

The Autobiographical Documentary in Spain

Efrén Cuevas

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Abstract: The chapter offers an overview of the autobiographical production in the Spanish documentary cinema, up to 2018. After a brief reflection about the peculiarities of the autobiographical practice in cinema, it starts pointing out to the late beginning of this practice in Spain, around the change of Century. Two thematic trends are dominant in this field: the works linked to spatial settings, related either to the biographical origin or to travel ventures; and the family portraits. From a structural and formal point of view, different approaches are found: from the diary structures of Guerín or Iscar, to the works closer to conventional documentary, or to those made out of recycling materials either public or domestic.

In recent decades, the horizons of documentary cinema have expanded to take in a range of new creative directions, including the consolidation of the autobiographical approach. This development has been evident in Spain, where documentary production has seen an indisputable boom in recent years, a boom that has included first-person documentaries. This chapter offers an overview of the autobiographical approach in Spanish documentary films, from its earliest manifestations through to 2018. Following a brief discussion of the definition of autobiography in cinema and of the reasons about the relatively late development of this type of documentary in Spain, the chapter will focus on the analysis of the most prominent trends and films in the Spanish context. It should be stressed, however, that given its nature as an overview, it will not be possible to offer an in-depth analysis of each film, due to the obvious limitations of space.¹

Autobiography in (documentary) cinema

Before embarking on an analysis of the Spanish case, a brief introduction is needed to explain how the concept of autobiography should be understood in the audiovisual context. It might be assumed that such an approach is not possible in filmmaking, as Elizabeth W. Bruss argued in her article "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography". Bruss suggested that cinema was not capable of providing three basic contextual parameters for autobiography: *truth-value*, *act-value* and *identity-value* (299-

¹ This chapter presents the basic content of an article published in Spanish in *RILCE* in 2012 (vol. 28, n. 1, pp. 106-125), although the period covered in that article (up to 2010) has been updated here to 2018.

300). However, given the examples she mentions, it is clear that Bruss is thinking of the kind of fiction films that critics have tended to label “autobiographical”, such as *81/2* or *The 400 Blows*. The description of such films as autobiography is indeed problematic, as it suggests a rather lax application of the parameters that have traditionally defined and delimited the genre. Although their characters could be understood to some extent as *alter egos* of the filmmakers, this does not necessarily mean that these films are in any real sense autobiographical.

In her discussion, however, Bruss does not seem to consider documentary filmmaking, a field in which autobiography can clearly be said to exist, as will be argued here. To begin with, the *truth-value* that Bruss claims autobiography must have is more obviously visible in autobiographical documentaries, given their nature as depictions of reality, based to a large extent on the *indexical* condition of the audiovisual document.² The quality of “personal performance” entailed in their *act-value* is also easily identifiable in autobiographical documentaries, with obvious expressions in cases like the diaries of Jonas Mekas or the films of Ross McElwee. Perhaps the one problematic aspect would be the question of their *identity-value*, i.e., the unification of the roles of author, narrator and protagonist comprising the “autobiographical pact” that Lejeune has signalled as a requirement of the genre (49-86). It is obvious, as Bruss points out, that a filmmaker cannot film a scene and be its protagonist at the same time. But in many cases such filmmakers, from behind the camera, interact as characters in the scenes they film, and assert their presence explicitly through the sound of their voice. In others, they appear on screen, implying that somebody else is filming them (and often a second person is recording the sound). But the shooting of these scenes is still directed by the filmmaker, and in any case the film shoot is only the first stage in the autobiographical filmmaking process, which will also need to undergo the editing and post-production processes.

It is precisely the editing stage that is the most characteristically autobiographical, being the stage in which the filmed material is given a “retrospective perspective”, a basic condition, as Lejeune (51) explains, of the autobiographical enterprise. It is from the present moment of writing—or editing, in the case of cinema—that the author looks back on the past and constructs, reassesses and gives coherence to his or her life story. In this sense, the autobiographical film is presented with a structure of its own, based on a temporal duality that is absent from the written medium: on one side are the images and sounds filmed over a specific period of time, coinciding with the immediate present of the events recorded and possibly including elements ranging from the filmmaker’s daily life to other more constructed situations such as interviews; on the other is the autobiographical retrospection of the filmmaker, who orders these scenes in the editing process and may add music or a narrator commentary more directly evocative of written

² It is taken as a given that this truth-value of autobiography is associated with a much more complex debate, given its borderline status between fiction and non-fiction. In Spain, both Darío Villanueva and Pozuelo Yvancos have proposed an interesting approach to this question, combining pragmatic and genetic perspectives. The two authors both argue that the autobiography’s status as a work of fiction due to its constructed nature (genetic perspective) is nevertheless compatible with its understanding as real or true by the reader (pragmatic perspective), who adopts an intentionally realist reading of these works (Villanueva 21-31). It is worth adding that in the context of cinema the referential nature of autobiography is even more prominent due to the powerful sensation of reality conveyed by the audiovisual medium.

autobiographical discourse. And there may even be a third temporal layer, created by autobiographical sound or visual material recovered from the past, such as photos or home movies from family archives.³

Origins of the autobiographical documentary in Spain

Having outlined the basic features of the film-autobiography, I will now turn to the main focus of this article, autobiographical cinema in Spain. In keeping with the definition above, what follows is an analysis of the autobiographical approach in documentary cinema (films released up to 2018) understood in its broadest sense, given that some autobiographical films are positioned at midway points between documentary, essay film and experimental cinema, especially in an era like the current one, when the hybridisation of different creative practices is becoming increasingly common.

The first aspect to consider is the paucity of autobiographical documentaries in Spain prior to the early 2000s. Documentary filmmaking has a strong social and historical tradition that has promoted a dominant conception of it as a window on the external material or historical world, often associated with the sober discourses of the sciences or presented within an objectivist paradigm. In this context, the subjective nature of the autobiographical gaze would be seen as clashing with the prevailing paradigm. However, as early as the 1970s this model began to change as the filmmaker began being included in the documentary through the use of metadiscursive strategies or themes of identity that drew on the filmmaker's biographical background. This trend grew over time so that by the 1990s it had become a usual approach in documentary filmmaking, especially in North America and Western Europe.⁴ In Spain, however, it does not seem to have been embraced until after the turn of the century. Indeed, all of the films analysed below have been made since the year 2000, with the exception of *Monos como Becky*, released in 1999.⁵

It is not easy to identify reasons for this time lag, despite the fact that it is relatively marked. One factor may have been the fact that no major Spanish filmmaker explored an autobiographical approach in those first decades of the new approach, with films that might have served as creative models for subsequent generations. Another is the fact that films by major autobiographical filmmakers in neighbouring countries took quite some time to be screened in Spain. It would only be from the year 2000 that serious attention began to be given to this approach, with retrospectives of filmmakers like Alan Berliner

³ For a more in-depth analysis of autobiography in cinema, the following references (among others) can be consulted: the anthology *Le Je Filme*, especially the chapters by R. Odin, Y. Beauvais and J. M. Bouhours, and W. de Greef; the first chapter of Jim Lane's *The Autobiographical Documentary in America*; the second part of Laura Rascaroli's *The Personal Camera*; and the third part -Modes of Subjectivity- of Michael Renov's *The Subject of Documentary*.

⁴ For an overview of the genre in the United States, see Jim Lane's *The Autobiographical Documentary in America*, which analyses films made in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

⁵ In the literature consulted for this study, only one reference with an earlier date was found: Casimiro Torreiro (41) on a film released in 1987, *Ma germana* by Xavier Juncosa, the second film in a trilogy whose final film, *Le temps et le distance*, is analysed here.

in 2002 or Naomi Kawase in 2008, and with the publication of various specialised books in those years.⁶

This situation has been changing, as noted above, since the beginning of this century. From any year since then it is possible to find a number of outstanding productions with an autobiographical approach, both shorts and feature-length films. For this analysis, these productions have been structured around two main categories: films articulated around a spatial axis, whether static or dynamic (e.g. travel), and films articulated around family stories, plus a brief digression to consider the films of Joaquim Jordá).

It is important to stress, first of all, that this survey of the Spanish autobiographical documentary makes no attempt to be exhaustive. An effort has been made to include the most important autobiographical films, but in fact it is far from easy to identify every first-person film produced, given that some works received only limited attention, were not featured at festivals, and/or are difficult to access. In any case, two types of films that could arguably be said to belong here have been excluded from this analysis. The first are those in the category of film “correspondence”, an initiative of the Centre for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB) that began in 2006 when Víctor Erice and Abbas Kiarostami were invited to establish an audiovisual correspondence in the form of short films or “letters”. From there the initiative expanded in the following years when one Mexican and four Spanish filmmakers were enlisted in a similar “correspondence” project with foreign filmmakers: José Luis Guerín with Jonas Mekas, Isaki Lacuesta with Naomi Kawase, Albert Serra with Lisandro Alonso, Jaime Rosales with Wang Bing, and Fernando Eimbcke with So Yong Kim. These audiovisual “letters” have a hybrid status that is associated with an autobiographical approach, but that transcends it, as they are positioned at a midway point between documentary, experimental film and essay film. The explanatory notes in the DVD collection of these films make this clear: “Filmed correspondence is a new cinematic genre: an experimental form of communication between directors who, despite being in geographically distant locations, are united by their desire to share ideas and reflections about what motivates their work and their lives.”

The second group of films that could claim a place in this chapter is made up of autobiographical documentaries by Latin American filmmakers based in Spain on a temporary or ongoing basis, usually co-produced by Spanish producers, but whose themes are clearly related to their countries of origin.⁷ Among these are Andrés Duque’s *Color perro que huye* (2011) and *Ensayo final para utopía* (2012), two films positioned halfway between documentary and essay, Pablo Baur’s *Los pasos de Antonio* (2007) and *El conserje* (2010), *Diario Argentino* (2006) by Lupe Pérez García, *Mi vida con Carlos*

⁶ See Cuevas, Efrén and Carlos Muguero, eds. *El hombre sin la cámara: el cine de Alan Berliner / The Man without the Movie Camera: The Cinema of Alan Berliner* (2002); Cuevas, Efrén and Alberto N. García, eds. *Landscapes of the Self: The Cinema of Ross McElwee / Paisajes del yo: el cine de Ross McElwee* (2008); López, José M. *Naomi Kawase. El cine en el umbral* (2008); and Martín, Gregorio, ed. *Cineastas frente al espejo* (2008).

⁷ A significant number of these films are associated with two master’s programs in creative documentary offered in Barcelona, at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and at Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

(2009) by German Berger, *Cuchillo de palo* (2010) by Renate Costa, and Carmen Torres' recent film *Amanecer* (2018).

Space as the articulator of personal identity

Cinema by its nature facilitates a bigger role for the spatial dimension, as it involves working with sounds and images that document the material, physical reality in which human dynamics unfold. It is therefore unsurprising that many of these autobiographical perspectives are structured around a specific space, which may be the family space associated with the filmmaker's origins or a strange space in which the personal identity needs to be asserted.

The central role of the autobiographical space can be observed in a number of short films that straddle the line between documentary and experimental film, partly due to the ambiguity of their status as autobiographies. This could be said of *Nenyure* (2005), a kind of essay film by Jorge Rivero that offers a portrait of the town of Mieres, which the filmmaker rebaptises with the name Nenyure and depicts as a ghost town, an almost dreamlike setting, in an effort to reflect the very real depopulation of this region following the collapse of the coal industry. The film features a female narrator whose tone is slow, almost metallic, and underscored with music, and whose first-person narration contributes an element typical of an autobiographical piece. However, this classification should be understood in a broad sense, as the narrator is not actually Jorge Rivero himself, although she does act as a kind of de facto spokesperson for the director, a native of Mieres whose intention with *Nenyure* is to express his personal connection to the place where he was born and raised.

Also located on borderline territory is the work of Elías León Siminiani: specifically, his two short films *Límites, 1ª persona* (*Limits: 1st Person*, 2001) and *Los orígenes del marketing* (*The Origins of Marketing*, 2009), and his feature film *Mapa* (*Map*, 2012). In the first short, a third-person narrator analyses some footage of a woman in the Sahara, filmed by a man, to argue that these images have a special magic due to the love between the two. However, halfway through the film, the sound and image change and the filmmaker, Siminiani, tells us in first person that after returning from the Sahara he broke up with his girlfriend, Ainhoa, the girl who appears in the images. This leads to a new reading of the footage, guided by the filmmaker's voice, gradually revealing its mechanisms of construction and its real purpose, to recover the relationship with his girlfriend.

Siminiani's next two films could be understood as a unit, as *Los orígenes del marketing* is presented as a prologue or peculiar trailer to the subsequent feature film, *Mapa*, which narrates a journey the filmmaker took to India to deal with a personal crisis. While both films share the same focus and material, the short has an appealing semantic density that is necessarily lost in *Mapa*, whose pace is sometimes marred by sudden changes of direction, with narrative or essay-style digressions that slow down the fluidity of the whole. Siminiani once again resorts to openly reflexive strategies in his way of constructing the story and invents an intermediary, María, with whom he engages in a

dialogue in which he is the author and she is a figure who appears to have assumed all the narrative power.⁸ In this way, a highly effective distance is created that allows Siminiani to use an autobiographical perspective to openly manipulate the story, in all its expressive possibilities, with a playful approach that still allows the filmmaker a means of channelling the concerns about identity that have prompted his trip to India. As was the case of *Límites, 1ª persona*, the experimental nature of these two films, along with the central role given to a reflexivity that can be termed as ludic (following Robert Stam's typology), provokes uncertainty about the consistency of the autobiographical approach, albeit somewhat more nuanced in this case than in the first film.

Mapa contains elements of the cinematic mode of the travel diary, a genre that two other more consolidated filmmakers, Ricardo Iscar and José Luis Guerín, have made use of in recent years. For both filmmakers this represents a somewhat unexpected change of register, as their previous films had taken directions far from autobiographical, tending towards quite an opposite approach, an observational style in which the filmmaker attempts to disappear, to position his camera like “a fly on the wall” in an effort to film a particular reality with a minimum of external intervention, and of course avoiding the voice-over commentary of a narrator. This is the approach taken in Iscar films like *Tierra negra* (2005) and *El cerco* (2005), or in the well-known *En construcción* (2001) by José Luis Guerín, although the latter has also adopted more experimental approaches, particularly in *Tren de sombras* (1997).

The travel diary, in its cinematic form, could be said to have a problematic status if it is subject to the same parameters as those expected of its written counterpart. The written travel diary is articulated on the basis of individual entries ordered chronologically over a period of time, a format similar to that of the diary-style audiovisual work, with the difference that in a film, as noted above, two phases of production are always needed: the immediate filming of the images, which eliminates any of the reflective distance that typifies the written diary; and the subsequent post-production phase, when the footage is articulated through editing and may be complemented with filmmaker commentary or other sound elements. This makes it difficult to conceive of an audiovisual diary in the strict sense, as a film diary will always possess a more clearly retrospective gaze, linking it more closely to standard autobiography.⁹

This is observable in Ricardo Iscar's medium-length film *Postal desde Buenos Aires* (*Postcard from Buenos Aires*, 2008). The filmmaker travels to the Argentine capital on the invitation of Argentina's Cinemateca, and during his stay he films everyday situations in the city: a dog walker, the cemetery, a café where people are dancing tangos... Iscar himself never appears on screen, but his voice provides a commentary on

⁸ It is important to take into account that the audiovisual narrator responsible for the whole story should not be conflated with that voice that emulates the literary narrator (voice-over), which constitutes only one of the expressive channels in an audiovisual story (which also has images, text, noises and character voices). To differentiate the two, Gaudreault refers to the global narrator as a “mega-narrator” and voice-overs as “delegated narrators” (57-62).

⁹ David E. James (161), with reference to the famous diaries of Jonas Mekas, refers to his periodic filming as “film diaries”, which then, after editing and adding the soundtrack, are transformed into “diary films”, cinematic works with a title and specific duration, which form part of Mekas' public filmography.

the autobiographical impressions of his trip, his sense of familiarity with the city, his relationship with the country, etc. The final part of the film takes on more the tone of an essay, with his visit to the Cinemateca archives. While the camera pans over the shelves to reveal the canisters of classic films, Iscar reflects on the role of cinema: “It’s the silence of a grave, where the stories that have made us grow are sleeping. It is the meeting with other parents, other travel companions and friends. They are lives at rest; volcanoes in times of peace. A huge necropolis. Mummies that at any moment may open their eyes and tell us of the wonders they have seen.” The last image, a beautiful dawn over the Paraná River, is, in his own words, “my postcard”, which he delivers to us in cinematic form, as spectators of his diary. The visual style in this case has a certain home-made quality, with a slightly unstable image resulting from the use of a hand-held camera. Indeed, it could be assumed that the director is filming with a small, non-professional camera that in a way replicates the pen of the diary writer, an instrument not in any way industrial, suitable for individual expression. The images taken, however, are not designed to call attention to themselves (as those of Jonas Mekas’ well-known diaries do, for example), but instead maintain an observational tone in keeping with Iscar’s previous work. But his voice-over commentary provides the autobiographical anchoring that transform the quality of distanced observation in a visual illustration of a personal journey, in which the leading role is played by the city of Buenos Aires.

José Luis Guerín, however, appears to seek a more literal approximation to the written diary with his film *Guest* (2010), right from the first image, which shows a notebook and pencil. Indeed, his film is presented, in what acts as a kind of subtitle, as a “record diary, Sep. 2007-Sep. 2008”. And in fact this is just what it turns out to be: a date on the calendar introduces each entry of his diary, which presents a varied collection of scenes, ranging from a quick shot of a place or character to long scenes in which he interviews different people in the locations he visits, always for the presentation of his previous film, *En la ciudad de Sylvia* (*In the City of Sylvia*, 2007), at festivals all over the world. Although it begins with several entries at the Venice Film Festival and the Cinémathèque Française in Paris, most of the film focuses on ordinary characters that he meets in poor neighbourhoods in Latin America or in the streets of different cities. Guerín is barely present on screen, other than the occasional brief reflection in a mirror or a photo taken of him for a festival credential, although we do sometimes hear him speaking off-camera while he interviews some of the people filmed (he even responds to the odd question asked by the interviewees, about his profession or why he is in their city). The camera he uses is a home movie camera, with no tripod, with that slightly unstable image that constantly reminds us of the position of the filmmaker and the *amateur* kind of filmmaking that Guerín is proposing. However, the absence of narrator commentary creates a distance from the footage that paradoxically blurs the autobiographical perspective that might be expected of a diary to suggest instead the gaze of a social observer, an ethnographer of contemporary societies. The diary structure allows Guerín considerable flexibility in the film’s final cut, with entries of different duration and tone, permitting the occasional insertion of essay-style fragments. An example of this is his arrival in New York, the images of which combine with visual excerpts and sound bites

from the fiction film *Portrait of Jennie* (1948), a strategy evocative of his second feature-length film, *Innisfree* (1990).

A certain diary-like quality also associated with travel stories can be found as well in the documentary *Asier eta biok* (*Asier and I*, 2013), directed by two siblings, Aitor and Amaia Merino, the first of whom is the film's protagonist and the presenter of the story. Aitor and his childhood friend Asier are both involved in Basque independence movements, but Asier is radicalised and joins the ETA terrorist group. Years later, he flees to France and is subsequently arrested. After years in prison, he is released and returns home. The Merino siblings present this documentary as an autobiographical story that follows the personal journeys of two friends, with a very appealing pace based on dynamic editing and a ludic use of reflexive strategies. Somewhere between Pamplona, Madrid and France, the documentary explores a very thorny issue in Spanish society, attempting to present an intermediate view between two opposing stances, although it ends up offering an excessively ambiguous perspective on the ETA terrorist movement.

Siminiani, Iscar and Guerin all posit their films in relation to strange spaces, with no biographical connection to their own life journeys. This is not the case with the Merinos' film, and it is certainly not the case of two films whose very *raison d'être* lies in the filmmakers' personal relationship with the space portrayed: *Yo soy de mi barrio* (*I Am from My Neighbourhood*, Juan Vicente Córdoba, 2002) and *El cielo gira* (*The Sky Turns*, Mercedes Álvarez, 2004). In the first of these two films, Córdoba offers a documentary on Madrid's Entrevías neighbourhood from an autobiographical perspective. As he himself states at the start of the film, "there are three things that you can't choose: your parents, your siblings, and your neighbourhood." Amidst major urban development changes in his neighbourhood, the filmmaker seeks to recover the history of Entrevías, not in the style of an expository documentary but in the form of a family biography. He thus articulates his film around interviews with his parents, relatives and friends, punctuated with first-person commentary like that which opens and closes the film. Visually, the film alternates between contemporary images of the neighbourhood and archival footage, combined with home movies made by an uncle of his. In addition (and this may be its most unique feature), it uses images from two of Córdoba's fiction films, both set in Entrevías some years earlier, to illustrate the passage of time in his neighbourhood. The filmmaker thus takes on the idea that any fiction film is also a documentary, as it activates the referential function that any audiovisual narrative has as a visual testimony of its own footage.

The second film, *El cielo gira*, presents a complex relationship between the filmmaker, Mercedes Álvarez, and the place portrayed, Aldealseñor, the town where she was born and lived for the first three years of her life. Curiously, the filmmaker never appears on screen and the documentary is clearly focused on offering a portrait of the town, with a contemplative style supported by long, static shots that capture the slow pace of this small Spanish village. But this visual distance is nuanced by the first-person commentary provided by Álvarez, whose calm tone matches the pace of the visuals, while introducing an emotional intimacy that compels the viewer to consider the images in autobiographical terms. This unique combination is expressed very concisely near the

beginning, when we see a static shot of a hill with a solitary oak tree and the filmmaker comments in a voice-over: “This for me is the strangest landscape in existence. It is the view from the house where I was born, and therefore the first thing I saw in the world. In other words, for the first three years of my life, this place was the world.”

What begins as a documentary about a place, through this anchoring in autobiography, ends up being a documentary about the marks of time, the temporal layers that accumulate in a place: the cyclical time of the seasons, which gives the film its structure; the historical time of the generations, from dinosaur tracks to the Roman ruins of nearby Numantia; and the biographical time of the old villagers, beginning in the 1930s, which includes the autobiographical time of the filmmaker. *Aldeaseñor* is effectively presented as a place with an unusual historical density. Thus, what appeared to be a film about the end of a cycle—the last person to be born there was the filmmaker herself nearly forty years ago—ends up turning into a study of historical cycles, observed on their different levels, both macro- and micro-historical. The news of the construction of a windmill park and the commencement of works to turn an old palace into a luxury hotel make it clear that while one era is ending another is beginning.

This rich articulation of temporal layers is epitomised in two places that thereby take on the quality of chronotopes, to borrow the concept posited by Bakhtin in the field of literary analysis (250-52): the hill with the oak tree and the village square. The hill serves almost as a physical frame for the documentary: it is the foundational image for the filmmaker, her first window on the world, and it serves to conclude the portrait of the village, with two of the old villagers who have featured most in the film walking in the distance while they talk about the fleetingness of their lives. The village square is not only a meeting point for the villagers, as such places usually are. It was also the home of the old elm tree, a witness to the passing of so many generations, which was transplanted decades ago and now stands silent in front of the palace that is being converted into a hotel. It is in this way, in this continuous and fruitful dialogue between the elements that comprise it, that *El cielo gira* earns the status of one of the best Spanish documentaries of the twenty-first century, as has been recognised at the numerous international festivals where it has received awards (Rotterdam, Cinema du Reel, BAFICI).¹⁰

Joaquim Jordà: a unique path

The filmmaker Joaquim Jordà offers a unique approach to autobiographical cinema in two films of particular importance among recent Spanish documentaries: *Monos como Becky* (Monkeys Like Becky, 1999) and *Más allá del espejo* (Beyond the Mirror, 2006). When he made the first of these films, which was co-written and co-directed with Núria Villazán, Jordà was already a prominent figure in the world of non-fiction cinema, thanks in particular to his film *Numax presenta...* (1980).

¹⁰ A more exhaustive analysis of *El cielo gira* can be found in my chapter “Cycles of Life: *El Cielo Gira* and Spanish Autobiographical Documentary”, included in the anthology *Cinema of Me* (2011).

It is worth highlighting that *Monos como Becky* constitutes the first documentary feature film with an autobiographical perspective to be released in Spain. The film is not initially presented as an autobiographical work, as its intention is to confront conventional psychiatry, as embodied in the well-known Portuguese psychiatrist Egas Moniz (1874-1955), with the current work carried out in the Malgrat Therapeutic Community on a small group of mental patients. The narrative thread for the portrayal of this group is the performance of a play about Moniz, and in this process Jordá and his small film crew become involved as part of the group and in fact appear quite frequently in front of the camera, not only filming but also taking part in everyday situations or in conversations with the patients. Moreover, Jordá feels a particular bond with these patients because not long before making the film he suffered a stroke from which he is still recovering. This detail, which comes up in a conversation with one of the patients, even leads to a short interview with Jordá himself, separate from the film shoot at the psychiatric institution, which helps to underscore the autobiographical perspective of this work.

This perspective is even more obvious in his last film, *Más allá del Espejo*, released posthumously. The film begins with Jordá struggling to read a newspaper article about Esther, a young girl who suffers from agnosia. We soon learn that the filmmaker himself, as a result of his stroke, also suffers from agnosia and alexia, disorders that affect perception (and therefore the ability to read). With this film, Jordá seeks to document the lives of people who suffer from this condition, and to this end he himself becomes one of the leading characters: we learn about his problems, just as we learn about Esther's and Rosario Villaescusa's, the documentary's other two protagonists; we will attend doctor's appointments where he is also a patient, and we will listen as he speaks to camera about the problems the disorder causes him. This film thus takes a step further than *Monos como Becky*, as the filmmaker's presence is no longer merely secondary but instrumental. In *Más allá del espejo*, Jordá positions himself on the same level as the other people he seeks to document, constantly interchanging the role of filmmaker and character, even to the point of allowing himself to be interviewed by Esther at one point, in keeping with the spirit of a joint enterprise that is created while filming the documentary.

Autobiographical looks at family portraits

One of the most productive variations of the autobiographical documentary is the one that Jim Lane, in his study of these kinds of films in the United States, classifies as the "family portrait" (95-119), a thematic focus that can in fact also be found in what this same author defines as a "journal entry documentary" (48-93). This classification draws our attention to the fact that many filmmakers take on film projects whose main theme is their own family, either to offer a portrait of their loved ones, or to search for answers to questions of identity related to their origins, to their family history. Spain has produced a significant number of films that fall under this category, which will be considered in this final section.

Several Spanish filmmakers who have made family portraits position themselves at a certain distance from their subjects, keeping outside the portrait or maintaining only a very discreet presence in it. However, even if they avoid taking a central role, it is

important to remember that the familial connection makes the intimacy of the portrait possible, thanks to the access to the family's private world that gives the film portrait a personality of its own. Under this category we could include (notwithstanding differences of thematic focus) works like *Amor Sanjuan* (*Sanjuan Love*, Luis Misis, 2006), *Cuadernos de contabilidad de Manolo Miralles* (*Manolo Miralles' Account Books*, Juan Miguel Miralles, 2005), *Bucarest. La memoria perdida* (*Bucharest: Lost Memory*, Albert Solé, 2008), *La memoria interior* (*Inner Memory*, María Ruido, 2002), *Familystrip* (Lluís Miñarro, 2009), and *Retrato* (*Portrait*, Carlos Ruiz, 2004).

In the medium-length film *Amor Sanjuan*, Luis Misis offers a portrait of his grandmother drawn from two different sources: some audio tapes on which his grandmother recorded personal testimonies, and the house she lived in (his grandmother died during filming of the documentary), which is now going to be torn down. Once again, the inhabited space is used as a visual symbol of a life, in this case accompanied by oral diaries, an unusual source for a family portrait. Among feature-length films are two works with a more conventional approach, determined to a certain extent by their objective to present figures already known to the audience: the painter Manolo Miralles and the politician Jordi Sole Tura. The film *Cuadernos de contabilidad de Manolo Miralles* was made by a relative, Juan Miguel Miralles, who never appears on screen, although it is one of the painter's daughters who acts as presenter in the documentary, reading the diary that her father had written in a voice-over and interviewing different family members. The autobiographical motivation is much clearer in *Bucarest. La memoria perdida*, as in this case it is Albert Sole, the protagonist's son, who takes on the task of delving into the life story of his father, a communist politician active from the 1950s to the early 1980s. The filmmaker interviews his mother and other witnesses, often appearing on camera, and narrates the whole documentary in first person, sharing his own journey of discovery with the spectator. In any case, in both these films more weight seems to be given to the presentation of the public dimension of these figures than to a personal search for the filmmaker's family roots.

The medium-length film *La memoria interior* represents a clear change of register. In this film, the filmmaker María Ruido explores the identity of her parents, Galicians who emigrated to Germany, taking an essay-style approach in which she reflects on questions like personal memory, official memory, or the marks of emigration on her parents' generation. But these reflections, with some very interesting conclusions, are not reflected in the visuals, which develop mainly on the basis of three interviews—with her parents, with a trade union member and with four workers—whose tone fails to produce the echo that the narrator's commentary has us expecting.

Familystrip and *Retrato* share similarities in their subject matter (a portrait of the filmmaker's parents), but their stylistic approaches are very clearly different. In *Familystrip*, Miñarro offers a very transparent structure: an audiovisual diary about the portrait that the painter Francesc Herrero is painting of the filmmaker and his parents in their house. At these sessions, a small film crew (camera and sound) record the conversations between the parents and their son, in which they recall old times: their engagement and marriage, children, etc. Occasionally the camera and sound crew even

take part in the conversation, in keeping with the familiar tone that characterises the whole film. Ultimately, the picture offers an impressionist portrait of the lives of these people, perhaps excessively tied to the mundane events of these posing sessions, almost as if it were a home movie, but shot with a professional film crew and subsequently turned into a public feature film. In its favour, it has the intimacy and warmth of the human portraits, especially that of the mother (the most talkative character), which could in a way be considered representative of a whole generation.

The formal structure of *Retrato* is quite the opposite of *Familystrip*. Its director, Carlos Ruiz, presents a portrait of his parents that combines voice-over interviews (of each parent separately) with highly unique visuals. In contrast with the intimacy conveyed by the son's interviews with his parents, bringing up memories, hardships and nostalgic yearnings, the image (in black and white) shows them in their house, but always posing and always separate (even when they are both in the frame). The parents' stiffness and the meticulous composition of the frames create a strange distancing effect—reminiscent of films like *Last Year at Marienbad*—that contrasts openly with the more mundane register of the dialogue. The filmmaker never appears in the frame and is only ever heard in occasional verbal exchanges, a fact that further complicates the spectator's reception of the film, as the usual intimacy facilitated by the autobiographical connection is expressly deconstructed in the image, even while being reinforced by the sound.

Two other films made in this decade also present portraits of family history, but based on home movies filmed by the filmmakers' parents: *El horizonte artificial* (*The Artificial Horizon*, José Irigoyen, 2007) and *Haciendo memoria* (*Making Memory*, Sandra Ruesga, 2005).¹¹ In the first case, Irigoyen's medium-length film uses footage filmed by his father between the 1940s and 1960s as its main visual source (except for three brief moments in the film). The soundtrack is dominated by his first-person commentary, which provides explanatory support to the images. In this context, the film could be understood as an audiovisual variant of what Paul John Eakin has defined in the written medium as “proximate collaborative autobiography” (175-182). Eakin proposes this term for works about an intimate friend or family member, with two people speaking, in which the author tells his or her own life story through telling the story of the other. We might well ask to what extent the other films discussed in this section could be classified in this category, but *El horizonte artificial* clearly fits the description, with a first-person paternal “voice” providing a visual chronicle of the family and social events of the moment, based on which the contemporary filmmaker is in fact constructing a “collaborative” family autobiography.

The short film *Haciendo memoria* posits a slightly different use of home-made footage, aiming for a contrast between image and sound that resonates on social and historical levels. The images are typical, showing the family on an outing or on holiday.

¹¹ A similar case might be that of *La doble vida del faquir* (*The Fakir's Double Life*, 2005), in which the co-director, Elisabet Cabeza, draws on amateur footage of a children's play, filmed in the years of the Civil War, to reconstruct that period from the perspective of her protagonists, who are now elderly. Well into the film she tells us in a voice-over that she got involved in this project because her father, now deceased, was one of those children. However, the filmmaker does not delve much further into this autobiographical angle.

The sound is comprised of conversations that Ruesga has with her parents, in which she asks them why they chose to visit the Valle de los Caídos or Cerro de San Cristobal, two well-known Francoist landmarks. Her parents' explanations refer to mundane experiences with no political connotations ("it was nearby", "there were nice views"). Ruesga appears uncomfortable with these explanations, seemingly searching for political motivations behind these personal decisions, which her parents reject outright. The conclusion says more than it seems, in a mini-chronicle of life in Spain during the late Francoist period. *Haciendo memoria* actually forms part of the series *Entre el dictador y yo* (*Between the Dictator and Me*, 2005), for which six filmmakers born after Franco's death made a short film on their relationship with the Franco years. All of the filmmakers take an autobiographical approach in their films: for Juan Barrero it is the memory of a visit with his father to Franco's yacht the Azor (located next to a motel in the middle of Castile); for Elia Urquiza it is her grandmother, who fills the soundtrack with her memories, the connection with Santander; for Raúl Cuevas it is his birthplace, a working-class neighbourhood in Catalonia. But it is perhaps Ruesga's film and the works by Guillem López and Mònica Rovira that present the most openly autobiographical perspective. López's film interweaves events and places—Franco's death, a school, a beach—with his own personal and family biography, using home movies and a conversation with his grandfather, while Rovira travels to her family's village (where her grandfather was mayor under Franco) and talks to different relatives there in an effort to understand an era which, not having experienced it herself, proves more opaque than she had imagined.

Two more recent films also explore family roots, but in relation to a generation (grandparents) that their filmmakers never had the chance to know personally: *Pepe el andaluz* (*Pepe the Andalusian*, 2013) and *Cartas a María* (*Letters to Maria*, 2014). Both films attempt to reconstruct the history of a lost grandparent, but they take different paths to do so and reach different conclusions. In *Pepe el andaluz*, Alejandro Alvarado (with the help of Concha Barquero as co-director) offers a portrait of his grandfather, who fought in the Civil War, got married shortly thereafter, emigrated to Argentina and then disappeared. Employing a classic quest structure, Alvarado seeks out the people and places that knew his grandfather, and ultimately discovers that he started a new life—and a new family—in Argentina, a family that now welcomes him in a moment of mutual surprise and recognition. *Cartas a María* shares this relatively conventional quest structure, although its aim is not to unveil a mystery, as the film's director, Maite García Ribot, already knows that her grandfather, a Spanish anarchist, fled to France in 1939 and died there in 1943 when Bordeaux was bombed. This film's originality lies mainly in its use of the letters written by Ribot's grandfather to his wife between 1937 and 1943, which give the film a thematic and formal continuity that takes it further than the usual technique of interviews and archival footage, which the director also uses in an effort to strike a balance that is not always entirely successful.

Family portraits are more interwoven into the life journeys of the filmmakers in last three films analysed in this section: *O Futbol* (*On Football*, 2016), *Le temps et le distance* (*Time and Distance*, François Gurguï, 2001) and *Nadar* (*Swimming*, Carla Subirana, 2008). The first, *O Futbol*, which premiered in 2015 at the Locarno Festival

and has been featured and awarded at many other international festivals, is a Brazilian-Spanish co-production both in terms of financing and co-authorship, as it was made by Brazil's Sergio Oksman and Spain's Carlos Muguiro. The film tells the story of Oksman's relationship with his father: after being estranged for more than twenty years they are reunited in 2013, and Sergio proposes that they spend the days of the 2014 World Cup together and make a film about the experience. The film is presented as a diary, with the dates shown on screen and always associated with a football match, with a clearly observational film strategy. Oksman shot the footage with a stationary camera, with long shots that contain frequent periods of idle time, with no extra-diegetic music or voice-over commentary (except for a brief explanation at the beginning). Father and son appear together often in the father's car, on different journeys, with the camera always filming them from behind. Most of the other scenes show the father in his office or in bars or restaurants. The film is dominated by that sensation of the present moment that is typical of the observational documentary, broken only once by a scene in which the two protagonists are watching some home movies of Sergio's parents' wedding and of some holidays. The present moment intersects with the past as well through the conversations, with brief references to the father's marriage breakup, and frequent discussions of football matches and players of the past.

O Futebol is in fact a film in which life, football and cinema fuse in a unique, almost overwhelming way. Fifteen days after the World Cup begins, Sergio's father is admitted to hospital and a few days later he dies—on the very same day as Brazil's resounding 7-1 defeat to Germany. Of course, none of this was planned, and it is for that very reason that these parallels experienced in the first person by the filmmaker between life, football and cinema are so overwhelming: the reunion with his father, a man who lives for football, who predicts that Germany or Argentina (the two teams that played in the final) would win the World Cup, and who dies as if he couldn't bear the unprecedented defeat of his national team. Oksman and Muguiro succeed in telling this intimate story in a sensitive way, positioning the camera at a certain distance to keep it unobtrusive, and paradoxically leaving the most "important" moments out of the frame, from the World Cup matches (as they never actually enter the football stadiums) to the death of Sergio's father.

In *Le temps et le distance* and *Nadar* we are once again presented with stories that have grandparents as the impetus for a quest. In the first film, the filmmaker has settled in France (hence the French title and the adaptation of the filmmaker's name, Francesc Xavier Juncosa Gurguí, to François Gurguí), but his family story is set in Catalonia. During the nearly eighty minutes of this feature film, Gurguí mixes a diverse range of material, achieving a kind of *collage* effect: his uncle's home movies, documentary footage taken by the filmmaker years earlier, current footage (like the footage he takes in his recently deceased grandmother's home), and even excerpts from his previous films. A billboard that the filmmaker sees on his return to Paris, with the phrase "know where you've come from to know where you're going" sums up perhaps a little too obviously the reason behind the film, which he expresses in different ways in his frequent essayistic and autobiographical voice-over commentary.

Carla Subirana undertakes a similar quest in her feature-length film *Nadar*. Her purpose initially is to piece together the story of her maternal grandfather, executed by firing squad in 1940, and to do this she searches in archives, interviews her own family, and even dramatises some scenes with an air of the *film noir* of the era. In parallel with this story, the film also tells us about the filmmaker herself, her mother and her grandmother (who had to raise their daughters alone), the world of women in which she grew up and which now, as shown in the final scene, has been broken with the birth of her son, Mateo. The film, shot over four years, turns partly into a family diary, as during this time her grandmother, who had Alzheimer's, passes away, and her mother begins to suffer from senile dementia. Subirana is thus confronted with the fragility of family memory on two levels, and it is this that forms the main motivation to make her film. In the end the filmmaker actually talks a lot more about this exploration of her family roots as a way of understanding herself better than about the mystery of her grandfather, a narrative thread that almost seems to serve more as a MacGuffin to hold the interest of the curious spectator. What is undeniable is that *Nadar* represented something of a novelty in Spanish cinema: a feature-length film that seeks a place in theatres and festivals with an openly autobiographical story, with no famous protagonists or other hooks that might give it some box office appeal.

In the preceding pages, I have sought to set out an overview of the autobiographical documentary film in Spain up to 2018. The films discussed here clearly reflect a rich diversity of practices and approaches. This diversity ranges from the film diaries made by Ricardo Iscar or José Luis Guerín to films that recycle home movie footage like *El horizonte artificial*, or feature-length documentaries articulated around rather conventional structures, based on interviews, public or family archival footage, and even dramatisations. These strategies are placed at the service of a wide range of autobiographical endeavours, with two basic categories standing out. The first revolves around the exploration of places and spaces, either closely linked to the filmmaker's origins (the films of Álvarez or Córdoba), or with no direct relation but connected to the biography through a travel story, as in the cases of Guerín, Iscar, and Siminiani. And the second category explores family portraits, with variations ranging from the formalist distance of *Retrato* to the more home-made style of *Familystrip*. All of these films suggest that films like *El cielo gira*, *Más allá del espejo* and *Nadar* are not isolated examples but points of reference for a creative movement that is being consolidated in Spain.

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Retrato (Carlos Ruiz, 2004)

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