

# DIALOGUE WITH ABSENCE: THE LETTER AS A LEGACY OF THE TRAUMATIC PAST IN THE CONTEMPORARY SPANISH DOCUMENTARY\*

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## **I. THE EPISTOLARY GENRE, DOCUMENTARY FILM AND POSTMEMORY**

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In the last fifteen years, the Spanish documentary film has expanded its potential as an experimental and creative medium (Cerdán, 2015), developing new resources for talking about the present and the historical past, including, for example, the adoption of performative patterns or the incorporation of narrative resources associated with fiction (Sánchez Alarcón and Jerez Zambrana, 2013). The digitalisation of filming and editing processes and the rise of the Internet have not only facilitated more flexible and immediate film production; they have also allowed filmmakers a degree of intimacy and introspection more characteristic of a written diary than of major fiction film productions, which are generally subordinated to large-scale technical equipment and crews and standardised production patterns. The lightwei-

ght and adaptable nature of digital technologies has resulted in a proliferation of personal projects—some of them self-produced—for which the filmmaker is able to adopt a much more subjective and reflective approach to reality (Mamblona, 2012: 86). In this sense, the documentary—traditionally identified with objectivity, restraint and transparency—has taken a direction inspired by avant-garde movements and video technology, opening the doors to a “desire to communicate things of the inner world” and thus to turn what was once strictly private into material for collective consumption (Cueto, 2007: 28).

The adoption of a first-person perspective became a prominent feature in American avant-garde films of the mid-twentieth century, with on-screen explorations of identity by Maya Deren, Jonas Mekas, and Kenneth Anger (Font, 2008: 40). The new home video recording formats made it possible to balance the overwhelming predomi-

## A DOCUMENTARY APPROACH THAT EXPLORES THE PERSONAL AND THE PRIVATE DOES NOT NECESSARILY HAVE TO FOCUS ON THE FIGURE OF THE FILMMAKER

nance of external focalisation of cinema until that time with a gaze directed towards the inner lives of the filmmakers and their relationship with the world around them (De la Torre, 2015: 572). Contributing to this new direction was the socio-cultural context of the 1970s and 1980s, marked by decolonisation processes and the “democratisation of the agents of history” that gave a voice to ordinary people, to those until then excluded from history; it was a context that facilitated this necessary subjective turn so that those who had previously been silenced by the media and the institutions could begin to be heard and arouse some interest (Wieviorka, 1998: 128). In Spain, a significant proportion of these personal documentaries only appeared after the beginning of the twenty-first century, coinciding with the rise of interest in other fields in revisiting the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship and, specifically, in measuring the depth of the scars left by that historical period on society as a whole and on individual families (Quílez, 2013: 47). Indeed, a documentary approach that explores the personal and the private does not necessarily have to focus on the figure of the filmmaker and his or her direct experience. In this sense, as will be demonstrated below, in the past few years films have been produced that address Spain's recent past through an exercise in *postmemory*, i.e., where the authors explore events, memories and narratives that they did not experience themselves, but that they inherited from previous generations (Hirsch, 1997: 22). In this context, most of the literary, theatrical, photographic and audiovisual (post-)narratives produced by children and gran-

dchildren are not informed by an allegedly objective and mimetic approach to the historical event; instead, they are characterised by subjectivity, doubt and, in many cases, a challenge of the established, univocal versions of the past, while also being structured around emotions (Araüna and Quílez, 2017).

There are many techniques that filmmakers use to reshape history – both social history and, sometimes, family history – and thereby lay the foundations of their own subjectivity. There are documentaries for which the introspection inherent in first person narration serves as the vehicle, like *Nadar* (Carla Subirana, 2008), where the director attempts to reconstruct the story of her grandfather, killed by firing squad under the Franco regime, through an investigation that she leads herself; there are also filmmakers who have made use of home movies to offer a present-day re-reading of a past safeguarded by the older generation, like the short film *Haciendo memoria* [Jogging My Memory] (Sandra Ruesga, 2005); and documentaries that include fiction scenes and even cartoons to recreate memories of a childhood marked by the trauma of orphanhood and totalitarian violence, like *The Blonds* (Los Rubios, Albertina Carri, 2003) or *The Missing Picture* (L'Image manquante, Rithy Panh, 2013). Among the many expressive possibilities for the construction of subjectivities, our interest in this article lies in the reading of personal correspondence, i.e., the use of the private letter, understood not only as a historic document but also, and above all, as a space for an intergenerational encounter and as a site for introspection and *postmemory*.

Considered a minor genre in literary studies (Sierra Blas, 2002: 122), private letters serve as supporting documents for historical research, and also as sources of information to enhance our understanding of attitudes of the period studied and for “the reconstruction of events from everyday life” (Doll, 2002: 35). Over the centuries, the letter has been used as a vehicle for all kinds of

information (from diplomatic communiques and court orders to declarations of love, and including personal, social or political news), serving to “express gratitude or joy, offer condolences, advice, or recommendations, to summon, exhort, console, ask a favour, share an opinion or suggest a project” (Mestre, 2000: 14). They are texts created for private consumption, some of which end up many years later becoming valuable documents for exploring, enriching and constructing the collective memory (Torrás, 1998: 5). In this way, as De Marco notes, these “apparently mundane discursive forms can be given new meaning when they are placed in relation with other texts” (De Marco, 2008) and also with time periods and contexts other than those in which they were created.

In the realm of filmmaking, the testimonial record known as the letter generally reflects a desire on the part of the filmmaker to demonstrate the relationship between the telling of his or her story and its reception by the audience, which becomes the addressee in the filmic correspondence. In *Letter from Siberia* (Lettre de Sibérie, Chris Marker, 1957), the film’s director illustrates a journey to past and present-day Siberia through a voice-over narrator who writes to an unknown recipient. Other films that also use letters expressly to construct their narratives are *Letter to Jane* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1972), *A Letter to Freddy Buache* (Lettre à Freddy Buache, Jean-Luc Godard, 1982), *Letter to My Sister* (Lettre à ma soeur, Habiba Djahnine, 2006) and *Correspondence(s)* (2009–2011), a series of video-letters exchanged between five pairs of acclaimed filmmakers, including Jonas Mekas, Isaki Lacuesta and Naomi Kawase, among others.

However, in some films the letter functions as a kind of legacy, i.e., as a text read by generations

after the one to which its writer belonged, to reconstruct a past that was before their time, but in which they somehow seem to be reflected. In these cases, letters serve as inherited documents, recovered by the filmmaker to piece together the puzzle of a past event or a past life that has until then been unknown to him or her. As emblems of memory (Hirsch, 1997: 5), here the letters attest to a loss that persists in the day-to-day lives of those

who recover them, playing a dual role: on the one hand, they function as proof of the existence of a given individual, and on the other, they operate as documents that pose enigmas and questions. In these do-

cumentaries, letters also evoke the contradictory coexistence of absence and presence intrinsic to the epistolary genre, as in all correspondence the addressee is physically absent yet invoked in the moment of writing, and when the letter is being read, the sender is present only in the handwritten lines on the page or in the mouth of the one who reads them (Soto, 1996: 155). Thus, in the films analysed below, the filmmaker becomes a kind of medium conjuring the absent, giving them back their voice through these legacies they have left in writing, but at the same time intervening in the form their reappearance takes.

In the following pages we will attempt to elucidate the techniques and strategies used by filmmakers like Maite García Ribot, Alejandro Alvarado and Concha Barquero, and Carolina Astudillo to place on screen the correspondence of individuals who lived in a troubled past era. These filmmakers take this approach in different ways. While *Cartas a María* [Letters to Maria] (Maite García Ribot, 2015) and *Pepe el andaluz* [Pepe the Andalusian] (Alejandro Alvarado and Concha Barquero, 2012) could be classified as what Hirsch calls “familial postmemory” (2012: 22), given

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**THEY ARE TEXTS CREATED FOR PRIVATE CONSUMPTION, SOME OF WHICH END UP MANY YEARS LATER BECOMING VALUABLE DOCUMENTS FOR EXPLORING THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

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that their filmmakers are related by blood to the protagonists of the bygone era they examine, *The Great Flight* (El gran vuelo, Carolina Astudillo, 2014) posits an “affiliative postmemory”, a position with the past that is generational rather than direct, as Astudillo, born and raised under the Chilean dictatorship, while not a “legitimate” granddaughter of the victims of the Spanish Civil War (Sosa, 2013: 76), nevertheless feels herself to be an heir to a traumatic memory which in her film will also be vested with new meaning. And it is this work of recontextualising the testimonies, archives and letters shared that places these three films among the group of contemporary documentary productions which, as Josetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández suggest, in relation to *Soldados anónimos* [Anonymous Soldiers] (Pere Vilà and Isaki Lacuesta, 2009), *Los materiales* [The Materials] (Los Hijos, 2010) and *Dime quién era Sanchicorrota* [Tell Me About Sanchicorrota] (Jorge Tur, 2013), “show us how the pragmatic past can be constructed without the sensationalist practices of the institutional documentary” (Cerdán and Fernández, 2017: 195).

## **2. FROM GRANDPARENTS TO GRANDCHILDREN: CARTAS A MARÍA AND PEPE EL ANDALUZ**

In contrast with *The Great Flight*, the films *Cartas a María* and *Pepe el Andaluz* are performative documentaries focused on *I* located in a third generation (the grandchildren) who has chosen to create a documentary film to try to shed some light on some enigmatic moments of their respective family memories—and of the socio-political and historical memory that frame them. In both films, the directors thus play a dual role: the investigator searching through archives of newspapers, films and documents, who recovers, re-edits and reinterprets public domain images of the past to take the spectator back to the era of the Spanish Civil War, Franco’s dictatorship

and exile; and the descendant, heir to a family album—and, as we will discover, to personal letters—who feels a duty to put a name to the portraits, or to read between the lines of those cryptic written passages.

The event that triggered *Cartas a María*, winner of the award for best documentary at the Festival Cinespaña in Toulouse in 2015, was the onset of the Alzheimer’s disease afflicting the director’s father, which compelled her to embark on a journey to uncover and reconstruct the history of her grandfather Pedro. A militant anarchist with the Durruti Column, Pedro was imprisoned in various internment camps before finally ending up dying in Bordeaux, ironically in an Allied bombing. From 1937 to 1943, he wrote some fifty letters to his wife, María, and his children, Pedrín and Flores, the latter the filmmaker’s father. It is precisely these letters that García Ribot discovers among her uncle’s books. And it is with these letters that she undertakes to give full meaning to certain words (“anarchist”, “war”, “exile”) that she heard in adult conversations when she was a child and that served her to build a kind of legend around the figure of this grandfather she never knew. Indeed, by choosing a few excerpts from these letters and superimposing them on a black

*Cartas a María* (Maite García Ribot, 2015). Image of one of Pedro’s letters to María, recovered by the filmmaker.



screen, García Ribot turns the correspondence into a series of interludes that establish the milestones in the forgotten biography of her grandfather: the trauma of forced separation, the hunger of the post-war years, the fear of death, the forced labour, the grief, but also the hope of returning to Gérjal (the town in the southern Spanish province of Almería, where María remained with her children, waiting).

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**WITH HER FILM PROJECT, GARCÍA RIBOT SEEKS TO EXPLORE AND RECONSTRUCT A HISTORICAL AND EMOTIONAL TERRITORY THAT NOBODY HAS VISITED IN SEVENTY YEARS**

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As Ana Amado points out, one of the characteristic features of productions made by second and third generations is the way that the filmmakers “translate the inherited language into their own”, thereby overlapping their own voice with “the voice of authority” and “replacing it with a new inventory” (Amado, 2004: 59). In *Cartas a María*, as can also be seen in *Pepe el Andaluz*, the filmmaker’s presence is revealed clearly through a first-person voice-over narrative; in other words, through a place of enunciation where García Ribot expresses her motivations, interests and objectives for her film project, whereby she seeks to explore and reconstruct a historical and emotional territory that nobody has visited in seventy years. In this way, the role her voice plays is not to appropriate the incomplete correspondence of her grandfather – since we are only given access to it through the written word – but to position herself as the heir to and interpreter of a particular past. Thus, like other *postmemory* documentaries that can be described as “filmic works in progress” (Ortega, 2007: 38;

Kruger, 2007: 37), the work of recovering, re-interpreting and depicting another person’s story is made explicitly visible over the course of the film, through the subjectivity of the director. The filmmaker’s voice is set in opposition to the supposed objectivity of the omniscient narrator and the apparent authority of testimony characteristic of the traditional documentary, while acting as a bridge between the subjective aspects and the social structures of the act of remembering. At the same time, through the adoption of the epistolary genre, García Ribot indirectly establishes an impossible dialogue, occurring as it does between the world of the living and the world of the dead, between grandfather and granddaughter; a dialogue which, although fictitious in a way because it never took place in the past and will never take place in the future, establishes a temporal frame of its own, at the moment of enunciation, that exists only in the here and now of the documentary narration.<sup>1</sup>

On the visual level, García Ribot illustrates this playing with temporal frames through the use of archive footage from the era. The slow-motion black-and-white footage shows buildings destroyed by bombs, desolate landscapes, factory workers, and men, women and children carrying bundles, escaping from the horror. From the past the filmmaker also recovers family snapshots, which she projects on screen and comments on with the attention to detail of someone trying to uncover the feelings, fears and longings of her forebears. However, the film is not filled only with this type of elegiac material, as the past coexists with the present of the enunciation, which García Ribot animates with colour images of places and people. The filmmaker decides to trace her grandfather’s steps and visit the same places where he spent time: Gérjal, the Pyrenees, the French border at Bourg-Madame, the Septfonds labour camp, Toulouse, Le Vernet Internment Camp, the Channel Islands, and Bordeaux, the city where Pedro was finally reunited with his brother, but

also where he would die. In this way, through the landscapes she visits (“witnesses of his journey, and now of mine”, García Ribot remarks at one point in the film), but also through the letters she has inherited from him, the filmmaker traces an invisible thread that connects her lost ancestor, a connection that replenishes the foliage of her family tree at the very moment it has begun to wither due to her father’s illness. The film’s ending is highly significant in this respect: García Ribot points the camera to a blue sky in constant movement and asserts that after her physical and emotional journey through the past, she feels closer to her father and to her grandfather. Despite the fact they have been moving in opposite directions (her father towards forgetting, García Ribot towards remembering), she feels at the end of her journey that “it’s like the crack that opened up in our lives seventy years ago has finally been closed.” And in part, that objective is achieved thanks to letters that not only open a window on her grandfather’s life story but also strengthen a father-daughter bond headed irrevocably towards amnesia and estrangement.

Another of the documentaries in which the voice of the grandchild is interwoven with correspondence from the past is *Pepe el andaluz*, winner of the Audience Award for Best Documentary at the 16th Málaga Film Festival in 2013. Directed by Concha Barquero and Alejandro Alvarado, in this film Alvarado, like García Ribot, seeks to piece together the life story of his grandfather: Pepe, a sergeant on the nationalist side who ended his days in Argentina. All that Alvarado has of his grandfather’s is a single photo and a lot of questions. Also using an explicit first-person narration, Alvarado expresses his need as a descendant to put names and faces to a story obscured

by the passage of time and a shroud of secrecy. With archive footage, old photos and interviews with his mother, grandmother, uncles and cousin, the filmmaker tries to reconstruct a life that is unknown to him, but which nevertheless marks his own and his family’s present. And like García Ribot, he embarks on a journey, which takes him to Córdoba, Málaga, Toronto, Bogotá and, finally,

Buenos Aires. The letters Pepe sent to his wife, María, acquire marked significance here, as does María herself, the director’s grandmother, who holds more secrets about her long lost husband than even the filmmakers expected. Alvarado integrates the letters into his investigation by reading di-

fferent excerpts aloud; they are passages infused with distress and longing, in which the writer immortalises his desire to be reunited with his loved ones and describes the harshness of his life away from home. On this point, the letters Pepe writes shortly after his departure become what Sierra Blas describes, with reference to this practice of written communication, as a “means of survival, overcoming distances and oblivion” (Sierra Blas, 2002: 124). But as they are being read now in the twenty-first century, these letters also allow the director to establish a spectral dialogue with his ancestors, with whom he can identify (as he shares an extraordinary physical resemblance to his grandfather) but from whom he is also separated by a bitter distance. Indeed, by the end of the film, the mythologised image that his childhood mind had constructed of his long-lost grandfather takes the shape of something more tangible and, as a result, less compensatory: the image of a man who was a sergeant with the insurrectionists and who, after spending three years in prison for fraud and impersonation of a public official, fled the country in search of work and ended up starting a new

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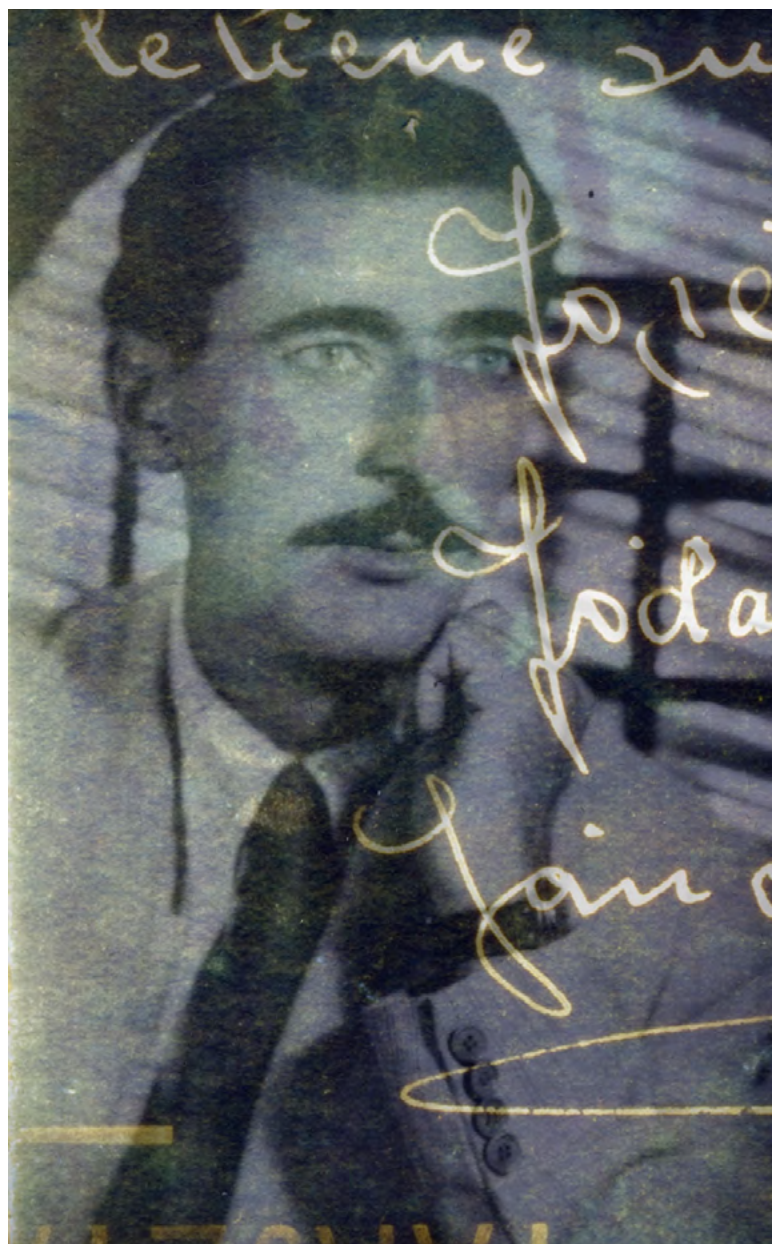
family, thereby abandoning his Spanish wife and children to their fate.

Alvarado's interviews with his grandmother are marked by silences and hesitations as she recounts what happened all those years ago. In reality, María's reticence on the subject hints at the scars and the gaping void that Pepe has left her life. Pepe is thus drawn as an enigma, someone who is nothing more than a name and a picture. His disappearance is initially attributed to their poverty and the need to earn a living by emigrating, but the trauma that the directors explore in the film is the product of a broken promise: a homecoming that never materialised. Pepe's forced emigration appears to be the version agreed on by María's children and María herself: a reconstruction of convenience, but an unstable one, in which contradictory stories are easily exposed and which falls apart altogether when Alvarado begins to delve more deeply. From the outset the film is posited as an investigation, but the first search in official records, which are inaccurate or incomplete and in most cases do not even contain Pepe's name, leads the directors to construct their story by focusing on sources of subjective experience and reviewing personal material like photographs and, of course, the letters.

The personal correspondence serves as the trigger for María's revelation of her secret and for posing the multitude of questions that swirl around the absent figure of Pepe. After some resistance, María finally shows her grandson the letters she received from Pepe when he was in Argentina, as well as an anonymous note that apparently brought an abrupt end to María's story of the waiting wife: "Pepe ran off with a woman and went to the province of Buenos Aires. Sorry for not giving my name. Good-bye." This information introduces a twist, as from this moment María becomes the central focus of the documentary, which turns to her story as a single mother in Algeria, where she emigrated in search of work to feed her children after Pepe left her and where she would soon be

devastated by another war. And when Alvarado, with archaeological fascination, repeats his grandfather's words to María as he reads the letters, he conjures up an ancestral "Other", a more passionate and sentimental Pepe than the man described in the words of his descendants, as if the handwritten lines we see on screen served as a link to a character who was no longer evasive but vulnerable. He is an absent figure who expresses his allegedly unconditional and undying love: "You take it easy, because your Pepe will never forget you." The epistolary material is thus the only element

*Pepe el andaluz* (Alejandro Alvarado and Concha Barquero, 2012). Image of Pepe's handwriting in one of the still frames from the documentary.



that enables us to transcend the ambiguity of the images and gives us access to the Pepe that María knew, as fleeting and deceitful as that Pepe might have been.

At the end of the film, Alvarado goes in search of his grandfather's Argentine descendants, and although Pepe, now dead, will remain an obscure figure in the story, the memories of his relatives will sketch out yet another identity for him, a new turn in the kaleidoscopic portrait that the film offers: the image of a womanising husband and an eccentric father, very different from the fearsome sergeant with the Regulares in Melilla that was presented in a sanitised biographical record. At this point, it is another personal document, this time kept by his Argentine family, that operates as the analogous link for the recovery of his memory and as a site for a spectral encounter: a cassette that has kept a trace of Pepe intact: his voice, which the tape contains with a nostalgic melody that will cross the ocean with his grandson to end the film at María's side. This is the culminating moment of the film: María listens with emotion to Pepe singing (singing to her) a tango that takes her back to a past that her grandson has also visited in a certain way. It is a final gesture of love ("The nostalgia of hearing your crazy laugh, of feeling your breath like a fire close to my mouth," sings Pepe) by a man who disappeared from a family who, many years later, doggedly continues to remember him.

*Cartas a María* and *Pepe el andaluz* are thus presented as documentaries in which memory is woven and unravelled with the snippets collected by their respective directors of a family puzzle that is still missing some pieces. We can therefore conclude that both films are performative and autobiographical documentaries, but also painful journeys into the past and present; or, to put it another way, thwarted attempts to decipher an inherited language (letters, photo albums, stories) that in most cases prove mysterious and resist a univocal reading.

### **3. THE INTIMATE VOICE AND THE POLITICAL SPHERE: THE GREAT FLIGHT**

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In contrast with the two documentaries discussed above, in *The Great Flight* (winner of Best Documentary at the 18th Festival de Málaga in 2015 and at Alcances 2015), Astudillo places her subjectivity and the process of her investigation in the background in order to give a voice to Clara Pueyo, a communist militant who was exiled in France in 1939. Pueyo was arrested in Barcelona in 1941 and sent to Les Corts prison for her clandestine work in rebuilding the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC, *Partido Socialista Unificado de Cataluña*). The film is made up of archive footage, for the most part taken from family films from the late 1930s and 1940s. These are home movies of the Catalan and Valencian upper middle class, originally "intended for a private interpretation" (Odin, 2007: 201), but which Astudillo vests with new meaning through an expressive montage to redefine them as public documents and to reflect on class and gender inequality in that tumultuous period of Spain's history (Quílez, 2016: 86). From a formal perspective, the film's material and essay approach is expressed in a male voice-over that guides the viewer's reading of its heterogeneous mix of images. With the exception of a brief fragment with different voices reciting the names of eleven people shot by firing squad, there is only one voice heard other than the narrator's: Clara Pueyo (played by an actress) reading some excerpts from her own letters, which thereby become a subject and a privileged voice in the enunciation.<sup>2</sup>

It is through the character of Pueyo, a hazy figure in terms of the precise details available on her life story and in terms of what happened to her after her escape from prison, that Astudillo appeals to a kind of collective experience of militant women in the period from the Second Spanish Republic to the harsh, early post-war years, when the protagonist was a prolific and avid wri-



ter of letters and notes. Given that *The Great Flight* is offered as a reflection on archive material, Pueyo's letters are integrated into this visual and verbal fabric as the most personal, intimate and accurate material (although not conclusively so) available to the filmmaker not only to reconstruct Pueyo's biography, but also, and especially, to reconstruct her emotional world. As in the case of the first two documentaries analysed above, the words of the communist militant – addressed to her brother in a concentration camp, to female comrades and to her lovers – establish a kind of direct connection with her experience of the conflict and its ramifications on private lives.

Our access to these expressions of Pueyo's emotional experience shift the conflict from the political sphere (the norm for historiographic narrations of the period) to an exploration of the ways that the members of revolutionary organisations lived and negotiated gender equality: "But life is also a daily struggle, the suffering of others, [...] and we women can no longer hope for anything for ourselves," she states in one of these letters. Indeed, as the documentary progresses, one of the possible hypotheses to explain Pueyo's disappearance from the face of the earth becomes increasingly compelling. Pursued by the Franco regime and treated with distrust by the directors of the PSUC, her escape from the Les Corts women's prison coincided with the flight of other communist leaders imprisoned in La Modelo: Albert Assa, Antonio Pardinilla, Manuel Donaire and Ángel Olaya. Their successful escape

plan, known as "the great flight", was not looked upon favourably by some of the militants, who believed that the fake order of release that facilitated their escape may have been bought by betraying other comrades to the imperialist powers, with whom the escapees evidently had a collusive relationship (Hernández, 2001: 730). Moreover, before her escape, Pueyo was criticised harshly by some of her comrades for her extramarital affair with Assa. In one letter, Pueyo complains to Pardinilla, the party's general secretary, about this lack of understanding for party members who, despite making a few mistakes,

had given their all for the communist cause. Would the rejection had been so fierce and the criticism so harsh if Clara Pueyo had been a man? This is precisely what she seems to be asking in this letter, when she claims that "others have been forgiven for things that nobody has even tried to



*El gran vuelo* (Carolina Astudillo, 2014).  
One of the few extant portraits of Clara Pueyo.

understand in me."

In contrast with the Marías to whom the letters in Ribot's and Alvarado and Barquero's films are addressed – both of whom act as mirrors for the absent men and the young directors searching for them – Pueyo is the main subject of this film and the character who writes and structures the story. In the dialogic first person of Pueyo's letters there is a recurring contradiction that marks her life experience, which is thus characterised as a swinging pendulum between militant asceticism and a feminine-tinged humanism that vindicates the need for sympathy and caring in the context of a masculinised, disciplinary political party. It is in

this sense that the letters written by Pueyo function as a form of “auto-gyno-graphic” expression, i.e., a type of writing which, although personal, interacts “with the cultural and social discourses of its context of production” that represent the woman who writes “as a second-class individual” (Torras, 1998: 30).

Pueyo’s letters and notes also mark the final points of the story that is left of her: they would be the object of scrutiny on the part of the authorities and the regime, who would scan their words for evidence to condemn her, and they would also inspire the distrust that the party expressed towards her after her escape. Over the course of the film, Astudillo uses Pueyo’s own private testimony to construct, with the archaeological precision of Peter Forgács, an essay on the biased production of images, universalising her forgotten status on multiple levels: as a woman, a militant and a dissident (Yusta, 2004: 63). Pueyo’s own words, although not precise in relation to the events, are indisputable in relation to the protagonist’s inability to fit into the identity categories that her context offered her. This inability to fit is associated with the marginalisation that women suffered (and still suffer) in the representations the patriarchy constructs of their bodies and the roles it assigns them. These are images that Astudillo returns to and which she constantly and tirelessly questions through Pueyo’s letters and the narrator on whom she projects herself.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

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The films analysed here all strive to break what Alvarado and Barquero would call a “tombstone-silence” (2015: 128) looming over a partial memory about which the directors themselves remark: “at school we all read the same history books with yawning gaps in their discussion of Francoism” (Alvarado and Baquero, 2015: 130). Although none of these three films have had the impact or distribution enjoyed by other audiovi-

sual products sponsored by public institutions and media corporations, they are all significant works that shed light on the representation of the past and its relationship with the present. The relative simplicity of their respective production processes allows the filmmakers greater creative freedom and the ability to place their own personal signature on their work. All three have been featured and awarded at major documentary film festivals both in Spain and internationally, and all three form part of the Filmin catalogue, a Spanish online film and TV series platform. They have all inspired discussions on alternative circuits and in public screenings at cultural centres, clubs and associations for memory. They are thus films that occupy an important place in contemporary Spanish documentary cinema.

As documentaries that explore familial (and also collective) memory, the role that letters play in all three films is structural. The use of letters restores the words of the absent subjects and positions their discourses in the world, albeit in manifestly subjective forms. Moreover, from a functional perspective, these documentaries have filled in gaps in the official records, due either to oversights or to deliberate administrative suppression, or to the systematic omission of the emotional dimension in traditional archive culture. The letters in these films constitute a textual source, a piece that the directors dust off like an archaeologist would do with an unclassified artefact; however, in their audiovisual formalisation, their expressive and emotional qualities also emerge. Indeed, in all three examples analysed, the letters have been inherited by a generation which, having grown up in a predominantly audiovisual culture, turns to the image as the medium for channelling history, family memory and collective memory. The words of the absent, beyond their semantic dimension, are constituted by lines, a transfer of the gesture to writing which, when presented to the camera, is filtered by the subjective mediation of the director — a mediation which, as we have seen,

may be explicit or apparently non-existent – and offers the spectator a direct connection to the absent figure, like Barthes' photographic trace (1980). This trace or voice recovers a kind of space in the historical world, or at least, in the story, which privileges experience over evidence. In a manner similar to family photographs, home movies or the interpretations and stories they preserve and pass on from the previous generation, letters open up a space of intergenerational connection where the legacy is intertwined with what is genuinely one's own, i.e., with the personal reflections of the filmmakers and with the fictional tales and creations they develop as tentative explanations of the secrets and contradictions of the past. In this way, history is recreated through the filter of intersubjectivity and emotions.

In short, these letters reconcile macrohistory and microhistory through the mediation of individuals who examine the documents in a different era, to shed light on those silenced spaces of the memory, whether that memory is familial (as especially evident in the first two films analysed) or more historical (as in Astudillo's film). In all three cases, these writings bequeathed by former generations are documents appropriated by the filmmakers to be re-read through the prism of a new context (the present in which the film is made). The end result in each case is a new version of a past that continues to have repercussions – both positive and negative – on our everyday lives.

## NOTES

- \* This article forms part of the R+D projects: "Dictionary of Political and Social Symbols: Iconographic Codes, Places of Memory and Symbolic Milestones in the Twentieth Century Spanish Imaginary" (Ref. HAR2016-77416-P) and "Articulations of Gender in the Contemporary Spanish Documentary: An Intersectional Perspective" (Ref. PGC2018-097966-B-I00). Both projects are funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities.

- 1 This spectral epistolary encounter with the missing family member can also be found in films like *Papá Iván* (María Inés Roqué, 2000) and *Encontrando a Víctor* [Finding Victor] (Natalia Bruschtein, 2005), both directed by the daughters of people who disappeared during the military dictatorship in Argentina. In these films, the filmmakers make use of family legacies – including letters their parents wrote to them while in hiding, when they were children – to reconstruct the traumatic past of their parents and of the country where they were born, in a space of intimacy and subjectivity (Quílez, 2010).
- 2 In her next and most recent documentary, *Ainhua, no soy esa* (2018), Astudillo would again make use of intimate writing to give voice to the absent, to the lost. With home movies and an in-depth reading of the diaries that Ainhua Mata wrote before committing suicide, the filmmaker weaves an alternative portrait of 1990s Spain, while vindicating women's literature as a space for drawing out a female-being historically subjugated to male power.

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## DIALOGUE WITH ABSENCE: THE EPISTLE AS INHERITANCE OF THE TRAUMATIC PAST IN CONTEMPORARY SPANISH DOCUMENTARIES

### Abstract

A recent trend in Spanish documentaries has been to recover the memory of a generation that is progressively disappearing. Notable among the filmmakers engaging in this practice, who in many cases were born since the Spanish transition to democracy, are those who use personal letters written by the victims of the Civil War and the Franco dictatorship as a narrative focus. These letters are represented as legacies recovered by the filmmakers to establish an impossible dialogue with their deceased authors, a dialogue that allows them to delve into the familial and/or collective memory of a period marked by totalitarian terror and violence. Through an analysis of the films *Pepe el andaluz* [Pepe the Andalusian] (Alejandro Alvarado and Concha Barquero, 2012), *The Great Flight* (El gran vuelo, Carolina Astudillo, 2014) and *Cartas a María* [Letters to Maria] (Maite García Ribot, 2015), this article explores the subjectivities created by these epistolary dialogues and how they can shed light on certain blind spots in Spanish history.

### Key words

Documentary Film; Epistolary Genre; Postmemory; Spanish Civil War; Familiar Memory.

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## DIÁLOGO CON LA AUSENCIA: LA EPÍSTOLA COMO HERENCIA DEL PASADO TRAUMÁTICO EN EL CINE DOCUMENTAL ESPAÑOL CONTEMPORÁNEO

### Resumen

Recientemente han emergido un conjunto de películas documentales que recuperan la memoria de una generación que, paulatinamente, está desapareciendo. De entre estos ejercicios, firmados en muchos casos por cineastas nacidos en democracia, destacan aquellos que ponen como centro narrativo las cartas personales escritas por quienes sufrieron la Guerra Civil y el franquismo. Se trata de legados que los documentalistas recuperan para establecer, con ellos, un diálogo imposible con el desaparecido; un diálogo que les permite indagar en la memoria familiar o colectiva de unos años marcados por la violencia y el terror totalitario. Este artículo se propone reflexionar, a partir del análisis de *Pepe el andaluz* (Alejandro Alvarado y Concha Barquero, 2012), *El gran vuelo* (Carolina Astudillo, 2014) y *Cartas a María* (Maite García Ribot, 2015), sobre estas nuevas subjetividades y sobre cómo, a partir de la epístola, es posible reivindicar audiovisualmente ciertos olvidos de la historia de España.

### Palabras clave

Documental; género epistolar; posmemoria; guerra civil; memoria familiar.

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