

# TYPOLOGICAL VARIANTS OF THE SPANISH AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY\*

NORBERTO MÍNGUEZ ARRANZ

ALBERTO FERNÁNDEZ HOYA

## I. INTRODUCTION

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Over the last two decades, the number of audiovisual creations being made outside the traditional production system has increased exponentially. A significant proportion of these films can be placed in the category of the contemporary audiovisual essay, defined either as a “culmination of the documentary film” (Weinrichter, 2007: 23), with an especially clear tendency towards authorial subjectivity since the final years of the last century, or as a genre of its own, albeit still maintaining obvious points of contact with the documentary genre and with more experimental and even avant-garde cinema (Català, 2005).

This is a type of creation with a prominent hybrid component (García Martínez, 2006) that is difficult to pin down in a specific genre (Català, 2014b). While in strictly quantitative terms these films still make up only a small minority of global

production, they exhibit an extraordinary capacity to reflect on complex realities and to transform discourses. They thus constitute an important phenomenon in contemporary filmmaking that undeniably places them in a “innovative and influential position” (Mínguez & Manzano-Espinoza, 2020: 24).

The increased presence of the essay film has been closely linked to the widespread adoption of new technologies that have made production processes simpler and more economical, while also giving filmmakers greater freedom and independence:

In the filmmaking world, essay-thinking acquires unexpected qualities whose existence would not even be suspected in other realms where an essayistic approach might be taken. This is due to two factors that are absent from other essay forms: images and technology (Català, 2019: 51).

Cinema is thus fertile terrain for the creative exploration of the essay as a unique initiative

for reflection on a given reality: a technological development that draws equally on the discursive potential of audiovisual language, its versatility and its heterogeneous, hybrid nature. This combination of elements is ideal for the creation of works made with an extraordinary freedom of thought, in which “the film essayist reflects through images that are rhetorically articulated by the technological possibilities” (Català, 2014a: 40).

As noted above, the asystematic nature of the audiovisual essay makes it hard to establish clearly delimited generic boundaries. However, it is possible to identify a number of recurring features, some of which were already present in the literary essay, for which a specific nomenclature has developed over the course of the form’s historical evolution.

There is a general consensus that Michel de Montaigne’s famous *Essais* (1580) constitute the birth of the modern essay and the origin of the name that would come to be used for this literary practice. However, essay writing can be traced back much further than the 16th century, to prominent precursors such as Plato, described by Luckács as the first and “greatest essayist who ever lived or wrote” (Luckács, 2010: 29), as well as figures like Plutarch and Seneca (Torné, 2016: 10).

It is possible to chart an evolution of essay writing, with its various branches and reconstructions constituting a long trajectory of explorations and creative transformations (Gómez Martínez, 1981; Aullón de Haro, 1992; Cruz, 2021). Tracing these precedents to the modern essay can help us to identify a set of features that “restrict the use of the term” (Arredondo, 1988: 168-169) while still offering a degree of conceptual flexibility. These features are:

- a communicative, reflexive, or didactic purpose;
- a subjective position of the author in relation to the text and to its readers;

- a wide range of subject matter, covering all kinds of issues and with the possibility of mixing different topics;
- prose of a literary style with no predetermined structure, admitting exposition and logical argument, along with digressions, in a concise text that is not intended to be exhaustive.

Many of these features have been integrated fully into the contemporary audiovisual essay, such as the strongly subjective presence of the authorial voice, the use of a fragmentary approach and an open-ended quality: “it is radical in its ‘non-radicalism’, in the refusal to reduce everything to a principle, in the emphasis of the partial over the whole, in its fragmentary nature” (Adorno, 1962: 19). These aspects do not undermine its extraordinary potential for reflection, in a genuine quest for knowledge that takes directions distinct from those of science, while also avoiding the kind of aesthetic, social or political approach that bears qualities of a manifesto.

The essay film, which would become one of the “indispensable discoveries of modern cinema” (Monterrubio, 2018: 54), has departed conceptually from its literary equivalent, diversifying and exploring new territories that also push the possibilities of filmic discourse beyond conventional practice, widening the boundaries of the form with the aid of the heterogeneous potential that characterises it, to vest the reception of its message with a greater polysemic weight.

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**THE ESSAY FILM HAS DEPARTED CONCEPTUALLY FROM ITS LITERARY EQUIVALENT, DIVERSIFYING AND EXPLORING NEW TERRITORIES THAT ALSO PUSH THE POSSIBILITIES OF FILMIC DISCOURSE BEYOND CONVENTIONAL PRACTICE**

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In line with this multiplicity of signifiers and openness to different meanings, the audiovisual essay also draws on another element that is central to its construction and development: the editing, which, for many authors, is where “the film is really born” (Peydró, 2019: 224).

There are a number of valuable studies dealing with the essay film, although not necessarily from an essayistic perspective or with the aim of establishing a taxonomy. One of the most influential scholars in the field of documentary analysis and theory is Bill Nichols (1997, 2001), who has developed a classification of different modes of documentary (poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive and performative). Some of Nichols’ categories could be applied to the essay film, although the fact that the essay itself is not included as a category constitutes a considerable limitation.

The relationship between subjectivity and the essay film is explored in depth by Laura Rascaroli (2009), in this case based on a conceptual framework that is clearly essayistic. Although her objective is not really to establish a taxonomy or offer an exhaustive definition, she does hint at a few categories that are useful for this study, such as the filmed diary; others that she proposes have been dismissed either because they are extremely rare (such as the notebook), or because they have been subsumed in another category in our taxonomy.

In his research on the essay film, Timothy Corrigan (2011) identifies various essayistic modes (the portrait, the travel essay, the diary, the editorial essay and the refractive essay), offering a detailed definition and a brief history of the genre. Although creating a complete taxonomy is not his basic objective either, his work constitutes a valuable contribution that has also been extremely useful for the structural approach described in this article, which aims to present a more exhaustive and wide-reaching study in an effort to cover all possible variants without spending too much

time on the analysis of specific titles, in the interests of offering the most comprehensive overview possible.

Of all these important contributions to this field of study, we have found the approach taken by Isleny Cruz (2019) to be the closest to our own. Cruz identifies various modes of essayistic enunciation: the creation documentary, appropriation and editing, the essay-video, canonical essayism, the self-referential film, the letter-video and the testimonial record. We adopt several of the categories proposed by Cruz and add a few that she does not consider, such as the mockumentary, the socio-political essay, and the historical-memorial essay.

## **2. SYSTEMATISING THE ASYSTEMATIC**

The basic objective of this study is to establish an overarching typology for Spanish essay films with the scope to categorise the widest range of variants possible and also to contribute to an understanding of films of this kind made beyond Spain’s borders.

This research draws on the results of a project in collaboration with the Cervantes Institute (“*Variaciones ensayísticas en el audiovisual español contemporáneo*”) that involves several lines of research, including the design of a catalogue of two hundred films produced in Spain that constitute a representative sample of the formal and thematic diversity of the audiovisual essay. This catalogue can currently be consulted at the CVC (Centro Virtual Cervantes) section of the Institute’s website.<sup>1</sup>

We acknowledge the contradiction inherent in the idea of systematising the asystematic, as the aim is to understand the variants of the audiovisual essay, while recognising that this typology cannot be equated with a traditional classification of film genres, which often involves thematic categorisations that are not possible in the case of the essay due to its non-topical nature. Moreover,

precisely because these films tend towards the asystematic, typologies of the audiovisual essay are never fixed or immobile spaces, but instead should be understood as categories that are determined based on the predominance of certain features that may coexist with others that are less pronounced.

A representative sample has been established for this study through the application of various selection criteria. The first of these was a qualitative consideration related to the presence in the films of certain features that define the audiovisual essay. The reference framework was based on the defining features outlined by Mínguez & Manzano-Espinosa (2020) as well as the relationship between the range of features identified and the necessary diversity of the sample. A second criterion was time-related: the sample is essentially contemporary, as 77.5% of the films selected were made since the year 2000. A few productions made earlier that were considered significant have also been included, as these enrich the sample without undermining its contemporary nature. A third selection criterion involved the expressive aspects of the films, ensuring that the formal diversity of the audiovisual essay was effectively represented.

Taking into account the complex, hybrid nature of the audiovisual essay, we have structured

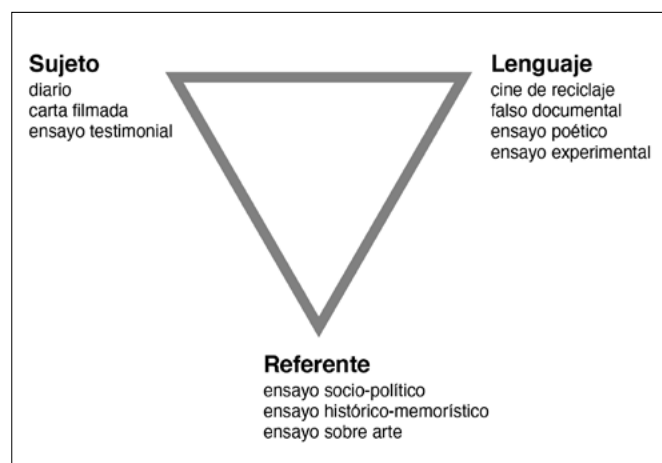


Image 1

**TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE COMPLEX, HYBRID NATURE OF THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY, WE HAVE STRUCTURED OUR TAXONOMY AROUND THREE KEY ELEMENTS THAT ARE ALWAYS PRESENT IN THE ESSAYISTIC MODE, BUT THAT MAY VARY IN PREVALENCE. THESE THREE KEY ELEMENTS ARE: SUBJECT, LANGUAGE, AND REFERENT**

our taxonomy around three key elements that are always present in the essayistic mode, but that may vary in prevalence. These three key elements are: subject, language, and referent (Image 1). In the essayistic mode, there is always a subject who uses language to express an idea about an object (the referent). Essayists calibrate the tools at their disposal, giving precedence or greater visibility to one of these three elements, and the audiovisual essay taxonomy described below is based on these calibrations. The precedence or greater visibility given to one element does not imply the absence of the others. While the categories proposed here are intended to be useful for the purposes of classification, it is important to recognise that an essay can simultaneously exhibit features belonging to different categories, although one usually predominates over the others. We would therefore argue that this study makes two original and significant contributions: a) it provides a taxonomy of audiovisual essay variants (although individual audiovisual essays are not analysed here, the research is the result of such analysis, and thus for each film identified a brief explanation is given of why it belongs to the category indicated); and b) it applies a conceptual framework that is specifically essayistic (rather than using documentary theory) with the aim of incorporating enough categories to reflect the diversity that characterises the audiovisual essay.

### 3. A PROPOSED TAXONOMY

Based on the analysis of the films that comprise the sample, the variants described below have been established.

#### The diary

One of the most radical forms of essayistic subjectivity is that where the protagonist expresses his or her own experience as a subject directly in the first person. An example of this variant can be found in *Mapa* [Map] (Elías León Siminiani, 2012), a diary film in which the director embarks on a journey to find himself (Image 2). He talks about big issues such as love, death and the uncertainties of life, but from a domestic perspective. This humble tone and the expression of emotions that are highly personal and yet at the same time universal elicit a powerful empathy for the narrator-protagonist. The film is constructed with a hybrid blend of objectivity and subjectivity, documentary and fiction. It combines an autobiographical narrative with a reflexive dimension expressed in the different lines of thought developed in the film. Siminiani thinks in images and words, and often the ideas are contained precisely in the form, i.e., in the way that texts, words and images interact.

Image 2



The filmmaker offers us a map of his own identity by turning his life into filmic material. Like any map, the film makes use of codes, which in this case become a new language of their own, a kind of creative idiolect that breaks certain conventions and connects easily with the imaginary and the emotional education of a generation. *Mapa* manages to articulate not only the route but also the architecture of a journey that is at once geographical and emotional.

*Guest* (José Luis Guerin, 2011), subtitled *Diario de registros* [Logbook], could also be placed in this category. It is also a travelogue, although in this case the "I" is not focalised so much on the director as on an observer whose subjectivity is expressed in the particular nature of a gaze. What is observed is as important as the construction (and sometimes even the deconstruction) of the gaze itself, which watches and listens in public spaces, but sometimes slips into the private, intimate space of the characters as well. It is a gaze that observes unexpected encounters, while at the same time achieving an extraordinary balance between a strong aesthetic sense that takes meticulous care with images and fragmentary footage sketching an open portrait whose composition must ultimately be articulated by the spectator. Although the film's testimonial component may sometimes give it the appearance of a news report, its approach to people and situations bears a humanistic sensibility that is far from common in journalistic work.

#### The filmed letter

While written correspondence has a long tradition as a medium of communication and as a literary genre, its limited presence in film is compensated for by some very special expressive possibilities. In contrast with the monologic quality of the diary, the filmed letter creates a dialogic space in which the

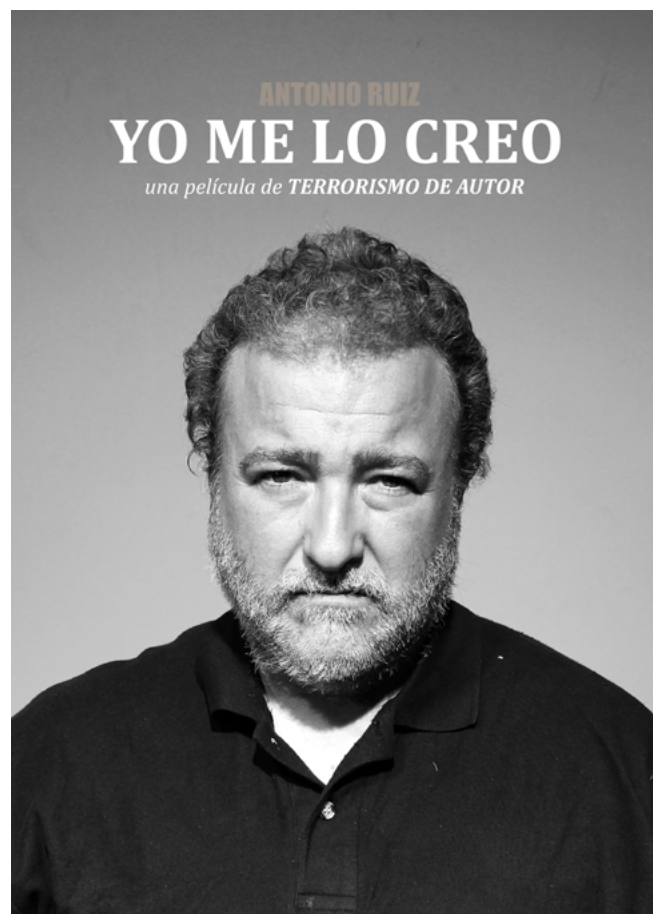
"I" addresses and responds to a "you". These two unobtrusive figures share a space and time that are always deferred, based on the construction and deconstruction of absence, distance and intimacy. This site of communication has the quality of a threshold between the dialogic exchange with the other and the self-sufficient solitude that characterises writing (Violi, 1987: 87). It is in effect an intimate space, conducive to reflection, understanding and feeling. This unique space has two addressees: one is the interlocutor, the "you" who exchanges a discursive position with the "I"; and the other is the audience, who undoubtedly determine the communicative device of the filmed letter. This category has a communal dimension due to the necessary shared authorship, but it also has a programmatic quality based on the expectation of a reply, of a discursive continuity. This is a feature that makes the filmed letter something risky, fragile and always tentative, and therefore very much in keeping with the essayistic spirit.

An interesting example of this mode is the correspondence between José Luis Guerín and Jonas Mekas.<sup>2</sup> This filmed correspondence reveals two different sensibilities: the spontaneity of Mekas, who leans towards improvisation, and the greater concern with composition of Guerín, who seeks a more deliberately planned mise-en-scène. Despite the duplicity of voices and gazes, these filmed letters constitute a return to cinema's roots, to craftsmanship: in both cases it is filmmaking with humility, without any intention to preach and with profound respect for the randomness of life. Like Kiarostami and Erice in their film series *Correspondences* (2005-2007), these directors share a creative ethic that implies a kind of resistance against the constraints of industry production, and this enables them to turn their gaze towards little everyday things for long enough to allow the spectator this same contemplative experience (Mínguez, 2019: 171).

### **The testimonial essay**

In this category, the essayist's voice gives way to a third person's. The perspective is still subjective, but the discourse is not journalistic, as it continues to be dominated by primordially essayistic features, such as the asystematic, the avant-garde and the dialogic. An example of this type of film is *Yo me lo creo* [I Believe It] (Terrorismo de autor, 2016), a long sequence shot interrupted by three fiction film scenes. The shot is a close-up of Antonio Ruiz (Image 3), who looks directly at the camera and speaks without moving his lips. Spectators are exposed to a listening exercise with no possibility of escape, testing their resistance. Ruiz speaks in the first person about his pain in a face-to-face encounter that forces us to listen and to look into the eyes of someone talking about things that are far from pleasant.

**Image 3**



Through this confrontation, the discourse delves into issues such as the economic crisis, the cracks in democracy, exploitation, and injustice. The mise-en-scène and the formal choices result in a powerful social and political positioning that gives rise to an insightful discourse and an intellectual and emotional bluntness that cannot help but affect the spectator.

For *A Squirrel Improvises* (Improvisaciones de una ardilla, 2017), Virginia García del Pino chose the testimony of philosopher Josep María Esquirol to reflect on contemporary politics and the role that the media play in them. The form chosen is very simple: over silent footage previously recorded and edited by the director, the philosopher improvises a series of reflections. Sometimes the reflection deals with the content of the images, while at other moments it departs from the visuals to explore more far-reaching ideas. The rupture results from the contrast between the calm, thought-provoking speech and the scenes showing us the machinations of politics. Behind the scenes at a rally, journalists waiting outside parliament, and a sea of microphones and cameras recording a politician's declarations prompt a reflection on the degeneration of information production, the tyranny of the news update and the more theatrical aspects of politics. However, the final decision on the meaning of it all is in the hands of the spectator, who is offered a calm and attentive gaze.

### **The found footage film**

Two modes that inevitably adopt an essayistic approach are the found footage film (archival film, appropriation) and the mockumentary. Both cases involve a process of resignification entailing a reflection on the value and use of images, and often also on the meaning of what is depicted and the way that meaning is constructed. A paradigmatic example of the archival film is *Canciones para después de una guerra* [Songs for after a War] (Basilio Martín Patino, 1971), a film constructed using

material from various sources (archive footage, fiction films, press cuttings, photographs, posters, advertising), patched together over a soundtrack of popular songs from the 1940s. It is a complex text in which the music interacts with the images to trigger the spectator's emotions and memory by placing the focus on the everyday life and society of Spain in the years after the Civil War. The film offers us a collage, an open, emotional text that allows the spectator considerable freedom for reflection. Patino refuses to articulate a seamless discourse about the past and this requires a dialogue that places demands on the spectator.

María Cañas experiments by mixing documentary and fiction, film and television, and old footage with more recent images. She appropriates this material and makes it her own, as her gaze is not distant or condescending but fused with the warmth within these images which, to use Didi-Huberman's expression (2012), are images that burn in contact with reality. *Holy Thriller* (María Cañas, 2011) is a short piece that is representative of the type of work that this filmmaker does and that illustrates perfectly how the ideas an essay conveys can be contained in the form, in the way the images have been cut and assembled with other images and other sounds. Although some authors identify the reflexive capacity of the audiovisual essay with its verbal component, this piece demonstrates that it is possible to generate ideas through a montage made up only of images and music. *Holy Thriller* (Im-

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Image 4

age 4) reflects on the potential of contemporary culture to integrate the sacred and the profane, the local and the global, but also on a certain melodramatic tendency underpinning different spheres of Spanish culture. Following Josep M. Català (2009), this piece could be described as an essay on the emotions, on their construction using images, on the possibility of reconfiguring them, on the relationships between private and public imaginaries, and on the intimate history that serves as a background for and an alternative to a supposedly fixed and absolute official history.

### **The mockumentary**

Every mockumentary is an essay because it either contains or incites a reflection. To illustrate this category, we cite two mockumentaries that reflect on memory, the image and the writing of history: *El grito del sur. Casas Viejas*<sup>3</sup> [The Cry of the South: Old Houses] (Basilio Martín Patino, 1995) and *The Mist in the Palm Trees* (La niebla en las palmeras, Carlos Molinero & Lola Salvador, 2006). Although both films adopt a documentary rhetoric, they ultimately transgress the genre system because their intention is not so much to represent reality as to establish a critical argument that can impart knowledge.

*El grito del sur. Casas Viejas* uses the rhetoric of historical documentaries that combine archival footage, witness statements and expert analysis. The difference here lies in the fact that although it is based on a real event, the director combines true and false statements and documents. The film bears all the hallmarks of documentary authenticity that would be expected of a non-fiction film, but it plays with the spectator by offering hints that its authenticity could be questioned; in other words, it mimics the tools and rhetoric of historical discourse while at the same time discrediting such discourse and undermining its institutional credibility.

*The Mist in the Palm Trees* revolves around the (fictitious) figure of Santiago Bergson and the events that marked his life, some of which are historical. The spectator never knows where Bergson is speaking to us from, but his discourse is dominated by an autobiographical tone. The footage used is diverse in nature (fiction, archive footage, scientific and artistic images, home movies, etc.) and the film engages in a massive operation of decontextualisation, i.e., a process of re-inscribing signifiers that exert a kind of emotional and intellectual violence amid images that burst with energy. This manipulation strips the images of their supposed objectivity and subjects them to a critical exercise that questions science as a discourse of authority and its capacity to solve certain social problems, thereby undermining our boundless confidence in the power of scientific reason and technology. The editing in *The Mist in the Palm Trees* forces us to ask a lot of questions, adding to our work as spectators and creating a text characterised by its lack of certainty and its incoherence, which thus contravenes the standards of traditional historical and scientific discourse.

### **The poetic essay**

Poeticity is a qualitative element observable in very specific practices of the literary essay. Howe-



Image 5

ver, its possibilities expand in the audiovisual essay, where the multiplicity of codes and the editing facilitate a certain degree of lyricism as a complementary feature of various categories. *Calles y sueños* [Streets and Dreams] (Eduardo Menéndez Madina, 1998) offers an example where the poetic dimension becomes decisive at certain moments in the film.

*The Silence before Bach* (El silencio antes de Bach, Portabella, 2007) proposes an intense dialogue between music and film through the figure of a cultural icon, a celebrated German composer who transcends boundaries. The film's expressiveness lies in the exploration of filmic possibilities while seeking to construct meaningfully independent sequences and evading the linear narrative tradition inherited from literature.

Another film of the poetic essay variant, *Los mundos sutiles* [The Subtle Worlds] (Eduardo Chapero-Jackson, 2013), is constructed around Antonio Machado's poetry collection *Campos de Castilla*, released on the centenary of its publication (Image 5). Taking the work of this renowned Sevillian poet as its main point of reference in itself suggests a discourse with a markedly poetic theme and form, a directorial intention that is

hinted at by the title of the work itself and that continues with the subsequent proposition of a whole poetic architecture.

Through the use of a first-person voice-over directing the argument, and drawing on support from music and images, *Odio los paraguas* [I Hate Umbrellas] (Adrián Perea, 2017) is a metaphorical work that focalises the disappointment and disillusion of romantic relationships on a supposed animosity towards umbrellas, objects intended to offer shelter, but which ultimately prove unreliable and wear out.

### **The experimental essay**

José Val del Omar, whose creations in the 1930s have earned him recognition as the precursor to Spanish experimental cinema, and the late Javier Aguirre, whose filmmaking career stretched over five decades, constitute two major figures whose work could be included in this category.

If the essay film is an exploration of the limitations and possibilities offered by audiovisual language, this quest for expression pushes even further when there is a clear commitment to experimentation. Examples of this are creations such as *Travelling* (Luis Rivera, 1972), or the ani-



**Image 6**

mated films of Rafael Balerdi (*Homenaje a Tarzán*, 1969) and José Antonio Sistiaga (*Ere erera baleibu Izik subua aruaren*, 1968-1970), who, inspired by the creative work of Canadian animator Norman McLaren, painted their images directly onto the celluloid. Numerous films of this category have been produced in recent years, such as *Evacuación* [Evacuation] (Colectivo Los Hijos, 2011), *Dress Rehearsal for Utopia* (Ensayo final para utopía, Andrés Duque, 2012), and *The Fifth Gospel of Kaspar Hauser* (O quinto evanxeo de Gaspar Hauser, Alberto Gracia, 2013).

*Pal Altoviti '07* (Samuel Alarcón, Bárbara Fluxá, 2007) is a film that invites each spectator to participate in the ultimate construction of its meaning. The abstract setting with no specific space or time, established by an opening shot that is finally revealed to be underwater and an unsettling use

of sound, offers an imagining of the site of Italy's Palazzo Altoviti consumed by the waters of the Tíber.

In *Walsed* (Alberte Pagán, 2014) the Galician filmmaker proposes a deconstruction of the experimental classic *Vision Fantastique* (Eugène Deslaw, 1957) reducing its sixty minutes of footage to just over three, using both its images and its soundtrack. In addition, Pagán reverses the images and compresses the sound onto two channels, one of which is also reversed.

### **The socio-political essay**

*Mercado de futuros* [Futures Market] (Mercedes Álvarez, 2011) is a film that deals with crisis, understood as the deterioration of a situation but also as a radical transformation of the world (Image 6). The film observes events and different locations of the city of Barcelona: a real estate showroom, a conference on management, a trading office, the remains of an apartment that is being cleared out, an old man tending a garden beside the train tracks, young people practising parkour.

*Mercado de futuros* is a contemplative film that gives spectators room to observe and freedom to reflect on what they see. It confronts us with familiar problems and situations, but the pace and organisation of the images allows us to glimpse what the media do not usually show and to consider it from a reflexive perspective. On occasions words guide the reflection and at other moments we bear witness to speeches or conversations captured on the spur of the moment that interact meaningfully with what the images show us. The film is posited as a quest, a confrontation with reality along a path whose direction will only be discovered at the end of the journey. The apparently unconnected events and locations are configured for the spectator as questions that do not necessarily allow for a definitive answer, but instead offer lines of thought about a society that seems to be focused more on the future than on the present.



Image 7

*Las variaciones Guernica* [Guernica Variations] (Guillermo G. Peydró, 2012) is an essay based on the painting Picasso was commissioned by Spain's republican government to paint for the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exposition. The film juxtaposes sections of *Guernica* with images of visitors to the museum who come to see the painting (Image 7), and with archive footage and audio mostly taken from different news programs. In one way or another, all the images and audio recordings selected allude to different forms of violence perpetrated by the authorities on the civilian population: from demonstrations repressed by the police in Santiago de Chile, Barcelona, and Cairo, to threatening images or declarations of dictators such as Bashar-al-Assad or Gaddafi, as well as a conversation between members of a US military helicopter crew while they fire on civilians and reporters in Iraq. The reflection is articulated by reorganising and juxtaposing images that allow spectators to reconsider their perspective, giving new meaning to familiar signifiers. The first operation involves rescuing Picasso's painting from its current status as a commodity for tourist consumption. Juxtaposing the painting with contemporary images effectively restores the painting's original meaning as

a protest against the cruelty and brutality perpetrated by Franco's forces on the civilian population. This interaction gives the contemporary images and audio, extracted from the flow of daily news and placed in contact with one another, a meaning that rescues them from the banality of that flow so that we can see in them a destructive logic that triggers our conscience. This essay sketches out an aesthetic and political position while at the same time creating a

dialogic space that enables the spectator to think freely based on the material offered.

### **The historical-memorial essay**

As essays often do, Guillermo G. Peydró's *La ciudad del trabajo* [City of Work] (2015) draws on a pre-existing object, in this case a work of architecture (Image 8), to offer a reflection on history and memory. This is not a traditional historical documentary but an essay that reflects on a historical reality by positioning itself around it. The starting point is the Universidad Laboral de Gijón, a building whose construction began in 1946 and took ten years. The film shows its evolution, its spaces and activities, interspersing the soundtrack with the filmmaker's reflections, dialogues from fiction films and audio from an old newsreel from the period. The Universidad Laboral, originally intended to be an orphanage for the children of miners, ended up becoming an architectural project of colossal dimensions, in keeping with a regime that needed to form new Spaniards. The interaction between fragments of fiction and non-fiction offers reflections on different aspects of the Franco dictatorship: Catholic indoctrination, the dignity of work, education as a means of social control, an inflated nationalism that exalted the grandeur



Image 8

of Spain over the foreign. The film conveys its ideas through its editing of images and dialogues, creating a broad interpretative space for spectators to develop their own reflections.

Another example of this category, albeit one that features a higher degree of subjectivity and poetic weight, is *The Sky Turns* (*El cielo gira*, Mercedes Álvarez, 2004). The filmmaker goes back to her hometown and observes the gap between two eras, one that is vanishing but still shows signs of life, and the other in the process of establishing itself. This exploration, which

takes on the tone of an intimate diary, is based on a contemplative gaze with a reflection organised around two timeframes: the first, the time of the village and its inhabitants (the seasons, everyday activities, memories); and the second, the historical time that emerges from the landscape around the village on every turn (dinosaur fossils, a dolmen, Roman ruins, an Arabic tower). These timeframes are superimposed on each other and come into contact, because the town's inhabitants coexist naturally with the traces of other civilisations, understanding themselves as part of a civilisation that is disappearing (Image 9). Slow-paced and largely unscripted, the film exudes an attitude of respectful waiting for things to happen, a tranquil gaze that is able to find beauty and poetry in the people and landscapes it depicts, resulting in an encounter between subjectivity and a world whose temporal limits stretch beyond memory (Mínguez, 2012: 69).

Image 9



### The art essay

The opening titles to *The Imaginary Garden* (*Le jardin imaginaire*, Guillermo G. Peydró, 2012) expressly identify it as an essay film and a film about art. It begins with an epistolary prelude whose tone and flavour recall the French master of the

film essay, Chris Marker. This introduction speaks to us from a sculpture garden created by Máximo Rojo in a town in the Spanish province of Guadalajara (Image 10), a collection of sculptures that constitute outsider art, unconstrained by institutionalised culture or by the market. This example of *art brut* is only the beginning of a journey that will lead us through Paris in search of traces of the essay and encounters with different artists and creative spaces. On this journey, the film reflects on itself and affirms its proximity to poetry and music, revealing itself to be an intellectual and emotional lesson that requires a gaze of its own.

Another example of this type of is *Train of Shadows* (Tren de sombras, José Luis Guerin, 1997), another film with a profound self-awareness, although its capacity for self-reflection is oriented towards the metacinematic. The film constructs a very clear enunciation that reflects more with images than with words, demanding an active spectator who needs to understand different codes and intertextual references. This dialogic quality offers a reflection on time, on how the image attempts to capture it, and a certain awareness of cinema as a language on the verge of extinction. This twilight tone recalls the inevitably fleeting nature of human existence. *Train of Shadows*

moves freely between fiction and non-fiction; it is a fictional tale disguised as a documentary. This transfiguration and the film's experimental component provide the ideal circumstances for the reflection it proposes.

#### **4. THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY AS AN OPEN SPACE**

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The development of this taxonomy entails a difficulty that is inherent in the multifarious and complex nature of the audiovisual essay, with creations that exhibit a number of hybrid qualities that could place them on the boundaries of several categories. As possible lines of future research, new genres arising from current digital practices could be considered, such as the interactive multimedia documentary (Gifreu-Castells, 2011), with its different formats and platforms, as well as the possibility of transmedia narratives in the context of non-fiction (Gifreu-Castells, 2016).

The audiovisual essay connects with other cultural movements associated with new technologies and new developments in self-expression. This form stands in opposition not so much to the scientific method as to the structures of scholarship with other interests and concerns not strictly

Image 10



related to the needs of knowledge. The essay does not impose predetermined scientific frameworks on reality; instead, it accepts reality in all its complexity even if that means being unable to fully understand or encompass it. It could be argued that the essay film is objective insofar as it unhesitatingly recognises its own subjectivity.

As noted above, the audiovisual essay cannot be conceived of as a set of discrete compartments, as the categories are fluid spaces that can combine features and tendencies to varying degrees. *Variaciones Guernica* is a political essay, but it is based on a work of art and at the same time is an archival film that uses editing to resignify the images and enable us to see them from a different perspective, while *The Sky Turns* is a historical-memorial essay which at the same time has an essentially poetic expression. Similarly, *Train of Shadows* has been categorised here as an art essay, but it is also a mockumentary and is sometimes labelled as experimental. Placing a film in one specific category therefore requires the identification of its predominant feature. The typology proposed here is not intended to set fixed boundaries, but to establish a map of formal and thematic aspects within which essay films may move with considerable freedom. It is a cartography of connected and sometimes overlapping territories that operates around three key elements: subject, language, and referent.

The dominance of the subject opens up a range of possibilities depending on whether it is defined by an "I" (diary, autobiography, self-portrait, travelogue), an "I"/"you" that gives rise to a dialogic pattern between two subjects (filmed letter), or the third-person perspective that characterises the testimonial essay. In the second case, it is the language that takes on greater importance, which may be based on reflection through exploration or innovation (experimental), or through a resignification (found footage film, mockumentary) or a quest for an expression that prioritises the aesthetic (poetic essay). In the third case, the subject and language do not disappear but are more subtly present be-

cause the reflection foregrounds the referent, giving rise to a wide range of themes that can be summed up in terms of three recurring possibilities: the socio-political essay, the historical-memorial essay, and the art essay. In short, it is our belief that a considerable number of films normally labelled as documentaries would benefit from a more productive and rigorous analysis if they were interpreted in light of the taxonomy outlined here, as it may provide a better understanding of the complex nature of these works and the relationship they establish with the spectator. ■

## NOTES

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- 1 The catalogue can be found at: <https://cvc.cervantes.es/artes/cine/ensayo/catalogo.htm>
- 2 The correspondence established between José Luis Guerín and Jonas Mekas was an initiative commissioned in 2011 by Jordi Balló for the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona in the context of an exhibition titled *Todas las cartas. Correspondencias filmicas* [All the Letters: Film Correspondence]. The correspondence between Guerín and Mekas covers a period of seventeen months with a total of nine letters.
- 3 This film was written and directed by Basilio Martín Patino for Canal Sur Televisión in 1995 and formed part of *Andalucía: Un siglo de fascinación* [Andalusia: A Century of Fascination], a seven-episode series on the identity, history and myths of the Andalusian region.

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## **TYPOLOGICAL VARIATION IN SPANISH AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY**

### **Abstract**

Taking as a starting point a review of the literary roots of the essay and an analysis of two hundred representative Spanish essay-films, this article proposes the establishment of a typology in order to study the Spanish audiovisual essay by identifying those variables that draw a geography of formal and thematic aspects that best define it. In this way, the typology proves its operability around three main areas of influence that allow different degrees and levels of expression: subject, language and referent. The predominance of the subject gives rise to the diary, the film-letter or the testimonial essay. In the second option, it is language that acquires preponderance through poetic essays, found footage films, experimental essays or documentary fakes. In the third option, the reflection puts the referent at the front, giving rise to the essay on art, the socio-political essay or the historical-memorial essay.

### **Key words**

Audiovisual Essay; Essay film; Non-Fiction; Taxonomy; Genres.

### **Authors**

Norberto Mínguez Arranz is Professor of Audiovisual Communication at Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Contact: norberto@ucm.es

Alberto Fernández Hoya is Assistant Professor at URJC (Madrid). Contact: alberto.fernandezh@urjc.es

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## **VARIANTES TIPOLOGICAS DEL ENSAYO AUDIOVISUAL ESPAÑOL**

### **Resumen**

Partiendo de una revisión que repasa las raíces literarias del ensayo y del análisis de doscientas obras representativas, el presente artículo propone el establecimiento de una tipología aplicada al estudio del ensayo audiovisual español, mediante la identificación de aquellas variables que trazan una geografía de los aspectos formales y temáticos que mejor lo definen. De este modo, se demuestra su operatividad en torno a tres grandes ejes de influencia que permiten diferentes grados y niveles de plasmación: el sujeto, el lenguaje y el referente. El predominio del sujeto da lugar a variantes como el diario, la carta filmada o el ensayo testimonial. En la segunda opción adquiere preponderancia el lenguaje dando lugar al ensayo poético, de reciclaje, experimental y al falso documental. Por último, cuando la reflexión pone en primer término al referente, surgen el ensayo sobre arte, el socio-político o el histórico-memorial.

### **Palabras clave**

Ensayo audiovisual; cine-ensayo; no ficción; taxonomía; géneros.

### **Autores**

Norberto Mínguez Arranz es Catedrático de Comunicación Audiovisual en la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Contacto: norberto@ucm.es

Alberto Fernández Hoya es Profesor Ayudante Doctor en la URJC (Madrid). Contacto: alberto.fernandezh@urjc.es

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