

# Feminine resistances: the figure of the Republican woman in Carolina Astudillo's documentary cinema<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Since the early years of democracy in Spain, the figure of the Republican woman has been recovered, rehabilitated, and reclaimed (albeit somewhat tepidly and as a minor part of the narrative) in documentaries as well as in fictional films. In terms of documentary, however, the filmography of Carolina Astudillo stands out. Astudillo is the author of several shorts and a feature-length film in which she defends the importance of the role women played in the Civil War, the rear-guard and the anti-Francoist resistance. This article seeks to analyse, from the perspective of gender, her film *El gran vuelo* (*The great flight*, 2014) with the aim of showing the ways in which the documentarian - using the story of Clara Pueyo Jornet, a communist militant who disappeared in 1943 - gives shape to the memory of all of the women who disappeared without trace. We seek to show how Astudillo develops a case against the gender discrimination that continues to dominate the imaginary of the Civil War, and at the same time reflect on the imbrication of biography and history, past and present, memory and forgetting.

## Keywords

feminism  
documentary cinema  
gender analysis  
Civil War  
Francoism  
Republican women

## I. Documentaries, women, and memory in recent Spanish history

For decades, cinema has been considered a mode of representation that creates and reinforces social imaginaries that often perpetuate realities that may appear to be natural, but which are in fact culturally constructed and almost always unequal. However, the 'seventh art' can also be reconstructed from the margins as an anti-establishment discourse, operating as a bastion, as resistance, and as an unmasking of social inequalities (Colaizzi 2007; Arranz 2010). In such cases cinema operates as 'a field of intervention and change' in which subjectivity is 'questioned and displaced – resignified' (Colaizzi 2007: 20) through narratives that are often constructed for and on behalf of class, ethnic and gender minorities. Cinema from the margins stands out in terms of its relationship to the subversion of the normative and to the politics of opposition, as does documentary because of its production costs, distribution channels, and number of viewers. From the beginning, documentary has been considered the filmic practice par excellence for being an audio-visual – as well as political – channel for history and memory, and more broadly, for the real, and has been used more often than fiction films as a vehicle for making visible and

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giving expression to the subaltern, the marginalized, the defeated, and those erased by the dominant powers (Estrada 2013: 6). As J. Revert notes, the documentary can function, according to the premise and focus of each particular film, as an effective 'democratic instrument ready to transform social problems and question monolithic and vertical discourses around which power is consolidated' (2014: 222).

In documentaries made from the perspective of gender, we find a very clear tendency among documentarians who emphasise the importance that exemplary women may have had in the past on the basis of these women's world vision and life trajectory. Such films denounce the scant attention these women have received from institutions, the media and more broadly, from public opinion. They also recover spaces forgotten by history and as such enrich the present and propose alternative stories about the past. Feminist cinema distances itself from the established system's hegemonic discourse, which is reluctant to include women's reality in its concerns, at least in a deep and critical way. Within feminist cinema, the documentary has been found to be an excellent means by which to evoke a past that conditions and determines the daily life of both the documentarian and other women. The documentary sometimes does this from the intimate perspective of autobiographical discourse. It was no accident that one of the leitmotifs of the feminist movement in the 1970s was 'the personal is the political', a motto whose ultimate aim is to dismantle the public/private dichotomy that has caused women so much harm throughout history. Additionally, by rejecting all representation that advocates a stable, uniform concept of personal and collective identity, most of these documentaries opt to experiment not only with the hidden sides of the filmmaker's subjectivity or that of the social subjects who are the protagonists of the film, but also with all the possibilities that audio-visual language opens up. This can be explained in part by the way that the soundtrack, editing, and framing play an important role in the perpetuation of gender asymmetries, as S. Maier notes (2011: 16).

A body of work stands out among Spanish documentaries, one that deals with the figure of the defeated and Republican women. This body of work can be located more particularly among documentaries that deal with episodes, themes, figures and perspectives that are rarely, if ever, addressed in the official history of the Civil War and Francoism. It is constructed from clearly feminist premises and claims and is bent on resisting hegemonic modes of reading the past. However, while the figure of the defeated, and more specifically, Republican woman has been recovered, rehabilitated and reclaimed in cinema under democracy, this process generally has taken place in a very half-hearted and sometimes excessively superficial way. Films like *Libertarias/Libertarians* (Aranda, 1996), *Silencio roto/Broken silence* (Armendáriz, 2001), *Las 13 rosas/Thirteen roses* (Martínez-Lázaro, 2007), *Los girasoles ciegos/The blind sunflowers* (Cuerda, 2008), *La mujer del anarquista/The anarchist's wife* (Sehr and Noëlle, 2009), *Estrellas que alcanzar/Stars to wish upon* (Rueda, 2010) and *La voz dormida/The Sleeping voice* (Zambrano, 2011) use a fictionalized recreation of the past to address the stories of women who were on the losing side of the war and who suffered persecution under the dictatorship, as did their male counterparts. However, these productions, framed within an audio-visual industry supported by the state and/or large media corporations, do no more than feed an official memory that is unwilling to cause discomfort or open up new debates about the conflict and the totalitarian regime. As Isaac Rosas asks in *El vano ayer* in regard to the contemporary Spanish novel about the Civil War and Francoism, '[W]ill we be able to create a portrait [of recent Spanish history] that is more than an unchanging photograph, whose analysis of the period and

its consequences goes beyond commonplaces [...]? Ultimately, will it be possible to have a novel that is necessary, that has not been written in vain?' (2004: 17).

A certain kind of documentary cinema has sought to answer Rosas's question in the affirmative, a cinema made from a gendered perspective that, in recent years, has sought to recover the important role that Republican women played in the war, the rear-guard and the anti-Francoist resistance and thus to illuminate these 'obscure zones that have been 'insufficiently rescued' by history (Sánchez-Biosca, 2006: 315). Thus, in *Mujeres en pie de guerra/Women at war* (2004), Susana Koska addresses the life of six female anti-Francoist fighters who testified before the camera (at the time the film was made) about their participation in the war and the clandestine resistance. These women were survivors of the armed conflict, and most were forced to go into exile or suffer the persecution and torture of jail and concentration camps. In Koska's documentary, women take turns before the camera to relate memories that, from a personal perspective, refer to the situation of thousands of women who organized in the rear-guard and then in the first years of Francoism to combat both the regime itself and gender inequality. For example, one of these women, Sara Berenguer, served as Secretary of Propaganda for *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women), an organization that mobilized women during the conflict and was created, according to its statutes, to put an end to 'the triple slavery to which women had been submitted: slavery to ignorance, slavery as women and slavery as workers' (Nash 1999: 127).<sup>2</sup> Connected by the voice-over of Koska herself, who serves as an 'active intermediary' in these stories (Sánchez 2014: 317), and the questions and commentaries embedded in them, *Mujeres en pie de guerra* uses archival images (photographs, excerpts from newsreels and contemporary documentaries and the front pages of newspapers) to illustrate the political and life experience of this group of women.

The use of oral testimony as a Gordian knot in the documentary narrative is repeated in *Las silenciadas/The silenced* (2011), a documentary that Pablo Ces directed, in order to recover a history that he, who was born under democracy, had never been taught in school. In an interview, he states, 'They told me that the war in Galicia ended quickly, but in fact Galicia was one of the places where the war lasted the longest, stretching into the 1950s' (Puga 2011). Using research conducted by Aurora Marco, Ces's mother and author of the book *Mulleres na guerrilla antifranquista galega (Women in the Galician Anti-Francoist Guerilla)*, Ces's film gives voice to the survivors, family members, and Marco herself, in order to map (and reclaim) the struggle of many Galician women who took part in the guerrilla movement, whether by providing shelter, carrying out administrative work, making connections between the Spanish Maquis and the rest of the opposition, or by taking up arms. Among these women, Consuelo Rodríguez, who was 91 years old when the documentary was filmed, stands out. She remembers that the female

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to Berenguer's memories, the documentary shares the memories of Neus Catalá, a maqui and a prisoner in the Ravensbrück concentration camp; Rosa Laviña, member of *Juventudes Libertarias* (Libertarian Youth); Rosa Díaz, exiled in France at twelve years old; Teresa Buigas, daughter of a Republican commander and member of the Communist Party in hiding; and María Salvo, militant in the *Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas* (Unified Socialist Youth), who was sentenced in 1940 to seventeen years in prison. The documentary also contains the brief testimonies of Merçona and Carme Puig Antich, sisters of Salvador Puig Antich, both of whom were students when he was detained and finally executed in March 1974 by garrote vil.

guerrillas 'owned our actions; we didn't owe anyone explanations'. Ces's documentary corroborates M. Nash's thesis that even if a situation of subalternity and dependence (in terms of gender relations) could not be overcome during the war, 'the mass mobilization of the population signified a rupture in the traditional confinement of women to the home and gave them collective public visibility for the first time' (1999: 92).

In *Guillena 1937/Guillena 1937* (2013), Mariano Agudo uses a tone similar to that of Koska and Ces, as well as using the testimony of victims' family members to revive the memory of a terrible event that took place during the Civil War. In September 1937, seventeen women between 24 and 70 years old, all of them daughters, wives or sisters of Republican militia members, were arrested in Guillena (the Sevillian town that gives the film its name). On the order of the rebel authorities, they were taken to the city hall, which had been turned into a provisional jail. One month later, they were shot and buried in a common grave in the cemetery of San José de Gerena, a neighbouring village. Their remains were not exhumed until 2012, after overcoming bureaucratic resistance, and thanks to the volunteer work of various archaeologists from the Arqueoactiva cooperative. The documentary addresses past injustices committed against this group of women, and highlights their families' desire to give their relatives a decent burial and to create a place of tribute that could put an end, as N. Richard notes, to a 'mourning that is in suspense, that is unfinished, tense, that leaves the subject and object in a state of grief and uncertainty, wandering aimlessly around the disappearance of the body and the truth they lack and miss' (2007: 138).

Koska and Ces focus in their work on the decisive and unquestionable participation of women in the anti-Francoist resistance, while Agudo concentrates (in *La madre sola/Single mother* (2010)) on the importance of the exhumation of common graves in the process of recovering historical memory and claiming reparation for the victims of Francoism. Miguel Paredes, for his part, chooses as his central theme the hardships that single women had to suffer in a society marked by the severity of a totalitarian, ultra-Catholic, and patriarchal regime. Eschewing a voice-over and opting instead for a careful and powerful use of archival images, Paredes constructs a case against a dictatorship whose feminine ideal was embodied in the devoted wife and in which the family, as Jordi Roca argues, was seen as a 'refuge and centre of health and moral regeneration' (1996: 224).

Although they portray different lives, the films mentioned above share a clear common theme: they all seek to counteract, insofar as it is possible, the disadvantaged role that women continue to occupy as an object of study, where, as Nash observes, recent research neglects 'women's vision and the perspective of gender' (1999: 85). Carolina Astudillo's filmography contributes to women's visibility. Astudillo is the director of *De Monstruos y Faldas/Of monsters and skirts* (2008), *Lo indecible/The unspeakable* (2012), *El deseo de la civilización: Notas para el gran vuelo /Desire for civilization: notes for the great flight* (2014) and *El gran vuelo/The great flight* (2014), documentaries of different lengths that take a critical and self-reflexive look at their own audio-visual language. They all account for the history of women who, for one reason or another, rebelled against the political and/or social repression that they faced in their respective times and places. All of these films will be examined below.

## **II. Women and political memory in the filmography of Carolina Astudillo**

S. Meyer argues that the ultimate objective of the feminist documentary is, and has been from its beginnings, 'to make women's stories visible', as well as to denounce (and in so doing attempt to change and overcome) 'the circumstances of oppression that had silenced those stories and the circumstances that had made so many of these stories traumatic' (2011: 19). If that is the case, then Astudillo's interest in the story of Clara Pueyo Jornet, the protagonist of *El gran vuelo*, does not seem accidental. *El gran vuelo* is a feature-length culmination of Astudillo's previous work in short films that centre on women and their relationship with political struggle and memory.

Born in Santiago de Chile in 1974, and raised under the military dictatorship, Astudillo began her career as a documentarian with *De Monstruos y faldas*, a 24-minute documentary co-produced for Localia TV and for the Masters programme in creative documentary at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. This medium-length film turned out to be a key rehearsal for her later feature-length film. In effect, this film, made with the help of historian Fernando Hernández, was not only an exercise in the documentation of prison life experienced by female political prisoners during Francoism, but also as a means of discovering the story of the woman - Clara Pueyo Jornet - who six years later would become the subject of *El gran vuelo*. Structured through the testimony of three daughters (Enriqueta Borrás, Libertad Canea and Maricarmen Guallar) and a nephew (Albert Pueyo) of women detained in the Les Corts Women's Prison, *De monstruos y faldas* interweaves oral histories with archival images and animated segments that emphasize the film's pursuit of truth. In this film Astudillo also uses, for the first time, Spanish home movies from the 1930s and 1940s, reading them from the perspective of gender. In *De monstruos y faldas*, the documentarian recovers distant images, turning them into essays about the complicated situation of women during the war and the post-war period in Spain through the process of enlargement, fragmentation and even the alteration of their original speed, thus resignifying them. However, the resignification to which Astudillo subjects home movies from the past is not an entirely new practice in feminist documentary. As M. Turim argues in an article about home movies and the feminist avant-garde,

Daily life, whether from the present or the past, has served as the raw material for certain filmmakers who seek to present a feminine/feminist vision in their films. Images from home movies [...] are one of the forms that these filmmakers have found to explore how cinema gathers and transforms fragments of lived experience' (2011: 282).

The colour images of the four family members of the victims of Francoist repression – who only appear at the beginning and end of the film – complement and contrast with other black and white images recovered from film and other audio-visual archives, images that also evoke the calm and comfortable lives of the Nationalists and their families during the miseries of the war and the postwar period. As later happens in *El gran vuelo*, the documentary archive in this film has an expressive power that transcends a purely illustrative and instrumental function. Along with archival images, Astudillo includes charcoal animations, among which stand out cartoons of needles and thread that seem to stitch shut women's mouths as they end up being trampled by men made of thread. These brief animated scenes allude to the title of the film, as do archival images of sewing machines and needles. The film's title, *De monstruos y faldas* addresses restrictive gender stereotypes, which are exemplified in the documentary through two concrete events. This first is the publication in a Barcelona newspaper of the news of the arrest of one of

these four women ('a monster in skirts has been detained', the article states). The second is the existence and later dismantling of the Oasis, an apartment located in the Barcelona neighbourhood of La Barceloneta that functioned as a storeroom for propaganda, which the female resisters passed off as a place where they met to sew and embroider (the women disguised themselves as the 'angels in the house' to subvert the system). The animations also allude to the labour of memory, which ties (or stitches) things together little by little, sometimes using pieces that don't match. Like Astudillo's other films, *De monstruous y faldas* reflects on the possibilities and impossibilities of reconstructing a distant past, and on its own mechanisms of representation.

Astudillo's interest in traumatic memory is not restricted, however, to Spain or to the Civil War or Francoism. Born under a totalitarian regime, the filmmaker returns in *Lo indecible* to her home country to recover the story of Gabriela Goycoolea. As in *El gran vuelo*, this film recovers an individual experience that, when articulated in story-form, becomes a collective memory. However, the narrative strategy used in this brief documentary differs completely from that used later in her first feature-length film. In *El gran vuelo*, Astudillo only resorts to the use of found footage when she wishes to appeal to the past and to reflect on the images inherited from it. *Lo indecible*, however, uses the word in its full sense, in the form of a testimony, focusing on a figure that floods the fourteen minutes of the film without rest. The voice in this film is still in the process of healing - in this case, it belonged to Goycoolea, a woman who was kidnapped by soldiers in 1974 when she was principal of a small school in Santiago de Chile. She was then confined in a clandestine detention and torture centre, accused of collaborating with the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement, or MIR). Goycoolea's story functions as a multifaceted prism through which other memories of horror are projected, a story that refers to her but also to all the victims of the Pinochet regime. If memory is fragmentary, if it is impossible to evoke atrocious abuses suffered first-hand without error, without distortions, without an overt or involuntarily amnesia, then an audio-visual transcription of such events must also lack unity, closure, definitive answers. To emphasize this quality throughout Goycoolea's testimony, Astudillo has seven male Chilean citizens (a tailor, a lawyer, a doctor, a young passer-by, etc.) read fragments of a seemingly infinite letter that contains detailed testimonies of torture suffered by women in the MIR. These testimonies were taken from the National Commission on Political Prison and Torture Report, commonly known as the Valech Commission. The fact that Astudillo selects an exclusively male group to read the female victims' testimonies of torture is not coincidental: 'I wanted them to be men, not only to serve as a counterpoint, but also to capture what would happen to them as they read these experiences narrated by women, how their bodies would react, what would happen with their voices, what they would feel', she explains in an interview (Wallace 2013). In a way similar to that found in *Shoah* (1985), Claude Lanzmann's magnum opus about the Holocaust, Astudillo uses this kind of witness, each filmed in his everyday setting in the present (a tailor shop, a library, a hospital, a park, a kitchen), precisely to stage her conviction that the shadow of this past continues to darken the present and that injuries, though invisible, remain hidden beneath the skin, hidden in every corner. The reading of these strangers' writings, choral but also distanced, even cold, removes emotion from a shocking and horrifying story, and thus 'also makes the viewer uncomfortable, a viewer who, in most cases, does not want to keep listening' (Wallace 2013). In fact, while we come to know in detail the nightmare experienced by other female victims of totalitarian terror through these readings, Goycoolea's story speaks to us, through faltering words and inevitable

silences, about the difficulties of remembering and explaining what happened to her loved ones, thus avoiding creating a visual memorial of this tragic period. *Lo indecible* is not so much about reliving the horror of the dictatorship as it is about reflecting on the impossibilities memory confronts when evoking the past.

Astudillo discovered Clara Pueyo's story through her first film, *De monstruos y faldas*. In her 2014 film, *El deseo de la civilización: Notas para el gran vuelo* she experiments with the archival material she takes up again in *El gran vuelo*. Astudillo's connection to recent Spanish history clearly differs from that of the generation that lived through the war and early Francoism, that is, she has the distance of one who does not have a direct memory of the conflict and the totalitarian repression. From this distance, Astudillo recovers archival materials from this past to grant them a new legibility and different uses and values. In this film in particular, she uses home movies that show Spanish society during the Republic, the Civil War and Francoism from an amateur gaze. Because of their domestic origin, these home movies, coming from the Catalan and Valencian haute bourgeoisie, propose an alternative version of the most institutionalized stories about the recent past. Astudillo's short film is structured through three parts and an epilogue, all of which she titles with phrases written in the first person (calling the three parts, 'I will have daughters who play at being little mothers', 'I will have sons who play war' and finally, 'I will have maids who wear aprons'). The film condenses reflections about class differences and gender stereotypes, an inheritance that passes from generation to generation, from mothers to daughters. These reflections would be completely developed in *El gran vuelo*. Excerpts from home movies support the concept of motherhood as a duty assumed in a deceptively natural way by women (through images of girls posing in front of the camera with their dolls); scenes testify to the assumption that only men are fit to take up arms (through footage that features boys playing at war); finally, in short sequences, the marginalization of maids is represented on screen (they appear cut off or in the background or abruptly disappear from view). Such scenes in *El deseo de civilización* exercise a function that is far more than illustrative. As also occurs in *El gran vuelo*, the home movie operates here as the means by which Astudillo not only comes to know the past but also the object on which she projects her emotions, fears, necessities and aspirations in the present. In white letters against a black background, the epilogue states, 'I will be like my mother, silent, wearing a blue apron, turning my gaze to the cupboards, and thus I will fulfil the desire for civilization', effectively closing this exercise in montage. Astudillo presents her last wish through a clever use of irony, since in effect the piece constitutes a modest but forceful way of denouncing the roles, spaces and images that civilization (understood here as patriarchy) has always sought to reserve for its daughters, mothers and female servants.

### **III. *El gran vuelo*, when the biographical is political**

'We can't hear the voices of our dead except in memories, dreams or an image. There are dead whom no one claims because their memory has vanished without a trace'. So *El gran vuelo* begins, with a male voice-over that, as a way of declaring its intentions, alludes to the film's ultimate objective: to trace, recover, contextualize and emphasize the historical and political importance of several lives (and resistances) forgotten and obliterated by the official memory of the Civil War and Francoism. Specifically, Astudillo appeals to the importance of the role that women played in the anti-Francoist struggle in the first years of a regime that doubly oppressed them, 'for being members of the opposition and for being women' (Yusta 2004: 63). These

women's lives and struggles have been practically invisible in the mainstream media and in the reigning discourses about the past, but they are no less relevant. They are portrayed in *El gran vuelo* through the figure of Clara Pueyo Jornet, exiled for a brief period in France in 1939 and then detained in Barcelona in 1941 and incarcerated in the Les Corts Women's Prison for her clandestine work in the restructuring of the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, or PSUC). Astudillo carries out a metonymic exercise using Pueyo's paradigmatic example. The metonymy works in two directions, since the communist activist, of whom practically no photographs remain, is frequently represented in the film through archival images that show bodies, faces, gestures and gazes that belong to other women but very well could have been hers.

As mentioned above, *El gran vuelo* opens with a statement about those condemned and forgotten by History (in uppercase), while the images that illustrate this statement also refer to the filmmaker's desire to recover a history (in lowercase). It is this history with which Astudillo seeks to enter into dialogue, from her position in the present as a producer, a woman and as the daughter of another totalitarian regime (that of Chile). Hence the archival images chosen for the opening of the film are of a spirit, in which four people sitting around a table seem to invoke, through the guidance of a mysterious woman, the beyond and those who inhabit it. Astudillo's task is similar to that of a medium, who makes voices audible and thus makes visible those who are not present. Astudillo rebels against the silence that reigns over memories that either 'hurt too much to want to remember them' or 'have become too uncomfortable' to allow them to return, as the narrator states. This narrator is voiced by another documentarian, Sergi Dies. However, the reflection at the beginning of the film transcends the level of argument (that is, the clairvoyant as Astudillo's alter ego, insofar as both are figures that bring the disappeared back) to appeal to the power of images in the processes of configuring historical memory. As R. Barthes observes in *Camera lucida*, photography, and thus cinema also, at the same time contains and evokes simulacra; photography and cinema are spectres that appeal as much to the concept of 'spectacle' as to the 'return of the dead' (1981: 9). The victims of history are exorcised, their ghosts, according to J. Labanyi, returning to claim reparation and to demand that their names be honored (2000: 66).

In a way, the round trip that Astudillo invites us to take through Pueyo's political-sentimental cartography – from the personal to the political, from the individual to the collective, from the concrete to the general and vice versa – connects with the American biopics that emerged from the realm of documentary cinema at the beginning of the 1960s, offering portraits of women who were 'exemplary but ordinary', and who helped 'to raise consciousness and build feminist community' (Holmlund 1988: 287). These films intentionally confront the biopics of a more industrial Hollywood, subject to the standards of fame and celebrity, and tend not only to structure their narratives around little-known or completely unknown lives, but also to question the supposed transparency of archival images when it is time to 'translate the truth of a life' (Holmlund 1998: 289). These films also cast doubt on modes of representation that until then had served to perpetuate the dominant patriarchal imaginary, and re-examine the contributions women have made to art, science, history and politics (Erens 1988: 556). Among these early documentary biopics produced from the perspective of gender, *There was an unseen cloud moving* (Leslie Thornton 1988) is notable for its similarities with *El gran vuelo*. In this film,

Thornton constructs (and deconstructs) the biography of Isabelle Eberhardt, the Swiss writer and explorer who at the end of the nineteenth century converted to Islam and (until she drowned at the age of 27) travelled through northern Africa dressed as a man. On the basis of fragments of poems and Eberhardt's travel diary, as well as archival images taken from newsreels and fiction films, Thornton approaches Eberhardt's subversive life and at the same time reflects on language and representation, gender and sexual identity and the ravages of colonialism.

Thornton uses Eberhardt's writing to portray the controversial artist's life from the artist's own subjective position; in *El gran vuelo*, Astudillo uses similar material, insofar as it presents personal letters as an emblem of memory. *El gran vuelo* uses letters in various ways to serve as a kind of link between the living and those who are no longer here, just as photography does, but with words. Vestiges of a past cut short by trauma, the letters that appear in the documentary are for the most part written by Pueyo, who takes up the pen to express her ideology, her fears and dreams and the solitude and injustices that she suffered as a woman during her years of anti-Francoist struggle. Read out loud by the actress María Cazes, who, like Sergi Dies, never appears physically in the film, Pueyo's letters, to whomever they may be addressed (her siblings, her companions in the struggle, her lover), are constructed from a threatening present: one which presupposes the need to follow a clandestine existence, and anticipates the possibility of a premature death. Hence the excerpts that Cazes reads for the viewer, which Astudillo illustrates with the original manuscript and archival images (sometimes slowed down for dramatic effect), are steeped with an emotion that can only be attained through the homodiegetic story. In one of these letters Pueyo acknowledges that 'life is also a daily struggle; it is the suffering of others, the needs of others, and we can't hope for anything now for us women'. The closing of a scene in the film verifies this assessment, in which the male narrator – the voice in the film that allows Astudillo to move from the particular to the general, from Pueyo to the rest of the Republican woman fighters – complains about the gender discrimination that prevailed in the heart of the resistance:

In all revolutions there are things that revolutionaries refuse to change, and the role of women tends to be one of them. The revolutionaries needed a decree and a series of unjustified arguments to withdraw women from the front: for example, that women were unskilled, promiscuous and spread venereal disease. Once again, the prejudice of our own companions, that which emerged in the first years, with this troop of monsters, witches, and princesses (*El gran vuelo*, 14'33").<sup>3</sup>

As the documentary progresses, one hypothesis about the disappearance of Clara Pueyo Jornet - made by F. Hernández in a dissertation about Franco's prisons - becomes convincing. This explanation suggests that Pueyo, then Secretary of the International Red Aid, was in fact 'a victim of that other exclusive and sectarian political culture that characterized the communist world in the difficult conditions of clandestineness' (2011: 727). Persecuted by the regime and treated with distrust by the PSUC leadership, Pueyo's escape from the Les Corts Women's Prison coincided with that of other communist leaders imprisoned in La Modelo: Albert Assa, Antonio Pardinilla, Manuel Donaire and Ángel Olaya. One group of militants greeted this successful

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<sup>3</sup> This and all other original Spanish quotations translated by Janet Hendrickson.

escape, known as ‘the great flight’, with suspicion, believing that those who were released were involved in espionage and collaboration with the imperialist powers (2011: 730). At one point in the documentary, the narrator wonders about the apparently coincidental fact that Pueyo was detained just a day before she had planned to leave the Oasis - the apartment that served as a clandestine centre of operations for the PSUC - for good.: ‘Did she know too much? How is it that these girls [Pueyo, as well as her companions Soledad Real and Isabel Imbert] had letters and documents that revealed their real names?’ Pueyo was strongly criticized by some of her companions for having been careless about the security guidelines established by the party, measures that also sanctioned extramarital relationships between their militants. Pueyo, who, according to her letters, seemed to have had a brief but intense relationship with Assa, complains to Pardinilla about the lack of empathy for those who gave their all to the communist cause, even if they made some mistakes. Would Pueyo have faced such severe rejection and criticism had she been a man? This is exactly what she seems to ask in this letter, which Astudillo illustrates with images of marble statues and processions, crosses and hooded men that allude to concepts like inflexibility, punishment, sacrifice, condemnation, redemption and patriarchy and which are symbols of an institution (the Church) that, though very distant from the PSUC ideologically, also has a strict hierarchy:

On Monday I won’t be at Oasis anymore [...]. I don’t feel annoyed or angry; a lot of it is my fault, although a lot of it is others’ fault, too [...]. The party remains above my most recent problems and your coldness. If the party means everything for you, then it does for me, too, Comrade Roberto. This is what you and the others have not been able to understand. You’ve excused other people for things that you haven’t even tried to understand in my case. Did you really think I was so strong? (*El gran vuelo*, 35’01’)

In addition to these private letters, other archival documents also play a notable role in *El gran vuelo*, most of them excerpts of home movies from the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s. The footage from these home movies ‘appeals to the mode of private reading’ (Odin 2007: 201) in its original form. However, Astudillo resignifies this footage to grant it a documentary value that tells us about a sector of society at that time – that of those who lived in comfort – and more specifically about the subservient role that women occupied during this period of upheaval in Spain. At one point in the film, Astudillo reflects, through a close analysis of this type of image and through the narrator’s voice, on the value of these home movies as involuntary receptacles through which we can read society and the world of the past, much as Péter Forgács does in his series *Private Hungary*. The narrator of *El gran vuelo* refers to Pueyo’s time in France – a very difficult time, in which she had to work as a maid and face the hardships that came with to exile – to denounce the invisibility that maids suffered at the time, women marginalized not only within their society, but also in the cinematographic images of them that remain:

There are no images that testify to Clara’s work in France. This isn’t unusual: the gaze of the haute bourgeoisie recognizes maids’ bodies through the children they care for and to accentuate their social condition. The uniform is not enough. We see them serving in long shots or in closed frames that fragment their bodies. They are no longer necessary. (*El gran vuelo*, 20’50’’).

Various scenes featuring children and mothers (and maids in the background, cut off by the frame or disappearing, ashamed, from a camera almost always held by a man), appear one after another on screen. The festive images of elegant women, girls in dresses, and servants contrast brutally with the other side of the post-war world: that marked by scarcity, torture, and death. This is the environment that Clara Pueyo endured: after she returned to Spain, her only child was born, but soon died from hunger. The war and its consequences changed a woman who was once cheerful, intellectually active, and idealistic, as she acknowledges in a letter. In fact, the crux of the film lies in the process of disillusionment that Pueyo experienced within the party for which she fought. However, even if the differences that finally distanced her from the PSUC support one of the theories that account for her fate, *El gran vuelo* concludes with a few additional or alternative explanations, which are equally feasible but have as little or less evidence to support them than the first. At the end of the film, the narrator asks, 'Could Clara have thought of living as a form of disloyalty and chosen anonymity to pacify her survivor's guilt?' Pueyo's nephew Albert thinks (or at least he was told) that his aunt took refuge in Russia, as he explains in a testimony in *De Monstruos y faldas*. Others have no doubt that she was killed. Stories about where she ended up are as varied and elusive as the true face of Clara herself. As an epilogue, Astudillo presents two photographs of the disappeared militant that show two contradictory but not mutually exclusive sides of her: a portrait from her first communion and a group photo with her companions in prison. As the narrator states, 'from studio décor to prison reality, from *femme fatale* to a woman condemned to death', Clara Pueyo inhabited multiple spaces, starred in different stories, and assumed roles that could be uncomfortable for the time in which she lived. Of her life, of her anti-Francoist struggle, there only remain a handful of images, a few letters and, fortunately, this documentary, which makes her available to us, as if the film were a crystal ball. *El gran vuelo* ends as it begins: with the clairvoyant of the opening scene invoking the ghostly women of the past, who, in the final scene of the film, jump and run on a beach, queens of a liberty that only seems real in the eroded sepia tone of old celluloid.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

In the epilogue to her book about Republican women in the Spanish conflict, Nash refers to the inheritance that, despite the long years of dictatorship, has been left to us by their antifascist struggle and their resolve to construct a free and egalitarian country. As Nash argues, 'Although Franco's regime cut short the path toward liberty and emancipation, it was not completely able to negate the societal experience of those years' (1999: 258). Through feminist activism, but also through history, literature, cinema and art in general, many women (and also some men) have fought in recent decades against amnesia and the patriarchal stories of official memory, in order to make this legacy visible. They have done so by shedding light on chapters of a recent past that have rarely been dealt with by institutionalized powers, or that feature lives that have, until now, been practically forgotten. This article has approached Carolina Astudillo's filmography from this perspective: hers was a body of work mediated by a desire to reveal the role of masculine autocracy in women's lives at a specific moment in Spanish history, that of the Civil War and the early post-war period.

Astudillo's filmography can be defined as an exercise in memory as well as postmemory: she was born the same year that Franco died. All of the decisive elements in her films take place in

the past, so that the narrative gaze in the present is marked by a generational distance from the facts it evokes. It is for this reason, perhaps, that her films occupy a different place from that of other audio-visual work from recent years that has addressed women's situation in the war and in Francoist society. Although the films of others, like *Mujeres en pie de guerra*, *Las silenciadas*, *Guillena 1937* and *La madre sola*, shed light on the little-known or unknown experiences and lives of women who, in one way or another, fought for a freer society, the use these films' directors have made of audio-visual language is almost always purely pragmatic. In all of these films the documentary archive functions as an illustration of what the testimonies relate, that is, as a graphic – and for the most part didactic – representation of the memories and sentiments that these testimonies reveal before the camera. However, in *De monstrous y faldas*, and particularly in *El deseo de la civilización* and *El gran vuelo*, Astudillo incorporates found footage as a complex, expressive and even metaphorical complement to the oral stories that, along with the music, comprise the soundtrack of these films.

In all of her films, and especially in *El gran vuelo*, her most involved work to date, Astudillo presents the spectator with a world of images that hide (in the margins of the frame, outside the field of view, in the gaze of the person who holds the camera) new readings of a history that almost always has been recounted in the same way. Astudillo tries to illuminate (with her reflections in voice-over, with the essayistic montage of the archives, with music and silence) that which could have been passed over, unperceived in the dominant stories about the war and dictatorship. The images that follow each other in *El gran vuelo* seem to conclude that not everything is what it seems, and this work ends up denouncing the false liberation of women who, avoiding the rigidity of gender restraints, devoted themselves to the anti-Francoist struggle. *El gran vuelo* brings all of these issues and techniques together as the culmination of Astudillo's long and meticulous work with documentation, reflection and creative experimentation.

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## Filmography

*De monstruos y faldas/Of monsters and skirts* (Carolina Astudillo, 2008)

*El deseo de la civilización: Notas para el gran vuelo /Desire for civilization: notes for the great flight* (Carolina Astudillo, 2014)

*El gran vuelo/The great flight* (Carolina Astudillo, 2014)

*Estrellas que alcanzar/Stars to wish upon* (Mikel Rueda, 2010)

*Guillena 1937/Guillena 1937* (Mariano Agudo , 2013)

*Halving the bones* (Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury, 1995).

*History and memory: for Akiko and Takesigie* (Rea Tajiri's, 1991)

*La madre sola/Single mother* (Miguel Paredes, 2010)

*La mujer del anarquista/The anarchist's wife* (Peter Sehr and Marie Noëlle, 2009)

*La voz dormida/The sleeping voice* (Benito Zambrano, 2011)

*Las 13 rosas/Thirteen roses* (Emilio Martínez-Lázaro, 2007)

*Las silenciadas/The silenced* (Pablo Ces, 2011)

*Libertarias/Libertarians* (Vicente Aranda, 1996)

*Lo indecible/The unspeakable* (Carolina Astudillo, 2012)

*Los girasoles ciegos/The blind sunflowers* (José Luis Cuerda, 2008)

*Measures of distance* (Mona Hatoum, 1988)

*Memories from the Department of Amnesia* (Janice Tanaka, 1989)

*Mujeres en pie de guerra/Women at war* (Susana Koska, 2004)

*Ni tsutsumarete/Embracing* (Naomi Kawase, 1992)

*Private Hungary.*(Péter Forgács, 1988-2002)

*Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985)

*Silencio roto/Broken silence* (Montxo Armendáriz, 2001)

*There was an unseen cloud moving* (Leslie Thornton, 1988)