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### Reflexivity in Iberian Documentary Film

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# REFLEXIVITY IN IBERIAN DOCUMENTARY FILM

*Samuel Amago*

To be reflexive is to reveal that films – all films, whether they are labeled fiction, documentary, or art – are created structured articulations of the filmmaker and not authentic truthful objective records.

(Ruby 1977, 10)

“El prestigio del documental sólo fue alcanzado gracias a la experimentación. Sin experimentación, el documental pierde sentido. Sin experimentación, el documental deja de existir.”

(Cavalcanti [1948] 2003, 451)

The crucial interdependency of reality and fiction that Susan Martin-Márquez (2004, 751) highlights in her description of contemporary Spanish media has only grown stronger in the Iberian context of the twenty-first century, where the flexibility and permeability of documentary forms has transformed nonfiction film in particular into “la punta del iceberg de una nueva concepción del audiovisual tanto a nivel de producción como a nivel artístico” (Gallego and Martínez 2012, 28). Filmmakers throughout the Iberian Peninsula have used reflexive and experimental documentary modes to draw attention to local geographies and historical realities, critique dominant modes of representation, analyze global pressures on local cultures, and reflect on the audiovisual structures of history and memory. In an essay written after the 2008 Festival de Cannes, Cyril Neyrat posited that it is precisely the opening up of the border between fiction and documentary that constitutes the principal sign of “la vitalidad de todo un sector de cine” (Neyrat 2009, 15). Surveying a number of nonfiction titles emerging from China, Catalonia, Portugal, Philippines, and beyond, Neyrat remarks – echoing Bill Nichols’s early assertion that “documentary film practice is the site of contestation and change” (1991, 12) – that it is the mixing of documentary and fiction that has inspired so many aesthetic innovations in the history of the cinema. Francisco Javier Ruiz del Olmo goes so far as to suggest, in an essay on “Compromiso y veracidad en el reciente cine documental español,” that documentary film has achieved “un nivel creativo muy elevado, muy por encima del cine narrativo convencional” (2009, 32). He ends by asserting that

films such as *El efecto Iguazú* (Pere Joan Ventura and Georgina Cisquella 2002), *La leyenda del tiempo* (Isaki Lacuesta 2006), and *En construcción* (José Luis Guerín 2001), whose committed use of a “fructífera mezcla audiovisual” (20) engages critically with social, political, emotional and metaphysical realities, in fact represent the “vanguardia creativa de nuestra cinematografía” (32).

While Ruiz del Olmo’s assertions of quality may perhaps be taken with a grain of salt, his rhetoric is nonetheless instructive when we talk about documentary film in the Iberian context, where both the writing on documentary and the production of documentary nearly always rely on possessive determiners and national markers of identification. This is perhaps ironic given the fact that digital modes of film production and reception, reduced production costs, and new modes of exhibition have contributed to the formation of geographically dispersed communities of viewers who have enjoyed unprecedented access to what would otherwise be “invisible” forms of cinema. The more conventional and largely urban international film festivals that have always sustained independent cinema (nonfiction and fiction) have been supplemented and in many cases replaced by more innovative platforms such as the Festival Internacional de Cinema Rural Carlos Velo, the Cinema Palleiriso, and the Festival de Cans, and digital venues such as the Festival Europeo de Cine Invisible (an online film festival organized by Filmotech), mubi.com, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and so on. As Gallego and Martínez note, digitalization, self-production, and new online channels of distribution and exhibition have increased access across the board, creating “microaudiencias” for new audiovisual content produced through “la hibridación de géneros y formatos” (2012, 36). The same technologies and practices that have democratized cinematic creativity on the production side have made it possible for what Roberto Cueto calls a “third public” (2008, 10) to view films that likely would otherwise remain unseen.<sup>1</sup> Existing somewhere between the popular audience and a more elite cinephile public, the “third public” described by Cueto has taken advantage of novel modes of distribution and reception in order to seek out “cine alternativo o ‘diferente’” (2008, 10). Cueto asserts that “antes que una invisibilidad, se está produciendo un desplazamiento de la visibilidad a otros espacios y hábitos de consumo” (2008, 10). Gallego and Martínez (2012, 29) argue, alongside Cueto, that rather than the death of cinema we are seeing the demise of old ways of thinking about it.

This essay examines how contemporary Iberian filmmakers have continued the tradition of innovation and rupture that has been present in the documentary form from its beginnings, and analyzes how those directors meld fictional and nonfictional modes of representation in their films in order to observe, critique, or otherwise erode traditional boundaries between reality and representation, showing and telling, narrative and testimony, realism and formalism. The essay centers on three works from three corners of the Iberian Peninsula that in one way or another question the “rhetorics of authenticity” upon which traditional documentary films have relied: from Galicia, *Todos vós sodes capitáns* (Oliver Laxe 2010), a reflexive film about globalism and social issues that also problematizes the ability of European cameras to document the social reality of non-European Others; from Portugal, *Aquele Querido Mês de Agosto* (Miguel Gomes 2008), a more observational film about Portuguese regional identity that contains within itself parallel narratives about the making of a “fictional” film-within-the-film and a romantic melodrama; and, from Catalonia, *Bicicleta, cullera, poma* (Carles Bosch 2011), an expository documentary on Pasqual Maragall’s battle with Alzheimer’s disease. One of this essay’s central goals is to demonstrate how the aesthetics of reflexivity function within and across Iberian cultural contexts in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup>

### Reflexive ethnography in *Todos vós sodes capitáns* (2010)

Un documental tamén pode ser arte, pero sitúanos nunha disposición diferente. E a min resultame máis intenso.

(Borrazás 2007, 73)

*Todos vós sodes capitáns* (2010), Galician director Oliver Laxe's first feature-length film, was shot during the years he spent in Tangier organizing a filmmaking workshop for socially marginalized youths. The film opens by drawing attention to the dual practices of looking and traveling that have historically encompassed ethnographic film, as a group of children observe and comment upon an approaching airplane, exhorting their companions to "look" and "see" it as it grows larger in their view. Following a cut to a noisy classroom, a teacher tells the children that "we are all here today to help your teacher Oliver to make his movie," which in turn introduces the ostensible topic of the film, which will document, according to the teacher, "gestures used here in the Magreb" so that "the audience and foreigners can understand us." The teacher's lesson on hand gestures highlights intertwined notions of visibility and pedagogy, and functions reflexively to signal the vexed relationship between Us and Them that stands at the center of any ethnographic film.

Laxe, who appears within the film as a fictionalized version of himself, works constantly to undermine his own authorial authority by including sequences in which he appears as a European outsider ill-equipped to represent the children or their social reality. His onscreen persona is that of a culturally oblivious pedant of cinema who lacks sensitivity to the children's situation. In an early sequence, the orphans express their doubts about Laxe's concern for their welfare, complaining that the director forces them to awake at five in the morning to begin shooting. When Laxe first appears onscreen, it is to explain to the children the photographic qualities of lenses and the cinematic apparatus they will use to make their movie; the diagrams and drawings appearing on the blackboard are clearly beyond the children's (and most viewers') capacity for comprehension. A later scene shot in a marketplace depicts vendors and shopkeepers confronting the camera, forbidding the European crew from shooting their faces; finally Laxe and his film crew capitulate, and surrender their camera to a Moroccan child who returns to the alleyway, where it is assumed he will have more success at shooting this street scene than the European outsiders.<sup>3</sup>

These "fictional" plot complications dominate the movie's first half, and serve to problematize, from the beginning, the premise that any foreign filmmaker might document Moroccan social reality authentically. At the film's midway point the director ostensibly cedes control of his film to the children when he engages a young man named Shakib to take the kids and their cameras on an excursion into the country. At this point, the children, who are already accustomed to producing things with their hands – using the machinery of sewing, metal working, and other tasks to earn their keep in the orphanage in which they live – are allowed to appropriate the cinematic apparatus for themselves. Following this apparent transference of authorship, the film shifts from an observational or "objective" ethnographic mode to a more poetic and subjective one. Narrative development slows in the film's second half, and the movie ends with a series of long takes in which the children swim in a creek, explore ruined stone buildings, and walk together through fields and forests where the wind can be heard whipping through branches and undulating wheat fields.<sup>4</sup> Immediately after the credits, there appears a painterly silent montage of 16-mm footage of the children, the landscape they inhabit, some animals that live in the orphanage garden, and the architecture of the orphanage buildings.

*Todos vós sodes capitáns* hinges on Oliver Laxe's deployment of two interrelated fictions. The first is the notion that the onscreen Laxe might actually be exploiting the children in order to shoot his film. Laxe's fictional insensitivity to the children's plight is a method of ridiculing himself in the first half of the film, and thus allows him to critique his own status as European outsider while preparing the viewer for his later (apparent) transference of power over the cinematic apparatus from himself to the children. The second fiction, which is perhaps less apparent, is that the real Laxe actually relinquishes power over the cinematic apparatus. The director admits in an interview that even after he has given the children power over the cameras he is clearly still there ("Claro, yo estoy siempre ahí" [Pena 2010, 15]), but this conceit nonetheless functions to reflect on the problematic historical relationship between European documentary filmmakers and Third-World subjects. Laxe's onscreen surrender of the camera and subsequent disappearance from the diegesis represents a formal acknowledgement of his moral responsibility before the objects of his directorial gaze. This metacinematic gesture would seem to respond preemptively to inevitable critiques of "romantic preservationism" (Rony 1996, 102) and cinematic "taxidermy" (Gaines 1999, 8) that critics have levied historically upon ethnographic films such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1921).

In the end, the viewer must determine whether Laxe's removal of himself from the film (as the director of the film within the film) represents an authentic attempt to question the power relations – institutional, discursive, narrative – that always arise when a Western filmmaker sets out to shoot a film about non-Western Others, or whether the film – despite its recognition of the problem – represents simply a disavowal of unavoidable pitfalls of ethnography. On the one hand, the film evinces a meta-awareness of some of the ideological problems that Nichols sees operating at the center of the European anthropological unconscious:

whiteness; maleness; the body of the observer; the experiential; canonical conventions of Western narrative; narrative conventions and forms from other cultures; the full indexical particularly of the image and its emotional impact; the erotics of the gaze; textual theory and interpretation; the actual workings of the institutional procedures that determine what counts as anthropological knowledge; and the viewer or audience for ethnographic film.

(1994, 65)

On the other hand, through its thoughtful contemplation of questions of authorship and authority, and through its refusal to perpetuate naively the problematic discourses of traditional ethnographic film, *Todos vós sodes capitáns* clearly seeks to position itself as a kind of "thinking Eurocentrism" that would respond critically and reflectively to the more "unthinking" varieties analyzed by Shohat and Stam (1994). In this regard the film's genealogy might be traced through the progressive realism of Third-Worldist films that engage with neo-colonial representations of subaltern sociality and histories. In this line, there exists a tradition of films that have sought, from Third-Worldist perspectives, to rewrite colonial history through reflexive realist lenses. While many of these kinds of films, as analyzed by Shohat and Stam, end with the reflexive topos of filmmakers deciding not to make the film (although "the audience knows the film has in fact been made" [1994, 281]), the reflexive forms comprising *Todos vós sodes capitáns* signal Laxe's ethical recognition of the ideological implications of a European filmmaker making a film about non-European Others. The aesthetics of reflexivity function in the film to acknowledge the moral obligation of Western documentary filmmakers to resist the siren song of realism and to reject ideological illusions of objectivity in documentary modes of ethnographic representation.

### Landscape and reflexive melodrama in *Aquele querido mês de agosto* (2008)

No es oportuno hablar de cine de ficción o de no ficción como dos modalidades de representación totalmente autónomas, ya que el documental está constantemente traspasando esta barrera para apropiarse de las herramientas y elementos propios del cine de ficción para ponerlos a su disposición y a la de la historia.

(Gallego and Martínez 2012, 29)

*Aquele Querido Mês de Agosto* (2008) has been described as “at once a musical, a travelogue, a quasi-incestuous family melodrama, an ethnographic portrait of Portuguese folk traditions and an account of its own chaotic production” (Lim 2010). What links Gomes’s film to Laxe’s is the way in which both filmmakers work reflexively across fictional and non-fictional registers in the confection of their ethnographic portraits, all the while situating the apparatus of cinematic representation within the ideological, historical, and spatial contexts to which it responds. *Aquele Querido Mês de Agosto* takes place in the municipality of Arganil, located in the mountainous geographical center of Portugal, where a movie crew waits for the green light to shoot an elaborate screen melodrama. Conversations between the director and his producer suggest that filming of the movie is not going well. Meanwhile, extended fragments of documentary footage shot, apparently, by the same crew documents the denizens of these Portuguese mountain zones and their summertime activities. A variety of people appear onscreen to share oral accounts of their personal histories and stories: volunteer firefighters, a wild boar – hunting collective, an English anarchist expatriate, municipal music groups, the adventures of a fun-loving ne’er-do-well named Paulo “Miller,” the publishers and printers of *O Comarca de Arganil* (a town newspaper), a roving band of motorcyclists, an octogenarian couple. The Portuguese film crew’s efforts to shoot their film about a boy and a girl in love represent simply one activity among many. If there is one theme that brings all these people and happenings together it is the notion of spectacle, which ranges from music, carnival, moviemaking and shadow plays, to watchtowers, religious processions, and hunting lodges. Present in all the forms of human activity portrayed onscreen are the interrelated actions of looking, observing, acting, playing.

Following a playful prelude in which a fox observes a chain-link hen house, the film’s opening sequence takes the viewer to a plaza in the Aldeia da Benfeita where Banda Gomape is performing a song. A power outage cuts the music and the light, and the film goes black. Contingency and accidents become minor keys or punctuations for the ensuing “narrative,” which documents central Portugal social reality through the increasingly unreliable lens of Miguel Gomes, the onscreen director, who is engaged in completing his troubled film production. The appearance of Gomes’s bored film crew, who passes the time by stacking dominoes, reinforces the film’s ludic aims. Within the strictly realist historical mise-en-scene of small towns dispersed through Portugal’s mountainous interior, these idle filmmakers function doubly as the actual documentary filmmakers and as fictional characters in the melodrama that finally begins, at the one-hour seventeen-minute mark, on the bridge over the river Alva in the town of Coja.

The real bridge across the Alva at once serves as a marker of geographical specificity and as a bridge from non-fiction into fiction. While *Todos vós sodes capitães* ends as poetic anti-ethnography, *Aquele Querido Mês de Agosto* playfully rejects documentary realism in favor of fiction and melodrama. Neyrat has characterized Gomes’s film as “un camino hacia la ficción”

(2009, 16), since it begins as an observational documentary about Portuguese life, customs, and music, only to relinquish its claims to the “real” in favor of the romantic tale that Gomes has been trying to realize. The film’s reflexive structures – extreme long takes, mise-en-scene of the making-of within the film, a mysterious concluding dialogue between Gomes and his director of sound production, Vasco Pimentel – allow Gomes to move his characters back and forth between reality and fiction, from realism to make believe, from social space to the world of melodrama. These self-reflexive moments draw strategic attention to Portuguese motion picture workers, musicians, writers, radio hosts, and boar hunters as situated within concrete cultural, geographical, and historical contexts.

As the narrative concludes, the viewer becomes aware – through the film’s elongated temporality and metacinematic gestures – of what Nichols calls “a thickened, denser sense of the textuality of the viewing experience” (2001, 62), that works to create a sense of mutual coexistence of historical world and the fictional world of representation. This deeper sense of layered textuality is complemented by the film’s extended play with temporality, since long takes and lingering pans across Portuguese landscapes, people, and performances create in the viewer a meta-consciousness of the fact that all cinematic images necessarily require “the time of our perception” (Wahlberg 2008, ix). In *Aquele Querido Mês de Agosto*, textual, temporal, and auditory self-consciousness function to link the array of people, stories, geographical zones, into a loosely meandering, fictional documentary about Portugal’s interior and the things that might happen there during an extremely slow month of summer vacation.

### **Pasqual Maragall as *Lloc de memòria in bicicleta, cullera, poma* (2011)**

The cinema in Spain is, in Brad Epps’ words, “inconceivable without Catalonia” (2013, 71), thanks to an industrial infrastructure and an array of practices that rendered Barcelona, especially during the early twentieth century, a crucial “capital of cinematic production in Spain” (2013, 72), home to “an established local film industry” (Colmeiro and Gabilondo 2013, 82). And yet, within the history of writing on motion picture production in Spain, Catalan language and culture have tended to be only perceptible as echoes and traces. The 2011 Goya Awards telecast may have marked a turning point: in the twenty-year history of the Goya Awards, Agustí Villaronga’s *Pa negre* (2010) was the first film shot in a Spanish official language other than Castilian to win Best Picture, along with eight other awards. The televised program, which *La Vanguardia* called a “Goyas con sabor catalán” (2011), was hosted by Catalan television personality and comic Andreu Buenafuente.<sup>5</sup> But it was Pasqual Maragall’s acceptance, with his wife, Diana Garrigosa, of the Goya award for Best Feature-Length Documentary for *Bicicleta, cullera, poma* (Carles Bosch 2011), that provided sentimental gravitas to a show that at times felt like a belated celebration of Catalonia’s contributions to audiovisual culture in Spain.

Bosch’s film narrates two years of Maragall’s ongoing battle with Alzheimer’s and documents his ongoing efforts to draw attention to the disease, control the advance of his own symptoms, and promote international research on treatments. The film opens with a close-up of Maragall, who responds to a question posed by the off-screen voice of the director, who asks, in Catalan, “What kind of movie should we do?” to which Maragall says, “divertida hòstia [. . .] divertida, interessant,” then, in English, Maragall remarks, “I am fed up with the issue of ‘pobrecitos, pobrecitos.’ Let’s kill the animal. The illness. And then we’ll talk about it.” This opening dialogue is followed by the title of the film and an oral account of Maragall’s symptoms narrated by his wife, Diana Garrigosa. Her description of her family’s experience of the disease is intercut with images of an indoor construction site where a crane is fabricating

what will later become the stage where a group of global experts in Alzheimer research and treatment gather to discuss the disease. Maragall appears within these shots of the construction site, observing the work in progress.

*Bicicleta, cullera, poma* focuses on one man, Maragall, as he moves through the intimate and institutional spaces where he has engaged both privately and publically with his struggle to first overcome, and then to come to terms with his condition. A series of painterly dissolves connect shots of simultaneous research happening across the globe in a variety of research centers, in Barcelona and Madrid, Spain; Rochester, United States; Rotterdam, Holland; and Hyderabad, India. These images of far-flung locales are accompanied by a series of emotionally charged conversations in which Alzheimer sufferers share their experiences as they go through the same stages of the disease. Montage works throughout the film to create an effect of simultaneity, reduced geographical scale, and, thus, a sense of transnational community and interconnectedness between Maragall and his counterparts in India, the United States, and beyond. Interviews draw Maragall into real and conceptual contact with other people situated in remote parts of the planet, while also bringing to the fore the physicians, researchers, and fundraising agents who are doing their work today. Brain models, CT scans, and experts' technical explanations of the disease make visible the technologies, people and practices that comprise the worldwide battle against dementia. Bosch accompanies Maragall to an Alzheimer's Association meeting in Chicago and, following a Friends of Pasqual Maragall Foundation meeting, Maragall and Bosch visit the New York City apartment where Maragall lived with his wife while he was doing graduate study at the New School. Towards the end of the film Maragall travels to Buenos Aires for the birth of his granddaughter.

*Bicicleta, cullera, poma* is reflexive in the way many interactive documentary films are reflexive; these kinds of documentaries "draw their social actors into direct encounter with the filmmaker" (Nichols 1991, 47) in a way that makes clearer the constructed nature of the film while signaling the director's role as organizing agent and originator of the exposition. Bosch's voice is the first sound heard on the soundtrack, over a black screen. The improvisatory nature of the film's opening sequence ("What kind of movie should we do?"), considered alongside the images of construction that immediately follow it, serve to create a sense of present-tense temporality; these are things that are happening now, all across the planet. By placing himself within his film, Bosch further signals his partiality vis-à-vis his cinematic object, suggesting that Maragall is a co-generator of his own cinematic story. At the same time, close-ups and poignant dialogues with Maragall's children and spouse create a sense of community between Maragall and Catalan viewers familiar with the man's public persona, but ignorant perhaps of the details of his private life. *Bicicleta, cullera, poma* is thus both an expository and interactive kind of documentary in which viewers are allowed to engage more or less directly with the relation between filmmaker and his subject. Bosch works to lay bare his emotional connection to the object under observation, and positions himself as the Catalan viewer's intermediary and mode of access to the real person that is Maragall.

In this regard, *Bicicleta, cullera, poma* is an extremely touching reflection on the personal life of one of contemporary Catalonia's most visible and successful politicians. The film's wide-ranging geographical specificity is accompanied by a more sobering temporal punctuation by which Bosch signals the time elapsed since Maragall's public announcement of the disease (6 months, 9 months, 1 year, 1½ years, 2 years). Temporal markers add urgency to a film that focuses on the man, the treatment, the research, the funding, and, finally, on the time that draws that man inexorably towards a sadly foregone conclusion. These privileged views of Maragall's life are leavened by the man's sense of humor, much of which is self-referential: Maragall remarks, as he is entering a laboratory, that those were "good shots" since



the cameraman filmed him trying to open the wrong door: “Ha ido muy bien porque me han filmado que me equivocaba dos veces.” And later, Maragall uses his camera phone to film the cameraman, and he observes, playfully, “grabo el grabador.” Queco Novell, who impersonated Maragall on TV3’s satirical political program, *Polònia*, appears early in the documentary putting on the wig and costume that he used in his act, but the film ends with Novell taking off his costume and retiring the character.

The film traces Maragall’s personal journey through a globally interconnected matrix of institutes, think tanks, treatment centers, and other more quotidian spaces where Maragall reflects on his loss of memory and comments on his past. The ease with which the former politician navigates a variety of global contexts makes him an appropriate representative of what Dominic Keown has described as the “refreshing outgoingness” of contemporary Catalan identity, which has tended to be “more international in orientation” (Keown 2011, 36). Indeed, Maragall appears comfortable wherever he finds himself and expresses himself adroitly in a handful of languages. At the same time, the multilingual soundtrack and wide-ranging geographical specificity of *Bicicleta*, *cullera*, *poma* work to universalize Maragall’s battle with Alzheimer’s. Thus, Maragall himself is represented in the film as a highly mobile, multiply coded site of memory who functions as a documentary synecdoche for a globally inflected Catalan identity, and whose persona echoes what Martí-Olivella has described as a Catalan cinematic idiom that has always been transnational and in-between (2011, 203). The film’s urgency and poignancy are derived from a temporal structure that marks the relentless progression of a disease without a cure, as the viewer – alongside Bosch – contemplates the tragic loss of a human icon of contemporary Catalonia.

### The politics of Iberian documentary

Like poetry, reflexive strategies remove the encrustations of habit.

(Nichols 1991, 67)

In the limited cross-section of documentaries analyzed in this essay one can see that the forms and functions of reflexive aesthetics in documentary film are as diverse as the subjects they treat. Indeed, as Colmeiro and Gabilondo note, “The historical mapping of cinema in Spain reveals a complex, fragmented picture composed of several singular cinemas marked by particular political and economic developments as well as by cultural [. . .] and linguistic diversity” (2013, 82). When we consider the Iberian Peninsula in its entirety, the picture acquires even greater intricacy. Yet, in each of the three cases outlined in this chapter we can see how a reflexive approach to documentary filmmaking allows filmmakers to draw attention to the crucial power of the cinema to shape not only representation but also ways of thinking about the relation between representation and reality. Therein lies the political importance of the reflexive mode, which allows filmmakers to be more forthcoming with their audiences about how:

knowledge is hyper-situated, placed not only in relation to the filmmaker’s physical presence, but also in relation to fundamental issues about the nature of the world, the structure and function of language, the authenticity of documentary sound and image, the difficulties of verification, and the status of empirical evidence in Western culture.

(Nichols 1991, 61)

Reflexive techniques make visible the same tension between representation and reality that in other forms of documentary is perhaps less apparent, but that is nevertheless always there. In so doing, these kinds of movies refuse to perpetuate the false consciousness that a more straightforward version of documentary realism might promote. As Jay Ruby notes in his essay on reflexive approaches to visual anthropology, “documentary filmmakers have a social obligation to *not* be objective” (1977, 10).

Keeping in mind this question of objectivity and its relation to realism and representation, and in keeping with the reflexive thrust of this essay, I conclude by reflecting on how some of the very same technologies that have revolutionized production and reception are also affecting scholarly approaches to the study of audiovisual culture. Academic critics have tended to remain largely invisible to the producers and creators of global popular cultural production. Mainstream critics and journalists are perhaps slightly more perceptible in the blurbs and sound bites that circulate in the blockbuster’s paracinematic orbit, and in Spain at least one newspaper critic has found himself (strategically for him) embroiled in a high profile written-word feud with Pedro Almodóvar (Cerdán and Fernández Labayen 2013, 129–30). But scholarly criticism remains, with a few notable exceptions, largely unseen by the producers of the art under analysis. But when you write about small-scale documentaries of the kind I have been describing in this essay, you become visible to that cinema’s producers in ways that are sometimes disconcerting, occasionally helpful, and always theoretically interesting. I conclude with an example from Galicia: a few weeks after the description of my talk was posted on the University of Texas at Austin webpage, on March 18, 2014, I received an email from Martin Pawley, of Zeitun Films, based in A Coruña, which pointed to a misattribution appearing in that description. Pawley noted that the director of *Todos vós sodes capitáns* is not Catalan but Galician.<sup>6</sup> His note was corrective, but also courteous and informative. He wrote:

Por supuesto, me interesaría mucho conocer tu análisis de la película, si pudiera ser posible. Quiero eso sí matizar que la película no es catalana sino gallega, al igual que el propio director, Oliver Laxe. De hecho en Galicia se está viviendo un momento cinematográfico muy interesante, en particular en el campo de la no ficción, con películas como *Vikíngland* o *Costa da morte*.

Indeed Galician documentary filmmakers are producing very interesting work, much of it deserving of scholarly attention. But the fact that a film shot in Tangier in French and Arabic and Castilian, and featuring mostly Moroccan actors, should be defined as Galician says a lot about the high stakes involved in twenty-first-century Iberian audiovisual culture.<sup>7</sup> It also brings up vital questions about critics’ position within the global system of documentary film production, distribution, and reception.

I have spent a lot of time thinking and writing about reflexive aesthetics in film and literature, but this was the first time that I found myself drawn so directly into dialogue with the object of my study *in medias res*. My electronic interaction with the Zeitun Films producer reminded me of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s introduction to the works of Marcel Mauss, in which Lévi-Strauss noted that even “the most objectively conducted analysis of [the objects of study] could not fail to reintegrate them inside the analyst’s subjectivity” (49). Lévi-Strauss was principally interested in explaining the importance of Mauss’s formulation of the “total social fact,” or the idea of the social as system ([1950] 1997, 51–52), which not only held that “*everything observed is part of the observation*, but also, and above all, that in a science in which the observer is of the same nature as the object of his study, *the observer himself is a part of his observation* [ . . . ]. The situation particular to the social sciences is different in nature; the

difference is to do with the intrinsic character of the object of study, which is that it is object and subject both at once, or both ‘thing’ and ‘representation’” (47, italics in original). Writing several decades later, Clifford Geertz argued that it is this awareness of and attention to the “multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another” (1973, 150) that make the social anthropologist’s reflective attention to the elaboration of a “thick description” so important.

The reflexive possibilities that come with digital distribution, reception, and criticism have made the subjective relationship between scholars and their objects of study visible in novel ways, and have contributed to my new awareness of what we might call the “total documentary fact.” In an era in which film producers are wont and able to Google themselves and their movies, effectively policing the reception and interpretation of their work, academic critics can find themselves drawn vitally into conversation with them. This reality is disconcerting because scholars labor so often from the solitary confines of library carrels, department offices, cafés, and home studies. But the same digital media that have facilitated our access to audiovisual artifacts produced in an array of locations also allows alert documentary producers to keep tabs on the critical fortunes of their films as they circulate throughout the world, surveying their online presence and curating the critical work on them. Skype, Twitter, Facebook, and Google’s crawling algorithms allow documentary producers to put themselves into instant contact with the downstream users, viewers, analysts, and students of their movies. As I write these lines, I know that my analysis of these films will likely be read by the very people who produced them, and I know that my somewhat arbitrary and utterly formalist method of selecting these titles over others will result in the conferral of a certain kind of access to Anglophone academic audiences. Of course, this has always been the case: scholars have unavoidable roles as canonizers and promoters of the work that they would analyze objectively.

The reduced economies of scale that characterize (and that will likely always characterize) contemporary Iberian documentary (reflexive or otherwise) give the deceiving impression that this is a small world; but as Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (2007) note, when you are talking about the cinema of small nations, it is precisely the question of scale that makes access to global audiovisual circuits all the more crucial. Hjort and Petrie describe how the interrelated forces of globalization and internationalization have often been felt especially intensely in these smaller kinds of cultural contexts, since “small nations by definition have very limited domestic markets for all locally produced goods and services – including culture – and so have been forced by the neo-liberal economic and political pressures of globalization into a greater dependency on external markets” (2007, 15). At the same time, these same small nations “have emerged out of twentieth-century processes of decolonization and liberation struggles [with] a strong vested interest in nation-building and the maintenance of a strong sense of national identity relevant both internally and externally to the nation” (2007, 15). This is especially the case in Galicia, which provides an ideal location for exploring “conflicting trends of globalization and identity” (Hooper and Puga Moruxa 2011, 1) and which possesses a “minority cinema within a minority national film industry” (Colmeiro 2011, 215). This is why it is so important to Zeitun Films that even an entirely or apparently postnational (from the Galician perspective) reflection on Moroccan social reality should bear the mark of Galician national identity as it circulates abroad. The geographical specificity of a film like *Aquele Querido Mês de Agosto* works to activate international viewers’ consciousness of (remote) Portuguese landscapes and cultural identities, even as it has some fun with the technologies and practices that make those landscapes visible onscreen and audible on the soundtrack. *Bicicleta, cullera, poma* is perhaps the least exportable film of the three, since it depends on viewers’ fluency in Catalan cultural referents. Yet in all three cases we can see how Iberian documentary film has made productive

use of a variety of reflexive visual strategies and audiovisual technologies to tell stories about its people's place in the world, and to make those places visible within the audiovisual structures of their moving pictures.

There exists a fundamental contradiction at the center of Iberian documentary of the twenty-first century. If, as Nichols notes, “documentary as a concept or practice occupies no fixed territory” (1991, 12), then in the contemporary Iberian context this formal fluidity is held in tension against an opposing and somewhat rigid territorial consciousness. On the one hand, as I outlined previously in the film analyses, filmmakers have worked to erode the distinctions between modes and styles of documentary practice through their strategic use of hybrid techniques whose ultimate goal is to blur the distinction between reality and fiction, showing and telling, mimesis and poesis. Yet at the same time that they have problematized formal barriers, boundaries, and distinctions, these same directors have also drawn special attention to national and regional geographies, cultures, identities, and languages. Jay Ruby proposes, in the first epigraph to this essay, that “to be reflexive is to reveal that films – all films, whether they are labeled fiction, documentary, or art – are created structured articulations of the filmmaker and not authentic truthful objective records” (1977, 10). In the contemporary Iberian cultural context there is a crucial final distinction that must be made. For Iberian documentary filmmakers, to be reflexive is also to contest the global economic, technological, and critical processes that are always working to deterritorialize film texts. Their self-conscious representation of the spaces and practices of representation allow them to reterritorialize cultural identity and project it outwards into the global mediascape. The reflexive Iberian documentary signals the fact that, like the minor literatures theorized by Deleuze and Guattari, “everything in them is political” (1986, 17).<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Ines Vázquez notes that in the Galician cultural context new technologies “facilitaron que calquera persoa poida construír un discurso propio, facer unha película ou unha cámara barata e o difundir, isto marca unha diferenza moi grande con outros tempos” (*Cultura galega* 2014, n.p.).
- 2 The flexible hybrid forms operating in the field of Iberian documentary have also been observed in a variety of Iberian literatures, where novelists and writers have played with what Sara Brenneis (2014) calls “genre fusion,” which works to produce a more complex representation of history, culture, and politics than might be possible to artists working exclusively within a single genre.
- 3 The director notes in an interview that this fictional recourse was intended as a way of “disappearing” (Pena 2010, 15) from the film, in order to avoid falling into a paternalistic orientalist trap (Pena 2010, 16). The film’s reflexive visual structures can also be seen in a sequence in which the children film a group of tourists with their cameras. The European tourists are clearly uncomfortable under the gaze of the Moroccan youths, and as the tourists scurry up a city street one of them mutters, “They should ask for our permission to film us.”
- 4 As Benavente notes in his review of the film, “Siguiendo la deriva de la tropa infantil por la geografía rural, casi al borde del ensueño o del trance, se entrega entonces a un modo contemplativo, a una película de exploración y descubrimiento de un mundo no evidente” (2011, 29).
- 5 Even the Catalan performance artist Jimmy Jump (Jaume Marquet) made a surprise appearance on the program, inspiring Buenafuente to say later, “Como catalán, me avergüenzo del ‘imbécil’ que ha salido con la barretina” (2011).
- 6 I am grateful to the faculty and graduate students at the University of Texas at Austin for their engaged and constructive feedback on an earlier version of this essay.
- 7 Despite the better efforts of the film’s Galician producers to identify the film as Galician, a headline published above a review of the film in *Cahiers du Cinéma España* describes *Todos vos sodes capitáns* as “una única película íntegramente española y dirigida por un español” (Pena 2010, 14).
- 8 Deleuze and Guattari argue that “the three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective

assemblage of enunciation” (1986, 18). My use of their work here was inspired in part by Joan Ramon Resina’s (1987) essay on time and community in Merçè Rodoreda’s *La plaça del Diamant* (1962).

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