

# MEMORY AND MASS GRAVES: POLITICAL STRATEGIES OF INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARIES<sup>1</sup>

JOSETXO CERDÁN

MIGUEL FERNÁNDEZ LABAYEN

## OVERVIEW: MEMORY, HISTORY AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

---

In recent decades, memory studies has developed into a sophisticated transdisciplinary platform. In so doing, it has facilitated the exploration of the complex ramifications of cultural and social memory, whose transnational dimensions reveal the interaction between the local and global repercussions of the politics of memory (HRISTOVA, LEE, KERANGAT and FERRÁNDIZ, 2014).

In the specific case of the relationship between memory and documentary, we would like to draw attention to two aspects related to how memory is classified and organised. First of all, there is the question of the abuses of memory, as pointed out by Paul Ricoeur, who identifies three levels on which this occurs, which he refers to as the pathological-therapeutic level, the practical level and the ethico-political level. According to Ricoeur, “on the pathological, therapeutic level, the

disturbances of blocked memory will emerge; on the properly practical level, those of manipulated memory; and on the ethico-political level, those of a memory abusively summoned, when commemoration rhymes with remembrance” (RICOEUR, 2009: 57). This relationship between memory and its traumas, manipulations and abuses is key to understanding the tensions between individual and collective practices and governmental and institutional policies related to memory, which will be the object of study of this article.

The second aspect we would like to highlight is the difference identified by the historian Paloma Aguilar between historical memory and collective (or social) memory. For Aguilar, historical memory is a “‘borrowed memory’ of past events that the subject has not experienced personally, [...] [which] is kept alive through commemorations” (AGUILAR, 2008: 43-44). Historical memory, according to Aguilar, would therefore be somewhat similar to the third level of abuses suggested by

Ricoeur, on the ethico-political level. On the other hand, collective memory “is sustained by groups that share a common identity [...]. Although they might have originally been configured by the individual memories of certain members of the group, over time the cultural elite—who promote political initiatives based around the dissemination of ethnic or cultural elements—ultimately develop a simplified, common discourse on the past, suitable for consumption by the members of the shared identity and easily manipulated by the political elite” (AGUILAR, 2008: 50). Based on this, we might conclude that collective memory would always be threatened from two directions: on one side is the possibility of it being turned into historical memory (manipulated by the elite through commemorations); on the other, is the danger of it being erased (or minimised) by a different collective memory that is also raised to historic status. The open and ever-changing nature of collective memory itself is thus paradoxical: it is what enables it to survive in different contexts, but it also leaves it open to manipulation, minimisation or even erasure. In any case, as Ricoeur reminds us, it is not with “the single hypothesis of the polarity between individual and collective memory that we enter into the field of history, but with the hypothesis of the threefold attribution of memory: to oneself, to one’s close relations, and to others” (RICOEUR, 2008: 132).

In addition to the tangled trajectories of memory and its attributions, we should also consider the relationships that memory establishes with history. Although today we can think about cinema in terms of history, we should do so in the sense that Hayden White gave it as a *practical past*: “the kind of past ordinary people [...] carry around with them as an imagined ‘reality’ serving in lieu of both religion and metaphysics as a paradigm or bedrock of ‘the real’” (WHITE, 2005: 334). This *practical past* is therefore different from *professional history*, understood as scientific history. The *practical past* is a space that encompasses

documentaries that take the past, and memory, as their raw material. Therefore, the documentary is not, nor should attempt to be, scientific history. This fact should not, however, lead us to discount the capacity of the documentary to reflect on and confront us with the past. On the contrary, the *practical past*, as a psychological substitute for religion and metaphysics, occupies a central place in contemporary societies, and it is there where it can act politically. For this reason, documentaries, as *practical past*, should be expected to have an “intimate relationship [...] with art, poetry, rhetoric and ethical reflection” (WHITE, 2005: 335). Documentary filmmaking should thus distance itself definitively from the *discourses of sobriety* with which it has traditionally been associated.

---

**WHILE FROM THE LATE 1970S TO THE MID-1990S THE FOCUS WAS PRIMARILY ON THE HEROISM OF THOSE WHO HAD LOST THE WAR, SINCE THE MID-1990S THE EMPHASIS HAS SHIFTED TO THE DEPICTION OF THE REPUBLICANS AS VICTIMS**

---

In the Spanish context, since the mid-1990s a huge volume of literary and audiovisual material has been produced on the topic of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco regime. But this is nothing new: since the years of the Spanish transition to democracy in the 1970s the recovery of the Republican memory has been realised through a wide range of historical, literary and cinematic texts. However, as noted by Ángel Loureiro (2008) and subsequently explored by Jo Labanyi (2010), in the mid-1990s there was a change in the approach used in the construction of this material. Specifically, while from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s the focus was primarily on the heroism of those who had lost the war, since the mid-1990s

the emphasis has shifted to the depiction of the Republicans as victims. In other words, there was a change in the narrative of the Spanish Civil War and, more specifically, of the Republican defeat. In the realm of film and television, Vicente Sánchez-Biosca was the first to bring attention to what he identified at that time as the *banality of good*, an inversion of the term *banality of evil* coined by Hannah Arendt with reference to the bureaucrats of the Holocaust: “*banality*, in that there is no moral challenge, no personal risk in the assertion, or any contribution whatsoever to the state of knowledge; *good*, to the extent that this banality is anchored in a noble, perhaps ethical, but now very distant origin, the vindication of the memory of the men, women and children who were sacrificed by the prevailing, merciless memory of the winners” (SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA, 2006: 315). Ángel Loureiro was rather blunter when he accused different fiction films, news features and documentaries made in the late 1990s and early 2000s of “winning over the public by means of a rhetoric of pathos based chiefly on the pain of the living relatives of the executed and on a simplified view of history” (LOUREIRO, 2008: 24).<sup>2</sup>

## **CORPUS**

Based on this historical and theoretical framework, it is our intention to examine a few independently produced documentary films that deal with the relationship between memory and the Spanish Civil War. We will show how these titles, far from exhibiting all the defects identified by Vicente Sánchez-Biosca and Ángel Loureiro, are able to develop complex discourses on memory and its different manifestations in relation to the identification and exhumation of those who died in the war. Specifically, the films analysed here question both the documentary value of the images recorded using audiovisual methods and their intended indexical signs, and the transparency of the testimony presented. In this way, a clear separation

can be made between the emotional use of memory as criticised by Loureiro and a sentimental memory that prevents the witnesses from being depicted as victims.

The main hypothesis of this essay is that the mode of production of a film that addresses issues of memory shapes and conditions the final form of the filmic product. To simplify the question further: independent production models, or, more generally, models less associated with institutions, can produce texts on memory that are distanced from the concept of commemorative historical memory described by Paloma Aguilar. As a result, these documentaries are able to engage politically from non-hegemonic and non-official positions, proposing dynamics for “bottom-up” readings of memory phenomena, close to the everyday practices of individuals who are not immersed in institutional logic. This might seem almost a truism, but our review of much of the literature on recent documentaries dealing with the memory of the Spanish Civil War has led us to the conclusion that it is a point that bears highlighting for an analysis of the topic that concerns us here.

We therefore need to discern between two main production models: institutional and independent. Although the boundaries between these two models would always be blurry, it is worth delimiting them in more detail to avoid erroneous classifications. The institutional mode of production involves the use of funds from a public institution established to provide production assistance, as well as television networks, public foundations and associations created or supported by institutions or political parties. In most cases, these films are produced using fairly consolidated structures, i.e., professional production studios. Conversely, films classified in the second category (independent production) are those that are financed by means other than those indicated above. Basically, these would include collective funding (including but not limited to the crowdfunding model) and personal financing. In such cases, as these films

are not linked to major production structures, they tend to face severe difficulties in gaining access to the hegemonic distribution channels and, as a result, are likely to be largely unseen. It is true that in recent years independently produced films have often subsequently found support from established producers who help them into the international distribution circuit. This generally occurs when the films are or are expected to be well-received on festival circuits. Between the institutional and the independent models there is thus a large, hazy territory of films that receive limited assistance, or that may be subject to certain institutional processes at a given moment; titles that fit into both categories and that are therefore difficult to classify.

As noted above, if we examine the profile of the documentaries about memory that generally appear both in the media and in academic publications, we will find that a very high percentage of them fall into the category of institutional productions. However, in this article we will be focusing on the far less structured field of independent documentaries. While compiling a corpus of institutional documentaries would entail the fairly simple task of reviewing the usual official records of film productions, the same cannot be said of independent documentaries. It would be safe to say that film production has expanded hugely with the digitalisation of cinema, but it is still impossible, at least to date, to map out a complete profile of independent films. For this reason, the methodology we have chosen for this article is the case study model. We thus take three films—one short and two feature-length productions—that have had a certain degree of visibility, albeit only in circuits outside mainstream theatres. These are three cases that fit within the parameters of independent production, and that specifically address the issue of mass graves. The films are: *Soldados anónimos/Soldats anònims* [Anonymous Soldiers] (Pere Vilà and Isaki Lacuesta, 2009), *Los materiales* [Materials] (Los Hijos, 2010) and *Dime quién*

*era Sanchicorrota* [Tell Me About Sanchicorrota] (Jorge Tur, 2013).

### **SOLDADOS ANÓNIMOS/SOLDATS ANÒNIMS (PERE VILÀ AND ISAKI LACUESTA, 2009)**

*Soldados anónimos* is a 24-minute film co-directed by Isaki Lacuesta and Pere Vilà. Apart from the small crew that worked on the film, the few credits recognise only the Universitat Rovira i Virgili, due to the fact that the team of historians and archaeologists who appear in the film were from this university. This is thus an example of a title produced completely outside the institutional production system. The film offers an observational record of a mass grave exhumation, which according to Lacuesta was the first ever conducted in Catalonia using scientific criteria (USEROS, 2014). Lacuesta and Vilà dispense with testimonies and the use of a voice-over narrator, providing no information on the event other than what the images show and the title highlights. The only words heard are those of the members of the forensic team carrying out the exhumation: dialogues stripped of any drama, about the best ways to carry out their work, where and how to proceed with the excavation, trivial comments on the remains they uncover, or even the occasional joke that helps break the monotony of the task.

With these few elements, and with the obvious descriptive intention already implicit in the film's title, viewers are confronted with a documentary free of any kind of empathic engagement with what they are watching, and nevertheless, an empathic reaction to the bones exhumed is inevitable. Around halfway through the film, in a brief scene showing an unearthed buckle being handled by the excavators, we hear a voice off camera remarking "if it is a Spanish Legion [buckle] or it is...", without ever finishing the sentence. And later there is a vague repetition of the idea that these are the remains of soldiers, an idea already suggested in the title.



Bones as generators of emotions in *Soldados anónimos*

*Soldados anónimos* places us in the challenging situation of reassessing the empathy we felt in response to the disinterred bones. In short, we are compelled to reconsider the presumed identification of the remains discovered. Because, as Loureiro suggests: "The remains of the buried victims in the graves acquire meaning only when we project our political interests onto their bodies. These bodies bring back the horror of the past only through a representation established in political pre-judgements, without which they would be reduced to mere bones bereft of meaning" (LOUREIRO, 2008: 335). Isaki Lacuesta himself is quite aware of this point: "in *Soldados anónimos*, on seeing the excavation, the spectator takes it as a given that it's a mass grave of Republicans. [...] After that there is a moment when you confirm that they were soldiers (as the title suggests), and later that they were Fascists, and suddenly the whole emotion that was floating there is inverted" (USEROS MARTÍN, 2014).

This same, clearly controversial idea of an exhumation that begins as a search for the remains of a lost hero and ends up uncovering something quite different is also articulated in *Los condenados* [The Condemned] (2009), the fiction feature



The documentary value of evidence and the emotional expectations of spectators in *Soldados anónimos*

film that Isaki Lacuesta presented the same year at the San Sebastián Film Festival. In personal correspondence with Lacuesta, he confessed to us that "there are whole sentences spoken by Pablo (one of the protagonists in *Los condenados*) that come from my troubled journals from those days (of shooting *Soldados Anónimos*)."<sup>3</sup>

### LOS MATERIALES (LOS HIJOS, 2010)

The second case examined here is *Los materiales*, a film made by the Madrid-based collective Los Hijos, the first feature-length film directed by the group. *Los materiales* is an experimental piece that could be read as a fictional tale about failure or as a documentary reflecting on a certain tendency in contemporary cinema. Both readings are valid and both serve as interpretative keys for the purposes of this article. Although a brief synopsis could never do the film justice (which is perhaps why Los Hijos refused to provide one and chose instead to give the dictionary definition of "material" when asked for one), the film could be said to be the story of three filmmakers who travel around the vicinity of the town of Riaño in the province of León, relocated due to the construc-

tion of a dam, in search of an identity, of a memory. But during their search, these filmmakers (who have the same names as the three members of the collective) begin to lose interest in what they see, in what they hear, and in the original objective of the film. To this narrative outline, at least two formal points should be added. Firstly, the images shown in the film are taken from raw footage from the shooting process, without the polishing work that any film requires: 70 hours reduced to 75 minutes. Secondly, the soundtrack is also made up of what could be described as raw sounds, but which do not necessarily match up with the images they are paired with. However, one thing is absent from the soundtrack: the voices of the three protagonists. Instead of hearing them, we read their conversations in a series of captions, in the style of subtitles, that appear throughout the film.

We will return now to the two possible readings of *Los materiales*: as a fictional tale of failure or as a reflective documentary. With respect to the first reading, it is worth noting that when Los Hijos travelled to Riaño in the summer of 2009 they already had the idea of making a film based on what are normally outtakes: ends of shots, abrupt camera shifts in search of the next frame, accidental recordings... the filming of the documentary was thus conceived as if it were a traditional documentary, with establishing shots and analytical planning of scenes and interviews, which were also conducted. To this original idea all that was needed was to add the technique of having the dialogues appear only in subtitles to be able to understand the film as a fictional tale of the process of a failure: the failed attempt to piece together an identity (and therefore a collective memory) which is too scattered and which, due to this dispersion, ultimately loses its initial appeal during the work process. As a reflective documentary, *Los materiales* questions the ordered, balanced and transparent world that some documentaries have presented of Spain in recent years, but it is also positioned in opposition to those other filmmak-



**Up. Questioning indexicality in *Los materiales***

**Down. Outtakes as memory in *Los materiales***

ers who believe that it is enough to let the testimony speak for itself. The most obvious example of all this appears in the two scenes which, in this attempt to recover the memory, deal with the episodes of the Civil War and the post-war period through the supposed search for sites of memory. These two scenes appear near the middle of the film. In the first, we see the filmmakers preparing an interview in the middle of the woods with a local who turns out to be the only character in the film that we hear speak. Standing beside a fallen oak, the character (Pedro) tells a story, which his father told him, about a shepherd who killed a member of the Spanish Maquis and buried him right there because he was stealing sheep. In fact, Pedro never uses the word "Maquis" or "guerrilla", but instead talks about "those people who wan-

dered homeless in the woods”, and “a man dedicated to stealing and killing sheep.” The body is still there, Pedro tells us, because nobody knows who it was; nobody has claimed it. Almost seamlessly, the testimony links this story with the story of the executions during the war and the Francoist period. In this case, we have the following words: “most of the people shot were from San Juan de Beleño, from San Juan de Beleño and around there. They called them the ‘*paseados*’ [i.e., executed without trial]. They brought them here and they killed them [...]. They were Republicans, they weren’t terrorists or anything, but were genuine democrats. But as it was the Franco dictatorship, well, they killed them.” Pedro’s memory, the film tells us, is incapable of constructing a coherent discourse on the war and the post-war period: the Republicans are democrats, but the Maquis are thieves. The following scene, which lasts for twelve minutes, goes further still. At the beginning of the scene, one of the subtitles announces that Pedro is going to drive the filmmakers to the grave of the people who were shot by firing squad. One of the three, Luis, decides not to go. After more than ten minutes of seeing Pedro walking through the forest, unable to find the place, the scene closes with a few terse subtitles:

What about the grave? (asks Luis)

Nothing.

We haven’t found it.

While *Soldados anónimos* explores the issue of the discursive baggage attached to an exhumation and the tumult provoked by the erroneous projection of our emotions onto it, *Los materiales* speaks to us of the fragile nature of memories. Both titles thus point to the same question: positing limits on the indexical value of the images. In addition, *Los materiales* questions the value of absolute truth that tends to be attributed to testimonies. Both points have been mythologised by many of the institutional documentaries of recent years, giving rise to what researchers like Francisco Ferrándiz have identified as a subgenre of “Civil War grave-

side testimony”, whereby testimony has been established as a cornerstone of the narratives on historical memory in media coverage (FERRÁNDIZ, 2008).

### **DIME QUIÉN ERA SANCHICORROTA (JORGE TUR, 2013)**

This film was made in the context of the Punto de Vista Documentary Film Festival in Navarre, when its director, Jorge Tur, won the selection for the X Films Project in 2012. Of the three films studied here, this is the film whose production is most closely linked to institutions (the Navarre regional government), but its limited budget<sup>4</sup> and the mediation of the Punto de Vista Festival between filmmaker and institution place it on neutral ground.

In any case, *Dime quién era Sanchicorrota* is a film which, on paper at least, does not address the question of the memory of the Spanish Civil War. Instead, it examines the local myth of a bandit named Sanchicorrota, on the pretext of exploring Las Bardenas, a desert region in southern Navarre. In his quest for clues about the bandit, Tur constructs a mythical, human and sentimental map of the region. And it is there that the Civil War makes an appearance. We will consider two moments in the film here. The first occurs at the beginning. After a few establishing shots, we see a shepherd in a frontal close-up, and after hearing him stammering, we hear Tur’s voice off camera:

What do you know about Sanchicorrota?

A few things I’ve heard on documentaries on television. He lived in the era...

Wait, wait... Don’t talk about documentaries or anything; talk about what you’ve heard people say around here... [...] What do you know about Sanchicorrota?

It’s what I’ve heard around here, what I’ve heard around here...

While in the case of *Los materiales*, the character of Pedro tells the stories his father has told him, and we are aware that this transmission of



Tokata examines the remains of supposed firing squad victims in *Dime quién era Sanchicorrota*

memory is fragmentary and contradictory, *Dime quién era Sanchicorrota* reveals that memories (and myths) are constructed with all kinds of material, including media material. Moreover, this is a way of warning us that we won't find any documentary certainty in this film.

After wandering around the desert lands of Las Bardenas for nearly an hour, Tur ultimately locates some human remains (several skulls and other bones) in a hut, and goes there with another of the characters in the film: Tokata, a retired farm worker. The character's reaction to the finding, due to the effect of the editing, is immediate: in a wide shot shows Tur and Tokata unblocking the entrance to the hut, and then we cut to Tokata looking at the bones and saying "these are the ones who were shot, there are five of them." He then thoroughly examines the five skulls and embarks on a somewhat erratic recollection. He tells how in his town, Arguedas, all but one of the bodies of those shot by firing squad have been recovered. And then he goes on to explain the recovery of his grandfather's remains. However, the camera, to avoid any excess of pathos, cuts and returns us to the desert landscapes while Tokata continues his narration in a voice-over. When the camera returns to the hut, the bones do not appear again, and we only have a close-up of the character as he continues telling stories of the repression after the war. But neither the stories he recalls (his



They killed my grandfather, but at least we knew where he was

Tokata's erratic memories as a means of avoiding pathos in *Dime quién era Sanchicorrota*

mother threatening one of his father's executioners with a knife in her hand) nor the attitude of the character himself convey any sense of pathos or victimisation. Tokata and the characters in his story (his mother, his Uncle Victor, the children of others who faced the firing squads) are characters who lost the war and suffered the consequences, but this does not mean they lost their capacity for action; they are characters with agency. Tokata's testimony is not a victim's testimony, nor is it transparent, nor does it encapsulate a conclusive truth. On the contrary, his discourse is erratic, resembling more a stream-of-consciousness narrative, and even contains internal contradictions, doubts and illogical reasoning. Yet far from reducing its value, this is what lends it legitimacy. ■

## CONCLUSIONS

*Dime quién era Sanchicorrota* is not a film about the Spanish Civil War, but it does touch upon it directly. Something similar could be said of *Los materiales*, where the search goes in a different direction, but the topic comes up because it is there along the way. In *Soldados anónimos*, the documenting of the exhumation reveals the risk of discursive excess in relation to some fairly neutral images and, as a result, we see how easily what Aguilar defines as historical memory can be politically manipulated. Meanwhile, *Los materiales* exposes the fragility of



memory and its contradictory construction. *Dime quién era Sanchicorrota* recognises the constructed and mythical nature of memory, but also confronts us with characters who, beyond such collective constructions, have elaborated a memory of their own about these events, a memory brought out by any strategy that can activate it, even accidentally. Finally, in the interaction between the director and his character, Tokata, according to parameters distinct from those of the victim of the Francoist repression, a series of negotiations unfold in front of the camera that evade any pathos and allow the character to create a profile that has nothing to do with the defenceless victim, taking ownership of his performativity at the expense of its supposed discursive transparency. It is worth noting that by the time the film was released, an analysis of the remains had confirmed that they were in fact more than 100 years old, and therefore could not have been from the Spanish Civil War (ARIGITA, 2013: 33). The point is thus not what the bones might document, but rather, how they activate Tokata's emotional memory, an example, with all its contradictions and virtues, of a memory thought and felt from the "bottom up", in contrast with institutional historical memory.

The three case studies analysed here are products of the independent production model and, as such, touch on one of the most sensitive topics of recent years related to the memory of the Civil War and Francoism: the topic of mass graves. In this context, none of the three films falls into the trap of exploiting the pathos of the testimony or the banality of good; on the contrary, they each articulate an idea of collective memory that reveals the risks of manipulation and abuse that are always present.

In short, the films analysed here are examples that speak to us of how the practical past can be constructed without the sensationalist practices of institutional documentaries, represented by testimony as a source of pathos and emotion and the document as an index or sign that asso-

ciates the documentary form with discourses of sobriety. The titles studied here point to political transformations in film production dealing with memory, which, as Ricoeur suggests, articulate a necessary threefold attribution of memory: to oneself, to one's close relations, and to others. It is here that collective memories, constructed politically, acquire their full meaning. ■

## NOTES

- 1 This research has been conducted as part of the research project "Las relaciones transnacionales en el cine digital hispanoamericano: los ejes de España, México y Argentina" (CSO2014-52750-P), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.
- 2 The works cited by Loureiro include *La hora de los valientes* (Antonio Mercero, 1998) and *Les fosses del silenci* (Montse Armengou and Ricard Belis, 2003).
- 3 Personal interview with the author in April 2010 via email.
- 4 Only 8,500 euros at that time, of which 3,000 was the filmmaker's salary and 5,500 was for production expenses.

## REFERENCES

- AGUILAR, Paloma (2008). *Políticas de la memoria y memorias de la política*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- ARIGITA, Nieves (2013). Los restos de cinco cadáveres hallados en Bardenas no son de fusilados en el 36. *Diario de Noticias*, 4 May, p. 33.
- FERRÁNDIZ, Francisco (2008). Cries and Whispers: Exhuming and Narrating Defeat in Spain Today. *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 9:2, pp. 177-192.
- HRISTOVA, Marije; DOUGLAS, Lee; KERANGAT, Zoé de and FERRÁNDIZ, Francisco (2014). Violence and the Politics of Memory in a Global Context: An Overture. *Culture & History Digital Journal*, 3 (2). Retrieved from <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2014.012>>
- LABANYI, Jo (2010). Testimonies of Repression. Methodological and Political Issues. In JÉREZ-FARRÁN, C. and AMAGO, S. (eds.), *Unearthing Franco's Legacy: Mass Graves*

*and the Recovering of Historical Memory in Spain* (pp. 192-207). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

LOUREIRO, Ángel G. (2008). Argumentos patéticos. Historia y memoria de la guerra civil. *Claves de Razón Práctica*, 186, pp. 18-25.

RICOEUR, Paul (2009). *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA, Vicente (2006). *Cine y Guerra Civil Española. Del mito a la memoria*. Madrid: Alianza.

USEROS MARTÍN, Ana (2014). Isaki Lacuesta. *Minerva. Revista del Círculo de Bellas Artes*, 22, pp. 82-87. Retrieved from <<http://www.revistaminerva.com/articulo.php?id=588>>

WHITE, Hayden (2005). The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses. *History and Theory*, 44, pp. 333-338.

**MEMORY AND MASS GRAVES: POLITICAL STRATEGIES OF INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARIES**

**Abstract**

This article examines the political strategies of independent Spanish documentaries of the 2000s and 2010s in the context of debates about historical memory. The hypothesis of this research is that independent documentaries can operate as vehicles for practices and discourses that are free from the institutional domestication normally affecting film and television productions dealing with memory. It is thus argued that documentary film practices distanced from official political interests can challenge some of the common assumptions in discussions of historical memory and offer a bottom-up perspective, in parallel with a process that brings a grassroots element into public discussions of memory. First of all, the article examines some of the most prominent theoretical positions on memory. We then analyse the films *Soldados Anónimos/Soldats Anònims* (Pere Vilà and Isaki Lacuesta, 2009), *Los materiales* (Los Hijos, 2010) and *Dime quién era Sanchicorrota* (Jorge Tur, 2013) as examples that illustrate these ideas. Based on a study of these films, we question the use of testimony and the indexical value of the document as the foundations of the discourse of the film documentary, and propose a distancing from these practices as a way of avoiding the sentimental use of memory evident in official political positions on the Spanish Civil War.

**Key words**

Historical Memory; Mass Grave; Independent Documentary; Spanish Civil War; Pere Vilà; Isaki Lacuesta; Los Hijos Film Collective; Jorge Tur.

**Authors**

Josetxo Cerdán is associate professor of Media Studies at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and a member of the research group TECMERIN. He was the coordinator of the M.A. program in Documentary at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (1999-2008), the artistic director of the Punto de Vista Documentary Film Festival (2010-2013) and programmer for the Flaherty Seminar (2012). He is the co-editor of *Mirada, memoria y fascinación* (2001) and *Documental y vanguardia* (2005). Contact: jcerdan@hum.uc3m.es.

Miguel Fernández Labayen is assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and a member of the research group TECMERIN. His articles on documentary and transnational cinema have been published in academic journals such

**MEMORIA Y FOSAS COMUNES: ESTRATEGIAS POLÍTICAS DEL DOCUMENTAL INDEPENDIENTE**

**Resumen**

Este artículo examina las estrategias políticas del documental independiente español de las décadas de los 2000 y los 2010 en el contexto de los debates sobre la memoria histórica. La hipótesis de la investigación es que dicho documental independiente vehicula unas prácticas y discursos alejados de la domesticación institucional de las producciones audiovisuales que abordan la memoria. Por consiguiente, se entiende que estas prácticas documentales alejadas de los intereses políticos oficiales problematizan algunos lugares comunes de los debates sobre la memoria histórica y ofrecen una visión desde abajo, en consonancia con un proceso de fuerte calado popular a la hora de debatir públicamente sobre la memoria. En primer lugar, el artículo recorre algunas de las más destacadas posiciones teóricas sobre la memoria. Posteriormente, se analizan las películas *Soldados Anónimos/Soldats Anònims* (Pere Vilà e Isaki Lacuesta, 2009), *Los materiales* (Los Hijos, 2010) y *Dime quién era Sanchicorrota* (Jorge Tur, 2013) como ejemplos que materializan estas cuestiones. A partir del estudio de estos filmes, se cuestiona el recurso a los testimonios y el valor indexal del documento como fundamentos del discurso del documental cinematográfico y se propone el distanciamiento de estas prácticas para superar el uso sentimental de la memoria presente en las políticas oficiales sobre la guerra civil.

**Palabras clave**

Memoria histórica; fosas comunes; documental independiente; guerra civil española; Pere Vilà; Isaki Lacuesta; colectivo Los Hijos; Jorge Tur.

**Autores**

Josetxo Cerdán (Pamplona, 1968) es profesor titular de Comunicación Audiovisual en la Universidad Carlos III de Madrid y miembro del grupo de investigación TECMERIN. Fue coordinador del Máster de Documental de la UAB (1998-2008), director del Festival de Documental Punto de Vista (2010-2013) y programador del Flaherty Seminar (2012). Ha coeditado *Mirada, memoria y fascinación* (2001) y *Documental y vanguardia* (2005). Contact: jcerdan@hum.uc3m.es.

Miguel Fernández Labayen (L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, 1976) es profesor visitante lector del Departamento de Periodismo y Comunicación Audiovisual de la Universidad Carlos III de Madrid y miembro del grupo de investigación TECMERIN. Sus trabajos sobre documental y cine transnacional han apa-

as *Transnational Cinemas* and the *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* and in collections like *Sampling Media* (2014). Contact: mflabaye@hum.uc3m.es.

**Article reference**

CERDÁN, JOSETXO, FERNÁNDEZ LABAYEN, Miguel (2017). Memory and Mass Graves: Political Strategies of Independent Documentaries. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 23, 187-198.

recido en revistas académicas como *Transnational Cinemas* o *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* y en volúmenes como *Sampling Media* (2014). Contacto: mflabaye@hum.uc3m.es.

**Referencia de este artículo**

CERDÁN, JOSETXO, FERNÁNDEZ LABAYEN, Miguel (2017). Memoria y fosas comunes: estrategias políticas del documental independiente. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 23, 187-198.

---

Edita / Published by



Licencia / License



ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB [www.revistaatalante.com](http://www.revistaatalante.com) MAIL [info@revistaatalante.com](mailto:info@revistaatalante.com)

---