

Digital Reality, or a Number of Proposals on the Road Towards the Film Essay

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■ *This article begins with a reflection on the eclipse of reality that occurred during the 1990s due to the emergence of new technologies and because the media put reality under suspicion. The new decade, on the other hand, augurs a certain return to reality, the crux of which is the use of digital technology. However, this return to reality goes beyond the borders established between reality and fiction to also embrace other roads. This article makes a claim for the notion of the film essay and examines a number of proposals in that direction.*

In December 1995, in the middle of the arguable celebrations and exaltations marking the centenary of film, the Spanish Association of Film Historians organised a congress at the Autonomous University of Barcelona aimed at promoting a re-reading of the history of Spanish cinema. At the end of the congress, history (which had guided the development of the different sessions) was marginalised in favour of the present in a speech that aimed to drive the point home. The University of Valencia professor Juan Miguel Company said, "Contemporary Spanish film has serious difficulties in talking about the present"¹. The statement came about in the light of a review of a number of films that were doing well at the box-office, in which the present was covered either by inappropriate tones, narrative script

strategies or a radical subservience to the proposals of genre films. It was the last year of the Socialist government of Felipe González and within the Administration they had begun to carry out a series of significant transformations that signalled the appearance of a new generation of filmmakers open to the trends and tastes of a young public who had managed to exclude any type of commitment from their lives. Spanish film appeared to have come out of the crisis generated by the excess of academic and erudite models that had characterised the early years of the Socialist decade to embrace others that featured the characteristics of postmodern films, such as historic forgetfulness, the pastiche recycling of diverse formulas, the preponderance of a literary culture of best-sellers and, particularly, the construction of a cinema of image that was no longer a mirror on the world but rather a spectacle of alleged timelessness.

This model of postmodern cinema was easily assimilated by the industry and interested television stations, who were quick to acquire screen rights, and effortlessly made the political change from the Socialist administration to the administration of the Popular Party. Its proposal was compliant with institutional models, having dismissed any approximation towards the real world and proven to be removed from any type of reflection on the present or on recent history. As Carlos F. Hedrero said in a study on the cultural characteristics of the filmmakers who helped bring reality to a crisis point during the 1990s, their viewpoints were "oriented towards an abstract present; their films reflected, from a considerably oblique distance, the social and political reality in which they were born. In these films, the reflection on the domination of what is social and on questions of current interest, as a way of confronting the cultural or political context directly and immediately or with an express desire to provide testimony, are premises and

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strategies currently in complete regression"². These were the years in which Juanma Bajo Ulloa found success with *Airbag* (1997), Alejandro Amenábar sketched a thriller set in the campus archive of a communications faculty in 1995's *Thesis* (Tesis), Julio Medem took the esoteric style of *Tierra* (1996) to the Cannes Film Festival and Alex de la Iglesia recreated a version of *The Exorcist*, set in Madrid's Gran Via, in *El Día de la Bestia* (1995).

The process of putting reality into jeopardy was not exclusive to Spanish films, but rather a symptom of a time in which postmodernity impaired thought and decided to put reality on hold. The 1990s was the decade of scepticism over any possible truth in images. This scepticism began with the discrediting of the information that came out the disaster of the first Gulf War, sold by the TV channels as the first televised war and which in the end was reduced to a war without images. The scepticism led the world towards what Ignacio Ramonet called *the era of suspicion*. In a particular context, the world began to be seen as a representation and the individual as a paranoid being lost in a universe in which everything is made visible, in which the appearance of the Internet, as a new way of understanding every possible relation between space and time, ends up destroying traditional forms of censorship and where all the data in the empirical world begin to provoke a strange feeling of mistrust. The crisis of truth coincided with the emergence of virtual non-places in cyberspace, which transformed the coordinates of space and time. Meanwhile, the appearance of digital images provoked a process of dematerialising images to the point that they were no longer an impression of the visible world and became simple informational data, in pixels that could be processed and treated with a scanner. In the world of film, these processes eventually went up a strange road in the elaboration of discourses. While at the beginning of the decade, shortly after the Gulf War, the main theme was the problem of limits in the representation of violence, e.g., with Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) or Bertrand Tavernier's 1995 work *The Bait* (*L'appât*), by the middle of the decade the central theme was to reflect on the impersonation of reality by different systems of representation, e.g., Peter Weir's *Truman's Show* (1997), or Roberto Begnini's 1998 film *Life is Beautiful* (*La vita è bella*). This process of transforming what is real for possible or virtual worlds culminated in the

emergence of ghosts or spectral beings who impact people's lives from beyond the grave, e.g., M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) or Alejandro Amenábar's 2001 work, *The Others*³.

Of course, despite the emergence of postmodernity, different forms of resistance sprang up both in Spanish films and international ones, particularly in certain models of auteur cinema, where creation goes hand-in-hand with a self-reflection on the image itself. A number of significant films, such as Víctor Erice's *El sol del membrillo* (1992), José Luis Guerín's 1997 work *Tren de sombras*, Marc Recha's *L'arbre de les cireres* (1998) or Joaquim Jordà's 1999 film *Mones com la Becky*, were presented as works that went against the tide, proposing a reflection on the way in which a film image can lead to an evaluation of the world, the difficulty in conquering truth and the way in which the revelation of a mystery can occupy a central place in images.

Theorists of philosophy and contemporary culture say that on September 11, 2001, things began to change and that the drama that accompanied the images of the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York helped certain sectors wake up; simplicity in thought was discredited and postmodernity inflexibly showed signs of its peculiar decadence. In a book titled *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek warned that at the end of the day, the change was not as radical as many people thought, because what the attack on the Twin Towers really showed was that the images created in fictional works had become an inevitable part of what was real, to the point that they ended up modulating our own world: "More difficult than denouncing the masking of reality as fiction, people ended up recognising a part of fiction as real reality"⁴. The amazing spectacle of the attack was similar to the amazing spectacle of particular disaster films, the iconography of which is established in our collective imagination. Although for the TV stations the 3,000 people who died in the Twin Towers were a simple numerical data whose material side they did not show, September 11 marked a 'before' and 'after' in the relationship between the world and images. The attack served to question the role of postmodern irony and led to the first discussions on the crisis of reality generated by the omnipresence of virtuality.

Thus, while George Lucas was working on *Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones*, a demonstration of the potential of the

virtual image's ability to create all the imaginary cities we have dreamed of on occasion and have never dared to make reality in international film festivals, a handful of filmmakers were repeatedly showing how the digital technology created to supplant reality had in fact increased the desire for reality in films and demanded that this reality, which postmodernity eclipsed during the 1990s, be ushered discreetly onto our screens. In the 1960s, the appearance of Nagra recorders and 16-mm cameras in television news reports transformed the look of the image, contributing a noticeable freshness. The revolution of the 16-mm camera led to a movement called *cinema vérité*, led by Jean Rouch, which proposed changing film writing into an experiment of an anthropological nature, diluting some of the basic conditioning factors of documentary aesthetics. In the first decades of the 21st century, digital simplicity has served to again question the limits of the image's reproduction ability, to dilute the role of the device as a conditioning factor in creative freedom and to erase the always delicate borders that separate documentary from fiction. The low costs involved has allowed digital technology not only to create an eroticised Lara Croft, able to supplant the sensuality of the top actresses, but also create a new desire for reality, which has begun to transform the film landscape.

However, when it comes to talking about films returning to a certain desire for what is real, we should tread carefully. On the one hand, we can see that a particular type of social film has begun to conquer some screens, making us believe that what they show is a faithful image of the world, when what they really propose is nothing other than a return to classic realist models, where the transparency of the image conceals a closed discourse based on chance and the elaboration of images with the aim of creating a look of reality, without succeeding in getting the camera to address the real world or establish a discussion about what is before it, nor how it could be filmed.

If we continue with the discourse about Spanish film and try to locate it with regard to some of the phenomena that have taken place in recent years, we can see that following the tempestuous ceremony of the Goya 2002 awards, which recognised a film about a group of people on the dole (Fernando León de Aranoa's *Los lunes al sol* (2002)) the type of Spanish cinema that lived with its back to the world has experienced a strong desire for reality. It is clear that

Los lunes al sol and Achero Mañas' *El bola* (2000) bring us closer to a real world and want to give examples of a certain commitment, but it is also true that the methods used in these films, based on a closed image, are far from any type of realist adherence. A film developed from a storyboard is a film that considers imagination as the starting point for all creative acts, which dismisses anything that is random and turns the shoot into an imitative fact rather than an act of investigating a truth. *Los lunes al sol*, for example, is a very closed film both with regard to the images and script concept, based on chance, i.e., on meetings between the characters, and on dramas aimed at convincing the viewer. To some extent, *Los lunes al sol* does nothing more than reinvent a tradition established by E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, which is to "give answers to new situations that take their form of reference from old situations".⁵

The desire for what is real has been manifested in films from other premises, from works that consider that the area of fundamental movement is neither the documentary or fiction but the field of the essay. Such is the case of a number of works which consider that the camera has to explore the world in order to build a discourse that is committed both to reality and also to the film, as it has to propose a reflection on the ways of building the discourse, the materials used and the issues at play. The new realism cannot call on the forms of the 19th century but has to follow the tradition of modernity that consists of converting all images into a discussion on their referentiality and discursive processes. For that reason, the central debate has nothing to do with the boom in documentaries, because many of them are simply converted into imitative products shored up by a central theme but lacking any reflexive vocation. If we look at some of the important documentaries made in Spain, such as *Asaltar los cielos* (1996), by López Linares and Rioyo; Jaime Camino's 2001 work *Los niños de Rusia* (2001) or *Gala* (2003), by Silvia Munt, we can see they contain no type of discussion about the documentary form but rather limit themselves to following a good theme with certain skill, but without questioning their function or limits. However, a documentary like Joaquim Jordà's *Mones com la Becky* (1999), which explores fiction and historical reality, creates a docudrama and includes a certain first-person type of writing, is a work that is open on its borders, where film writing ends up approaching the essay and

becomes a type of philosophy. This idea of the essay has appeared in some of the most interesting proposals in contemporary film.

When it comes to establishing a proposal for a list of important films that have transformed the limits of what is real based on essay-type writing, the decisive work has to be, without any doubt, Jean Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1991-1997). Created as a non-chronological particular history of the cinema, it was divided into six chapters to be broadcast on TV and announced the bases of what some people have called postcinema, because of its nature of a hybrid territory, where the image opens up towards strange poetic territories, rewrites the historic tradition itself and is presented as an insightful reflection on the need to invoke memory to check the way in which images (fiction and documentaries) ended up providing a testimony, either actively or passively, to the future of the 20th century. Godard followed the logic of the collage in *Histoire(s) du cinema*, mixing archive footage, sound, quotes, fragments of poems and pictorial references to finally rebuke the role of creation and images as devices of an imagination that supports Walter Benjamin's theory that all documents on culture are, at the end of the day, about barbarity.

The essay as a way of investigating film's power to reveal what is real, through the use of the digital image, was used in one of the most radical and suggestive theoretical works of contemporary cinema, i.e., *Ten* (2002), by Abbas Kiarostami, in which two security cameras were placed in the front of a car, on the right-hand window. Kiarostami did away with any attempt at blocking in order to show ten car trips during which a woman who is separated from her husband talks with the people she picks up along the way. The Iranian filmmaker explored what is real from a minimalist perspective in the hope that something would emerge to destabilise the relationship between the characters. In the end, the tears on the face of one of the passengers ends up bearing witness to a powerful revelation. *Ten* openly plays with the same idea of security cameras as the television series *Big Brother*, but while reality TV becomes a game and a spectacle, *Ten* converts into an explosion of an intimate truth.

Chris Marker is one of the great filmmakers/essayists working in anonymity. He began making films in the 1950s and is still at work today, and his films are characterised by

a clear attempt to break free from the rules and limitations imposed by the cinema and its formats. *Level Five* is the most powerful film-essay Marker has made about our present. Shot in 1997, when the Internet phenomenon was becoming institutionalised, the film shows a French Net surfer who decides to trawl the web for information on the Battle of Okinawa. His investigation leads to mystery, confusion over information and pessimism. In the end, he reaches the conclusion that even in the time of the information society there are issues, such as the mass suicide of Japanese schoolgirls in Okinawa, which continue to be hidden because they are not transparent. History continues to be a discourse that depends on documents, and documents have always been closely linked to systems of power.

In her year 2000 film *The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse)*, Agnès Varda, another filmmaker of the Nouvelle Vague school, gave us a bona fide lesson in the economy of digital technology at the service of the essay. Using a small video camera, she set out to glimpse images of people who live on the margin of the consumer society and recycle the things that others throw away. Although she denounced excess and consumerism in the different manifestations of our society, her critique was also a condemnation on the situation of films. At a time when the image has acquired unthinkable levels of grandiloquence, she plays with simple images, gathering fragments of reality all alone to eventually construct a true moral lesson on film's ability to confront life's little details and observe them up close.

Staying in France, I would also like to mention Nicolas Philibert's documentary *To Be and To Have (Etre et avoir)* (2002). Philibert, a filmmaker who has made admirable works on the world of deaf people and psychiatric institutions, decided to explore the world of the school. He set his camera up in a small rural school, where a single teacher was in charge of all the year groups, to build up a firm homage to the largely forgotten and anonymous work of teachers. The invisible camera focuses on the learning process that takes place in the classroom and on different students, and shares with them some of their most intimate moments, making them protagonists while at the same time establishing a political discourse about the need to support public institutions at a time when different countries,

including France, have jeopardised the awareness of public goods.

Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman is one of the great pillars of the second wave of modernity that was radicalised in the 1970s. Over the course of her career she has cultivated different hybrid genres to impose a meticulous and steady view of the world around her. Of her recent work, I would particularly like to mention *South* (1999), an exploratory film she shot in the southern states of the US. The final frame in the film is the strongest demonstration of the Godard maxim by which all travelling is a moral question. Akerman wanted to make a film about the deep south, the landscape portrayed by Mark Twain and William Faulkner, but she ended up experiencing how intolerance is still present there today. While she was in the area, the Ku Klux Klan grabbed a black man, tied him up and dragged his body from the back of their car for some six kilometres until it was completely destroyed. A few days after the brutal killing, Akerman filmed the path they had taken, forcing us to look at it to remind us that the time it takes to observe is nothing like the time it takes to feel pain.

Johan van der Keuken was one of the leading European documentary makers and a key figure in reflections on reality and forms of observation. In 1999, a doctor found a cancer in Van der Keuken's blood. As soon as he knew about it, he suggested to his wife that they go on a long trip. With a small digital camera, Van der Keuken travelled around India, Africa and the US. The result was an enigmatic film titled *The Long Holiday* (*De Grotte Vakantie*, 1999), in which each image of reality is taken as if it were being seen for the last time, as if it was going to be lost forever and it was important to keep it to certify the existence of a life that had been lived.

Frederick Wiseman has been one of the great American documentarists since 1967 and one of the main exponents of the so-called non-intervention method, which consists of capturing a particular reality in an objective manner without giving signs of the presence of the camera. However, his most recent film, *The Last Letter* (2002), is, oddly enough, a work of fiction. Wiseman filmed an elderly actress from the Comédie Française, Catherine Samie, alone on a stage, reciting a text by Vasili Gossman in which a woman says goodbye to her daughter before being taken to a gas chamber. In Gossman's gesture of turning to fiction we can

see a clear need to go beyond the present in order to document the anguish of history, the injuries of time and to see how they are still present in the makeup of our world.

History, memory and a commitment to the past as ways of endorsing reality itself in film have become one of the main areas of debate in contemporary cinema. One of the best works about history that today's cinema has offered was made with just a handful of photographs. The work was called *No Pasarán*, directed by Jean-François Ymbert. The director/narrator came across six random photos of a concentration camp for Republican soldiers in Argeles and decided to reconstruct the memory of the camps and enquire into the historical responsibility of the French government, based on an ongoing investigation of the photos that provided testament to the uncertain destination that befell the Republicans who survived in France in sub-human conditions, while many ended up being deported to the German camps. Almost without resources, Ymbert calls upon memory, shows the contradictions in the story and makes the photos into types of stamps, evidence that explains the power of commitment to the image with respect to its time. *No Pasarán* is moving because it does not discard documentary truth, but neither does it forget the essay-based power of film language.

Notes

1. Juan Miguel Company, "El pijama bajo el abrigo. Un cine en el crepúsculo". In *Tras el sueño. Actas del Centenario*. 6th Congress of the Spanish Association of Film Historians, Madrid: Academy of Film Art and Sciences of Spain, 1998.
2. Carlos F. Heredero. *Espejo de miradas. Entrevistas con directores del cine español de los noventa*. Madrid: Alcalá de Henares Film Festival, 1997, p. 65.
3. The author developed the theme of the crisis of reality in films of the 1990s in the final chapter of the book, *Fábulas de lo visible. El cine como creador de realidades*. Barcelona: El Acantilado, 2003.
4. Slavoj Žizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London/New York, Verso 2002, p. 19.
5. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.