, play cards, etc. Finally, we are led along a path to the site of the ritual, where the Government Palace and the Secretary General's office are represented, and the governor is represented by a kind of totem. Little by little, the ceremony begins and sequence shots begin to dominate, as the objective



is to try to film as much as possible to capture the here and now, the immediacy of the ritual. At minute 11, the dance begins.

## **CHOREOCINEMA, POSSESSION DANCES AND DUALITY**

With respect to the choreographic dimension, Deren attempted to delve deeper into her research through *choreocinema* and through the idea of ritual as a way of dissolving the individual in the collective through music and dance. From an artistic perspective, her interest also lies in capturing the moving body engaged in dance, the gestures, the drums and other ceremonial elements, and bringing all this together into a coherent whole through pans and changes of focal lenses (SULLIVAN, 2001: 217). Another obvious intention behind her footage was to offer a system of documentation that would integrate mythical symbols through movement, but Deren did not manage to develop it, as she realised that it was impossible to separate the dance of the Voudoun of their cosmology: the rituals were offered to the *loa* or gods in a complete ceremonial act, and in the decontextualised dances we cannot see either their moral meaning or the physical effort that characterises Western dance performances (DEREN qtd. in SULLIVAN, 2001: 208).

In Rouch's film the dance begins with a circular movement. A few Hauka move around an inner circle while others, acting as sentinels with pieces of wood representing rifles, move around an outer circle, supposedly guarding the first, thus initiating the representation of the authorities. The imagery in *Les maîtres fous* is powerful and often disturbing: men possessed with their eyes whirling like the ones we see in Deren's Haitian footage, foaming at the mouth, eating a sacrificed dog, burning their bodies with flaming torches. Also, just as we see with Deren's Haitians, the possession begins first in the movement of the feet, then in the hands, and the shoulders, until it



Pictured, Haukas possessed. Still frame from *Les maîtres fous* (Jean Rouch, 1955)

reaches the head and the dancers are completely possessed by these “new gods” who take the form of the authorities of the British Empire. However, Rouch's approach to filming lacks the conscious choreographic dimension that characterises Deren's material, the dialogue that she pioneered between camera and dancer. As early as her film *A Study on Choreography for Camera*, (1945) Deren had begun to make conscious choreographic use of the camera and the editing process, which she also formulates theoretically in her text *Choreography for the Camera* (DEREN, 2005: 220-224), where she explains that her aim was not to film the dance or the dancers, but rather to create duets between camera and dancer, while also vesting everything on the other side of the lens with movement. To do this she used variations in camera speed, and created leaps in space and in time through the editing process. Deren's way of moving the camera in the Haitian film footage reflects her idea of turning camera and dancer into dance partners. While Rouch simply filmed the dance, Deren contributed to the dance with her camera.

On a conceptual and anthropological level, both Rouch, founder of what has been called “vi-

sual anthropology”, and Deren share an interest in the idea of duality in Songhay and Voudoun cosmologies that underpin the rituals that we see in their respective projects. The main symbol of the Haitian religion is a coordinate axis that reflects the world of the living (the visible) and the world of the dead (the invisible), and this appears repeatedly in Deren’s footage. For the Haitians, the soul of the living is the reflection of the surface of the cosmic mirror, and is fixed to that surface by the existence of the body it reflects; with death, the force that fixed it will sink into the depths of the mirror and position itself at the bottom of the vertical axis (DEREN, 2004: 34-35). This idea is very similar to what Rouch found in his research into the Songhay people and their notion of *bia*, which “designates shadow, reflection and soul at the same time. This *bia* is linked to the body for life, although it can leave the body temporally while it sleeps (in dreams), or occasionally when awake (in a state of daydreaming, reflection or possession). At the moment of death it leaves the body to follow its own path in the next world. [...] Every person has a *bia* or double, who inhabits a parallel world, the world of the doubles. This world is the home of the spirits” (ROUCH, 2007: 32; 40). The concept of duality proposed here could also be compared to Edgar Morin’s view of the human being and the cinema in his book *L’Homme Imaginaire* (Morin, 1965).

The film *Les maîtres fous* ends with Rouch’s voice, leaving a door open to magic, to poetry, to the unknown: “[and] seeing this, we cannot help but wonder whether these men of Africa might not know some remedies that enable them not to be abnormal, but to be totally integrated into their environment. Remedies of which we are as yet unaware.”<sup>7</sup> These words tie in with the objective of Deren’s entire filmography: to show the invisible through the visible; an objective which, for her, should be aimed for by both the artist/magician and the scientist (DEREN qtd. in SULLIVAN, 2001: 212), revealing a certain metaphysical or

transcendental phenomenological dimension in both filmmakers that could be explored in a future study.

## CONCLUSIONS

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From the above analysis of the cinematographic, political, anthropological and choreographic aspects of the two projects that are the focus of this article, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

Rouch and Deren moved in an intermediate realm between art and anthropology, and both managed to become directly involved in the rituals they filmed, overstepping the boundaries between observer and participant. Both filmmakers documented rituals in a poetic way, different from the traditional approach, and began to be concerned about the role of the filmmaker and/or anthropologist, the role of the camera and the way in which the realities filmed were represented, responding to a new type of ethnography that Gregory Bateson (1958: 1) classified as “artistic”.

Both Deren and Rouch also illustrate Morin’s idea of the ethnographic film: “here appears the anthropological purity of the cinema. It encompasses the whole field of the real world that it places within hand’s reach and the whole field of the imaginary world, as it shares both the vision of the dream and the perception of wakefulness. The anthropological field that moves from the objective self (the double) to the subjective self (sense of self, soul), from the subjective world (anthropo-cosmomorphism) to the objective world (practical perception), is virtually in the *field of the camera*” (MORIN, 2001: 152).

We could consider both projects to be political exercises, beginning with the elimination of hierarchies as the filmmakers take part in the rituals, constituting an opposition to the clichéd colonialist cinema of directors like Machin, Poirier or Martin and Osa Johnson. The anti-imperialist Rouch was the first white director to film Africa from within, trying to show the African people

as they really were, free of clichés and prejudices; through his way of working, of sharing his work with the participants in his films, and his conscious involvement, he put into practice an anthropology which he himself described as “shared anthropology” – the same kind of anthropology that Deren would practice in Haiti.

Both directors established a clear precedent for the documentary genre and for the cinema in general, in the way they resolved or tried to resolve the new problems they faced when attempting a cinematic representation of the visible dimension of the ritual, but also the metaphor, the poetry and the invisible universes revealed in the form of that ritual, which constitute a major part of the identity of the peoples who perform it. Rouch's evolution in his works of *ethnofiction* would also lead him in time to develop sociological film exercises like *Chronique d'un été* (Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch, 1960), an attempt to portray French society that could be considered the very first expression of *cinéma-vérité*.

Deren's and Rouch's work had a particularly strong influence on the way that ethnographic documentaries were made. Notable examples of this could be John Marshall and Robert Gardner's *The Hunters* (1957), *A Kalahari Family* (John Marshall, 2002) and *Dead Birds* (Robert Gardner, 1963), or Hubert Smith and Neil Reichline's *The Spirit Possession of Alejandro Mamani* (1973). In Spain we also have clear examples of this influence in the documentary feature film *Dance to the Spirits* (Dansa als esperits, 2010) by Ricardo Íscar, and in Isaki Lacuesta's works *The Double Steps* (Los pasos dobles, 2011) and *The Clay Diaries* (El cuaderno de Barro, 2012). ■

## NOTES

1 Maya Deren's Haitian footage is made up of 6,000 metres of film (stored at the Anthology Film Archives in New York), together with 1,000 photographs and 50 hours of audio recordings (in 1953 the company Elektra

Records compiled a selection of these sound recordings and released it under the title *Voices of Haiti*). As I have not had the opportunity to view all of the material, I have based my analysis of her project on my viewing of certain parts of the footage that have been digitised, as well as on the writings of Deren and of Moira Sullivan. The material edited by Teiji and Cherel Ito is also occasionally taken as a reference. In the Boston University Mugar Library Special Collections, in addition to Deren's sound recordings, notebooks and diaries, there is a document of significant value for understanding the material, which Deren called “Guide to Haiti Film Catalogue”, a kind of visual inventory in which the filmmaker describes the best parts of her footage. In this guide she divides her material into 17 sections: the first eight rolls are dedicated to an eight-day *caille* ceremony filmed in 1947; another four rolls are of the same ceremony, which she filmed again in 1949; and finally, the last five rolls were of dances and ceremonies dating between 1949 and 1954. All the footage is in black and white and was never edited by the filmmaker.

- 2 The Songhay Empire was one of West Africa's oldest empires. It was founded in Kukiya in the seventh century by the Berber chieftain Za Alayamen, who was fleeing the Arab invasion. Until the eleventh century it enjoyed an important position as a trade centre on the banks of the Niger River, where the Islamized dynasty of the Dia established its capital in Gao. According to Al-Bakri, only the king was Muslim, while the population itself continued to practice their animist tradition.
- 3 The term *choreocinema*, according to Moira Sullivan (2001: 215), was coined by the American dance critic John Martin specifically to define the film works of Maya Deren.
- 4 A term originating from the African Fon people of West Africa, meaning “god”. Historians identify the date of the first ceremony of the Voudoun cult as 14 August 1791.
- 5 Quote translated from the French audio-commentary on the DVD of *Les Maîtres fous*.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.

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## **AN EXPLORATION OF MAYA DEREN'S HAITIAN FOOTAGE AND JEAN ROUCH'S *LES MAÎTRES FOUS***

### **Abstract**

This article explores the relationship between Jean Rouch's *Les maîtres fous* (1955) and Maya Deren's Haitian film footage (1947-54), two almost contemporaneous projects involving the filming of possession dances – of the African Songhay in Rouch's case, and of the Haitian Vodoun cult in the case of Deren. Both filmmakers were pioneers who took an innovative approach in their filming of these ceremonies, using lightweight technical equipment and involving themselves directly in the ritual (each in a different way), to produce a respectful and poetic representation that was free of the prejudices and the colonial superiority prevalent among Western filmmakers until that time. While Deren was unable to give her material a final form due to a plethora of ethical and cinematographic obstacles, Rouch would successfully bring ethnography and cinema together in his work, thereby establishing a new documentary sub-genre, known as *ethnofiction*.

### **Key words**

Maya Deren; Jean Rouch; Ethnofiction; Documentary; Dance; Anthropology; Possession; Politics.

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## **TRANSITANDO EL METRAJE HAITIANO DE MAYA DEREN Y LOS AMOS LOCOS DE JEAN ROUCH**

### **Resumen**

El presente artículo aborda la relación entre *Los amos locos* (1955) de Jean Rouch y el metraje haitiano (1947-54) de Maya Deren, trabajos cercanos en el tiempo y dedicados a filmar las danzas de posesión —de los *songhay* africanos, en el caso de Rouch, y de los haitianos, en el de Deren—. Ambos cineastas fueron pioneros a la hora de filmar estas manifestaciones de una manera innovadora, utilizando equipos de rodaje ligeros e involucrándose —cada uno de forma diferente— en el ritual, abordándolo desde el respeto y la poesía, dejando de lado los prejuicios y la superioridad colonialista imperante hasta esos momentos. Deren no lograría dar una forma final a su material debido a que se vio inmersa en una gran cantidad de problemas morales y cinematográficos que se lo impidieron; en cambio, Rouch conseguiría con su trabajo aunar etnografía y cine instaurando un nuevo sub-género documental, la *etnoficción*.

### **Palabras clave**

Maya Deren; Jean Rouch; etnoficción; documental; danza; antropología; posesión; política.

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# THE STATUARY CONDITION IN CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE CINEMA

GLÒRIA SALVADÓ

FRAN BENAVENTE

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN BOYD

This article presents an analysis of the statue as a metaphor and a significant figure in contemporary Portuguese cinema. By examining the use of the recurring motif of the statue, it is our aim to demonstrate the existence of a statuary condition that extrapolates this motif to a transversally deployed figurative representation that posits the sculptural condition of the actor's body, the shot as a block of time and a record of the memory, and filmmaking as a necessary dialectic articulation between the moving temporal flow and the resistance of certain images. To this end, we will analyse the mechanisms that constitute this figurative representation: the blank stare, frontality, immobility, anti-naturalism, theatrical staging, the power of the word, the visibility of representational devices, interruption, and a particular form of working with the actor's body, as the object of phantasmagoria or the site of the material expression of the gag. Taking the work of Manoel de Oliveira as a starting point, source and key influence,<sup>1</sup> we seek to underscore the

importance of this figure, closely linked to the need to evoke a past, a personal and collective memory, in some of the most significant poetics of contemporary Portuguese cinema, such as the films of Pedro Costa, Miguel Gomes or Rita Azevedo.

Our main focus will thus be contemporary Portuguese cinema, from which we will take three images as a starting point to illustrate our idea. All three were made in 2012 in the production hub that is the European cultural capital of Guimarães. Two of them are found in the collective film *Centro histórico* (2012); specifically, in Manoel de Oliveira's *O conquistador conquistado* and Pedro Costa's *Sweet Exorcist*. In spite of the difference in tone (Oliveira's short is burlesque and ironic, while Costa's is gloomy and spectral), both filmmakers take the same approach, locating a statue at the heart of the story.<sup>2</sup>

In *O conquistador conquistado*, Oliveira shows us the statue of King Afonso Henriques, Portugal's first monarch, presiding over one



The monumental statue. Frame from *O conquistador conquistado* de Manoel de Oliveira en *Centro Histórico* (2012)

of the most emblematic squares of Guimarães. Oliveira's depiction is critical, reducing the sculpture to a cliché. As the tourist crowds pass by so fleetingly, there is only time to see the sights through their camera's viewfinder. The film evokes the choreographies of Jacques Tati and their ironic reflection on the fast pace of the modern world. The banality of the flow of tourists clashes with the solemn stateliness of the statue. The immobile figure is impervious to these new temporal rhythms. Oliveira's film is almost silent. There is no possibility of articulating a verbal narrative (apart from a few announcements from a megaphone) and, consequently, there is no time for history. There is no chance of exploring the past, or of reviving a memory. The tourist's gaze fixes on an image but sees nothing. In this sense, the film functions as a counter-chronicle to *A Talking Picture* (*Um filme falado*, Manoel de Oliveira, 2003), a film whose central device rests on the need for the word to give meaning to the ruins and vestiges of the past.<sup>3</sup>

Pedro Costa, on the other hand, turns his camera away from city monuments (mythical history) and towards the inside of an ordinary lift, where we find Ventura, the protagonist from *Colossal Youth* (*Juventude em marcha*, Pedro Costa, 2006), together with the figure of a



The persistence of history: eyes that don't see. Frame from *Sweet Exorcist* de Pedro Costa en *Centro Histórico* (2012)

spectral soldier, a kind of metal statue with eyes closed. They are two sculptural, stone figures, trapped in an interval of stillness that interrupts the flow of time to give the moment its dialectic weight. In *Sweet Exorcist*, the ghosts of the past do return. In a kind of dreamlike delirium, faced with the motionless figure of the soldier, Ventura recalls his experiences in the colonial wars, the April Revolution and his days as a worker in post-revolutionary Lisbon. Different times fuse with one another; different moments are superimposed one on the other. The multiple voices of the forgotten emerge: the memory of the slaves returns. In fact, this short film formed the basis for the development of *Cavalo Dinheiro* (2014), a film not concerned with the epic and monumental history of kings and heroes, but with the history of those left behind, on the border between worlds (the secret, phantasmal history of the spectres, the forgotten).

To these two series of images it is worth adding a third: that of the bodies filmed by João Pedro Rodrigues in *The King's Body* (*O corpo de Afonso*, 2012), sculptural bodies carved out by the camera, which serve to problematise the contemporary representation of the monumental and sovereign body in the age of the image. The film, provocative and humorous, ponders the question of what the

body of Portugal's first king was really like. It thus returns to one of the central themes in Rodrigues's work: the problematisation of the body and the need to sculpt it. In a casting session for the film itself, Rodrigues interviews various characters whose reflections bring corporeality, the concept of monarchy and the economic crisis into relation with one another. The Apollonian exhibition of figures combines with a reading of the chronicles of King Afonso and with other images related to Portugal's first king, shown against a CG screen. The muscular bodies are flattened, becoming two-dimensional. Embedded in the screen, they



The statuary image. *O corpo de Afonso* (João Pedro Rodrigues, 2012)

become pure components of the image. In this way, the exercise proposed by Rodrigues transcends a reflection on the body and history to consider their visual (digital and cinematic) representation.

We can thus see how these three contemporary films posit three modes of figurative representation articulated around the idea of the centrality of a certain statuary condition of the human figure: first of all, with Oliveira, the idea of the statue as monument; secondly, Pedro Costa's articulation of the idea of the body as a monumental statuary record; and finally, João Pedro Rodrigues's portrayal of the move from statue to body and from body to its conversion in image. Each of these

three films illustrates one of the fundamental categories of the statuary condition that we seek to explore in this article: the monumental statue, the statuary body, and the statuary image. It is our view that each of these devices is significant to an understanding of the prevailing aesthetic regime in contemporary Portuguese art house cinema and the importance in that cinema of the statue as a figure and cinematic metaphor. In the following sections we explore these three models in more detail.

## THE MONUMENTAL STATUE

The first category, the monumental statue, appears often in the films of Manoel de Oliveira. In fact, Oliveira serves as the key exponent of this figurative representation in contemporary cinema for the purposes of this study. His influence, acknowledged or indirect, has been decisive for the contemporary context. This director's interest in the monumental statue can be identified as early as his second film, *Estátuas de Lisboa* (1932). In this picture, Oliveira brings a series of tensions into play which determine the film's imaginary and affect its mise en scène, and which arise from the clash between the dichotomies of absence/presence, mobile/immobile, present/past, real body/figurative body. On this point, it is worth recalling one of the core elements of the Portuguese imaginary, defined by the philosopher Eduardo Lourenço with reference to Fernando de Pessoa's *O marinheiro*<sup>4</sup>: the idea of "pure absence as a form of supreme presence" (LOURENÇO, 2006: 31) and its relation to *saudade*, a uniquely Portuguese kind of melancholy based on the longing for the return of a glorious past that is yet to come (the central idea of the myth of the Fifth Empire). At this point it is worth placing this definition in relation with the set of dialectics activated by the statue: the statue in the here-and-now (supreme presence) evokes a distant past (absence) by virtue of what it represents. At the same time, it is a

static mass which we look at and which, in turn, returns our gaze. Consequently, as Georges Didi-Huberman (1997: 14) suggests, it facilitates the accumulation of temporal layers. However, for an image to truly *look at us*, for the fleeting glimmer of the past to be activated, it is necessary for that past to be associated with the idea of loss: “[t]hen we begin to understand that everything to be seen, as still as it may be, as neutral as it may appear, becomes irresistible when it sustains a loss — albeit through a simple but compelling association of ideas or a play on words — and, hence, it looks at us, concerns us, troubles us” (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 1997: 16). In the context of Portuguese cinema this idea can be considered from the perspective of *saudade*, feeling as invocation, the echo of a loss, the impossibility of returning to a mythologised past. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that statues naturally integrate a certain idea of loss: the absence of a presence invoked by a stone figure. Both impressions of loss combine in a reinvention of time. The monumental statues of Portuguese cinema express a latency.

In this respect, in Oliveira’s most recent film the statue appears at the point of origin of a temporal friction. Consider, for example, the beginning *Christopher Columbus, The Enigma* (Cristóvão Colombo - O enigma, Manoel de Oliveira, 2007). The brothers Hermínio and Manuel Luciano Silva contemplate the statue of King João I, in Lisbon’s Praça da Figueira, just before leaving for the United States. In that moment the narrative plays with time to produce an impossibility, as a caption on the image indicates that the scene takes place in 1946, long before the creation of this statue by Leopoldo de Almeida (it was erected in 1971). The statue acts as a device that precipitates a temporal clash, which seems to underscore the presence of a mysterious figure, something like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history (BENJAMIN, 2008: 310). This static angel (in a way also a statue) reveals the film’s temporal trick, evoking the past in the

present through the contemplation of objects that return the observer’s gaze.

Another significant film in this respect is *A Talking Picture*, in which the history professor Rosa Maria and her daughter Maria Joana take a cruise on the Mediterranean. Mother and daughter travel back to the historical milestones of Western civilisation, reproducing the route of the first conquerors in search of the father, on a journey that evokes the emergence of memory and the survival of the past. The cruise traces the route of Vasco de Gama’s sea voyage all the way to India, superimposing different times and spaces. Oliveira’s *mise en scène* turns the statues and ruins of Egypt, Greece and Italy into the device (the vestiges) that facilitate the resurrection of history, the resuscitation of the past; they open a temporal breach and function as a space for the articulation of a verbal narrative that turns the movement and power of evocation into clichéd images. Something similar is true of the statue of Pedro Macao and the ruins of the Gran Hotel in *Voyage to the Beginning of the World* (*Voyage au début du monde*, Manoel de Oliveira, 1997), Oliveira’s ultimate film about memory; or with the tombs of the kings visited by King Sebastião in the opening scenes of *The Fifth Empire* (*O Quinto Imperio - Ontem como hoje*, Manoel de Oliveira, 2004).

**The statuary body. *A Talking Picture* (Manoel de Oliveira, 2003)**



In all these cases, the statues activate a memory and are, in turn, the driving force that propels a discourse and a system of representation of bodies. The immobility of the statues pushes the narrative beyond its limits. In *A Talking Picture* Rosa Maria turns into a statue on the deck of the boat, staring out to sea. Manoel also evokes his life in the car ride in *Voyage to the Beginning of the World* that takes him to the places of his childhood. The car drives along the highway while he, immobile, looks out and remembers his past. In *Christopher Columbus* Manuel Luciano da Silva and his wife visit the Castillo de Sagres, a “historic centre” for Portugal’s maritime expansion. There, next to a broken head of a sculpture and the endless horizon of the Atlantic Ocean, they recite, inexpressively as a duo, the opening lines of the First Canto of Luis Vaz de Camões’s *Los Lusíadas*. History, in the context of the figurative representation of the statue, is depicted as words open to the vertical depths of time.

In these scenes an important shift occurs: the immobility of the statues seems to be transferred to the expressions of the characters. Their appearance is static and frontal; their performance is theatrical and solemn. Their gaze is directed out into the void, to a kind of infinite and unreachable great beyond. In this way, the monumental statues give way to the second mode referred to above: the statuary body.

## **THE STATUARY BODY**

We will continue, for the moment, with Oliveira. The process of transfer of statuary qualities from stone to body is made explicit in a central scene of *The Fifth Empire*; the scene in which the statues of the kings that preceded Don Sebastião turn into living bodies while he sleeps. The change of state occurs in the realm of dream, a territory which, according to Lourenço, facilitates a temporal amalgam and, consequently, the expression of the Portuguese soul (LOURENÇO, 2006: 35). These figures

inhabit a kind of limbo, a suspended parenthesis in which the great moments of Portuguese history have already occurred and, at the same time, are yet to come. This link between the motif of the statue and a re-reading of Portuguese destiny in history explains the potency of this figurative representation studied in Portuguese film, in a contemporary example of what Serge Daney described about Portuguese cinema in 1981 (DANEY, 2001).

Bodies of stone become human bodies; the static figure acquires motion. Out of this process emerges the fantastic, the mystery. This idea culminates in *The Strange Case of Angélica* (*O estranho caso de Angélica*, Manoel de Oliveira, 2010), a story about a body’s change of state. The corpse of the female protagonist comes back to life in the pictures taken by the photographer Isaac. Angélica, another kind of statue, recovers movement in a still image. Like the kings in *The Fifth Empire*, she is a figure between life and death, the present and the past, arising out of a dreamlike delirium of the male protagonist. In both cases, Oliveira explores the dialogue between movement and interruption, between photography and cinema, between sculptural body and real body, between theatrical representation and cinematic image. In short, as is made clear in the scene in which Isaac contemplates the line of newly developed photographs hanging up in his dark room, Oliveira examines the question of the statue from the perspective of the dialectic between mobility and immobility, and articulates it as a question of editing. Sculptures/static figures turn into moving images in the flow or continuity of the filmic mode.

Oliveira’s style is consolidated on the basis of the idea that film is a medium for capturing theatre (BÉNARD DA COSTA, 2001: 98) through mechanisms of gestural and dynamic minimisation, frontality and inexpressiveness. Anti-naturalism and theatricality underpin the *mise en scène* in *Amor de perdição* (1979), *Francisca* (1981), *Le soulier de*

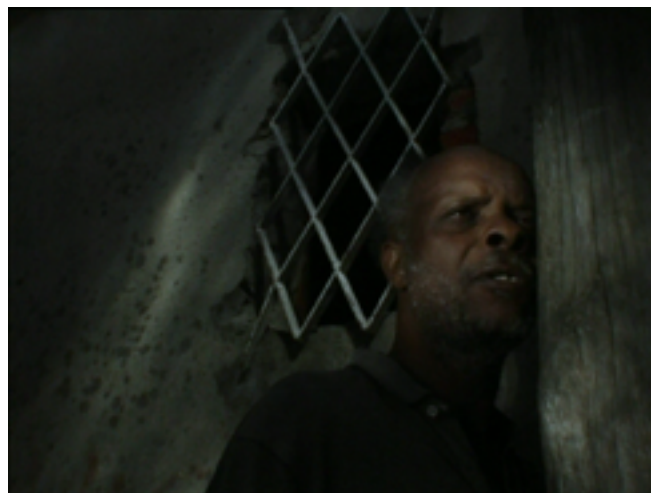


*satin* (1985) – with its painted sets – and *Mon cas* (1986), which takes place in a theatre; and also in *Abraham's Valley* (Vale Abraão, 1995), *Party* (1996), *Word and Utopia* (Palavra e utopia, 2000), *A Talking Picture* and *Gébo et l'ombre* (2012), a film that underscores the fabricated nature of cinema and of representation.

The gaze to camera is a central mechanism whose use culminates in *Non, ou a vã glória da mandar*. The ensign Cabrita, played by Luis Miguel Cintra, travels with his comrades in a military truck in the midst of the colonial war. The vehicle is shown in constant lateral motion. The flow is interrupted every time the lieutenant begins the narration of an episode in Portugal's history, and turns his gaze on the spectator, who has the sensation not of being looked at, but of being plunged into the past. Luis Miguel Cintra's gaze evokes a reverse shot that never appears, pointing out an absence that emerges in the shot itself; its reverse shot is the memory, the past. In this way, Portuguese cinema articulates a gaze without a reverse shot that opens up a gap in time; it is *face-to-face* with history.<sup>5</sup> The result is a false match cut, a discontinuity in the images. Once again, temporal fiction is related to a kind of statuary figurative representation.

Often the only movement in these scenes arises from the word, which takes shape and becomes a physical element that also appears in the scene. Indeed, Oliveira views the word as sovereign, as emotion and movement (JOHNSON: 2003), as a *mise en scène* and image in itself.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from Oliveira, Pedro Costa is the filmmaker who has offered the most radical articulation of the poetics of the statuary body in the contemporary context. Before analysing the statue of the soldier that appears in *Sweet Exorcist* and *Cavalo Dinheiro*, we should consider the other body in the story: Ventura, the true paradigm of the static human figure. Ventura, like Vanda in *No Quarto da Vanda* (2000), is a character in suspension. His zombie, living-dead



Resistance in history: eyes that see. *Juventude em marcha* (Pedro Costa, 2006)

state is founded on a heavy, rigid and lugubrious mobility. His slow and laboured walking, his speaking in murmurs, and his vacant stare arise from the tension contained in the body of the character. The friction between mobility and immobility, which in Oliveira's films gives shape to the relationship between actors and space, is contained in Costa's work in the bodies of his characters. In his body Ventura brings together the tension between movement and interruption, between present and past. On the other hand, in Oliveira's work, as Mathias Lavin points out, this tension is translated into two central movements of the *mise en scène*: the frontal body, immobile, positioned in the middle of the shot, and a body in motion that moves around it while it flows from the word (LAVIN, 2008). Costa's characters exhibit limited mobility. Shut up indoors and in intimate spaces, sculpted between lights and shadows, only the word moves between them or in them. This *mise-en-scène* model culminates in *Sweet Exorcist* (and especially in *Cavalo Dinheiro*) with an extreme dissociation between voice and body. The voice is autonomous from the image. Ventura's and the soldier-statue's thoughts exist outside their bodies. A chasm is opened up between image and sound, producing an overwhelming dissociation



of rhythms. The two characters appear suspended in time, their gestures interrupted, but their voices take up the flow of memory. The spatial-temporal disorder, a hallmark of Costa's work, is exacerbated here as well. While Fontainhas was an isolated, disconnected space, a kind of interregnum, the lift in which Ventura appears in *Sweet Exorcist* is a temporal gap in which the past does not yet exist and is present at the same time. This strategy is taken to its extreme in *Cavalo Dinheiro*, a film that presents a labyrinth of times and spaces traced out in Ventura's sleepwalking mind. His memories and experiences give rise to a surprising journey, a perverse connection of heterogeneous spaces that unexpectedly connect passages, catacombs, hospitals and abandoned factories during Portugal's Carnation Revolution. The present, the colonial wars and the Carnation Revolution all occur simultaneously. We enter into a subjective mental state that recalls Dante's limbo in the *Divine Comedy*, a vast valley surrounded by a hazy darkness in which the only sound heard is the endless sound of lamentation.

The word is essential for the development of the narrative. The scenes take shape out of the characters' monologues: Vanda in his room, in *No quarto da Vanda*, talking about his family or the residents of Fontainhas; Ventura, sitting on a bench recalling his past as a construction worker, while at the same time evoking all the stories of the immigrants who arrived in Portugal in the 1970s, or reciting the letter he never sent to his wife. The characters explain their stories on the basis of their memories, their past. Costa moulds the shape of this verbal narrative, which the characters learn and verbalise somewhat mechanically. The director does not give instructions for the performance (the characters are playing themselves) but concentrates solely on the work with the text. Fiction and documentary are fused. The body language and verbal expression of the characters have points of contact with those of Bresson's models.

This configuration of the *mise en scène* around static figures with a statuary quality also appears in the work of other Portuguese filmmakers. For example, João César Monteiro also works with this type of figure in *Que farei eu com esta espada* (1975), a film whose central image is a young woman (Margarida Gil) dressed as a knight who, in an still pose, holds up a sword while looking out over the Atlantic in a kind of warning to any enemy approaching Lisbon from the sea: American NATO vessels which Monteiro, in a playful use of editing, associates with the ship transporting Nosferatu and all the evils that travel with him. In this case it is a figure faced with the abyss, the void, the immensity of the sea; a pseudo-statue associated with the ideas of rebellion and resistance, the fight against imperialism and oppression. It should not be forgotten that this is one of the films that reflects the climate and the hopes of revolution unleashed after April 1974. Once again, and in another context, the statuary figure facilitates an opening to the past, in which everything happens as a result of a gaze (the young woman's gaze out to sea). The past of imperial conquests is evoked and compared against the present of the people's revolution; different times are superimposed one on another, making a political statement that is ironic, playful and teasing. It is an image taken by the spectres of the past.

It is also interesting to note how Monteiro films his own body or the bodies of his *alter egos*: his filmography begins with an image of Luis Miguel Cintra sitting on a bench in Jardim do Principe Real, in *Quem espera por sapatos de defunto morre descalço* (1970), and ends with an analogous frame, filmed thirty years later, in which he plays João Vuvu in *Vai e vem* (2003). These two frontal bodies, which could be likened to static figures, are incapable of remaining impervious to the movement that surrounds them in the shot. The arc that takes us from one film to the other reveals how Monteiro subverts the statuary figure and turns it into raw material for slapstick humour

or into an image for worship. In this sense, on his body Monteiro re-reads the collective historical avatars of the contemporary figures of the vampire, the undead that comes to life, and of the burlesque comic, with its full weight of machinist automaton. The long still frame, the frontality, the spatio-temporal disconnections; all these elements reappear fixed on the body of the filmmaker in anticipation of the subversive moment that breaks with the ecstasy.

In another sense, the ceremonies of exaltation of female beauty that fill the films of the Portuguese director also construct a kind of statuary image. The code of the ritual related to the female body ranges from temporal sublimation to the sculptural isolation of the body and the separation of the sections of torso, face or hands in space or in time. The gaze of João de Deus, for example, in his rituals and libations with young girls, aims at making the image eternal, capturing the ethereal composition of the statue-image in a sacred space and a duration, beyond time itself.

The devices that we are analysing may often open up a third space, in depth, towards the constructive reverse side of the scene. Besides the purely temporal clash, there are films that highlight the place where the representation is prepared, the space outside the frame, for example when characters address the camera and reveal their dual condition as actors and characters. This is what happens in Rita Azevedo Gomes's *A vingança de uma mulher* (2012), whose story is articulated around three key premises: the coexistence of past and present in a single space, theatrical declamation as a core element of all the scenes, and the inclusion of the creation process itself in the film. The influence of Max Ophüls and of modern theatre can also be seen in the demiurge who marks out the story. In the first scene a character addresses the camera; shortly afterwards we discover that this is that type of demiurge, the film's narrator, who dresses the actors, introduces the scenes, fills in the temporal

gaps and integrates the filmic act itself and the theatrical representation as material for reflection in its narratives. The film is constructed around a resentful, rejected female body who as she narrates her story acquires movement through the word. In this case the *mise en scène* also takes shape through the bodily struggle in an enclosed space between two figures: Roberto (Fernando Rodrigues) and the Duchess (Rita Durão). The Duchess is presented as an effigy in the moments of greatest intensity in the story. Out of her blank stare, her face in close-up, arise the memories of her original trauma in the form of an obvious theatricalisation of the past. We see Rita Durão going over the script, as if she were studying her own character. Is Durão preparing her performance? Is the Duchess contemplating what she wants to explain to Fernando? The visibility of the *mise en scène* and its construction (like the back of the theatre set revealed at the beginning of *Benilde*) is material for the narrative. The fictional apparatus moves into the foreground.

The gazes into space also open up unexpected cracks. The last image of *Quem espera por sapatos de defunto morre descalço* is a long take in which Livio, played by Luis Miguel Cintra, also looks at the camera. Livio is a character in suspension, left by his beloved, incapable of regaining movement, whose gaze has no corresponding reverse shot. The image persists as a question mark, open, awaiting a new space that can bring it to life. This tradition reappears in the films of Miguel Gomes and João Nicolau, filmmakers following in the style of Monteiro. The statuary relationship appears in this case in a more playful manner. The constrained, deactivated character, trapped in a cycle of return of the same old experiences, scrutinises the horizon, the out-of-frame, in search of creative energies that could invent a new world. Hugo's initial yawn in *Canção de amor e saúde* turns into the snout of a lion-statue. They are faces with no reverse shot to give continuity. The absence that seeps through the gaps in the shot is the conspiracy, the incomprehensible,



[The statue through editing. *Gébo et l'ombre* (Manoel de Oliveira, 2012)]

the secret, the stranger that intrudes in the present of the characters like an element of rupture or a background noise. The theatrical turns into the musical. Ultimately, everything revolves around an escape, the characters' desire for fiction, perceptible in Ventura's stories in *Tabú* (Miguel Gomes, 2012), in Francisco's confinement in a children's story in *A cara que mereces* (Miguel Gomes, 2004) or in Hugo's seafaring adventure in *A espada e a Rosa* (João Nicolau, 2010). Before his eyes a world of fiction opens up and anything is possible. And it is thanks to the cinema, the theatre, the editing, the performance. This is why Francisco takes part in a school play in Gomes's first film, or why the character of Rosa, in *A espada e Rosa*, is performed by three different actors, while Melo, in the same film, performs a play on the boat in which he plays every role. As Jacques Lemièrre explains, in Portuguese cinema reality appears filtered through the theatre. Reality is explored from the perspective of fiction, working on the basis of a poetics of distortion.

## FROM THE STATUARY BODY TO THE STATUARY IMAGE

Finally, we come to the third category: the statuary image. This category occurs through the interruption of the movement of the image; it

is a statuary condition articulated in the editing process. The characteristics we have examined in relation to the other statues are also present here; the shot lingers on a frontally positioned body looking into the camera. Raymond Bellour writes that when the camera stops over an image, it generates a vanishing point that indicates an abstract time; an image that brings together various moments in time (BELLOUR, 2002).

Once again, Oliveira appears as the leading filmmaker in the formulation of this technique. At the end of *Gebo et l'ombre* (2012), when the character played by Michael Lonsdale decides to take the blame for a crime he didn't commit, he stands up before the authorities and his expression is frozen. The image stops. This ending connects with the final scene in *A Talking Picture*, in which the contorted face of the ship captain stares helplessly at the disaster befalling the ship, and with the ending to *Vai e vem*, where Monteiro's eye appeals to the spectator from a kind of great beyond. Once again, we are confronted with images lacking a contemporaneous reverse shot, invoking death and resonating with echoes of the past. The ethical decision of the protagonist in *Gebo et l'ombre* vibrates with the interruption introduced by the editing. Raul Brandão's play ends inconclusively and *Gebo's* final act is left unresolved.

Hence the importance of what could be referred to as statuary scenes, where immobility affects all the characters in the shot. This occurs at several moments in Oliveira's *Amor de perdição* (1979) and *Francisca* (1981) (in both cases this kind of temporal suspension is related to an exploration of the limits of sound and image), and in the scene, bathed in pink lighting, of the hunt for the mythical *gambusinos* in the moonlight in João Pedro Rodrigues's *To Die Like a Man* (Morrer como um homem, 2009). In this way we might explain the predominance of long sequence shots as single-shot scenes in certain Portuguese films.

We may thus conclude that the statuary condition appears as a transversally deployed

figurative representation in different poetics of contemporary Portuguese cinema which share a particular mode of relating to history, a treatment of the shot as a sculptural block (of time and space) and an acting style in which the body is also a stone block, a material presence and medium for the word that passes through it, with its rhythms and music evoking and invoking past or latent ghosts. In this equation, the theatre, the visible mechanism of representation, is the preferred mode of access to the veiled reality. Fiction reveals that reality and the statue is the image that resists, or, rather, insists.

In this sense, we could map an archaeology of the modern (and genuinely revolutionary) particularity of Portuguese cinema at a key moment in its history. This archaeology reveals an original moment in film which, moving beyond Cinema Novo, opens the history of this film tradition to modernity: *Acto de Primavera* (Manoel de Oliveira, 1963). The weight of reality examined through the exploration of the theatrical act, the ethnographic quality as presence of the body of the people, the clash of temporal layers, the predominance of motionless figures, the recitation and the word already brilliantly combined in this foundational film, which presents a theatrical depiction of the mystery of the Passion in a town in the province of Tras-Os-Montes, and in so doing, identifies cinema as mystery. The anthropological memory explored in this film operates as a return of ancestral expressions and a revival of old words deposited in rough, expressionless faces with fixed gazes and a temporalised presence. In Oliveira's work, the statue is a repository of time, a monumentalised being, a record that the cinema sets in a dialectic with the flow of time, of the film, and the animation of the cinematic image. The degree to which this is linked to a particular way of understanding Portuguese cinema and what it records of Portugal as a theme can be explored through the ethnographic documentaries of Antonio Campos and their reuse as an image

of the past in *Redemption* (Miguel Gomes, 2013), through the anthropological films of Antonio Reis and their urban re-reading in Pedro Costa's work, and finally, through Oliveira himself, whose films are founded (for example, in *The Strange Case of Angélica*), on the need to contrast photographic images and stills of the monumental mythological bodies of the harvesters with the images taken of the motionless body of the dead woman so that in the editing, in the gap, between still bodies and reviving words, we may glimpse the ghost, the cinematic image that transcends death and disappearance.

The specifically cinematic quality of the statue as a potential figure and secret code of a film tradition that explores temporal interruption and the place of suspension is thus revealed as another of the particular recurring mechanisms that determine the shared singularities of contemporary Portuguese cinema. ■

## NOTES

- \* The images illustrating this article have been contributed voluntarily by the authors of the text, who were liable for locating and requesting the proprietary rights of reproduction. In any event, the inclusion of images in the texts of *L'Atalante* is always done by way of citation, for their analysis, commentary and critical assessment. (Editor's note).
- 1 Mathias Lavin views the statues in Manoel de Oliveira's films as a key element in the relationship between body and space; in short, in the conception of the *mise en scène*: "[...] la statuaire ne se justifie pas comme un simple motif mais, de façon plus essentielle, comme un élément stratégique dans une élaboration figurative qui conduit à approfondir l'analyse de la relation entre la figuration du corps et le traitement de l'espace" (LAVIN, 2008: 128).
- 2 "Manoel de Oliveira just reminded me the other day—when he saw this film—about *his* statue in the film, the statue of our first king, and he said 'it's good to have statues in my film and your film because it's the only way to talk properly in film about the human

condition.' Very enigmatic, but I'm just saying what he told me." In: COSTA, Pedro. Q&A. *The Tokyo Film Exposition*. Retrieved from <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvIDvoo4sXw>> [02/03/2015]

- 3 In *A Talking Picture*, history reduced to clichés and frozen in the tourist image could only be redirected by the depth of the memory and the movement of the word. It is in this sense that we may interpret, at the beginning of *O conquistador conquistado*, the interesting friction between the initial lateral tracking shot and the shot of the face of the tourist observing the parade of images, all over the voice of the guide. These are followed by powerful shots of the centre of Guimarães that explore the presence of a past ignored by the tourist's camera, which passes over, stops, and sees nothing. Between the stone and the petrified image one can only shrug one's shoulders. The opening of *A Talking Picture* posits the same horizontal movement of the cruise that leaves Lisbon from the original point of the departure of the Portuguese explorers. The route taken can be read as a reverse shot of the frontal gaze of the historian, Rosa Maria, who articulates a spoken narrative that transforms the clichéd superficiality of the monument (el Padrão dos Descobrimentos) into the depth of the reviving evocation that confuses real, imaginary and mythical history (mist over Belem Tower). This is a clear exercise in counterpoint using similar mechanisms of *mise en scène*.
- 4 It is worth noting, in this context of statues and the importance of the clash between movement and interruption, that the subtitle of this play is *Drama estático em um quadro*.
- 5 See the concept of the reverse shot with death ("contraplano con la muerte") in SALVADÓ, 2012.
- 6 See: De Baecque & Parsi, 1996: 80.

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## THE STATUARY CONDITION IN CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE CINEMA

### Abstract

This article explores the importance of the statue as a key figure in certain poetics of contemporary Portuguese cinema. The statuesque component is deployed from the way of filming bodies and from the interpretive register. It's studied in different modalities of appearance according to categories that we propose: the monument, human statue and picture-statue. This statuesque phenomenology of Portuguese cinema articulates key concepts in the definition of Portuguese film poetics: the anti-naturalism, theatricality, historical archeology and long takes.

### Key words

Cinema; Portugal; Statue; Body; Word; theatricality; History.

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## LA CONDICIÓN ESTATUARIA EN EL CINE PORTUGUÉS CONTEMPORÁNEO

### Resumen

El presente artículo explora la importancia de la estatua como figura determinante de ciertas poéticas del cine portugués contemporáneo. El componente estatuario se despliega a partir del modo de filmar los cuerpos y del registro interpretativo, y se estudia en diferentes modalidades de aparición según categorías que proponemos: el monumento, la estatua humana y la imagen-estatua. Esta fenomenología estatuaría del cine portugués se articula a partir de conceptos clave en la definición de la poética fílmica lusa: el antinaturalismo, la teatralidad, la arqueología histórica y el plano durativo.

### Palabras clave

Cine; Portugal; estatua; cuerpo; palabra; teatralidad; Historia.

### Autor

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# ANDRÉ BAZIN ON MARS: THE EXASPERATION OF ONTOLOGICAL REALISM AS A CRITICAL PARADIGM IN THE MAGAZINE *FILM IDEAL* AND THE FILMS OF PEDRO LAZAGA

JORGE NIETO

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN BOYD

In issue 77-78 of the magazine *Nuestro Cine*, published in late 1968, Vicente Molina Foix (40) described the work of Spanish filmmaker Pedro Lazaga as “a mirage occurring during a brief space of time among a small group of specialist critics (in which I participated, perhaps as one of the most active exponents) who thought they saw in Lazaga the potential revival of a genre [comedy] so habitually abused in Spanish cinema.” The critic was referring here to the attention Lazaga’s films had received in the magazine *Film Ideal* during the 1960s, especially those produced at such a prolific rate since the 1950s, specifically since *Roberto el diablo* (1956).

In the recognition of Lazaga’s work in the pages of *Film Ideal*, two significant elements can be identified. The first is an effort to develop and apply, in an original and unique way, the theories of André Bazin to the practice of film criticism, after the realism associated with neorealism as a critical paradigm (evident in *Objetivo*, in the ear-

ly issues of *Film Ideal* and in *Cinema Universitario*) had given way critical realism (in the final issues of *Cinema Universitario*, in the cultural publication *Acento Cultural* and in *Nuestro Cine*). Founded in 1956, in its early days *Film Ideal* combined a particular conception of neorealism with the Catholic perspectives of the time on cinema, giving rise to what came to be known as “*neoidealismo*”. The magazine would move away from these ideas in the early 1960s to adopt the “*auteur/mise en scène*” paradigm developed by *Cahiers du cinéma*. Bazin was one of the founders of this French publication and, furthermore, a Catholic, making it possible to establish a conceptual connection with the early days of *Film Ideal*.

Secondly, Lazaga constituted a somewhat provocative answer to the quest for a point of reference in Spanish cinema that was not part of the “new cinema” acclaimed by the editors of *Nuestro Cine* and promoted by Spain’s Office of Cinematography and Theatre in the mid-1960s. *Nues-*

tro Cine was established in 1961, continuing the trajectory of the aforementioned magazine *Objetivo*, *Cinema Universitario* and *Acento Cultural*. In its critical perspective it positioned itself close to publications like *Cinema Nuovo* or *Positif*. Along with the rise of the New Spanish Cinema, another of the key themes of the early 1960s was the definition of realism (MONTERDE, 2003). The realism of *Nuestro Cine* was founded on the idea that the cinema offered a way of examining reality, its social structures, and what lies behind external appearances. The underlying theoretical basis was Marxist literary theory and criticism, specifically the ideas of Georg Lukács as interpreted by the Italian film critic Guido Aristarco.

The group of film critics writing for *Film Ideal* known as the *marcianos* (“Martians”)—Ricardo Buceta, José María Palá and Marcelino Villegas, along with contributions by certain “travel companions” like Pere Gimferrer, José Luis Guarner, Vicente Molina Foix or Javier Sagastizábal—also advocated realism at this time, but their conception of it was very different. This conception was based on the notions about the nature of cinema offered by André Bazin, taken to an extreme to turn them into what Miguel Rubio (TUBAU, 1983: 177-178) describes as “probably the most nihilistic art theory of all: that to be a good film director one had to be a bad film director [...], because a good director has certain intentions while a bad one does not. This group developed a kind of *super-Bazinism*, for want of a better name, with the elaboration of the theory of impure art, of the involuntary documentary: this takes Bazin’s theory of ontological realism to its logical extreme.”

This critical approach needs to be understood in the context of *Film Ideal*’s confrontation with *Nuestro Cine*. Indeed, it could be considered the climax of a rivalry that gave rise to one of the most unique and fruitful periods in Spanish film criticism. But in addition, as José Luis Guarner suggests, the proposition of the Martians, “who were purists [...], unwittingly imposed a structur-

alist restriction: we don’t believe in content, we don’t believe in anything; we only believe in the reality of the still frame. Without realising it, they brought one of the hobbyhorses of modern criticism into the arena, but on a level that allowed for considerable confusion” (TUBAU, 1983: 161).

## THE MARTIAN BAZIN

As is well known, many of Bazin’s notions are based on his view of realism as intrinsic to photography due to its “technical objectivity”: “Originality in photography as distinct from originally in painting lies in the essential objective character of photography. [...] For the first time, an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. The personality of the photographer enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed” (1967: 13).

The cinema, by adding motion to the photograph, is “objectivity in time” (1967: 14). For Bazin the cinema also constitutes a key piece of the history of representation in the arts, characterised in his opinion by an increasing tendency towards convergence with reality. This trajectory brings together technique and expression: synchronised sound, the development of new cinematographic processes, the introduction of colour and of wide-screen formats have been accompanied by a series of expressive techniques that respect the pro-filmic space, tending to reinforce the ontological connection between image and reality.

The French critic is decisively supportive of such techniques, as becomes evident in his reflections on montage. Bazin prefers filmmakers who entrust the film’s meaning to the image connected to reality over those who seek to manipulate that image in the *mise en scène*, like the Expressionists do, or in its juxtaposition through montage. While the latter abandon the objectivity of the image or situate the meaning outside it, in the connection between the shots the former main-



tain the spatio-temporal continuity of the action presented. Bazin argues that montage contradicts the ontological principle of the image, falsifying reality, and thus he even rules it out altogether in certain circumstances: “‘When the essence of a scene demands the simultaneous presence of two or more factors in the action, montage is ruled out.’ It can reclaim its right to be used, however, whenever the import of the action no longer depends on physical contiguity, even though this may be implied.” (1967: 50). While *formativist* filmmakers begin with preconceptions that definitively mark the significance of the image, pushing it in a single direction (hence the manipulation or use of montage), realists are defined by their use of techniques like the sequence shot or depth of field (1990c) which allow the entry into the image of ambiguity, a quality they associate with reality.<sup>1</sup>

In the value that Bazin places on the absence of preconceptions we can glean a critical approach that influenced *Film Ideal*. Non-intervention in the process of creation of the film image means the absence of subjective mediation, other than the choice of frame; the absence of a filter of *prejudices* between reality, its representation and, ultimately, the viewer. Considering this from the perspective of reception, techniques that influence the connection between image and reality, and that do not contradict the nature of cinema—like the sequence shot, depth of field or controlled use of montage—allow the spectator a greater degree of freedom in constructing meaning insofar as that meaning, in principle, is only partly determined beforehand. In the context of film criticism, the situation desired by the editors of *Film Ideal* is the unarmed confrontation of the critic with the film, also without prejudices, *with freedom*, without dissecting it analytically or subjecting it to a sociological gaze.

One of the accusations made of the *Nuestro Cine* critics was that they watched a film with preconceived ideas, and that these entailed the application of *deductive criticism* rather than the pref-

erable use of *inductive criticism*. The development of Bazin’s thought in the pages of *Film Ideal* would result in the positive appraisal of films that met the standards of cinema as defined and defended by the French critic. Thus, while it true that watching a film—from the perspective of creation or reception—without prejudices is a concept that could be attributed to Bazin, it is also true that the development and exasperation of his ideas would turn into a critical paradigm for judging films, and would thus in a sense entail a return to deductive criticism, to the preconceived notions that were so reviled.

In any case, such contradictions were of little importance when Bazin’s theories began to be developed in *Film Ideal*. In *Un arte vivo*, Javier Sagastizabal (1963a) directly links modernity in cinema to the aforementioned long takes that capture the spatio-temporal continuity of the action. According to Sagastizabal such shots result in a more fluid narration and an increase in the activity required of the spectator, since the meaning is no longer completely spelt out. This critic also points out two other aspects of modern cinema: the predominance of the character in the story, expressed through the *mise en scène*—notable among the examples he includes is *Hatari* (Howard Hawks, 1962), a key film in the magazine’s critical canon in those years—to the point that its dramatic progression loses importance, or the new appreciation for what he calls “*tiempos muertos*” (“dead times”): “it is only the dead times which, more than the external twists and turns of the story, reflect the true measure of the value of numerous modern films” (SAGASTIZABAL, 1963a: 134). By “dead times” Sagastizabal means scenes or shots that interrupt the story to linger on the characters, providing the spectator with information on their feelings, motivations or desires, although it is also true that shots that respect the continuity of the action, that do not break up the scenes with elliptical pauses, can fulfil a similar function. The predominance of the

character does not mean that the film explores the character's psychology. Indeed, Sagastizabal later differentiates between what he calls character films and actor films: while the former are moulded to the needs of psychological analysis of the character, directors who pursue the latter become dependent on the actors "to the point that they completely take over (Renoir, Cukor, Logan, Becker, etc.) [...]. Thus, while in 'character films' the actors are required to engage in 'psychology', in 'actor films' it is enough for them simply to be men" (SAGASTIZABAL, 1963b: 467). Actor films are less prone to prejudices, to a predetermined establishment of meaning, than character films.

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### IN THE VALUE THAT BAZIN PLACES ON THE ABSENCE OF PRECONCEPTIONS WE CAN GLEAN A CRITICAL APPROACH THAT INFLUENCED FILM IDEAL

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Sagastizabal claims that modern cinema gives preference to "the subtle discovery of a creative mind [...] over the most emphatic rhetorical discourse, the most pretentious psychological treatise and the most pompous philosophical thesis" (1963a: 135).<sup>2</sup> His claims could still be situated within the boundaries of *Bazinian* orthodoxy. Overstepping those boundaries, however, was the development of the Martian revolution, which in its more exalted moments would assert that the artistic development of cinema contradicts its ontology. This is what Buceta claims in *Reflexiones para mejor entender* (1964b); for the auteur, "the cinema only attains the category of art when it ceases to be what it is by nature: a mechanical reproduction of reality" (1964b: 197). Moreover, the cinema "only succeeded in being admitted as such [art] when it turned into a language" (1964b: 197), and this art form, as it pursues an objective of communication, is founded

on conventions that limit its meaning and come into conflict with the alleged ambiguity of the realist image. However, the history of cinema—the history of cinema as technique—has evolved in an inverse direction to the history of cinema as art, because the ever greater perfection of the image has "enhanced its inherent realism and hindered the manipulations to deontologize it" (1964b: 197). This explains the opposition of numerous auteurs to technical changes. Buceta asks the question: "Is a certain weight of conventionalism inherent to cinema? My opinion would be no, provided that we don't expect cinema to be what it cannot be" (1964b: 197). Indeed, according to Buceta there are films that escape convention: *Something to Live For* (George Stevens, 1952), *La venganza de los Villalobos* (Fernando Méndez, 1955), *L'ultima violenza* (Raffaello Matarazzo and Silvio Amadio, 1957), *Man in the Shadow* (Jack Arnold, 1957), *The Giants of Thessaly* (I giganti della Tessaglia. Gli argonauti, Riccardo Freda, 1960), *Goliath against the Giants* (Goliath contro i giganti, Guido Malatesta, 1961) or, obviously, *Trampa para Catalina* (Pedro Lazaga, 1961) and *Siete espartanos* (Pedro Lazaga, 1962). Buceta claims that all these films "are prophesies of what cinema will be once it frees itself from the conventionalisms [...] that choke the medium today" (1964b: 196).

*Reflexiones para mejor entender* is the culmination of an iconoclastic approach that began with the first reviews of the Martians. Obviously, the references that support their assertions stand out, especially when *Film Ideal* was still immersed in the wake of the auteur paradigm. In his review of *The Sins of Rachel Cade* (Gordon Douglas, 1961), Palá (1963a: 616) was already describing the auteur as a relic "of a way of understanding art that to me reeks terribly of the academic and of art collector's snobbery." Beyond the provocation, and the repetitions of the extremist version of the ideas of Bazin (2003), who had denounced their more outrageous expressions, describing them as an "aesthetic cult of personality", the Martian

reappraisal of the auteur paradigm is founded on a change in the conception of the *mise en scène*. The auteur apologists understood this to refer to a series of choices made by directors associated with the way in which the film takes shape—the choice of points of view, shots and their duration, the performances of the actors, etc.—in close relation with their particular personal worlds and preferred themes. The notion of the *mise en scène* underscores the indissoluble coherence between content and form, in its condition as an essential route of access to the auteur’s “vision of the world”, that which gives his work its unity—referring both to the individual film and to his films as a whole—and which makes it possible to differentiate true auteurs from mere artisans. For the Martians, however, the *mise en scène* is above all the point of access to the ambiguity of reality. This obviously also entails a change to the criteria for evaluation, and many of the films they considered important were not included in the magazine’s film canon. It is true that the Martians also dealt with recognised directors—Richard Fleischer, for example—but, as made clear in Buceta’s article cited above, much of the future of the cinema would depend on filmmakers and films outside not only of the canon of that time but also of the canon that the history of criticism has been building up to our times.

In the films reviewed by the Martians, special value is given to those scenes, and even shots, that are free of symbolism, where there is no manipulation of the image, the action is shown in continuity with no tricks or fragmentation, and where cinematic language, according to their claims, gives way to reality, regardless of the intention or skill of the film’s director. It was common for some scenes to be rejected and others accepted in the same film: this is the case of *The Pigeon That Took Rome* (Melville Shavelson, 1962) (BUCETA, 1964a: 96); and even for the ones accepted to be the result of restrictions or the industry or of the director’s lack of expertise: the scenes starring Richard Bur-

ton and Elizabeth Taylor in *The V.I.P.s* (Anthony Asquith, 1963), due to an “incidental obligation of the star system, possess longer shots” (PALÁ, 1963b: 628), and the film, “thanks to its blatant adoption of star system principles, [is] an example of spontaneous and natural cinema similar to *The Son of the Sheik* in Italy or *La venganza de los Villalobos* (Fernando Méndez) in Mexico” (1963b: 629); in *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* (Andrew V. McLaglen, 1961), on the other hand, “what could be considered the product of a clumsy directing method is an orchestrated rebellion of life and of the person-actor against schemes and characters” (PALÁ, 1964: 95), and this gives the film’s direction a quality that is “primitive” and free of prejudices. Moreover, reality must also be visible in the shots and in their articulation in the scenes and sequences that comprise the narrative. This is what Villegas stresses in his review of *He Can’t Stop Doing It* (Er kann’s nicht lassen, Axel von Ambesser, 1962). For the reviewer (1964a: 100), the film is planned out in such a way that it has to be accepted “as a reality. [...] At no moment is there proper narration, nobody recounts anything [...]. Any notion of exposition, climax, denouement, emotion, suspense, ending, etc., is abandoned, and the film joins the ranks of all great movies by becoming a series of moving pictures of a few people and a few places.”

The reaction in the magazine itself to the direction that Bazin’s ideas were being pushed in by the Martians did not take long to appear. This reaction was based on a return to the auteur, to *Bazinian* orthodoxy and to a freer critical approach, but not so much in the sense of simple appreciation without preconceptions—the Martians themselves had demonstrated that this would be impossible—but with the capacity to apply different critical hypotheses in accordance with the specific needs of each film. Sagastizabal warned of the consequences of adopting exclusionary aesthetic postulates: “In other words, if films with montage, literary or pictorial elements are inappropriate,

none of those jewels of cinema like *La huelga*, *En el umbral de la vida* or *Le carrosse d'or* could be evaluated on fair terms" (1966: 119). The critic thus advocated an end to banner waving, and a rejection of critical approaches that lead to phobias and phobias.

Ramón G. Redondo repeated the call to return to the auteur. He agrees that reality is present in the films cited by Buceta in *Reflexiones para mejor entender*, "but reality in the sense that would be understood by the pre-Socratic materialists; in other words, reality as matter and as matter in its most immediate sense" (1964: 257), and he compares them with the work of Richard Fleischer, another filmmaker popular with the Martians. In Fleischer's films,

the aim of the director was to insert [reality] inside a coherent story and through a personal and specific *mise en scène* that would enable him to offer his vision of the world: Fleischer is an auteur. Dealing with an auteur, we must speak of a particular style in his *mise en scène*. And where there is a style, there is a language. Of course, none of this happens, or it happens to a lesser degree, in the other films cited. And—an inevitable paradox—the presence of reality, without subjective intervention in it, contributes an air of farce to all those narrated stories due to the absence of a creator [...] who could build a climate and an amenable gateway of understanding between his world and ours. (1964: 257-258)

The return of the auteur was accompanied by the inescapable view that cinema "is a narrative medium that makes use of an expressive language based on images and sounds" (MARTÍNEZ LEÓN, 1965: 293). The film production process entails preconceptions, choices based on prior notions, and "the fact that we may prefer [...] a film by Raoul Walsh or another by Louis Malle, cannot be based on the fact that the first presents us directly with reality and the other with language, but rather, ultimately, that Walsh makes use of language in such a way that he conveys to us a truthful appearance of reality, while Malle does so in a more obscure

way and his vision of reality thus seems more distorted" (MARTÍNEZ LEÓN, 1965: 293).

## THE BAZINIAN LAZAGA

In Lazaga's films, what attracts the most interest is his *mise en scène*. But it could be argued that many of the particular features that define it, and which so delight the radical *Bazinians*, were developed before *Roberto el diablo*. In *Cuerda de presos* (1956), for example, the scene of Camino and Silvestre's farewell is presented in a single shot presenting the whole scene. Depth of field is used in many shots in *La vida es maravillosa* (1955), and the film even makes unequivocal use of certain "dead times" as defined by Sagastizabal in *Un arte vivo* (1963a). These resources are present, but they are applied to a film with a clear and *important* theme, which could be summed up as the triumph of an Arcadian innocence over the complexity (and with it the wickedness) of the ways of the modern world.

What is valued most in Lazaga's work, however, is that such techniques are not placed at the service of transcendent themes or, as in *La vida es maravillosa*, artistic compositions. The review of *Trampa para Catalina* by José Luis Guarner marks the turning point in the appreciation of the filmmaker's work. Guarner highlights that the director manages to "see and show characters and situations as directly and spontaneously as possible" (1964: 206), and offers as an example the scene in which Catalina (Concha Velasco) performs a cha-cha-cha with a geography lesson over "Paramaná": "It is not merely a lucky application of an idea of comedy, or an idea of a musical. It is the perfect observation of a character at a revealing moment for her character, respecting her ontological, spatial and temporal reality. In short, an idea of documentary in its broadest sense" (1964: 206).

Also evaluated positively is the fact that the characters in his films really *are*, rather than merely *pretending to be*—another means of ac-

cess to reality. This is suggested by Sagastizabal in his review of *Fin de semana* (1963), in which the characters are outlined in broad strokes in a story bereft of artifice. This last aspect, which might be rejected by critics of content, nevertheless means that the attention is focused on a *mise en scène* in which the actors act freely and to which it is not possible to apply any subsequent “tricks”. Lazaga’s filmmaking is created and composed in the shot: “If Lazaga’s films should be considered modern it is only because of the ‘revealing’ dimension arising from a *mise en scène* that aims to go beyond the merely external appearances of the script” (SAGASTIZABAL, 1965: 66). Moreover, Lazaga’s importance lies

in taking some actors and allowing them to act completely free and unrestrained in front of the camera, yet not uncontrolled in the style of the “amateurists” who make up the new generation of Spanish cinema (Summers, Regueiro, etc.). Contrary to filmmakers like these, Lazaga does not film “wildly”, knowing that later on he can add in sound effects (songs, etc.) or editing tricks to patch up imperfections in the shoot. [...] He values a gesture in all its authentic truth over the artifice of any technical laboratory trick. And this is the CinemaScope format works so well for his films. (SAGASTIZABAL, 1965: 66).

The limited application of montage and the use of widescreen formats effectively place Lazaga on the path of convergence between cinema and reality. Sagastizabal finds the unity of action, time and space in some of the scenes portrayed by Ángela (Elvira Quintillá), specifically in the scene related to the character’s solitude: “one of the few glorious moments of Spanish cinema” (1965: 66). A similar reaction is offered by Marcelino Villagas in his review of *Siete espartanos*. The reviewer cites the long take of the flight of the Spartans at the beginning of the film—“there are no insertions or camera tricks to provide emotion, suspense, etc. The changes of shot occur only when there is a change to the situation” (1964b: 281)—to char-

acterise it as the work of a primitive filmmaker who displays a desire to escape the conventional language of the cinema, even if he doesn’t always succeed in doing so.

But the film that best embodies the Martians’ way of understanding cinema is *Dos chicas locas, locas* (1964). Indeed, as Vicente Molina Foix suggests, Buceta and his companions had up to that time found films that only partly illustrated the principles contained in *Reflexiones para mejor entender*: “Now, with *Dos chicas* we have one of the

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**THE REFLECTIONS AND CRITICISM OF THE MARTIANS IN THE PAGES OF FILM IDEAL CONSTITUTED A NEW, ALBEIT EPHEMERAL, CRITICAL PARADIGM THAT WOULD COEXIST WITH (WITHOUT MANAGING TO REPLACE) THE PARADIGM BASED ON THE AUTEUR AND THE MISE EN SCÈNE**

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best examples of a certain way of making films, generally absent from movie screens, and which of course contains in its perfection the seeds of years and years of filmmaking and of the miraculous results of a director’s connection with some established forms of production.” (1965: 374).

The film displays “a wild freedom on every level” (1965: 374); it is a *chronicle*, not a *story*, of events: “a simple succession of events on a primitive physical, dynamic level, pure phenomenology of the event and of the act, a slice of life in motion” (1965: 374). To this we should add the absence of prior planning in the performance of the actors, of any preconception about the acting, or of any technique that would give us access to the character’s psychology. In this film, the reviewer continues, these characteristics of modern cinema become even more recognisable than they are in certain examples of new cinema: in *The Fire Within* (*Le feu follet*, 1963), for example, Louis Malle distorts the character por-

trayed by Maurice Ronet because “everything in it is conceived on the basis of attitudes imposed beforehand; a theory of the character is applied to the actor”; in *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, 1960) Jean-Luc Godard makes use of certain shots intended to reveal the psychology of the character portrayed by Jean Seberg (1965: 374).

The recognition of Lazaga’s films also represents a provocative commitment to popular cinema: “The real *raison d’être* of these films [...] can be found watching *Martes y trece*, *Los tramosos*, *Dos chicas locas, locas*, *Luna de verano*, *Sabían demasiado*, etc., on a Sunday afternoon, in a local movie theatre” (PALÁ, 1965: 363). The director, furthermore, was able to make the most of the conditions in which he made his films. The commercial turn that his career had taken permitted him a greater freedom of experimentation in terms of the *mise en scène*, with some mistakes but also with some very notable successes (SAGASTIZABAL, 1965). In short, as Guarner pointed out, “Lazaga has become a director who knows how to make films, who makes a lot of films [...] of which some are good and others are not, as is true of everyone. Lazaga’s advantage, in my opinion, is that he shoots seven films every two years, of which two prove good; his balance sheet is thus always better than that of others who in the same time make only one film, and a bad one.” (1964: 206).

## CONCLUSIONS: THE MARTIAN CRITICAL PARADIGM

In light of the foregoing analysis, the reflections and criticism of the Martians in the pages of *Film Ideal* constituted a new, albeit ephemeral, critical paradigm that would coexist with (without managing to replace) the paradigm based on the auteur and the *mise en scène*. The Martian paradigm is founded on the following five points:

1. Moving beyond the *mise en scène* understood as the manifestation of an “auteur’s vision of the world” that fuses content and expression.

The *mise en scène* is now assessed for its capacity to maintain the ontological connection between image and ambiguous reality. This results in a positive appraisal of films that go beyond the limits of the idealist-film canon, which is still restricted to the so-called “auteurs”.

2. Reality can be present in the shot, the scene and the film as a whole. Along with techniques that allow the representation of the action in its spatio-temporal continuity, as Bazin proposes, the Martians positively appraise freedom in the performance of the actors and the predominance of the character in the story to the point of diluting the latter. They also prefer a simple succession of events to a story, understood as the result of the placement of those events in a series through causal, spatial and temporal relations in a dramatic progression towards their resolution.

3. The film is valued as a *product*, not for the process that led to that product. Indeed (and this is sometimes recognised by the critics), the reality present in many of the titles they review could be attributed to a lack of direction of actors, restrictions of the industry or the lack of expertise of the filmmaker in the use of narrative and expressive techniques. None of this is relevant; only the film as a product matters.

4. A realistic product is the consequence of a type of cinema made without prejudices, which is invented with each film; hence the primitive quality associated with these directors. Bazin stressed that certain cinematographic techniques reflected the existence of preconceptions that sought to impose meaning on the image. The Martians radicalised this idea by suggesting that modernity and the future of cinema could be found in films where conventions are reduced to their minimum expression; in fact, they even claimed that the filmic language based on these conventions contradicts the nature of cinema itself.

5. Last of all, prior judgements should also be abandoned in the practice of criticism. While this proposition would naturally lead to reviewing films

outside the magazine's canon, it is undeniable that the conversion of the Martians' extremist versions of *Bazinian* theories into a paradigm represented a return to the imposition of prior judgements.

Buceta, Palá, Villegas and their travel companions found in Pedro Lazaga's films the expression of many of their critical theories, particularly in the film *Dos chicas locas, locas*. The recognition of the Catalan director also represented the proposal taken from popular cinema of an alternative to the New Spanish Cinema acclaimed by *Nuestro Cine*. Lazaga's films are realistic, not because they attempt to describe everyday life or to transcend it by revealing what lay behind external appearances (as argued by Spanish critics since the mid-1950s), but because he understood cinema "as a mechanism for recording and successive reproduction (in other words, as a pioneer would see it)" (PALÁ, 1965: 263); they are thus realistic in the most *Bazinian* sense of the word, and this came to be considered a modern quality that was quite unheard of in the cinema of the time. ■

## NOTES

- 1 For more details of Bazin's ideas, only very roughly outlined here, see also ANDREW (1978: 169-216 o 2010), as well as his own writings (1967, 1990, 1999 and 2002).
- 2 The reference here to the films acclaimed by *Nuestro Cine* is explicit. This magazine did not hesitate to respond to frequent provocations in an attempt to undermine the ideas on which they were founded with the publication of the series by Gérard Gozlan. *Las delicias de la ambigüedad. Análisis del sistema crítico de André Bazin* (1964), which originally appeared in issues 45 and 46 (1962) of the magazine *Positif*.

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## **ANDRÉ BAZIN ON MARS: THE EXASPERATION OF ONTOLOGICAL REALISM AS A CRITICAL PARADIGM IN THE MAGAZINE *FILM IDEAL* AND THE FILMS OF PEDRO LAZAGA**

### **Abstract**

The 1960s could be considered one of the more fruitful periods of Spanish film criticism, due mainly to the rivalry between the magazines *Film Ideal* and *Nuestro Cine*, each of which posited very different views on the nature and role of cinema. The aim of this article is to explore one of the key points of this rivalry: French critic André Bazin's conception of realism as developed in the mid-1960s by the Spanish critics referred to as the "marcianos" ("Martians")—particularly Marcelino Villegas, José María Palá and Ricardo Buceta—in the magazine *Film Ideal*, turning it into a critical paradigm that would lead to a reappraisal of films left out of the canon of the day, and even out of the annals of film history in subsequent years. Notable among these is the work of director Pedro Lazaga.

### **Key words**

Theory and Film Criticism; Realism; André Bazin; *Film Ideal*; Pedro Lazaga.

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## **ANDRÉ BAZIN EN MARTE. LA EXASPERACIÓN DEL REALISMO ONTOLÓGICO COMO PARADIGMA CRÍTICO EN LA REVISTA *FILM IDEAL* Y EL CINE DE PEDRO LAZAGA**

### **Resumen**

Los años sesenta pueden considerarse uno de los momentos más fructíferos de la crítica cinematográfica española, debido sobre todo a la rivalidad entre las revistas *Film Ideal* y *Nuestro Cine*, cada una con planteamientos muy distintos sobre la naturaleza y la función del cine. Este artículo pretende aproximarse a uno de los puntos más destacados de esta rivalidad: la deriva que a mediados de la década toma el realismo tal como lo define el crítico francés André Bazin en manos de los críticos denominados "marcianos"—sobre todo Marcelino Villegas, José María Palá y Ricardo Buceta— desde la revista *Film Ideal* hasta constituir un paradigma crítico que conducirá a revalorizar películas alejadas del canon del momento, incluso del historiográfico tiempo posterior. Entre estas destacan las del director Pedro Lazaga.

### **Palabras clave**

Teoría y crítica del cine; realismo; André Bazin; *Film Ideal*; Pedro Lazaga.

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# MAPPING WINGS OF DESIRE: BERLIN AND THE CITY OF FORGOTTEN PLACES

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JAVIER BONED PURKISS

ALBERTO E. GARCÍA-MORENO

TRANSLATED BY MARTIN BOYD

## I. THE FORGOTTEN PLACES, THE STARTING POINT FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT

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Observing and watching are essential activities for an architect. Sometimes the act of seeing can become a mechanism that gives rise to a thought and launches a project. This is why it is so important to recognize certain qualities of the places around us, the spaces we inhabit, to allow them to speak to us about what is going on there.

There are many invisible, concealed places in the ordinary city where spontaneous, unpredictable things happen, urban fragments with a rough-hewn quality that reveal the city's history much more directly than the neat, flat surface of the organised, productive city where the urban space is subject to standardisation and systematisation. In a sense, when we refer to these places, we also speak of freedom in a world excessively codified by regulations.

These *forgotten places* are intimately related to certain concepts defined by Ignasi de Solà-Morales with his notion of *terrains vagues*:<sup>1</sup> city spaces free of the controlling hands of urban planning, in which all futures are possible (SOLÀ MORALES, 2002: 181-193). These are places that possess a kind of invisible energy that permeates them and inspires a certain admiration and a desire to explore them.

The *forgotten places* interest us because they speak of the past, but although they constitute solid anchors of memory, this firmness does not result in their physical consolidation in today's cities; on the contrary, they tend to be places of great fragility, endangered by the progress of the planned city that is ever fearful of indeterminacy and always seeking constructed completeness.

The *forgotten places* also interest us because they speak of the future. To enter these places is to read the very soul of the city, and to visit spaces that offer themselves as fertile ground for the de-

velopment of new ways of conceiving a city. The marks that time leaves on the urban landscape create spaces that wait expectantly for a still uncertain future. These empty urban spaces offer the best opportunities to imagine a city whose construction is approached differently from the norm. Such indeterminacies stimulate lateral thinking to give life to other modes of growth, other occupations. The place becomes fragile and all official control blurs around its fuzzy edges, often giving rise an experimental space full of activity but which never actually consolidates its place in the orderly, systematised city.

These places, charged with symbolism and meaning, do not appear in the regular travel guide books. They tend to be unrepresented spaces, invisible on current maps of the city, and yet they reflect a fundamental quality of the contemporary city. For this reason, we believe that they need to be mapped in order to identify them and recognise their value in the city.

In an approach reminiscent of Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*,<sup>2</sup> we have proposed a project that involves describing the contemporary city through abstraction (CALVINO, 1998). The imaginary cities presented by Calvino in his novel do not fully resemble any real city; they are like a *collage* of qualities which on their own do not constitute an exact reality but which, appropriately mixed together and reconstructed, could describe almost any city. We therefore suggest that adopting Calvino's approach constitutes a methodological process that responds perfectly to the complexity of contemporary urban life: to break up the qualities of the city and then reconstruct one or more maps that can describe that city's most authentic living reality. This fragmented and reconstructed reality offers the possibility of describing and mapping the city of *forgotten places*, because these places are in themselves fragments of the urban reality which, once recognised and charted, can create a new cartography, a previously undrawn map that can reveal certain qual-

ities of the unplanned world, of those forgotten spaces that are at once sites of memory and of the uncertain future, powerful in terms of their presence but weak in relation to the planned city.

We thus rescue from our memory a city which like no other represents the fragmented city, unpredictable and uncertain, replete with empty spaces charged with history and spontaneity. That city is Berlin, an extremely unique city of which probably one of the greatest chroniclers is the director Wim Wenders. The use of Wenders's filmography as a documentary source for the German capital is an obvious choice given that this director, especially in his film *Wings of Desire* (*Der himmel über Berlin*, Wim Wenders, 1987) has been able to record the reality and landscapes of Berlin in a way that is particularly revealing for the purposes of our research. Moreover, the whole filmography of the German director lays bare his interest in documenting fragile places which he senses are on the verge of disappearing, and which unquestionably bear a similarity to the forgotten places that are the object of our research (COOK, 1997).

We have also chosen Wenders's films for this project because his contribution to the study of the city as a contemporary phenomenon is extremely valuable. Wenders reveals himself in his films as a narrator of the city and of the people who inhabit it. He has an interesting way of approaching filmmaking as a connected series of fragments, locations, slices of life, cuttings from stories, but all with a common thread, which is the city itself and the territory of collective existence.

For Wenders, the cinema is a medium that can capture the nature of the city, and this belief is a consequence of his work in documenting the real environment where urban life unfolds. With his work, and in parallel with the narration of each film, Wenders has pursued his aspiration to document the city through the selection of settings where the film will be shot, as the locations he chooses are rarely pre-designed sets; generally,

they are real locations which are faithfully documented in his films. The result is a portrait of urban life through the presentation of indeterminate and unconventional spaces in which we can discern a more authentic urban reality than the one offered in official narratives. Because as Wenders tells us, the cinema and the city have grown up together. Films are historical documents of our times, capable like no other art form of capturing the essence of things, the atmosphere and the currents of their time, fears, desires... The cinema belongs to the city and reflects its essence (WENDERS, 2005).

Wenders himself acknowledges his interest in making his films a kind of compilation of these forgotten spaces, with his almost obsessive choice of real locations that he identifies as endangered environments, which can be used to show—generally very accurately—the life of a city. For the German director, filming these places means giving them permanence, not only as an image saved from oblivion, but as an element that conveys the memory of a place. If these places disappeared, the city would lose a part of its memory (BRUNO, 2002).<sup>3</sup>

What I find extraordinary about Berlin is that these points still exist [...], it's not possible to say exactly what they are for. They have no function, and that is what makes them appealing [...]. I think that it will never be possible to make any city council understand that, in terms of urban development, the most beautiful parts of their city are the places where nobody has ever intervened [...]. It's as if cities were under obligation to do something with these corners. It's pathetic. They are places doomed to disappear because they are totally anachronistic and because the city cannot bear that they have been left out of their urban planning (WENDERS, 2005: 134).

Wenders's interest, as expressed in these words, often focuses on places with no established function, vacant spaces paradoxically produced by the organisation of the modern city. These are

urban spaces which somehow escape the control of the authorities that oversee the city. He even goes so far as to suggest that such urban indeterminacies are what enable us to understand and narrate the complexity of the contemporary city (CALDWELL AND REA, 1991: 46).

In view of all of the above, studying Wenders's films in terms of their way of describing the city and its urban landscapes has become a fundamental tool for our research.

## **2. BERLIN, THE STARTING POINT FOR A FILM**

In 1986, Wim Wenders came up with the idea to make a film that would show city life in Berlin. On returning to Germany after several years in the United States, the director felt a need to make a film in his home country and in his native language.

The first point we want to highlight about this film is the creative process behind it, which proved to be especially important in determining the final product. The film did not begin with a script, but with a particular way of looking at a city. From the outset Berlin was not merely a set of locations chosen as settings for the scenes; rather, the city itself would be portrayed as an integral member of the cast. Moreover, the city of Berlin was the first and most important element of the film's plot; Berlin was its starting point.

The first thing Wim Wenders did before beginning the filming process itself was to wander around the city of Berlin, taking down notes of places that caught his interest. Travelling around the city was an essential part of the director's work, as in this way he could record in first person the spaces that interested him in order to narrate the story of Berlin, turning the city into the film's protagonist. On these city tours Wenders imagined, as protagonists for his film, a pair of angels who also inhabit Berlin, from whose privileged visual perspectives we are shown the city from any vantage point. The angel's view is able to move from



Islands and texts by Handke

the most distant aerial positions right down to the tiniest detail of objects in household spaces.

Berlin was the real starting point for the film [...]; I wanted to make a film in Berlin. In a way the idea arose from the complexity of this city and from the attempt to find a narrative form that can show various points of view in a multifaceted way. The angels are used as a trick to be able to explain things about Berlin (WENDERS, 2005: 135-136).

Just as the angels make it possible to present the city on every spatial scale, they also offer multiple temporal scales. The angels represent Time, permanence, eternity, in opposition to the ephemeral and volatile time of the human world. In this way, Wenders's film is a bridge between different times, and the inclusion of angels opens up a dialogue with history through documentary images of the city's past, nearly always related to the war and the air raids. Through the angel, different

times are superimposed in a single place, allowing the director considerable narrative freedom to recount the memory of the city.

Wim Wenders's project is thus constructed through the filming of his own *forgotten places*, and of the angels that visit them, as witnesses of the everyday lives of Berlin's inhabitants and of the memory of times gone by: in this way, he weaves a story of the city's memory and of the people who populate the city at the time the film was made, and a connection is established through these spaces devoid of certainty where all the city's voices find their echo.

### 3. PETER HANDKE, THE STARTING POINT FOR A FILM SHOOT

*Wings of Desire* is a film that was based not on a finished script, but largely on improvisation in-

spired by the city itself, places noted down on the director's travels and the story in which the angels become protagonists of and witnesses to life in Berlin. Due to the uncertain beginnings of the filming process, Wim Wenders decided to collaborate with the Austrian writer Peter Handke, with whom he had already worked previously<sup>4</sup> (MARTIN BRADY, 2005).

The filming process began with a call from Wenders to Handke to ask him to write the screenplay. The writer initially declined the offer, but faced with Wenders's insistence and especially after hearing the vague idea he had come up with for the story, Handke finally agreed to write a script for only ten scenes.

There are ten in total, ten poems or dialogues which for Wenders turned into the terra firma. They are his islands, his lighthouses that light up the night and guide his steps from one place to another. The creative process of this film is extremely interesting, courageous and admirable. A film that is based on the specificity of a city like Berlin and on some dialogues that put these locations to poetry (WENDERS, 2005: 142).

This was the beginning of a unique collaborative process between the two men: Wenders sent Handke the ten locations he had chosen, Handke wrote the texts for these locations and the director, as he received them, incorporated them into the filming process that was already under way.

This discovery was a decisive point in our research, because the places chosen by Wenders would in turn become our *islands*, the lighthouses that would guide our research of Berlin. Who better than Wenders to choose the forgotten places, and who better than Handke to put them to poetry? Thus, according to our theory we would be able to draw a new map of Berlin with the ten locations chosen by Wim Wenders in order to offer a new vision of the city through his *forgotten places*. At this point in the research it became essential to identify the exact locations where Handke's texts appear.

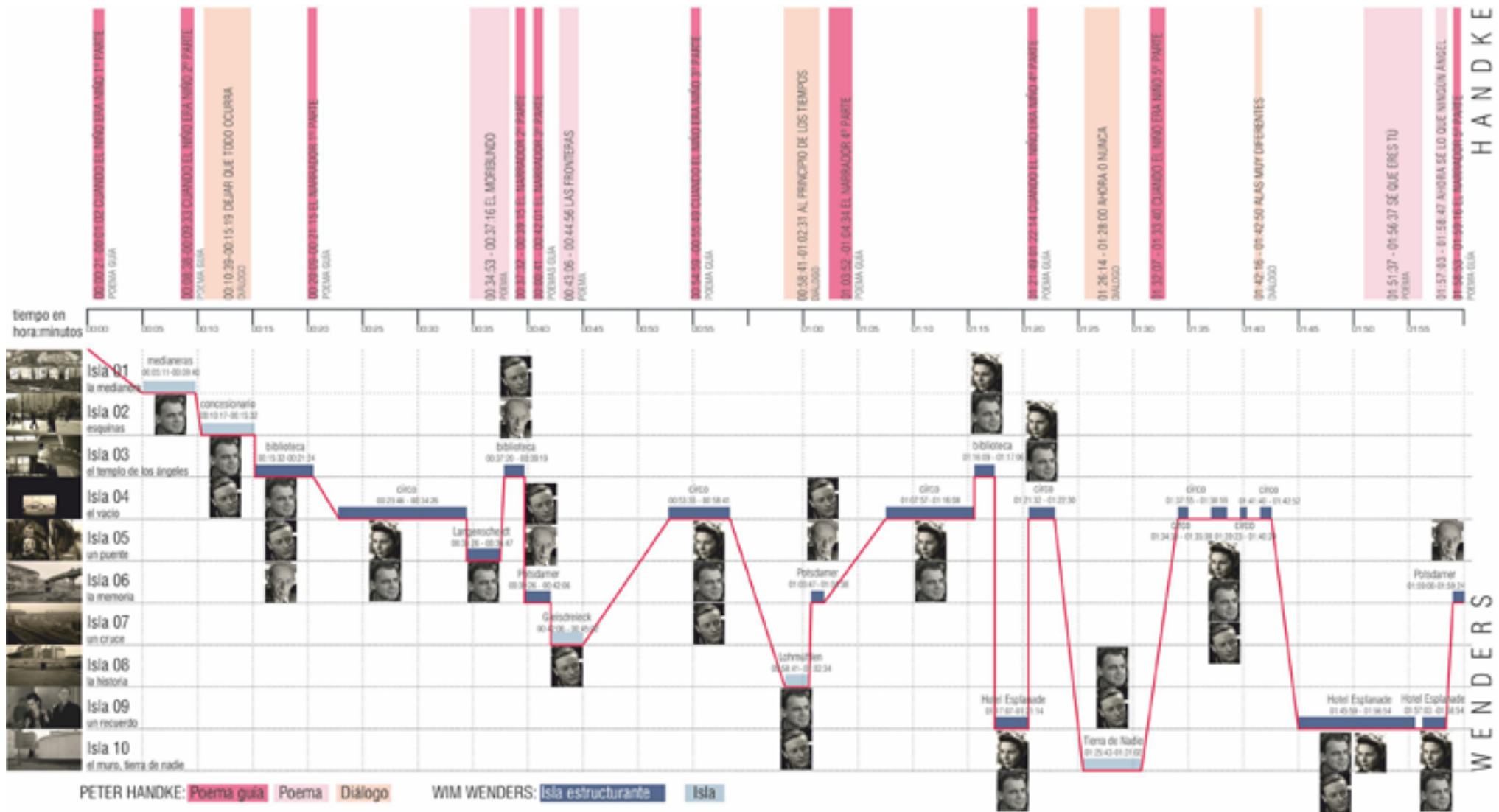
We found the version of the film with director's commentary released by Filmax in 2003, which immediately became an indispensable source for this project, as the explanations offered by Wenders reveal details of the filming process, and also provide some references to help identify Peter Handke's texts. Thanks to Wenders's own words we know that the ten contributions include four long dialogues, while the other six are poems. The places chosen by Wenders that Handke put to words thus became the main structure of our research.

The texts that Peter Handke contributed to the film have been identified as four dialogues and six poems, of which two were broken up to be recited at different times during the film, and which therefore direct the narrative and mark the rhythm of the story, which we have named *guiding poems*.

After identifying Handke's texts in the film and their association with a place in the city, we had to find these places in the Berlin of twenty-five years later. This process was highly complex, as over that time Berlin has gone from being a city located in a divided nation to the capital of the reunified Germany, with all the transformations that this unique change of situation entails. Our field work in the Berlin of 2012 allowed us to revisit the places filmed by Wenders in 1986 and to observe the transformations they had undergone, documenting the two moments in time and comparing them by using the architect's greatest tool: the drawing.

At the same time, with the aim of better understanding Wenders's manner of superimposing the locations with Handke's dialogues and poems, we created a time map for the film, a graph onto which the two layers were superimposed in a visual representation of the film's itinerary.

The ten locations resulting from the intersection of Handke's texts with the scenes filmed by Wenders, and which have therefore served to define the map of Berlin for *Wings of Desire*, are:



Timeline of film Wings of Desire. Maps, locations, poems, people





Still frames from *Wings of Desire*. Location of the south circus on Friedrichstrasse, where we can see wall murals projecting onto the empty space where the scenes were set

1. The Stadtring median wall
2. The car dealer's on Kurfürstendamm
3. Berlin State Library
4. Friedrichstrasse Circus
5. Langenscheidtbrücke
6. Potsdamer Platz
7. Gleisdreieck
8. Lohmühlenbrücke
9. Hotel Esplanade
10. No Man's Land

#### **4. WINGS OF DESIRE, THE STARTING POINT FOR A NEW MAP**

In the development of our map of Berlin we have a document of its situation in 1986 thanks to Wenders's film, and the field work in Berlin allowed us to document its current condition, bearing witness to what has survived over the last

twenty-five years. To complete the research with the narration of a time before the film was made, we made use of the book *Walking in Berlin* (HESSEL, Spanish edition: *Paseos por Berlin*, 1997) originally published in 1929 with the title *Spazieren in Berlin*. This work has been essential for understanding the city in the past from the perspective of our research, as Hessel's text describes the German capital through the act of walking around the city in first person—leading Walter Benjamin to dub this author the *flâneur* of Berlin. Hessel is thus another witness who, like Wenders and us, wandered the city in his day in order to investigate it and describe it. For the purposes of our research, Hessel has been a perfect guide to the Berlin of the past, as in his wanderings around the city in the 1920s he describes many of the spaces that Wenders chose for his film.

Our map therefore does not aim to offer only a trip around the city, but also a journey into Berlin's

past: to 1986, when the film was shot, and also to the earlier history of these places thanks to Franz Hessel. We have intersected these geographies of the city to create a map of Berlin that offers us a blended view from the perspective of the writer, the filmmaker and the architect, on a journey from the early 20th century up to the present day (CAPEL SÁEZ, 2001). The film *Wings of Desire* acts as a nexus between past and present and helps us to rediscover the landscape and the activity of the city by using it as a travel guide.

This is our new *Warburgian* map of Berlin (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2010), structured around ten *islands* as we have understood them in the work of Wenders and Handke. Our proposed map of Berlin presents a city that can be accessed by travelling through its fragments. The decade of the 1980s is illustrated by still frames from Wenders's film and guided by Handke's words. The early 20th century is described in the words of Franz Hessel, accompanied by old pictures and maps that show the city's past and memory. Finally, on our visit to the Berlin of today, we collected imag-

es of these places and made maps that document our own experience (HARMON, 2009).

The Berlin map is made up of ten sections, ten elements that comprise the geography and landscape of a city. They are ten fragments that in turn reflect ten qualities that can be used to define the city of Berlin:

THE MEDIAN WALL. Island 01 Stadtring median walls

CORNERS. Island 02 Car dealer's on Kurfürstendamm

THE TEMPLE OF THE ANGELS. Island 03 Berlin State Library

THE VOID. Island 04 Friedrichstrasse Circus

A BRIDGE. Island 05 Langenscheidtbrücke

MEMORY. Island 06 Potsdamer Platz

A CROSSING. Island 07 Gleisdreieck

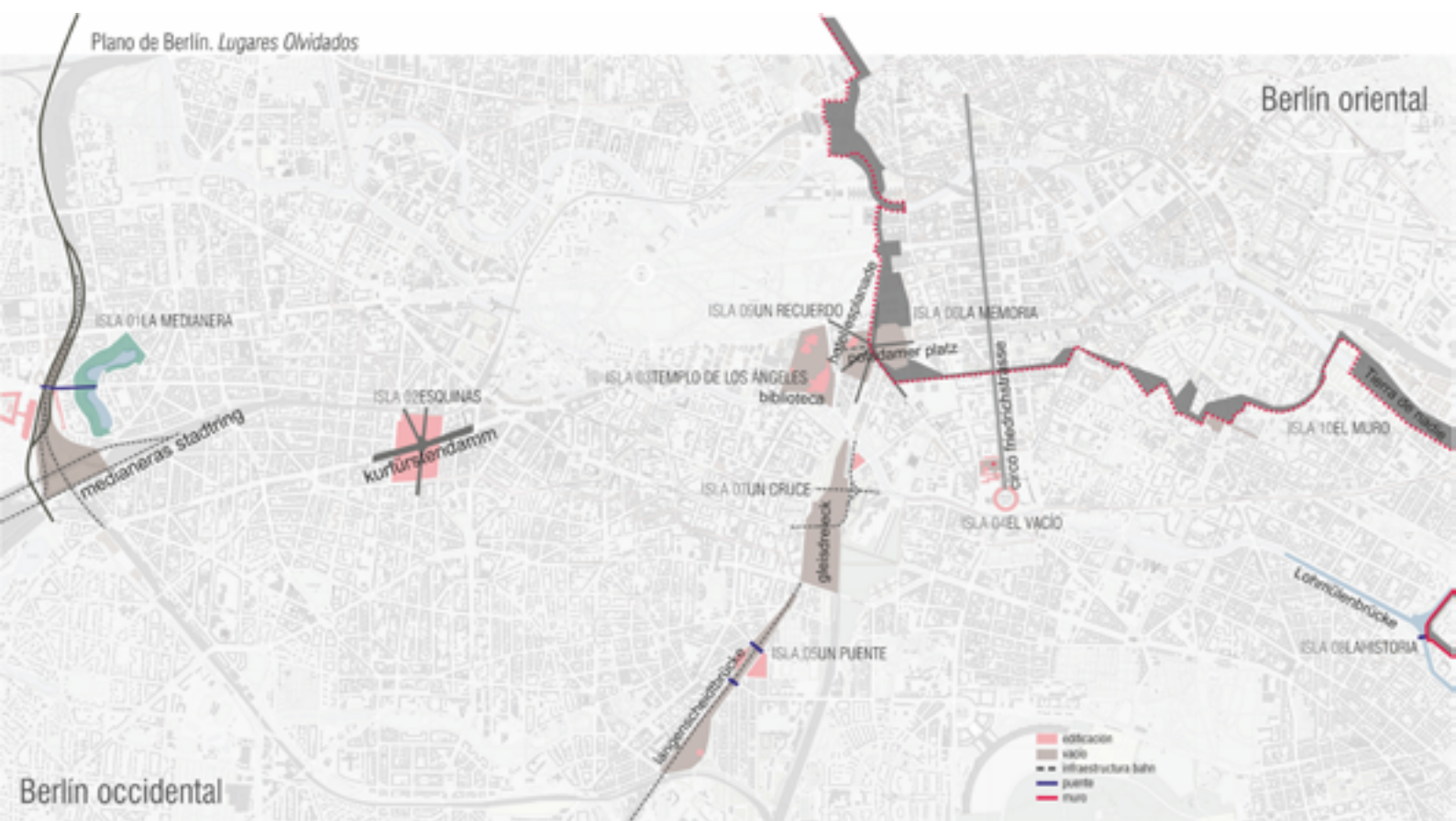
HISTORY Island 08 Lohmühlenbrücke

A MEMORY. Island 09 Hotel Esplanade

THE WALL Island 10 No Man's Land

The film *Wings of Desire* offers a parallel view of the city, neither complete nor a substitute for every other, but simply one of many. We cannot

Map of Berlin. Wenders's Islands



claim to know Berlin after watching the film, but we can assert that the city of empty spaces shown by Wim Wenders forms part of that other knowledge and that it is a fundamental part of Berlin as well. Mapping the locations of Wenders's film as they were in 1986 has enabled us to discover and identify the elements of that Berlin that continue to form part of the catalogue of the city's forgotten places. We have also found that the less intervention these locations have undergone, the more they continue to reflect the values that led to their being chosen to form part of Wenders's Berlin. The spaces that have been transformed with no understanding of their real values have been turned into dull images that could be anywhere in the world, reflecting a cliché of what a city is.

The forgotten places in our cities, far from being dispensable spaces as they tend to be seen through the lens of urban development, can be a foundation and point of support for the architect's work on the city. Working on the city's interstitial projects, anonymous, silent and small, does much more for its inhabitability than ambitious architectural and urban development projects like the megalomaniacal transformation of Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, as Wim Wenders documents so well in his film. The forgotten places are spaces bursting with energy where the city is offered in an open and thought-provoking way, and accepting this offer and being able to recognise it in these fragments will provide essential raw material for the project. The *forgotten places* are places where destruction is only apparent, as they comprise an intermediate landscape between construction and reconstruction. Paradoxically, the forgotten places are urban discontinuities where the city refuses to be forgotten. It is essential in our work as architects to keep them alive, to rescue their memory, just as we have learned from the work of Wim Wenders in his films. ■

## NOTES

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- 1 The term *terrain vague* was coined in 1995 by Ignasi de Solà-Morales in an article of that name, in which he outlined his definition or description of the term. The article, subsequently included in the monograph *Territorios* (SOLÀ-MORALES, 2002), focused attention on the undeveloped spaces that the contemporary city had produced in the process of colonisation of its territory.
- 2 Italo Calvino wrote the novel *Invisible Cities*, an exploration of the landscapes of imagined cities, in 1972. The book, as he himself explains, developed out of short reflections written at different moments, fragments of ideas that he compiled in folders, fleeting visions of an imagined city, invisible to the eyes of a conventional gaze. This collection of writings on particular facets of cities grew until it finally turned into a novel.
- 3 This idea of filming the city in order to give it permanence and turn it into a device for conveying the memory of a place is reinforced in the arguments of Giuliana Bruno in her book *Atlas of Emotion*. On her travels to the marginalised sections of Berlin, the rural zones of India or the peripheries of some of the most important cities in the world, she finds that feelings are closely tied to the context of the person who experiences them and emotions are indissolubly linked to the place where they arise.
- 4 Wim Wenders's first collaboration with Austrian writer Peter Handke was back in 1969, on a short 12-minute film titled *3 American LPs* (*Drei Amerikanische LP's*, 1969), in which both men talk about American music and its influence in Europe. Their next collaboration was in 1972, with Wenders's film based on Handke's book of the same name, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* (*Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter*, 1972). In 1975 they collaborated again, this time on the film *The Wrong Move* (*Falsche Bewegung*, 1975), for which Handke wrote a screenplay based on Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, 1795). In 1986 Wenders decided to turn to Handke once again, to write the script

for the film *Wings of Desire*, which would be published a few years later under the same title (WENDERS and HANDKE, 1992).

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## **MAPPING WINGS OF DESIRE: BERLIN AND THE CITY OF FORGOTTEN PLACES**

### **Abstract**

The forgotten places are worlds within other worlds, places without set rules, with no order or control. They are places waiting to be dreamed of. They speak to us of the complex and blurred line between the planned and the unplanned city. Through Wenders's film *Wings of Desire*, with special focus on its script and filming process, we explore certain significant places in the German capital that share many of the qualities of such forgotten places, which were carefully chosen by the director in 1987. In doing so, we reveal a creative process involving a series of fragments of scenes associated with places in the city that build an itinerary offering an original and innovative experience of the city of Berlin.

### **Key words**

Wenders; Berlin; *Terrains Vagues*; Atlas; Poems; Architecture; City.

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## **A(T)LAS DEL DESEO. BERLÍN Y LA CIUDAD DE LOS LUGARES OLVIDADOS**

### **Resumen**

Los lugares olvidados son mundos dentro de otros mundos, son lugares sin reglas establecidas, sin orden ni control. Lugares expectantes para ser soñados. Nos hablan de la complejidad y de los límites difusos entre la ciudad planificada y la no planificada. A través de la película de Wenders *El cielo sobre Berlín*, analizando especialmente su guión y proceso de rodaje, indagamos sobre ciertos lugares significativos de la capital alemana que comparten muchas de las cualidades de estos lugares olvidados y que fueron cuidadosamente seleccionados por el director en 1987. Descubrimos así un proceso creativo como suma de fragmentos de escenas asociadas con lugares de la ciudad que construyen un itinerario que propicia una experiencia inédita y novedosa sobre la ciudad de Berlín.

### **Palabras clave**

Wenders; Berlín; *terrains vagues*; atlas; poemas; arquitectura; ciudad.

### **Autor**

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Podcast semanal del  
**CINEFÓRUM L'ATALANTE**  
sobre actualidad e historia cinematográfica

disponible en  
**UPV RTV**

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