

Four Points of the Compass and a Centre of Gravity for Contemporary Documentaries in Spain¹

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- *The current reality of the documentary within the audiovisual industry in Spain is the object of discussion of this article. The author presents an overview of the situation of this genre not just from an industrial perspective, but also the cultural, historic and social points of view necessary for a sector in which different types of interests are at play. The text establishes the different pressures and the high and low moments of the documentary, a genre that has undergone a renaissance in recent years within the field of audiovisual production.*

"The situation of the documentary sector of the Spanish audiovisual industry is an expression of the general crisis the industry is going through and which can only be solved as part of a new model of relations between television stations, institutions and industry, configured within a single European market. The application of European directives and compliance with them in relation to television without borders would be positive if it formed part of a structural vision that included other essential elements, such as TV-station funding, distribution, independent production quotas, etc. Without a structural solution such as the one regularly demanded and proposed by all segments of the industry, Spain will be banished from the European audiovisual landscape, with all the economic and cultural consequences that entails, and the Spanish documentary will be just another victim"².

If I have started this text with such a long quote it is simply to demonstrate that the main industrial concerns present in

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all the forums relating to documentaries have existed for at least the past 10 years or so. In other words, they are chronic problems within the audiovisual context in Spain. For many (too many) years, documentaries were dormant in Spain. This is no overstatement: documentaries have been administratively and industrially obsolete since the Miró Act (1984), which unsuccessfully tried to promote the many documentaries made during the Transition. However, the situation is plainly beginning to change, e.g., in the case of Catalonia, because of CTL Resolution 123/2003 of 9 April from the Catalan Institute for Cultural Industries, which approved a number of aid mechanisms for 55-minute documentaries made for TV³. However, despite this timid revival, the problems remain the same and the projected solutions have changed little from the proposals of a decade ago. The 'structural solution' Meere calls forms the basis of current claims and actions. We can therefore conclude that the issue (both the problem and possible solutions) has for a long time been circulating in a type of Möbius strip that it apparently doesn't know how to escape from.

Approaching the issue of the documentary in exclusively industrial terms therefore does not go far enough. In fact, if we analyse the official discourses generated around the documentary, we can see there is a very serious contradiction in proposing exclusively industrial and economic-based solutions when the defence is located within the field of cultural relevance⁴. It all recalls the words of the Chilean filmmaker resident in France, Patricio Guzmán: "A country without documentary cinema is like a family without a photo album". More recently, there have been calls to make documentaries an expression of a country's democratic health and quality⁵. If documentaries are claimed in these cultural and political terms, it doesn't make sense to then do nothing and wait for the approval of a set of legislative measures that can facilitate the production of something

which, as the introduction to this paper seems to say, can only be the product of a country's industrial, cultural and democratic health. These demagogic discourses are ineffective for properly fertilising a field in which the documentary can be developed. If we want to really defend the documentary as a necessary creation space we cannot be so superficial or rely on such inoperative generalisations. We need to discuss the documentary in the contemporary Spanish context by accepting all the paradoxes and contradictions the field contains: firstly, industrial ones, but also cultural and aesthetic ones. We should thus start from a series of premises, of spaces that are threatening the Spanish documentary and which cannot be forgotten under any circumstances, to try to overcome the accommodating but ultimately not very productive positions that reign today.

Firstly, we need to agree that there are two types of interests and professional profiles in current Spanish documentary making. On one hand, there are people with journalistic and television-based training, particularly those who worked in TV and over time decided to try their hand in the independent arena (independent with regard to either the medium or broadcaster and the productive and aesthetic narrowness generated) either by forming a production company or working as freelance documentarists. On the other hand, there are people from the film industry (some of whom were already linked to the embryonic period of the documentary during the years of the Transition), accustomed to production dynamics and different aesthetic approaches. It is not easy for the two groups to coexist, much less so when what is being decided today (with a disgraceful time lag with regard to the European environment⁶ and at a time of crisis that could not be at all beneficial) is the way in which television stations and different governments in Spain collaborate in the specific funding of documentaries. What is currently on the negotiating table, when documentaries have already become important, is aid for the development and establishment of the genre and, indirectly, the people who work in it. The problem of documentaries coexisting with journalism is not confined exclusively to Spain. As Brian Winston⁷ said recently, the propagation of *direct cinema* that began in the 1960s saw the documentary become linked almost exclusively to journalism and ignored any previous legacy. The self-interested confusion between the docu-

mentary and journalism and its comparison to the *factual* thus makes it a real problem for the survival of the genre. It is true that this approximation of the documentary and journalism has allowed the former to endure one of the difficult periods of its history and, especially, was the most effective way of obtaining funding mechanisms from the television industry. But we should not forget the fundamental difference that Winston establishes between a journalist and a documentarist, i.e., while a journalist traditionally is committed to an audience, a documentarist establishes his commitment and thus his telling of the truth with the protagonists of his film⁸. We should not lose sight of the fact that, despite the historic role journalism played in getting documentaries funded by television stations, the necessary meeting point between filmmakers and journalists in the documentary has to be the commitment space with the protagonists of the films. This not negotiable for films made for the cinema, and nor should it be negotiable for films made exclusively for TV. Otherwise, the product might be able to be considered a journalistic report or even a factual programme, but never a documentary.

Another issue that threatens the current reality of the documentary in Spain is the fact that it usually involves a type of film that is much cheaper to make than fiction, both with regard to television documentaries⁹ and film documentaries. In principle, this doesn't seem to be a problem, but a closer look reveals the paradoxes. The great interest in documentaries, regardless of whether they're made be released in the cinema or on television, involves a clear drop in the production budgets¹⁰. In short, people have moved from making fiction to making documentaries because it is cheaper and consequently more accessible (in the short term for a producer and in the medium and long terms for a national production). In other words, the proliferation of the production of documentaries lowers the average price for audiovisual production and thus reduces the capital invested when, as in the case that concerns us here, the number of hours produced does not increase. Diversification of production, with the attention the documentary appears to be receiving, could hence end up concealing decapitalisation within the Spanish audiovisual industry.

Closely related to this is the fact, which Jaime J. Pena¹¹ criticised a few months ago, that auteur film was margina-

lized in the 1990s to the point that it nearly disappeared. The only exception in recent times has been the documentary. Events up until now suggest that this is not only or even mainly because of aesthetic views, but has instead been conditioned by economic factors. For that reason, although it might seem paradoxical, the proliferation of the documentary could be a ruse that firstly leads to the general decapitalisation of productions and secondly sees the space won by the documentary become the only survival space for the directors with the more radical and alternative proposals on the market. It would be a way of forcing the people who run the biggest formal risks to increasingly limit themselves to 'craft' films¹² and survival. However, this paradox can also obviously have a positive side: the appearance of the documentary in the audiovisual landscape could allow the production, even if on a very small scale, of a number of films that would otherwise have no place within the sphere of contemporary audiovisual production in Spain.

Continuing in the same vein, and taking as a basis the idea that the documentary is cheaper than fiction, it might look like an ideal area for testing the worth of new filmmakers (and even new producers). But the reality is very different. In fact, the renaissance of the documentary in recent years, and even today, has allowed the rise of very few new documentarists. On the other hand, it has been essential for a good many established filmmakers, who a few years ago were unable to get their fictional works made (especially because of the dynamic appearance of new filmmakers at the national level in the early 1990s) and who turned to making documentaries: this phenomenon can clearly be seen in the sector of people who we call filmmakers even though they work in television. A further paradox is thus that the new attention given the documentary has resulted not in the appearance of new artists but the return of a number of consolidated filmmakers who had been unable to get any new works under way for a while. Very few new documentarists have been able to take advantage of the new situation. Overall, we can find many journalists who have undergone film training, particularly following the implementation of autonomous community TV stations, and film directors with a number of titles to their name who have been able to develop their projects thanks to the new situation. This has occurred both in the area of realisation and production: documentaries are linked to companies,

whether TV stations or film production companies, which already have a certain style. There is therefore no real renovation of filmmakers as occurred, for example, in the early 1990s, both with regard to television fiction (with the proliferation of TV soaps) and in the cinema.

Another pressure established in this context concerns the centre versus the periphery, which is also generated by the budgetary difference between the production of documentaries and fiction. Spanish audiovisual production has centred on Madrid for a number of years. Other centres with a certain tradition in the sector, e.g., Valencia or Barcelona, have seen their ability to generate works weaken in recent years (particularly their ability get their works on the market). In Catalonia at least, the reappearance of the documentary has been a safety net for an audiovisual industry in crisis (particularly in the film sector). However, the situation has also put even more distance between peripheral productions and those generated in the centre. The documentary has saved audiovisual production in Catalonia, but is also the reason why the distance from the production forms with Madrid has increased.

All of these pressures, which stem from an economic and industrial sphere but have their most obvious consequences in the fields of aesthetics and culture, have shaped the latest reality of contemporary Spanish documentaries. It is thus a divided reality, as the pressures impede harmonious and homogenous development. Moreover, this divide is yet another consequence of the times we live in, where absolute truths have been shattered and reality fragmented, if not completely destroyed. It should come as no surprise then that the term 'documentary' has been used to cover such different films as *El sol del membrillo* (Víctor Erice, 1992), *Asaltar los cielos* (José Luis López Linares and Javier Rioyo, 1996), *Mones com la Becky* (Joaquín Jordà and Núria Villazán, 1999), *La espalda del mundo* (Javier Corcuera, 2000), *En construcción* (José Luis Guerín, 2001), *Polígono sur* (Dominique Abel, 2001), *Machín toda una vida* (Núria Villazán, 2002), *Cravan vs. Cravan* (Isaki Lacuesta, 2002) and *El gran Gato* (Ventura Pons, 2002). The nature of each of these films responds to aesthetically and commercially different objectives and production approaches¹⁴ (the list was limited to films released in the cinema as differences in production, format and objectives in the television area would have made it even longer). What seems

clear is that the current resurgence of the documentary in Spain also responds to a need within the audiovisual industry to diversify production and obtain an equal footing with the neighbouring European reality, rather than a social necessity. In other words, there is the industry but not the society the situation requires, at least not in the terms needed.

A quick look at the history of the documentary in Spain suggests two particularly important periods, both of which feature a clear link with a particular time of social unrest: i.e., the years of the Republic (1931-1936) and the last stages of the Transition (1970-1984). In the first case, the advent of the Republic introduced a series of civil liberties that saw a change from documentaries made principally with propaganda purposes to ones that were much more interesting both socially and aesthetically: from the films shot in the teaching missions through to the *Velo y Mantilla* films and *Las Hurdes*, by Luis Buñuel. The two elements that stand out in this new type of documentary were the training film (as a social objective) and the *avant-garde* film (as an aesthetic objective). This documentary effort eventually materialised in the interesting war films made during the Civil War. The second golden period was located mainly in television and took place in the run-up to the Transition. The appearance of TVE-2 in 1966 (or UHF, as it was called at the time) signified the start-up of a real creation laboratory, not just in documentaries, although mainly within that field, which would continue for the next ten years. This experiment included the participation of young filmmakers who represented what we would today label as a clear display of political, cultural and social positions that would later appear more unmistakably during the Transition. During this period, expectations arose around the recovery of liberties, which, together with the dissemination around the country of a number of trends in film and culture, such as the underground movement, allowed a new resurgence of the documentary. However, the *democratic normalisation* at the beginning of the 1980s and the promulgation of laws that favoured big-budget projects which condemned more alternative funding models to oblivion, made it clear that the renaissance of the genre was, again, temporary.

It is hard to believe that the documentary is on the rise today because there are a number of similar social bases. This involves a serious problem for its harmonious develop-

ment, more or less as crucial as specific institutional support for the genre. Documentarists in Spain today are not at the *avant-garde* of a society that is insistent with regard to its forms of policy, culture or leisure. Both filmmakers and producers face the difficult task of finding spaces of social, aesthetic and political concerns that are not easily locatable¹⁵. It is no coincidence that we can identify two main issues in Spanish documentaries, although they coincide in situating the conflict within a space alien to the viewer and removed from the public. The first is the historical documentary, which always shows a closed and therefore removed historical conflict. The second is one that shows 'otherness', i.e., conflictive spaces different to one's own. The former mainly involves documentaries based on the Spanish Civil War (and its immediate consequences) which deal with conflicts overcome by the country's democratic transition: democratisation establishes a new beginning, and even though some of these documentaries claim to be *repairing* an historic injustice, it is always an injustice located in the past. One example is the distance in *La vieja memoria* (Jaime Camino, 1977), a film which, while talking about the past, interrogates Spanish society about the present it is building. Another is *Los niños de Rusia* (Jaime Camino, 2001), the images of which extend to the present with the function of embedding it more deeply in the past (i.e., unable to be recovered). The latter include a great many documentaries that deal with contemporary but far-off realities, e.g., *El juego de Cuba* (Manuel Martín Cuenca, 2001), *El caso Pinochet* (Patricio Guzmán, 2001) or *Balseros* (Carles Bosch and Josep Maria Domènech, 2002).

In short, there are few contemporary Spanish documentaries that investigate present conflicts in Spanish society, and those that do establish a number of fluctuating and vaguely defined discursive strategies. The clearest examples include *En construcción* (José Luis Guerín, 2001), *Asesinato en febrero* (Éterio Ortega, 2001), *Polígono Sur* and even *Fuente Álamo. La caricia del tiempo* (Pablo García, 2001). What most of these documentaries that seek to investigate contemporary Spanish society have in common is that they start from a clear commitment to the people involved (people who lose out, in the majority of the cases) but then project a number of filmic and social stereotypes on them which, rather than bringing us closer to them, establish a layer between the people onscreen and

the viewer. This might be beneficial for the film, as the viewer ends up feeling involved in this type of stereotyped treatment (such as in the case of *En construcción*, which, not coincidentally, was the most-watched Spanish documentary in recent years) but it is dangerous because it establishes a number of overly obvious mediations. The films therefore work very well as aesthetic constructions but are removed from any social or political analysis. Furthermore, it is paradoxical that history, the past and memory are very rarely cited in this group of documentaries. The most obvious case is *Asesinato en febrero*, where the director Eterio Ortega manages to establish a discussion about the subject of ETA in social terms, but at the expense of a number of basic questions. It is worth remembering, because of the parallels that could be established thematically, that one documentary made during the Transition, *El proceso de Burgos* (Imanol Uribe, 1979), began with a monologue by Francisco Letamendía in which, while continually moving around as if enclosed by the frame, he gave a history of the Basque Country from the 15th century through to the birth of ETA. Ortega's film did the opposite: there were no historical reasons for the situation, it just exposed an action and its consequences. Although most of the cases involve very valid films, they end up lacking a mechanism that links them to society and that is not at the same time a lens that circumscribes the final image to the exclusive discretion of the filmmaker.

Josep Maria Català recently reminded us of the importance of the feeling of *melancholy* in contemporary art (and therefore in the documentary as an artistic form) and its differences with the feeling of *nostalgia*: "People who took part in something which has disappeared feel nostalgia, while melancholy is a way of emotionally capturing the changes and the passing of time about reality. Nostalgia is an individual gesture, while melancholy is social"¹⁶. In other words, *melancholy* incorporates the two terms that appear to be hard to reconcile in a great many contemporary Spanish documentaries: history and society, in such a way that at least one part of these mechanisms that link Spanish society to its documentaries (and, therefore, its documentarists) involves nothing other than *melancholy*. The best example of this could be the magnificent film by Joaquín Jordà and Núria Villazán, *Mones com la Becky*. As Català goes on to say, "It (melancholy) is an ambiguous

feeling but one that is tremendously fertile. It is a feeling that stirs us to action, but which at the same time preserves us from violent, drastic and definitive movements. A feeling which, in short, is absolutely essential to understanding a new reality that is being made through the amalgamation of a lost reality and another reality yet to be found"¹⁷. If we say that one of the big problems of contemporary Spanish documentaries is the link between the past, present and society, this *amalgamation of realities* is the perfect catalyst for overcoming this problem. Spanish documentaries have to look at reality while incorporating present, past and future in a discourse which, just because it is coherent, does not mean it is not complex, and this complexity will be delimited by the four points of the compass I have outlined in this vein: industry, culture, history and society. But to move with ease between these four points of the compass, it is necessary to have a centre of gravity that locates them on the land, and this point of gravitation finds one of its best expressions, one of its most obvious examples, in something as contemporary as *melancholy*.

Notes

1. Some parts of this text are the reworking of a previous text (Irregularities in a Singular Process: The Spanish Documentary Boom) presented on 17 December 2002 within the framework of *Visible Evidence. Films, médias, réalité*, celebrated in Marseille.
2. Marco Meere, "El documental en España y Europa: audiencia y producción", in *Boletín FUNDESCO*, no. 139, April 1993, p. 10. In fact, Meere's text did not refer to documentaries (despite the title), but rather 'factual programmes', examples of which in Spain include *Informe semanal* and *¿Quién sabe donde?*, which he used to illustrate the text. According to the concept I use here, documentaries are a subtype of the factual programme, but only one subtype (always speaking within a very general organisation of the audiovisual field).
3. Other initiatives along the same line have been mentioned in previous texts I have worked on with colleagues: Josetxo Cerdán and Casimiro Torreiro, "Entre la esperanza y el desaliento. Situación actual del documental en España"; Josep Maria Català, Josetxo Cerdán and Casimiro Terreiro (editors) *Imagen, Memoria y Fascinación. Notas sobre el documental en España*, Ocho y Media, Malaga Spanish Film Festival, Madrid, 2001, pp. 139-151; and Josetxo Cerdán, "El documental", within the work by María Corominas and Miquel de Moragas (editors), *Informe de la comunicació a Catalunya (2001-2002)*, UAB, Bellaterra, 2003, pp. 13-116. It is also true that there has been some bad news in recent months, notably in the area of film exhibitions; the latest Spanish films have been unable to reach (or even come near) the level of viewers established in *En construcción* (José Luis Guerin, 2001).
4. The cultural call by audiovisual production in general has been made virtually since cinema was first recognised as a creative activity and is a common theme people return to when there is an industrial sector interested in promoting a protectionist policy.
5. Joan González, "Una mirada a l'entorn documental", in *Quaderns del CAC*, 14, September-December 2002, pp. 91-96. This is not the place to discuss the forms of legitimisation and the call currently established by the documentary, but rather a touchstone for remembering the many documentaries banned by the censors in the countries where they were made (beginning with Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes* (1932), the screening of which was suspended by the Spanish authorities during the Second Republic) and all the documentaries that have been made clandestinely or during periods of dubious democratic legitimacy of the people in power (and which might also include the time of the Spanish Transition), not to mention, as it dealt primarily with propaganda films, documentaries such as *Triumph des Willens* (1934) and *Olympia* (1938), two films that Lenny Riefenstahl made under the direct orders of the 3rd Reich in Germany. I therefore do not believe that the documentary can be linked to the democratic health of a country, although it does often acquire a greater force during times of social agitation (and I am not referring only to the proliferation of social or war documentaries).
6. Meere criticised this delay in 1993 (*op. cit.*).
7. WINSTON, B. *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries*, British Film Institute, London, 2001.
8. When a documentarist chooses to put himself at the service of a number of previous ideas, he finds himself on the shaky ground of the propaganda film, a type of documentary in which the protagonists are put to the service of ideas. In this sense, I could mention the work of Britain's GPO, which was able to turn around the propagandistic approach of its production (steps which later, during World War II, would be masterfully developed by Humphrey Jennings). For further information on this topic, see Josep Maria Català and Josetxo Cerdán, "La mirada y la ira" in the work by Carlos F. Heredero and José Enrique Monterde, *En torno al Free Cinema. La tradición realista en el cine británico*, Gijón International Film Festival, Gijón, 2001, pp. 53-63.
9. In this framework, I should also mention that the cheapest programmes in the field of factual programmes, which, as I said in the first note include the documentary as a subtype, are reality shows (programmes that also allow great profitability as they generate 'parasites' throughout the programming of the broadcaster that screens them).
10. Although this is not the place to discuss it, it is also of considerable concern that this step is being taken at a particularly key moment, in which television is becoming the principle source of funding for the audiovisual sphere (compulsorily by law) and when the European Community's

television without borders directives are becoming increasingly clear.

11. PENA, J. J. "Cine español de los noventa: Hoja de reclamaciones", in *Secuencias*, 16, 2nd quarter 2003, pp. 38-54.
12. The term comes from a conversation I had with the director of *Cravan vs. Carvan* (2002), Isaki Lacuesta.
13. See GARCÍA DE CASTRO, M. *La ficción televisiva popular*, Gedisa, Barcelona, 2002.
14. In recent years there have been very serious efforts to organise the things that have come to be covered by the term 'documentary', the most notable of which is an article by Josep Maria Català, which begins with a call to use the term 'film-essay': "El film-ensayo: la didáctica como una actividad subversiva" in *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, 34, February 2000, pp. 78-96. This text was awarded Best Research Article of the Year by the Spanish Association of Film Historians and has since become quite popular among both theorists and filmmakers.
15. I am aware, in this framework, that one could argue that the figures that films get at the box-office or TV will end up influencing cultural and political references. However, this argument is too feeble, as two examples illustrate: the television documentary that attracted the most viewers across the world in 2003 was (at the time of writing) the international co-production *The Odyssey of the Species*, which TVE broadcast in prime time on its first channel. The word 'documentary' was not used to promote it. This means it would be hard to follow this model as the genre is located in society. With regard to theatres, the big sensation of the season was *Bowling for Columbine*, a documentary mega-production which is valid with regard to its formal postulates, but which could only be orchestrated from a place like Hollywood. In this case, it is therefore the production model that invalidates the example.
16. Josep Maria Català, "La necesaria impureza del nuevo documental", in *Documentaria 2003. Muestra Internacional de Cine Documental de Mujeres. Sexo, Mentiras y Mundialización*, Catalogue, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2003, p. 25.
17. Op. cit., page 26.