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Poetics

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Fear of the bear? Rewilding, rural agencies and politics in two documentaries in Trentino and the Pyrenees

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Documentary narratives
Environmental conflict
Rewilding policies
Rural agency
Bear reintroduction
Media discourse

ABSTRACT

In Trentino and the Pyrenees, the population of bears has grown since the 1990s, when new specimens were released into the wild to recover this endangered species. The reintroduction generated a conflictive cohabitation with village dwellers, the shepherding sector, and rural initiatives in both areas. The aim of this research is to evaluate how local media and two audiovisual documentaries covered the bear issue in both regions. The researchers analysed the content of 86 articles from two newspapers in 2022, conducted a narrative analysis of the documentaries and interviewed their directors. The results reveal that the documentaries created a counter-narrative to politicisation, in the Italian case, and to environmentalisation, in the Catalan. Because both documentaries paid attention to rural communities, they contributed to increasing rural agency, an aspect aligned with the filmmakers' motivations at the inception of both productions. The authors argue that the circulation of these narratives diversely expresses renewed imaginaries of rural societies in both contexts.

1. Introduction

Bears and humans have an ancestral relationship that has prompted cultural and social storytelling since prehistoric times. Interpretations of wall paintings in Turkey (Çatalhöyük) suggest that Neolithic communities may already have had taboos about bears and other wild animals (Russell, 2012). In the Middle Ages, bears were put on show at fairs, and, in Europe, they were demonised by the Church, which portrayed them as central symbols of pagan rituals (Agus, 2019). Since then, bears have been persecuted and are now extinct in many of their original habitats, after being hunted and poisoned up to the mid-20th century, when conservationist policies and new sensibilities aimed to reverse the situation.

The human fascination for bears was alive during the mass media and cinema eras of the last century. The bear became an icon with a gentler image: a cute toy like the teddy bear (created in the early 1900s); Winnie-the-Pooh, a tender human-friendly character; or Yogi Bear, a funny opportunist to name but three endearing transformations. Research has shown that the presence of an animal in a story can increase "narrative interspecies empathy" (Malecki et al., 2019). This influence on attitudes has been positively tested for fiction, although it does not imply an impact on activists or even engagement in pro-animal causes (Malecki et al., 2018). Bears are at the centre of a considerable number of documentaries: some noteworthy productions popularise their life (e.g., Fothergill & Scholey, 2014), while others tell stories about the complexities and dangers of human relationships with these animals (Herzog, 2005). In North America, the grizzly bear was the focus of numerous productions, with approaches ranging from the naturalistic to the more

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2024.101890>

Received 25 July 2023; Received in revised form 13 March 2024; Accepted 21 April 2024

Available online 30 April 2024

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socio-cultural. Some even cultivated the image of ‘monstrous’ bears, replicating human anxieties and fears towards the animal, but also arousing our sympathy (Fuchs, 2018). This demonstrates a growing interest in the uses and representation of this creature.

Our research focused on two European regions: Trentino (Italy) and the Pyrenees in Catalonia (Spain), France and Andorra. In both contexts, starting from the mid-1990s, bears were successfully reintroduced as part of conservationist EU policies and proliferated in number and land occupation. In the case of the Pyrenees, the situation is now regarded as an environmental conflict with cultural, social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Environmental Justice Atlas, 2022). Our efforts were specially addressed to see how two documentaries managed to offer counter-hegemonic stories, giving agency to rural and expert viewpoints: *La frequentazione dell’orso* by Federico Betta (2022) and *El no a l’os*, by Freixa and Camps (2021).

2. Living among bears

Human-bear cohabitation involves a series of social issues that have been investigated by a growing body of research, which recommends that policymaking and wildlife management should consider the needs, attitudes, and perceptions of stakeholders and, more broadly, the general public (Kellert, 1994). Conservationist approaches propose that cohabitation needs to include all agencies at play: human, animal, and the influence of landscapes (Boonman-Berson et al., 2016). The acceptance of bears by human communities is not straightforwardly related to bear population density, but rather to the human perception of the risks and the effects of their presence (Siemer et al., 2023). This, in turn, is influenced by people’s trust in conservation policies and how they are implemented. People may have positive attitudes towards bears but not necessarily support conservation policies (Kaczensky et al., 2004). Other research shows that people’s attitudes towards bears can vary substantially: a case study from Alberta points out that bear conservation can reflect power struggles between socio-political actors. If rural workers perceive a loss of power or respect, they might react with forms of resistance against bear conservation policies (Hughes & Nielsen, 2019).

A study conducted in Bulgaria shows that human-bear relationships can take the form of “landscapes of tolerance” or “landscapes of fear” (Toncheva & Fletcher, 2021): to favour the development of the former, public engagement at the local level may be of utmost importance. Democratic participation calls for the involvement of all stakeholders (wildlife management, local authorities, local inhabitants, rural workers) in open public discussions informed by scientific knowledge and the acknowledgment of the issues and needs of all the parties involved. However, in the Pyrenees, some authors noted that environmental motivations prevailed over farming rationales and the life and work customs of local communities, and conservationism led to contradictions and far-reaching transformations in the farming structure and the relation between human communities and the land, reinforcing processes of rural dispossession (Pons-Raga et al., 2021; Vaccaro & Beltran, 2009).

Research on the coverage of bears shows that the media tend to use episodic (rather than thematic) frames, focusing on single events and generating often oversimplified accounts, instead of acting as a platform for an in-depth public dialogue on human-bear relationships (Siemer et al., 2023). Media attention is usually conflict-oriented, and coverage of the bear increases when there are problematic encounters, attacks, and killings (of sheep, bears, or sometimes humans). This has been noticed in Slovenia (Kaczensky et al., 2001), as well as in Japan (Sakurai et al., 2013) and North America (Hughes et al., 2020). Usually, media content provides little information about bears (Siemer et al., 2007) and nearly no statistics (Sakurai et al., 2013). In the Japanese case, the police are normally a more common source for the media than wildlife experts (Sakurai et al., 2013). According to a recent study, bears are the large carnivore most covered by the media and, while they also receive the most neutral or positive coverage (Bombieri et al., 2018), this is not always the case. Media coverage might influence public perception (acceptance or tolerance) of bears (Gore et al., 2005; Gore & Knuth, 2009). Communication is central in conflicts about rewilding processes. In this respect, a study on wolf growing presence highlighted the spiralling pattern of communication about wolf-human cohabitation and, in this scenario, emphasized the need to tolerate and handle conflicts (Ottolini et al., 2021, p. 82). The media, however, tend to fuel conflict. Overall, research highlights the need for people and institutions responsible for bear management to work closely with communities and the media to convey useful information and facilitate a public dialogue.

Bear reintroduction in Trentino and the Pyrenees has been driven by European policies and mainly conducted by local institutions. Expert knowledge, which is crucial for the success of such projects, has struggled to make its voice heard and seldom fruitfully interacted with local communities. At the same time, local communities have had little voice both in the public debate and in the development of policies surrounding the issues generated by the reintroduction of bears. For example, as we will see, in Trentino populist politics fuelled polarisation through a “politics of fear” (Wodak, 2015) that treats the bear as a “foreigner” and an “invader” threatening local communities. Rather than giving voice to locals, however, this political style identifies the voice of the political leader with the voice of “the people” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Media and culture are at the centre of public awareness of rewilding policies and their consequences. A cultural approach to rural representations in Spain has recently identified a discourse embedded in new productions (from novels and cinema to journalism) labelled as “resituated rural” (Castelló, 2023). In these renewed narratives about the rural, storytelling gives more salience to rural agents (dwellers, farmers, small local businesses), visualising their realities and viewpoints. Television and audiovisual documentaries have been identified as a site for the so-called “agentic rural” (Castelló, 2024), which is one of the main characteristics of these cultural practices in which rural dwellers are not only targets of actions by external interests or far-away designed policies, but also communities with a voice and a high potential for transformative action. As our research points out, especially in the Catalan case, this discourse in action implied to shift protagonism from experts and technicians to local communities and their interests.

3. Context

In Trentino and the Pyrenees, the reintroduction of the brown bear started in the 1990s with the support of the LIFE European programme, under the umbrella of the Habitats EU Directive ([Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the Conservation of Natural Habitats & of Wild Fauna & Flora, 1992](#)).

In Italy, the project Life Ursus was preceded by a feasibility study in 1997 which included a survey that confirmed that 73 % of the population had a favourable view of the reintroduction of the bear ([Dupré et al., 2000](#)). Most rural workers were in favour of reintroducing the bear (75 % of beekeepers, 73 % of agriculturists, 66 % of breeders). Another survey in 2011 noted that much of this support had been withdrawn ([Frapporti et al., 2018](#)). Between 1999 and 2002, ten bears from Slovenia were released. In 2021, there were at least 69 bears in the area, and 24 encounters between humans and bears were recorded, in five of which the animal approached humans. That year, 301 bear-related damages were recorded, with 504 grazing animals killed and a smaller number lost or wounded, for a total compensation of more than 170,000 euros ([Groff et al., 2021](#)). In the Pyrenees, France and the Spanish autonomous communities of Catalonia, Aragon and Navarre signed an agreement to reintroduce the bear in 1993, when the plantigrade was nearly extinct. Two females and one male from Slovenia were released in 1996; in 2006, five more specimens were introduced ([Generalitat de Catalunya, 2014](#)). Between 1996 and 2022, 128 bears were born, and the total population grew to 76 ([Generalitat de Catalunya, 2023](#)). Between 1996 and 2012, there were 208 attacks with 327 dead grazing animals, and between 2004 and 2012 bears destroyed or damaged 207 beehives in Catalonia ([Generalitat de Catalunya, 2014](#)).

In Trentino, since 2007, the Settore Grandi Carnivori (Large Carnivores Sector) has produced a yearly report on large carnivores in the area that monitors the bear population. The killing of a man in early 2023, a unique event since bear reintroduction (although there had been other, non-fatal attacks in previous years) sparked intense media coverage. In the Pyrenees, the PiroLife Programme, a monitoring programme coordinated by the Catalan Government under the LIFE scheme, started in 2014. Among other actions, this initiative aimed to better inform and sensitise society, with the objective of increasing and consolidating the bear population. In August 2019, due to attacks on cattle or sheep, farmers, and rural dwellers mobilised and around one thousand people took part in a cross-border demonstration in Ainsa (Aragon).

The public discourse at the local level was highly politicised in Italy, especially in recent years. After the 2018 local elections, the new administration led by Maurizio Fugatti – a member of the right-wing populist party Lega – took a critical stance towards bears, which led to clashes between the administration and environmentalist/animal rights associations, often ending up in courts. Tension was particularly high after the capture of bear M49 and even more so after the killing, in 2023, of a local man presumably by bear JJ4 ([Agenzia Ansa, 2023](#)). Fugatti was assigned an escort for security reasons in 2021 and again in 2023, after receiving several threats ([Agenzia Ansa, 2021](#)). Consistently, as one study notes, there was a growing presence of bears in the print media from 2000 to 2020 ([Scillitani, 2019](#)). The author notes that *L'Adige*, a local newspaper, covered bears with negative tones more often than other national and local newspapers. Especially after the events started in 2012 and ended in 2014 with the attempt to capture and the accidental killing of bear Daniza, the debate in Trentino (including the coverage by *L'Adige*) turned more political, putting aside the scientific aspects of the issue. In this sense, in newspaper articles, political sources dominate over expert sources ([Scillitani, 2019](#)).

In Catalonia, some days after the liberation of the female Giva in Selles (France) in 1996, Televisió de Catalunya, the public TV channel, broadcasted the TV report *Que ve l'ós* (*The bear is coming*) ([Raya et al., 1996](#)). Since that moment, journalistic coverage of bears increased. The poisoning and death of the male Cachou in 2020 caught the attention of the media, who often approached the issue like a crime story. The TV report produced by TVC *Territori os* (*Bear land*) ([Regàs & Díaz, 2019](#)) gave wide-ranging coverage by telling the story and issues of bear reintroduction in a more complex perspective. Overall, unlike in Italy, the public discourse had a stronger environmental frame in Catalonia.

4. Method

The research adopted a qualitative approach. We conducted a mixed-method study with qualitative text analysis, narrative analysis of both documentaries, and in-depth interviews with two of the directors. Therefore, we had three types of documentation in dialogue form. Qualitative content analysis differs from conventional quantitative content analysis and is closer to an ethnography which “stresses identifying and capturing the relevant data that cover the range of, say, news coverage of a topic” ([Altheide & Schneider, 2013](#), p. 27). It requires the data to be coded inductively and revised after the corpus is analysed, and this involves clarifying themes, frames, and discourse ([Altheide, 2000](#), p. 291).

For the newspaper analysis, we selected two major local outlets: *L'Adige* in Trentino, and *Segre* in the Pyrenees. *L'Adige* is the most widely circulating Italian-language newspaper in Trentino, with an average daily circulation of 15,385 copies in the region in 2022.¹ *Segre* is a Catalan-language leading daily in the Lleida region. From April 2022 to March 2023, the newspaper had 47,000 daily readers and the online website registered 556,870 users in the last month available.² While both countries have a polarized pluralist media system ([Hallin & Mancini, 2004](#)), these local media have rather independent editorial lines and focus their coverage on a broad range of topics of regional relevance.

We collected all news pieces containing the word ‘bear/s’, in 2022, and processed a corpus of 86 items, 49 for *L'Adige* and 37 for

¹ Source: <https://www.adsnotizie.it/> (last access on 6 December 2023).

² Sources: Segre (2023) SEGRE continua como líder indiscutible en Lleida, según el EGM, 20 April. ; data for November 2023, <https://www.ojdinteractiva.es/medios-digitales/segre-evolucion-audiencia/totales/todos/3900/trafico-global/> (last access on 9 December 2023).

Segre. The unit of analysis was the news piece and we focused on three main elements: topics, news sources, and pictures. Using qualitative analysis software,³ we annotated the main topics and we used a simple categorisation of sources: institutions (city councils, rural agents, or police, for example), farmers/locals (small businesses in the rural areas, shepherds, etc.), politicians (political figures not representing a particular institution), environmentalists/animal rights activists (from spokespersons of NGOs to activists), scientists/experts (scholars and researchers), and courts (see Tables 1 and 2).

As Roland Barthes (1977, p. 17) stated, “the press photograph is a message”, and in our case, it is part of the rhetoric of journalism. In the pieces, the content is read jointly with the image, the genre of the news piece, and the headline and topic covered. In this sense, we were aware that images do not “capture reality” but construct an ideological portrayal of an issue. To exemplify this, pieces on bears can be illustrated quite differently, from nice pictures of bears in the wild to images of butchered and bleeding sheep after attacks, or a dead bear lying as if it were asleep. This is why we also conducted a visual analysis of 95 images, with open labels to capture the content and assess how they related to the topics in each case.

We then conducted a narrative analysis of documentaries, focusing on sources, interviewees and visuals. We considered the whole documentary and those aspects of the plot that constructed a different, alternative story. This aspect allowed us to contrast how newspapers were using sources and how documentaries displayed them. We also paid attention to visuals in the films: they not only portray actants in a particular way, but situate them in specific environments (e.g., the countryside, an office, a demonstration). These features were considered and qualitatively reported.

In the third stage, we conducted in-depth interviews with directors Federico Betta and Vanesa Freixa. Interviewees become information sources as well as agents of the story (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005, pp. 210–211). The interviews were planned and executed as a dialogic process between the researchers and the participants, in a process of co-creation of knowledge (Hennink et al., 2010, p. 116). We prepared semi-structured questionnaires containing a list of open issues related to the authors’ motivation to film the documentaries: for example, aspects of the production process, the criteria used to select the interviewees and locations, the post-production stage, reception by the general public, the impact on the media, political interpretations and discussions of the issue generated by the documentaries. The interviews were conversations that took place in a face-to-face encounter with Freixa in the Pyrenees (21st June 2023) and in an online meeting with Betta (30th June 2023).

5. Results

5.1. The bear in the local media

The coverage of the bear in the Italian *L’Adige* in 2022 mainly focused on specific events, rather than the broader socio-political and multi-faceted issue. Of 49 articles, 24 were on violent events such as bears attacking humans or farms, or bears wounded or killed by humans voluntarily or by accident. Other articles focused on legal controversies related to the bear, usually trial updates or court decisions on charges pressed by wounded individuals or animal rights associations against the local government. Security and cohabitation with the bear were also major topics, but they were usually framed in the context of specific events such as encounters or attacks.

Fig. 1 shows the use of information sources in the sample. *L’Adige* was characterised by the overwhelming use of political and institutional sources. Single politicians were the most cited (21), followed by institutional sources (15) and animal rights associations (13); courts were also important sources of information (7), while locals and farmers were less cited (8 and 4 times, respectively). Rural workers are heard in only three articles: in two cases, they speak with a collective voice, as representatives of young farmers (*L’Adige*, 2022e) and of a beekeeper’s association (Pedrini, 2022) while, in a third, a single farmer’s complaint is depicted as a form of (excessive) rage (*L’Adige*, 2022c). Scientists and experts were quoted only four times: twice to suggest that people avoided an area where a bear attacked grazing animals, once to quantify the number of bears in Trentino, and once to describe a personal professional experience about human-bear (and wolf) cohabitation. The newspaper intensively covered the issue in summer and early autumn, in September and August (Fig. 2).

In the Italian newspaper, the presence of bears is treated as a highly politicised issue, mainly structured as a polarised debate between local politicians and animal rights associations. The bear is either treated as a problem of public safety, or as a tool of political struggle. Safety is largely focused on the general public, rather than rural workers, who are marginalised voices in the media debate about the bear. The political dimension of the bear, moreover, does not appear to be part of a plural, complex debate, but rather of a polarised struggle between the current local government and some animal rights associations. The polarisation of this debate is well symbolised by the fact that these two political actors often “talk through tribunals” (*L’Adige*, 2022a; 2022b and many other articles focusing on legal controversies between animal rights associations and local authorities) by pressing charges against each other, but also by the shocking death threats against the provincial president Maurizio Fugatti that appeared in the streets of Trento after the accidental death of a bear that had been captured. These death threats sparked a series of heated responses from politicians to the (unknown) perpetrators (*L’Adige*, 2022g, 2022h, 2022i).

In terms of visuals, the bear is usually the main (and often only) protagonist in the Italian outlet. There are several images of caged bears, which usually accompany articles critical of bear detention, or announcing bears being freed into the wild. This is the case, for example, of an article about a court decision against the bear management guidelines of the Provincia di Trento (*L’Adige*, 2022b) or of

³ Atlas.ti 23.2.1.

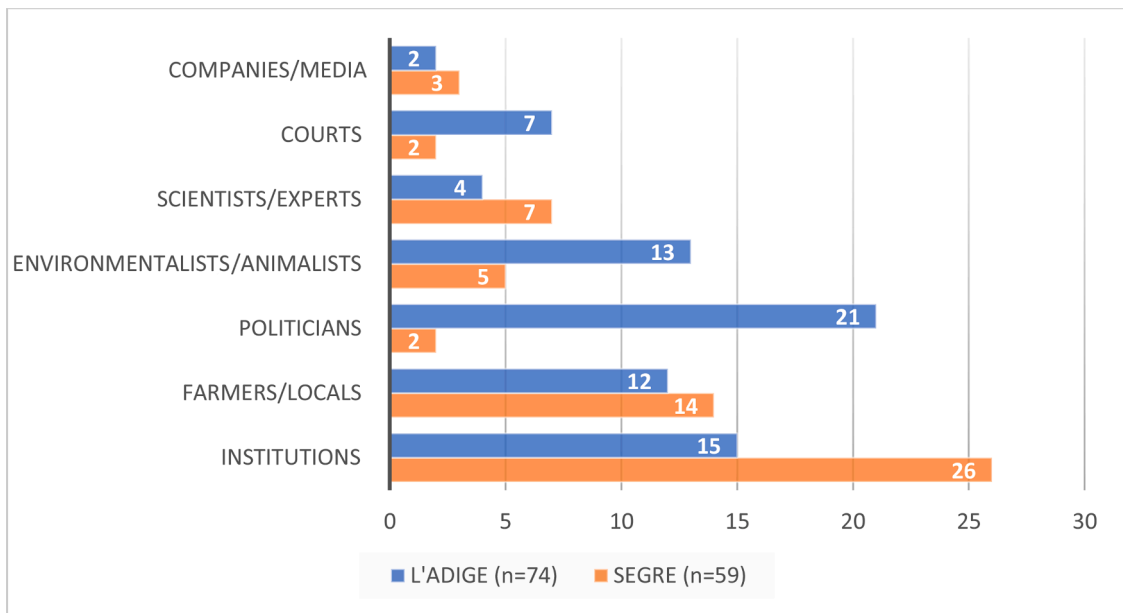


Fig. 1. Sources quoted in the local media (n = 133).
Source: Authors.

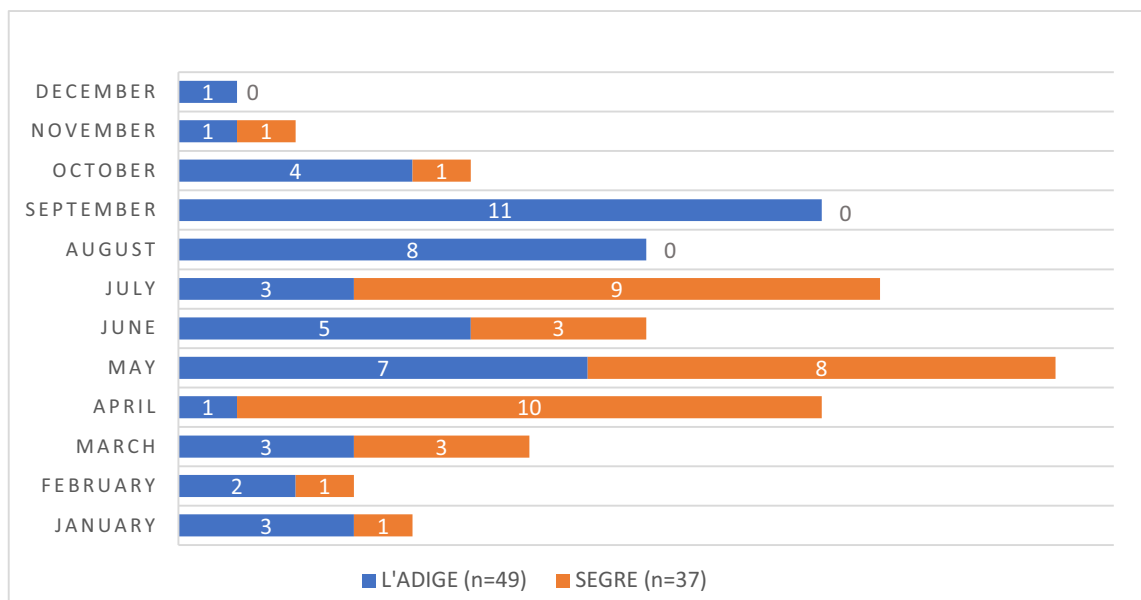


Fig. 2. Distribution of media attention over time (n = 86).
Source: Authors.

two pieces reporting on a bear being freed after medical treatment (L'Adige, 2022d, 2022f). The materials also contain images of local politicians: they are all connected to the death threats to Fugatti after the accidental death of a bear that was being captured, and in four out of five photos, the politician is Fugatti himself. Although activists' protests are visually represented in only one article (L'Adige, 2022j), several pictures highlight the importance of the event. Images of the rural world, on the other hand, are extremely rare: farmers and damages to farming activities have only one visual each.

The regional daily *Segre* covered the issue less intensely in 2022, with a peak between April and July (Fig. 2). Unlike the Italian case, the main sources in *Segre* were institutional (26) and the politicians were relegated to a position of minor importance (2). Locals and farmers (14) and scientists (7) played relevant roles. The main topic in this newspaper is bears' attacks on grazing animals, and the controversy revolves around what the government should pay the farmers in compensation for their losses due to these attacks.

Secondary topics are the increase in bear population and bears' behaviour, both linked to an environmentalist rationale.

Important visuals in *Segre* belong to two main thematic framings: an environmentalist-wildlife one, and a bear-as-attacker of animals one. We must note that the media are usually provided with these images by official institutions, such as the local government of Vall d'Aran, the Rural Agents of the Catalan Government and, sometimes, the PiroLife programme. Very exceptionally we find photographs taken by locals or by newspaper journalists; for example, one of a bear roaming a road close to a small village was taken by a resident (Segre, 2022c). The environmentalist wildlife imaginary of the bear is linked to the visualisation of the animal in its natural environment through pictures or videos. The images can provide evidence of their customs, like their footprints when hibernation ends (Segre, 2022e), a mother with her cubs (Segre, 2022d), a limping bear (ACN, 2022b) or two bears copulating (Segre, 2022b). However, in the imaginary, the bear is sometimes represented as a beast and evildoer with shocking images of the bloody remains of a sheep (ACN, 2022a; Segre, 2022a) or the destruction in a honey farm (Ramirez, 2022). In the Catalan media, we found two reports on farmers' protests when a shepherd decided to give up his job, sold all his animals, and denounced that it was impossible to keep his farm in working order because of attacks by bears. This case attracted the support of some villagers who protested to the authorities about the precarious situation of rural initiatives and the lack of support, and they pinpointed the bear as one of the major challenges to their existence (Farnell, 2022a,b).

5.2. Documentary narratives

La frequentazione dell'orso, directed by Federico Betta and produced by Fondazione Caritro and CAI Club Alpino Italiano with the support of several other contributors, is a 60-minute documentary presented in 2022 at the Trento Film Festival. The production won some prizes, one of which was the national Premio RAI 2022. The title conveys a particular perspective, as the word "frequentazione" – translatable as "frequentation" – involves the idea of cohabitation with the bear, as well as the will to spend time with bears, in the sense of gaining a deeper understanding of these creatures and their relationship with humans. The documentary conveys a nuanced perspective, investigating the complexities of bears' relationship with humans throughout history and in the present.

El no a l'os is a 74-minute documentary about the reintroduction of the bear in the Pyrenees that won the Special Award 'Mountain Wilderness' at the Torelló Mountain Film Festival (2021).⁴ Pepe Camps and Vanesa Freixa produced the film with support from the Catalan Government and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The filmmakers also got micro-funding from associations, local councils, and individuals through the platform Verkami. Freixa argued that, when they started shooting in 2018, the media framed the conflict in a biased way: "The image that was spread everywhere plunged the locals into the pit of barbarism and raised the sector in favour of the bear to the pedestal of civility" (Freixa, 2023, p. 73).⁵ They were motivated to overcome the polarisation of the issue and the need among farmers, politicians, and technical stakeholders "to generate mutual empathy" (Freixa, 2023, p. 74). Camps recognised in the media that the title was "politically incorrect", and they wanted to give the people "who say no to the bear" a voice because mainstream productions "put the microphones to the use of the yes side" (Martínez, 2021).

5.2.1. Re-structuring the story

La frequentazione starts with a historical digression that tries to convey the idea that bears are deeply rooted in the mountains of Trentino, and that they have been interacting with humans for centuries. Ancient artifacts made from bear skulls and paintings representing bear hunts are shown and explained. The conflictual side of the relationship, however, is balanced with the explanation (by art historian Silvia Spada) of the fascination humans have for bears, which has always been perceived as "similar to us" and has become a constant and welcome presence in our houses in the form of teddy bears. Thus, the narrative moves from a *status quo* represented by old relationships and cultural roots to a problematisation in which experts, and some locals, take the lead.

The documentary describes the damages that bears can cause to farming activities, how local activities have been adapting to their presence, and how just the thought of a potential encounter with a bear is having a considerable effect on the daily lives of some locals. It then proceeds to briefly display the voices and motivations of animal rights activists and environmentalists who struggle to free the bears caged in the Castellor Centre, an animal care home. The documentary explains the struggle between those who wanted to protect the bear, those who wanted to exterminate it, and the general anthropisation of the region, which eventually led to the quasi-extinction of the bear in the Alps and, years later, to the "Life Ursus" reintroduction project. The last part is dominated once again by experts, who try to sum up the nuances of bear reintroduction. The whole conclusion seems to be designed to highlight the complexities of the bear-human relationship and, to some extent, the impossibility of fully "solving" them all.

After an introduction in which we hear voices against a backdrop of scenic pictures of the Pyrenean landscapes, *El no a l'os* is structured in nine sections entitled: the extermination, the imposition, the disconnection, the attacks, north face/south face, rewilding, bear war, the end of *estiva*,⁶ and cohabitation. In this structure, we note that the "imposition" – that is to say, how the bear was reintroduced in the 1990s without sufficiently considering local and rural viewpoints and challenges – is part of the disruptive section of the story. This means that it was this imposition that broke the preceding *status quo*, in which bears were almost anecdotal or a threat

⁴ See, <https://torellomountainfilm.cat/pagina/palmares-1/157>, last access 24th July 2023. From 16 June 2023, the documentary is available online on the 3Cat platform (<https://www.ccma.cat/3cat/el-no-a-los/video/6225910/>).

⁵ Interviews and materials originally in Italian, Catalan and Spanish were translated by the authors.

⁶ *Estiva* is a pastoralist custom of transhumance in the Pyrenees and the Alps which involves relocating the sheep to higher pastures in good weather and lower pastures in bad.

of the past, although the shepherding sector was already in crisis. The problematisation, well assessed by expert voices, talks of cohabitation. Hence, the documentary is not proposing the end of the bear, but a change of paradigm in which communities will have more sovereignty to decide how to manage their lands and socio-economic activities.

In both documentaries the structures are based on a *status quo* – the past –, in which humans had reached a state of equilibrium that was broken by the reintroduction of the bear. Both explain that bears were hunted, even poisoned. They take an anthropological approach from progress to disruption, represented by the reintroduction and the release of new specimens. At this point, however, they take different paths. In the Italian production, experts play a preeminent role in offering a scientific point of view (albeit understandable to the general public), but rural workers, animal rights activists, and environmentalists are represented as well, giving voice to several leading stakeholders. The problematisation aims to move the conflict from a polarised debate to a multi-perspective dialogue. In the Catalan documentary, experts also play a role, but the dwellers' performance is more salient: the problematisation focuses on shepherds, how they had to change their way of managing their livestock, and the huge problems that bears represent. The discussion then focuses on the idea that the increase in the number of bears means the extinction of rural people and culture: they are not compatible. Therefore, the last part of the story explores the ways in which cohabitation could be possible, which is expressed differently on the French and Catalan sides of the Pyrenees: the new *status quo* is (forced) cohabitation.

5.2.2. Changing agencies

Overall, *La frequentazione* seems to be permeated by the need to problematise the reintroduction of the bear in Trentino, by calling for an open and serene dialogue with multiple voices and the constant backing of science and knowledge. In the story, an expert (Massimo Vettorazzi, Italian Alpine Club) argues for a “balance” between bears and humans: “The reintroduction of these animals has certainly generated critical issues, conflicts. Some can be attenuated, but they cannot be eliminated in a context of such widespread human presence” (min. 51). Luca Pedrotti (Stelvio National Park) explains that “bears are not ‘problematic’ in themselves; it is the human-bear relationship that generates problems” (min. 55); he argues for the need to problematise the communication about the bear, rather than oversimplify it, which is what tends to happen in the current public debate, and concludes that “the bear is not black or white, it is grey [...] everybody is a bit right and a bit wrong”.

Whereas politics dominates in the media, the documentary presents us with voices that are less prominent in the public debate: farmers, locals, environmentalists, animal rights activists and, most importantly, experts (scientists, academics, writers). Of the twenty sources, twelve are experts of some kind, while four are activists, three are farmers, and one is a local dweller. Many of these voices highlight the positive and negative aspects of reintroducing the bear, and, importantly, the fact that discourses and actions should aim at equilibrium, rather than polarisation. The overall tone, reinforced by the choice of music and a mix of footage of bears and Trentino's landscapes, is quiet and balanced; it is issue-focused, tackles the human-bear relationship from diverse angles, and does not focus on single events or attempts to attract the attention through shocking images or statements; it constructs a complex, plural discourse and contains important scientific, cultural, and sociological notions about the bear.

El no a l'os is a story from the grassroots, grounded on experts' arguments, that points out that the opportunity to do things properly was missed. The story has two major agents: the local people, farmers, and shepherds (11) – who play the leading roles – and the scientists and academics (6) –who provide legitimacy. In the documentary, we also hear from environmentalists (2) and one ex-European Commission representative who take issue with the documentary's main line of argument: the bear was reintroduced without sufficient consideration of local people, and it is now a problem for rural dwellers. The documentary refers this to as “The imposition”. In the part entitled “The disconnection”, we are exposed to arguments on the divide between rural peripheries and urban centres. *El no a l'os* articulates a critique of conservationist policies that consider nature as a virgin place, without taking into account the anthropisation of the Pyrenees. Rewilding policies are presented as processes of great impact on local communities. A major issue is bear attacks on grazing animals and the great loss this represents for farmers and shepherds.

Overall, there are differences between the two audiovisual texts. In the Italian documentary, agency relies more on experts and activists, whereas in the Catalan the protagonists are local people and experts. But there are similarities too: in both, expert voices provide legitimacy, and there is some but little room for politicians and institutions even though the documentaries contest their hegemonic agency.

5.2.3. Lands and people

La frequentazione dell'orso adopts a variety of visuals that reflect the complexity of its central theme: from images of field and lab research at the very beginning, to more intimist moments such as naturalist Angelo Caliarì entering bear dens; from idyllic landscapes to damage caused by bears (in particular to beekeeping stations) and protests by animal rights associations. The documentary makes considerable use of historical footage, including some of the first video recordings of bears in Trentino, artistic and journalistic depictions of bear hunting, and scientific footage of captured and released bears. Human-bear cohabitation is the main focus of amateur footage of an encounter between a female bear, her cubs, and Caliarì, and security camera footage of bears entering villages or getting close to farms. Interviewees are recorded against a backdrop of nature, or in their houses surrounded by bear-related material. The visual construction of the documentary highlights the multifaceted nature of human-bear cohabitation, its bright and dark sides, and the deep relationship between bears and the local, rural environment with which they co-exist.

The visuals in *El no a l'os* are central to its frame too. The audiovisual text uses archive footage as evidence of how hunters showed the dead bodies of bears as trophies. These images represent the connection to a rooted past, which however is not depicted as brutal. The past is part of the sociocultural background of the Pyrenees and although the discourse from anthropologists and local shepherds acknowledges that the objective was clearly to exterminate the animal from the mountains, this is understood in its historical context. The most spectacular footage in the production shows images of the sheep freely grazing in the high mountains. These images are

accompanied by those of the interviewees. The shepherds are recorded in their environment, in the mountains and inside their modest houses. Significantly, the images are accurate and dignify the people participating; this sort of footage is different from the kind in the media, which is more focused on the bear. To sum up, in both cases, the visuals are in tune with the aim of the productions to place the locals at a proper standpoint.

5.3. The authors

5.3.1. Motivations and inception

Betta explained in the interview that the idea of the documentary was born when, in 2020, news about bear M49 became of national interest, because it had been captured and had managed to escape more than once (Genzone & Bertacchini, 2021).

I noticed that the bear had this particular feature, that is, to cross boundaries [...] this sort of ‘permeability’ across the boundary between wild and human made me look at it as something that symbolises [...] how communities approach issues. The bear ‘polarised’ people into ‘teams’ (Betta, interview).

The filmmaker claimed that the perspective on the bear needed to be broader, so he aimed to move away from narrow, polarised perspectives and to tell a story about “the relationship between humans and bears in the Province of Trento with the broadest possible gaze”. His ambition was to “try to line up the various ‘souls’ of the relationship between bears and humans to see the complexity of discussing an issue of this sort and dignify all the actors involved”. The title itself uses an uncommon word, *frequentazione* (frequentation), which – Betta explained – aims to transmit complexity instead of the simplification and polarisation typically found in public and media debate. Betta pointed out that “talking about the bear in Trentino is difficult” because of the considerable polarisation of the public debate.

The motivation to start *El no a l’os* was an encounter with a shepherd in the area of Salau, France, who disagreed with the reintroduction of the bear. Freixa had been the founder of the Shepherds School in Catalonia and always connected with the pastoral sector on both sides of the Pyrenees. One of the major problems was the impact the bear was having on the extensive livestock sector. She remarked that, although there was growing opposition in the area, “different positionings on the bear had not been constructed, and they still haven’t been today”. Freixa and Camps observed that the discussion in the media and the public discourse was biased in favour of the conservationist and environmentalist arguments.

In the interview, Freixa was clear about the objective of the documentary, embedded in the title: “The aim was precisely to explain the ‘why’ of this ‘no to the bear’, what was behind this ‘no to the bear’ and why some people were against it. This is the reason why the documentary adopted the perspective of the primary sector, the farmers”. When selecting the interviewees, the producers wanted people directly affected by the bear: “We wanted to explain the arguments well”. So, their goal was to offer grounded perspectives instead of the stereotyped depictions of the opponents – e.g., showing rude hunters with threatening attitudes or making incomprehensible statements. For Freixa, these biased representations are part of the processes of rural dispossession. She explained that there are many reasons, but one of the fundamental ones is “the loss of sovereignty for the management of their mountains”.

5.3.2. Voices

As regards the choice of voices for the documentary, Betta explained that he first looked for those people who had studied the bear in Trentino, in order to have experts tell their part of the full “story”. Afterwards, he realised that the complexity of the topic touched upon several other sectors, including that of rural workers: in this case, he attempted to represent both small and big farmers, to explain the impact of bears on their jobs, and to avoid spectacularisation or emotional representations. The filmmaker remarked that he did not exclude any important source, but that, due to time constraints, he did not manage to interview a representative of hunters involved in bear management. He admitted having had difficulties interacting with local politicians and had the impression that they did not want to appear in the documentary as “one voice among others”.

Betta said that his aim in having representatives of animal rights and environmentalist associations in the documentary was to go beyond their stereotypical representation and to let their reasons fully (or at least more clearly) emerge. According to him, animal rights activists and scientists often make similar arguments about the bear: however, in the media and public debate, activists’ arguments often remain hidden behind their (sometimes “aggressive”) actions, while the voice of scientists is limited to formal documents and publications which are not disseminated among the general public. Both these voices, therefore, are somehow silenced in the public debate. “It looks – said Betta – as if the ‘bear problem’ reflects how the mediatisation of things functions. To the extent that today, in Rome, where I live, I talk to friends about the bear, and everybody has their opinion: clear, distinct, definitive. And they would know exactly what to do”.

Freixa did not acknowledge any special problem with finding interviewees for the documentary although she criticised the attitude of some politicians who were disconnected from the local realities. She also said that some relevant actors from the French side did not take part because of the controversial nature of the topic. She sought more convincing explanations of why some French farmers resisted applying the measures to prevent bear attacks – although she argued that they were adopting a culturally and politically motivated position to maintain their way of managing livestock and lands. Freixa said that she understood these remaining fears and reluctance because the farmers’ voice is often misused and sometimes manipulated by rationales from outside the communities. According to Freixa, the Catalan part of the story was quite different: it is an account of defeat that accepts bears and the need to adapt to their proliferation. Although there are huge and costly implications for the shepherds, they are more prepared to accept arguments from officialdom even if they are not consulted or considered.

5.3.3. Impact

When asked about the expected impact, Betta explained that he had an “activist approach” and, therefore, the documentary aimed to “offer the communities living with the bear a tool to start a dialogue”. His main objective was to reach out to local communities and spark a debate among the people most affected by the presence of bears. Therefore, although he was satisfied in general with the reception of the documentary – which won a prize and was broadcast by the local channel of RAI, the public television –, he was disappointed that some local screenings were not held and, in one case, the event was cancelled after a man was tragically killed by a bear in 2023. He claimed that people’s reactions to the screenings were usually very positive, but he also believes that the documentary was mainly seen by ‘bear enthusiasts’, and not by rural people. According to him, the social value of the documentary could have been greater if screenings had been specifically organised to reach communities affected by bears; however, in this regard, there was little success.

A few days before our interview with Freixa, the documentary had been broadcast by TVC, the public television in Catalonia. The filmmaker was satisfied not with the impact in terms of audience ratings but with the fact that it was screened in many small villages, and this was the starting point for discussions and debates in cities and towns. According to Freixa, in these face-to-face encounters with communities, participants expressed displeasure with previous coverage of bear reintroduction:

For me, it is crucial that all this serves to change the story of the people that live here [in the Pyrenees], to offer them other tools or positionings. And I think that the documentary does this. And my second obsession (...) is for people to increase their self-esteem and love themselves for what they are and what they do. And for them to be aware not only of the dynamics of colonisation that are behind the reintroduction of the bear, but also of solar energy installations, hydroelectric plants, or the imposition of the Olympic Games.⁷ (Freixa, interview)

Freixa noted contradictions in the conservationist measures: “On the one hand we are protecting the species and letting them grow, with all the discourse fostering conservation, but there will come a time when we will have to start hunting them because there will be too many. This is bound to happen, just as it happens elsewhere and as it happened with the wolves in France”. For Freixa this is the reason why “rewilding policies are dangerous”, given the impossibility to have a clear idea of what will happen in the natural, social, economic, and cultural environment. Her opposition to rewilding policies has a lot to do with global warming and the conservation of life on planet Earth. She argued in favour of the need to consider the rural viewpoint if we want to keep life on our planet; in favour of degrowth processes and community food sovereignty policies to live in greater harmony with our environment.

6. Conclusions

The documentary has evolved considerably in the last decades, but it still produces what Roger Silverstone (1983, p. 138) remarked more than forty years ago: a “transformation of another reality – unfamiliar perhaps, often threatening – into one that is both familiar and reassuring”. For Silverstone, this was done through narratives, images and commentary. The result, both in television drama and documentary, was a work on a “naturalisation of the text” (Silverstone, 1983, p. 152). The documentaries studied here comply with the idea of the “naturalisation” of the text, and familiarisation with a rural life that had been made invisible. The documentaries aimed to put viewers in touch with a reality closer to these communities, a story that pointed out the complexities of bear-human cohabitation and gave a voice to experts and the local people impacted by EU rewilding policies since the 1990s. Displaying statements by farmers and rural dwellers, they contributed to legitimise these communities, problematising hegemonic discourses around the bear.

As seen in our research, the storytelling about bears reported by local media is limited. Local newspapers rely on institutional and political sources. In the case of Trentino, there is a politicisation driven by a polarised discourse between political leaders and activists. In the case of Catalonia, the journalistic narratives follow a hegemonic discourse of institutional environmentalisation, a process that has been identified since the 1990s (see Buttle, 1992), and take for granted the benefits of rewilding. Although in both cases these stories could be interpreted as “political”, they are clearly “de-politicising”, because they banalise the issue in different ways. In the Italian case, the bear issue becomes a mere fetishist object to fuel polarising politics and populist strategies; in the Catalan, the structures, topics, and images have a technical nature, and sometimes an idealised vision of the mountains and rural life.

We need to highlight evident differences between both contexts and documentaries. In Trentino, the politicisation of bear reintroduction has generated a discrepancy between expert knowledge (which should mainly drive local policies) and populist political discourse. In the Pyrenees, scientists and environmentalists are better represented in the media.

Betta and Camps/Freixa’s documentaries produced counter-narratives that operate differently in each context. Both audiovisual texts were an exercise in “giving voice” to communities, agents, and experts, who problematised visions embedded in media and institutional discourses, offering a critical vision of the rewilding policies. In the Italian case, the documentary aimed to give voice to experts, activists and local dwellers in an exercise of democratisation of imaginaries: pluralism and dialogue were favoured to polarisation and reciprocal intolerance. Betta took distance from the oversimplified, black-and-white discourses reproduced in the media and structured through a populist political style. In the Catalan case, the audiovisual clearly developed what has been labelled an “agentic rural” (Castelló, 2024); the revalorisation of rural voices determined to administer their own lives. The documentary did not merely “give voice” to the public discussion; it offered grounded articulate voices. The latter was a clear example of what has been identified as “relocated rural”, a family of narratives about overcoming victimisation and stereotypes of rural life (Castelló, 2023).

⁷ The Catalan Government had been considering consultations about the organization of the Winter Olympic Games in the Pyrenees, but after controversies due to climate conditions, administrative disparities and opposition in the region, the candidature is currently on standby.

In addition, both documentaries offer agency to a highly neglected actor in the media and politics: the bear. This is achieved through the interpretation of its behaviour and a deep understanding of its interactions with the locals. Altogether, the implications of this type of alternative documentary productions are extremely relevant for three main reasons: (1) they help to understand the consequences and complexities of rewilding policies in the specific areas affected; (2) they offer legitimacy and visibility to voices made invisible in mainstream media and polarized political forums, and (3) they enrich public debate on topics in which it is possible to overcome anthropocentric perspectives and observe the assemblages between humans and non-humans, jointly interacting with the dynamics of local economies, marginalized places, or processes of environmental commodification (see, Bennett, 2010, Tsing, 2015). Of course, in both cases we should consider that the range of impact of these alternative productions is limited. Nonetheless, we also maintain the importance of having platforms for diverse voices to express their responses to mainstream stories on rewilding policies.

In this regard, we want to conclude this discussion with an optimistic message about the value of independent productions that use uncommon sources and viewpoints and purposely problematise hegemonic narratives. These are the sort of counter-narratives that remain unseen at higher levels of policymaking, which often do not consider how office-designed rules are not always easily implemented in daily practice and on local premises. Policymakers should consider more carefully the disparate consequences of rewilding or conservation rules; in-site experience and small-scale communication matter.

Funding

This article is part of the research project “Nuevos imaginarios del rural en la España contemporánea: cultura, documental y periodismo” (PID2021-122696-I00) funded by the MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501,100,011,033/ and ERDF A way of making Europe. The study was also supported by Next Generation EU (European Union), the Spanish Ministry of Universities, and the Plan de Recuperación, Transformación y Resiliencia, under a María Zambrano Grant (2021URV-MZ-17).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Carlo Berti: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Enric Castelló:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interests.

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