

Voices from the emptiness. Developing the *agentic rural* on Spanish television

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Abstract

This article analyses rural representations in the documentary series *Ruralitas* (2020) on the Spanish TVE. The programme shows that the people living in the countryside have agency and do not conform to common rural stereotypes. Nevertheless, the stories flirt with ideas of the ‘rural idyll’ by focusing on the beauty of the landscape and traditional rural versus urban binaries. However, the series also develops what the author names an *agentic rural*. The *agentic rural* not only empowers countryside dwellers and portrays self-determined destinies in the countryside, but also highlights problems associated with depopulation.

Keywords

Television narratives, agentic rural, rural representations, rural TV documentary, Spain

Introduction

In recent years, narratives about a notionally ‘empty Spain’ have become widespread throughout the country. This label was first used in a well-known essay by Sergio [del Molino \(2016\)](#) to refer to the vast stretches of Spain that had become depopulated over several decades due to processes of migration to big cities. It evolved to the notion of ‘emptied Spain’ in 2019 when regionally rooted claims initiated a political movement demanding the development of and investment in rural communities and villages. The narratives of emptiness emphasised a rurality in crisis, a dwindling population and a lack of services. In this context, journalism and public media as a whole play a significant role in providing motivations and reasons for living and staying in the countryside.

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The documentary series *Ruralitas* (2020—present) was released by Radio Televisión Española (RTVE), the Spanish public TV corporation, to offer a ‘positive portrayal’ and show the ‘charm’ of rural lifestyles (Prensa RTVE, 2020, 2021). The programme was aired on the television channel La2 and scheduled on Sundays at 19: 35 h. Although it is not a mainstream show—in May 2022, it had reached a modest audience share of 2.2% and 211,000 viewers (VerTele, 2022)—, the fact that the series has been made available on the RTVE on-line platform is an achievement aligned with the commitment of the corporation to provide quality content.

The executive producer of the show, Amparo Castellano, stated that the programme aimed to discuss ‘what the country is actually like, if it is really an emptied Spain or still a powerful Spain, with a lot of services offered in large cities’ (quoted in Alía, 2020). The programme’s aim, she remarked, was to explain ‘a world that we all ignore’, to look for stories and people who represent a different way of living and show that ‘this Spain is not anchored in the sixties’ (ibid).

In this article, I aim to contribute to the academic study of rural imaginaries by analysing how rural life is represented in the series, with particular focus on the agency of the people living in the countryside, narratives about the rural idyll and the effect of lexical and visual choices on a discourse that tends to deviate from common stereotypes. To do so, I focus on two seasons of *Ruralitas* (2020 and 2021).

Representing the rural

The rural and the urban are socially constituted. In this article, I discuss representational imaginaries and provide a narrative analysis of ‘the rural’, a socially-constructed notion rooted in culture. ‘The countryside’ refers to the place and landscape to which we commonly attach the widely problematised meanings of the rural. In semiotic terms, the countryside is also a ‘landscape to be seen’ (Salabert, 2013: 47–48), and the way in which this landscape is considered and constituted depends on whether one is the observer or the observed.

In the 1970 s, Raymond Williams (2001 [1973]) discussed how the British countryside had been constructed in literature and culture, and how this had influenced understandings of the rural throughout history. According to Williams, the arrival of capitalism to the countryside triggered the dichotomy between urban and rural life. So development and the way in which people make a life for themselves became core to definitions of the rural. According to the early work by Keith Halfacree (1993: 34), a distinction must be made between the rural as a space and the rural as a represented space. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s work on the production of space, Halfacree’s model (2006, 2007) of rural space has representations of the rural as one of its three vertexes, along with rural spatial practices of consumption and production, and the experience of the inhabitants in their daily lives.

‘Rural’ is commonly used as both an adjective and a noun. Like many other media and cultural analysts, geographers and rural sociologists (Cloke, 2006; Halfacree, 1993, 2003, 2006; Philo, 1997; Resina, 2013), I use the term in both grammatical forms in alignment with new approaches that consider that the imaginary and the media play a role in the

social construction of the term. Paul Cloke (2006: 18) acknowledged its ‘context-specific’ meaning and pointed out that ‘the concept of rurality lives on in the popular imagination and everyday practices of the contemporary world’. In these representations, Michael Woods (2011: 48) noted that the media usually amplify the stereotypes attached to the countryside, ‘but they also shape public expectations of the rural’. The author also noted that, since 1997 in the British context, the media have been offering more complex representations of the rural as an ‘unsettled place’ (Woods, 2010). Although studies on media representations of the rural are still scarce, previous research has noted the existence of ‘rural media spaces’ and productions in which images of the rural mix idyllic portrayals, social network stories, traditional media, tourist or commercial products (Andersson and Jansson, 2010; Mordue, 2009).

The rural idyll is a discourse with a history that has been traced back to Roman times and which peaked in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Bunce, 2003; Short, 2006). Joan Ramon Resina (2013: 11) notes that landscape as a visually ‘consumable object’ is a much more recent development. Many authors note the fractured nature of the idyll, and some highlight the influence of media discourse (Bunce, 2003: 28; Yarwood, 2005). The idyll is represented by a variety of motifs, but one of the most common is the countryside as a place of peace and calm without all the worries and the hustle and bustle of the city. It has also been seen as a class-motivated discourse related to gentrification (Phillips et al., 2020). The beautiful scenery is occasionally romanticised and gives a sense of well-being. However, popular culture also exposes us to anti-idyllic rural stories: David Bell (1997) shows that horror films had constructed a ‘monstrous rural’ in American film and Tim Hall (2020) claims that the idyllic imaginary of the rural is no longer acceptable in Britain. There are many non-idyllic and problematic issues, and Bell (2006) holds that the idyll is only in our imagination: in the rural, there are noisy machines and pesticides, social unrest, animals on farms, lack of services and many other anti-idyllic sources, which are concealed by the idyll.

In its analysis of television, previous research has shown that fictional media productions can create and circulate stereotypes about the rural (Castelló and O’Donnell, 2009; Phillips et al., 2001; Fowler and Helfield, 2006; Eriksson, 2010). Programmes about the countryside tend to idealise the land and the people, and often adopt a nostalgic approach which emphasises the picturesque. Nonfiction productions such as news coverage also provide valuable material for studying the rural idyll. For example, critical discourse analysis of a Taiwanese TV programme pointed out several markers of idyllic narratives: for example, ‘dream-house’, the ‘bodily experience’ or the idealisation of the lifestyle and daily life (Chueh and Lu, 2018). And more in line with my approach, Susan Fountaine and Sandy Bulmer (2022: 96) discussed how the factual entertainment show about farming life in New Zealand, *Country Calendar* (1966—present), constructed a sense of *mediated authenticity*—following Gunn Enli’s notion (2015)—which is relevant for this study. They hold that the rural idyll is constantly negotiated, and the focus on positively framed content can erode the ‘authenticity contract’, which is an important condition if the audience is to accept the mediated narratives.

Rural mediated agencies

The concepts of ‘agentic’ and ‘mediation’ require clarification. In society, the agency of citizens can transform social structures so, as agents, our day-to-day decisions drive our action. This affects how we narrate our context and our positioning in social conflicts and interactions. The capacity to change the course of a story is at the core of processes of agency, which Anthony Giddens (2014 [1979]: 70) describes as ‘situated practices’. Social structures are involved in and transformed by these practices: for Giddens (2014 [1979]: 80), structure and agency are interdependent. When agency is a product of social interaction, it is understood to be the ‘sociocultural mediated capacity to act’ (Ahearn, 2001: 112). The adjective ‘mediated’ incorporates the agency of day-to-day interactions generated by popular culture and media.

In media representations, agencies are always mediated, which means that mediatisation processes have an impact not only on how agents express their intentions but also on the intentions themselves. In this sense, mediated agencies are driven by processes of mediatisation, and they are transformed within culture and society at large (Hjarvard, 2008; Hepp, 2009). Added to this, social networks, technologies and media act as a trigger for what social cognitive theory refers to as collective agency. Agency is not just individual action; it is also collective and reiterative action in a social context expressed through language and discourse. ‘In these agentic transactions people are producers as well as products of social systems’ (Bandura, 1999b: 24). In these processes, the *agentic* level of actants enriches the function of ‘self-determination’, which is one of the main characteristics of individual agencies (Little et al. 2006) and related to the processes of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1999a). However, I use *agentic collective* to refer to the agency of communities as a whole and to action based on shared beliefs that drive future action (Bandura, 1999b). In the field of communication, media and cultural studies, the active voices and *agentic* capacities of marginalised or vulnerable communities are tools for social transformation (Dutta, 2021). If individual agencies are added to community stories (in narratives about villages, the country, dwellers) the agentic collective is reinforced because individual stories converge on, but do not necessarily coincide with, collective action. In an urban-centred world, and in the context of a depopulated Spanish countryside with shortcomings in public transport, health and education, rural communities also have a chance to enhance their agency by making their voices heard through the media.

One example of how they do so in television documentaries about the countryside is the farming life series *Country Calendar* (1966) in New Zealand. This series is the focus of Fountaine’s thematic study (2020), which examined the emphasis on the subtopic of the development, innovations and achievements of rural communities, and particularly innovative businesses. This points to the *agentic* capacity of the rural community—sometimes at the expense of political or problematic issues in the countryside—and focuses on the power of communities to transform the structure in which they are embedded. The same can be said when the same programme incorporated indigenous Māori voices to decolonise broadcasting on rural issues (Fountaine et al., 2022). Although the authors pointed out that these efforts are insufficient and argued that indigenous

creators should be more visible, these initiatives are factors that improve the collective agency of rural communities.

TV genre here plays an ideological role (Gitlin, 2004). The documentary series studied in this article has some elements that resemble lifestyle television about the rural, with the *motif* of ‘living in the countryside’. In a review of various TV programmes about the British countryside—such as *Countryfile* (1988) or *Coast* (2005)—Felix Thompson (2010: 65) concluded that in these productions presenters act as guides who encourage consumers and tourists to visit beautiful places. Re-visiting studies of British lifestyle TV genres in the early 2000s reveals how this sort of televised ordinariness concealed a neoliberal individualism that empowered the agency of viewers and treated citizens as consumers (Brunson et al., 2001; Brunson, 2003; Taylor, 2002). Under no circumstances should the *agentic rural* become a variation of the ideologies of DIY (do-it-yourself); rather, it should be a collective desire expressed through a combination of individual willingness to stay and live in the countryside and a strong social awareness of the need for public policies to support the communities there.

The Spanish emptiness and television

In Spain, the idealisation and stigmatisation of the countryside is an issue that stretches far back in time, and it is difficult to summarise in just one section of an article. Rural Spain was already stereotyped in 19th-century novels and newspapers. In the 1950 s, during the Franco dictatorship, television was a tool for propaganda that screened newsreels about agricultural development and idealisations of the rural (Moreno-Caballud, 2016; González Cubero and Zarza Arribas, 2019). In the 1960 s and early 1970s, during the economic development (*desarrollismo*), a massive rural exodus to the cities reinforced the media and film stereotype of the yokel (*paleta*), a figure of humour and comedy (Richardson, 2002). Subsequently, the rural was the idealised context for fictional series such as *Crónicas de un pueblo* (1971-1974), which portrayed the Spanish countryside and, at the same time, worked as a propaganda tool to popularise the *Fuero de los españoles* and other fundamental laws of the dictatorship (Rueda Laffond, 2006).

During the democratic transition (1975–1981) and the following years, cinema and television portrayed the countryside as more underdeveloped than cities, where the economy, job opportunities and a vibrant cultural scene attracted migrants from the villages. In the 1990 s, television programmes such as *Un país en la mochila* (1995), lyrically conducted by the writer José Antonio Labordeta reported on the countryside in documentaries that took viewers on a tour around the country. The rural was also crucial for regional television and local depictions of villages and the countryside and as the background for fictional television series. More recently, new shows on private and public channels used the countryside as a place to locate doc-realities like *Volando voy* (2015), sit-coms like *El pueblo* (2019), or humorous late-shows like *El foraster* (2013) and *El paisano* (2018).

During the second half of the 2010 s, after del Molino’s (2016) essay about the ‘empty Spain’, a debate on the depopulation and stigmatisation of the rural emerged in the media. In 2019, a troubled electoral year, the topic was politically revamped as ‘emptied Spain’,

as the issue gained importance in the public sphere. The notion denounced the lack of attention to the country's vast rural areas, and it noted salient representations focusing on a variety of discourses ranging from the romantic and idealised to the darkest rural depictions. During that year an important demonstration in Madrid defended the claims made by the 'emptied Spain', and one association, demanding better conditions for a region in Aragon (Teruel Existe), eventually formed a party. The change from 'empty' to 'emptied' was meaningful because the movement defending the countryside adopted a more politicised tone which today is articulated by the party platform 'España Vacuada' (Empied Spain).

Several scholars adopted then the notion 'emptied' (*vacuada*) or 'empty' (*vacía*) to study the depopulated Spanish countryside and have offered explanations about depopulation and its causes. However, there is a lack of research on how the rural is portrayed in the Spanish media. One comparative approach noted that the rural idyll was very present in lifestyle magazines (Baylina and Berg, 2010). More recently, I have proposed the notion of 'relocated rural' to explain how Spanish cultural production and media are challenging stereotypes and promoting innovative depictions of the countryside (Castelló, 2023).

Materials and method

This article is based on a corpus of 19 h and 47 min of television documentaries, which consisted of all 23 programmes in the series *Ruralitas* produced and aired in 2020 and 2021, and available online. The analysis is limited to the first two seasons (10 episodes in 2020 and 13 in 2021) with an average of around 50 min each. Both seasons were similar in terms of structure: (1) each episode covered two main regions or locations in rural Spain and visited several villages, (2) the locations were presented by a local, who acted as a guide for the viewers, (3) in each location the guide introduced several residents and visited different villages.

I conducted a qualitative analysis of the narratives and discourses in the programmes (Altheide, 2000; Altheide and Schneider, 2013). The units of analysis were the actors who told the story in the programme. Actors 'perform actions' in the narrative and acting not only causes events but allows actors 'to experience them' (Bal, 2000: 83). Actors performing actions and talking about their activity in the media become actants, with a level of agency. When people talk about their lives, they express agency in phrases like 'I decided to do...' and 'It was clear to me that I wanted to stay here', which imprints control over the action. I focused on these stories in particular.

Over the 23 episodes, 46 people played the role of 'guiding' actants, two in each programme. They structured the episode by introducing 'resident' actants, who told their stories. Finally, there were 'lateral' actants, who appeared in secondary and tertiary scenes and were not identified by name. The research focused on guiding and resident actant types, of whom a total of 247 were studied over the 23 episodes. They were easily identified and coded—for instance, S1E9A096 means actant number 96 in season one episode nine—because the programme introduced them with their first name, a short description (for instance, Javier, viticulturist) and a portrait image for around three or

4 seconds. When actants appeared in pairs or groups, I identified and coded them only if they articulated a story. Actants explained several aspects and processes of their lives, professions, circumstances and thoughts. However, not all the stories and footage were relevant to the aim and objectives of this research. I specifically analysed three aspects of the storytelling: (1) why the actants decided to live and stay in the countryside, (2) how they make a living, and (3) what their opinion is of living in the countryside and what motivations they have to stay there.

I focused on three elements of analysis: the lexical choices they made to describe their motivations to live there; the actions they mention (that's to say, the verbs they use) and the actions they perform while talking (visual elements in the image); and the metaphors they use to refer to their villages and way of life. In a separate column, I noted any mention of the rural/urban idyll/anti-idyll, which provided valuable qualitative data. For the metaphor analysis, I used conceptual approaches, and I identified and annotated target (the rural) and source domains. I considered the importance of analogies for establishing ideological understandings of complex social and political issues (Musolf, 2004, 2006; Wodak, 2009). I also paid attention to visual, aesthetic, and technical aspects relevant to the overall meaning of the audiovisual text. As far as the visuals were concerned, I noted the activity that the participants were engaged in while they spoke. I also noted the range of actions by the participants and when the series used landscape depictions as an idyllic backdrop. After each episode, I drafted a short memo on topics, lexical uses, and other elements contextualising the stories.

Results

Self-determination and motivations

Several actants explained why or how they had ended up living in their villages, especially if they had not been born there. In these narratives, there was a clear pattern of self-determination. Their stories emphasised why they wanted to live in the countryside, sometimes isolated villages, or tiny places. The verb and noun commonly used to express this self-determination were 'decide' and 'decision' [*decidir*, *decisión*]. I detected up to 20 actants who decided to live there: 'we decided voluntarily to go back to the village' (S1E1A001), 'I took the decision to come to the countryside to live' (S2E2A118), 'I decided to stay and set this business up here', 'I decided to go back to the village' (S1E1A172), or 'I decided to have my children in the countryside' (S2E10A213).

The story of 'the decision' and the act of 'deciding' are constants, although their circumstances and contexts are different. Importantly, in the stories, there is a 'commitment', a 'choice', and the agents 'committed' to staying [*apostar/apuestan*]. So, the decision involved taking risks and trying to succeed. For instance, a cheesemaker explained he 'decided to buy some cattle' (S1E2A011). Similarly, one of the guiding actants said someone else was 'committed to setting up an ecological vivarium' (S2E1A108). Another stated, 'we will have to keep making commitments' (S2E8A185). These stories show that staying in the countryside requires a continuous effort. However, hardly any of

the actants expressed regrets and, overall, they were happy with their choice (S1E1A006; S1E10A097).

Fundamental to their narratives were the notions of ‘project’ (see, for instance, S2E1A114; S2E2E118; S2E2A120; S2E2A121) and ‘dream’ (see, for instance, S2E8186; S2E10A209; S2E12A22). Many had a project they wished to undertake, a personal and professional work in progress linked to their life vision. Some stories are more troubled, and the decision to go to the countryside was brought about by a personal, economic or professional crisis. Therefore, it was taken under pressure (S1E10A105, S2E2A118, S2E4A150). However, the stories had a positive present, in the sense that the actants were going through a good moment when they took part in the programme. The documentary series did not delve into harsh and hopeless situations in small towns and rural areas, and for those people who had problems, the countryside was a friendly environment, a community, a sort of big family.

Among the motivations mentioned in their narratives about the rural, the concepts of ‘family’ and ‘tradition’ played a major role. They anchor people to where they live and work. Some of the actants felt as if they were a link in a chain between their parents and grandparents and their children or the young people living in the area. Some stressed their ambition to ‘keep the tradition, that is the important thing’ (S2E10A217), or ‘recovering old traditions’ (S2E13A243), while others were aware of the need to renew traditions. Therefore, the village is ‘innovation and at the same time tradition’ (S1E9A087) as one said. As another put it, ‘being artisans is not being old or not modern. It is also innovation’ (S2E5A159). The programme tried to look for innovative projects that involved new ways of practising old crafts and trades: cheesemaking, farming, beekeeping, pottery, or winemaking. However, it also portrayed other actors reminiscing about old times or talking about endangered professions: shepherds, muleteers, seamstresses and others.

Several agents were portrayed in the light of the tensions between rurality and cosmopolitanism. Some had never left the village or had a more traditional and conservative approach, but the programme showed that living in the countryside does not limit expectations. Some actants had on-going projects involving London, France, the United States, or Japan (S1E8A077; S1E8A078, S2E10A213) so living in rural Spain does not prevent them from having opportunities in a globalised, networked world. In some stories, the countryside is presented as the best place to bring up a family because villages are ‘safer’—children can go out (S2E5A163)—and a rural environment is more conducive to living with a disability.

The idyll and its counterpart

Although the narrative of the rural idyll is present throughout the programmes, they are also peppered with counterpoints. Some actants stressed the positive elements immanent to the rural, using terms such as happiness, calm, freedom, peace and humanity. Other lexical choices emphasise the rural idyll: magic, paradise, enjoyment and an idyllic place. The narratives of the main or ‘guiding’ actants generally followed the same structure: (1) they introduce themselves and tell us what they do, (2) they explain and discuss their

activities and their lives and introduce other actants who speak about their jobs and daily lives, and (3) they assess their positive experience of living in the countryside.

However, in the midst of all this, we sometimes find a counterpoint to the idyll because several actants acknowledged the difficulties and challenges of living in the countryside. For example, working as a baker ‘is very hard, very hard, especially in your personal life’ (S1E2A011); the beginnings of setting up a small farm ‘were really hard because of the economic situation, we went through some bad times, the social welfare office helped us for a time’ (S1E2A021); a rural teacher says that ‘having classes with mixed levels makes it a bit hard, but hey, you get used to it’ (S1E10A098); a biologist working on a new farm says that they had some ‘hard years’ and ‘very difficult times’ (S2E2A120).

The actants are generally well adapted to the countryside, yet we find some gender and cultural differences. Although the Spanish countryside is a masculinised social environment, women had a salient presence in the programme. Almost half of the actants (44%) were women. There were very few examples of gender discrimination stories over the two seasons. Still, there were some feminist claims, mostly vindicating the role of women in the country or their capacity to do specific work and jobs (see, for instance, S2E13A239, S1E8A082, S1E5A047). Several actants break gender stereotypes because they say they work as stonemasons, blacksmiths or cabinetmakers. At least two of them expressed their non-heteronormative condition in some way. Furthermore, they raised no concern about discrimination. Quite the opposite, one even portrays the countryside as very inclusive: ‘I talk about my man, my husband, and nobody ever judges me. The countryside is light and human. You deal with your neighbours, and there is really no judgement on whom they think you are’ (S2E5A154).

In this inclusive rural society, migrants who came to the villages from abroad also have a presence and became actants in the series. Overall, they are portrayed as having almost no problems with the culture and experiencing no discrimination in the countryside (S2E1A113, S2E8A196). One participant who migrated from Latin-America said: ‘I had the perception that people in villages were more closed, more racist. But in my personal experience... I can say that they are less racist than the people in the city’ (A2E5A163). Overall, the country is portrayed as a place of cultural and gender equality.

Nevertheless, Spanish linguistic diversity in the country was underrepresented in the programmes. Although some of the music accompanying the scenes is in languages other than Spanish, the programme did not portray the normalisation of regional languages in the episodes from Galicia, the Basque Country, Valencia and Catalonia. Galician, Basque and Catalan were present in such minor expressions as ‘hello’, ‘goodbye’, and ‘how are things’. People were not shown expressing themselves naturally in their mother tongue even though the series claims to portray day-to-day relationships among villagers, family and others. The general situation portrayed is of a monolingual Spanish-speaking rural Spain, and music and vernacular salutations and farewells are used as a picturesque background.

Not empty: Abandonment and oblivion

Although the series explicitly mentioned the notion of the ‘emptied Spain’ in the abstract of the TVE website, few actants discussed the issue, and notions of the ‘empty’ or the ‘emptied’ Spain is much contested. Some participants express their ‘sadness’ when they hear of the concept (S1E1A007; S1E2A011). One proposes to replace emptied with ‘donor Spain’ (*España donante*), because she believes that the country donates people, resources, intelligence and other things to the non-emptied Spain (S1E1A008). Another argues that the term ‘emptied Spain’ is ‘wrong’ because ‘Spain is full’, and he suggests changing the term for ‘Spain with possibilities’ (*España con posibilidades*) (S1E2A011). Very occasionally, the programme puts politicians on the spot, which reveals its critical side. Particular targets are insufficient funding and the lack of promotional rural policies. One actant makes the following play on words: ‘Spain hasn’t been emptied; it’s been taken in by politicians’ (S1E4A041, ‘No es la España vaciada, es vacilada por los políticos’). Overall, the phrase ‘emptied Spain’ is noted as a politicised concept that is criticised (see, for instance, S1E2A173, S2E12A223, S2E1A108).

The actants’ discourse denies the notion of ‘empty’ or ‘emptied’, which is quite understandable because they inhabit this ‘emptiness’. However, other epithets are used to label their situation, the most salient of which are ‘abandonment’ and ‘oblivion’ [*abandonar/abandono; olvidar/olvido*]. A farmer pointed out that one of the villagers, an actant he is introducing, ‘is one of the few young people who is fighting for this forgotten land’ (S2E13A243). Another explained that she was trying to give real value to activities that ‘people have forgotten’ (S1E1A004). One of the participants claims that ‘those who forget their origins, forget their identity’ (S2E10A209), and another regrets that ‘small towns are left to go to rack and ruin’ (S2E12A237) [*dejados de la mano de Dios*]. There are many other examples of actants who use verbs and actions like recover [*recuperar*], conserve [*conservar*], keep [*mantener*] and the like to express a sense of resistance. Paradoxically, in parallel with these narratives, they also express the idea that villages have all that they need (S1E3A034; S2E11A224) and mention the good quality of life (S1E10A106; S2E2A121; S2E2A127; S2E5A163).

Metaphors: Bodies and roots

During the analysis, I collected the metaphors used by the actants that were relevant to the three aspects (see methodology). The language was not particularly metaphorical and, overall, it was rather denotative and referential. However, I identified metaphors and comparisons related to life and death. For some, in winter, ‘the village is dead’ (S1E6A056), for others the village ‘was fading’ (S1E6A060), and a teacher says that whenever a classroom was closed down it was ‘like another step in the process of burying us’ [*echar un poco de tierra sobre nosotros*] (S1E4A044). Also, the rural areas ‘are dying’ (S1E7A067) or ‘if things go on like this, it will go under. Hardly a breath of life left’ (S1E8A082) and the village ‘is going to die’ (S1E4A035). There are other metaphors or tropes that enable us to establish a discourse framed by the metaphor THE RURAL IS A (DYING) BODY. This notion seems to be an anti-idyll story about the rural but paradoxically

reactivates the possibility of taking action to prevent death. The metaphor highlights the contrast between the victimisation of the rural and those interviewees who were active and standing on their own two feet.

The metaphor has considerable discursive power because it activates the counterpoint of the living. In the series, these stories set an epic tone where the agency of the inhabitants is also associated with resistance. The noun ‘life’ and the verb ‘to live’ are prominent throughout the actants’ narratives about the rural, which, overall, are about the fight for life. It is the life of the actants, which is remembered and described, but also the life of the villages and other places. Here, the villages ‘have lost a lot of life’ (S2E2A121), ‘if there are children, the villages have life’ (S2E11A219), and also they ‘are keeping this land alive’ (S2E13A242). Ensuring that there are young people is one way of injecting life into the country and some actants express the same idea by raising their children there or arguing that children are the reason to settle in villages. Some talk of ‘fixing the population’ (S1E9A086; S2E3A134). In one of the episodes, the act of dying is expressed in a referential, non-metaphorical way, in the sense that a rural doctor talks about the senior citizens who die in small towns (S1E10A097).

Occasionally, we find rural metaphors in the actants’ storytelling such as when they compare the country to roots. The metaphor *THE RURAL IS (OUR) ROOTS* (or where our roots are) is articulated twice, once when an actant says that ‘returning to your roots is good’ (S1E3A027) and when another says that he never lost his ‘roots’ (S1E6A060). When asked why he lives and works where he does another actant argues: ‘I suppose because of roots. You have them inside you like your town’ (S1E10A101). A couple with children explains that they ‘were looking for a place to put down roots’ (S1E9A094). The roots metaphor is part of a family of tropes under the umbrella of the country, its lexis, and logics. Here, to explain the complexity of the target domain—the country and life there—the actants use a familiar source domain—nature—with the analogy that the countryside is a living being (a body in danger or a plant) or the place to live as plants do and put down roots.

Visuals: Rural aesthetics

Visuals are extremely meaningful for the programme’s narratives and discourse. As they are complex, I focus on three aspects that are the backbone of the series and stamp the programme with what I shall refer to as a rural aesthetic. These aspects are: (1) a *mise-en-scène* that conjures up a pleasant and beautiful rural landscape, (2) the countryside displayed as a picture postcard through picturesque scenes, motifs and details, and (3) a mix of the first two aspects with naturalistic visuals that give the audience a sense of authenticity. Techniques such as slow motion accompanied by music provide tonalities of romanticisation.

The series shows people working and living in their environment. Therefore, the ‘guiding actants’ are *cicerones* followed by images, which sometimes play with a sort of subjective camera to make the audience feel they are there. This is how we become part of their lives. The ‘guiding actants’ are often filmed driving their cars—shot from the passenger seat—while they explain where they are going or who they are visiting. In their

‘casual’ encounters, the ‘guiding actant’ meets other villagers in their workplace. The meaningful oral discourse on what actants do and how they live is reinforced by the images of what they are doing while they talk. Most actants are shown going about their tasks: farming animals, teaching, cooking, housekeeping, sewing, selling products in a shop, caring for their family, handcrafting products, forging metals and similar. These visuals show that the rural population are busy people instead of the stereotype that there is little to do in the country. They are constantly working and making things, and some combine work with pleasure like playing instruments, dancing, climbing mountains, hiking or riding a horse.

A major visual technique for constructing desirable rurality is using drones that give stunning pictures of natural landscapes, villages and roads while following the ‘guiding actants’. The technique is professionally used, and a multiplicity of cameras enable viewers to listen to a conversation and, in the next frame, see the actants from above surrounded by the landscape. The aesthetics of the countryside is embellished and at times masterfully presented as in the episode on the shellfish harvesters in Camariñas (Galicia) accompanied by shots of the sea and the people in the marshes and the beautiful traditional song *Camariñas* (S2E13). Folk music is mixed with pop and other styles, depending on the moment, the place, the topic and the story being told. In general, the postproduction work is of a high standard. The *mise-en-scène* unfolds in the natural setting of the story and the rural is constructed with archival images: animals in the countryside, narrow streets in old villages, stone houses and old roofs, tractors and agricultural tools and machines. Although the visuals use metaphors to express solitude, calm and peace—a lonely cat, an old man walking alone, the sound of bells, and the like—they do not necessarily portray an empty space; the people are there, in the workshops, farming the fields.

The third aspect mentioned above counteracts the romanticisation of the rural: we are shown places that are not so beautiful, like the interior of a workshop where an actant is making castanets, the small shop in a village where you can find a bit of everything, the warehouse where a couple of villagers are making olive paté. Hence, the programme shows the ‘charm’ of rural life, but also gives us a glimpse of its uglier side.

Discussion: The *agentic rural*

The shift from ‘empty Spain’ to ‘emptied Spain’ changed the focus to an agent that was responsible for the emptiness. In the actants’ discourse, this agent is not an individual or an institution but a system, a sociocultural structure of meaning, the *habitus* as a ‘socialized subjectivity’ in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms (2005: 186), or structuring institutions in Giddens’ (2014 [1979]). More meaningful was that, overall, the actants denied the emptiness and proposed a new, not always idealised, vision of their realities. They often depicted naturalistic situations and described the multi-faceted reality of living in the country.

Ruralitas gave the people living in the country a voice, although it was obviously a mediated voice, used to produce a structured documentary for a state-owned public channel. The countryside was portrayed positively; this was the explicit aim of the

programme. It challenged the negative stereotypes of the people and, although it acknowledged depopulation and the problems related to job seeking, economy or services, the overall portrayal depicted busy and active people, in charge of small but meaningful activities. Most important was their self-determination and ability to decide to live and stay in small villages. In this regard, the two seasons analysed showed that rural communities ‘are not the passive recipients and victims of changes imposed from outside but have the capacity to mobilize to represent their own interests’ (Woods 2011: 291).

Although they have features similar to lifestyle television (they show how people live in the country), the programmes are absolutely different from those devoted to gardening tips or cooking recipes that television analysts studied in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Brunson, 2003; Brunson et al., 2001; Taylor, 2002). It would be simplistic to suggest that they portray the countryside as a mere ‘site for consumption.’ There are other struggles, closer to my focus. The collective agency of rural communities striving to rise to their challenges clashes with individual circumstances and other obstacles: possibilism and will—the *agentic* expressed by the actants—versus socioeconomic and cultural structures. Likewise, the solidarity and the logics of the rural as a place for the commons (Ostrom, 1990) clashes with the logics of intensive farming or other consequences of neoliberal and late capitalism such as precarious salaries, weak public services—health, schooling—and a poor job market. The actants expressed this difficulty and valued their quality of life by differentiating their country routines from the more stressful, speed-driven, automatised and anonymous daily routines in cities. The programme articulated the ‘rural idyll’, but it would be more appropriate to nuance the label with what Mark Shucksmith (2018) refers to as ‘the good countryside’, a concept that uses the utopian and collective desire to progress towards alternative networked futures. The stories expressed the determination to go on working for the communities, the belief in their economic, social and personal models, and the reliance on their values. Finally, both seasons of the programme depicted the rural as a place of considerable diversity, by no means a homogeneous non-classed, non-politicised, non-racialised, non-cultured place. In this regard, although this matter has some margin for improvement, the programme was sensitive to rural otherness (Cloke, 2006; Halfacree, 2003; Little, 1999; Stenbacka, 2011).

Overall, the programme’s narratives were part of what I refer to here as an *agentic rural*: a discourse on the rural rooted in the stories of people living in the countryside who were constructing an agentic collective. They were empowered, and they explained the decisions and choices they had taken to embark on their life projects. However, their discourse was hardly problematised, the deep conflicts in rural areas were largely passed over, and the linguistic and cultural diversity was almost ignored. This latter issue has not been properly addressed by the Spanish public TV channel since its inception and being the democratic transition in the country a lost opportunity to fix it (Castelló, 2016).

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to examine how rural life was depicted in a documentary series, and how its narratives were in dialogue with discourses on the ‘rural idyll’ or the rural/urban dichotomies, and assessed the agency of the participating actants. The research was

limited to a television documentary series in Spain and, clearly, a larger corpus or interviews could have provided a broader picture. Nevertheless, the results enabled to articulate the concept of *agentic rural*, a narrative device that presents rural communities through the mechanism of reporting on active, self-determined, entrepreneurial people. The narratives helped to overcome some of the traditional stereotypes of rural life—like the victimisation or conservatism of the people—although they also contained some residual idealisations and conceal the fact that the countryside is often treated as a site for the mass, intensive production of food, energy or leisure. The series portrayed the difficulties of living in the countryside but did not present a general picture of the challenges facing the Spanish rural today. They consistently played with the idealisation of the rural in their attempt to depict depopulated regions in a positive light and find alternatives to keep them alive.

The research may be meaningful for future studies on how documentary participants are portrayed. Are they depicted as victims or passive subjects? Do they have a capacity for transformation? Are they reacting to or resisting any particular structures? In this case, the agency of the rural dwellers taking part in the first two seasons of *Ruralitas* was activated, expressed and reported. This proved to be a useful tool for understanding mediated rurality and was valuable output of the programme: the *agentic rural* is challenging the discourse of the ‘emptied Spain’ by depicting a rural society that was both creative and active, but also suffering from problems of depopulation, aging, lack of resources and qualified jobs. I have defined how this was constructed through narratives of resilience, resistance and initiative and I have shown the self-determination of the actants and their commitment to their decision to lead their lives in the rural. Rural/urban dichotomies were present in the programme, but the victimisation of the countryside was problematised because the community was portrayed as an active one with plenty of individual and collective projects for the future. In short, these narrations of the *agentic rural* were in tune with new representations that depict networked, purposeful, empowered individuals and communities.

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