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Cycles of Life: *El Cielo Gira* and Spanish Autobiographical Documentary

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A wide shot of a landscape with a hill and a solitary tree at the top. We hear the filmmaker’s voice: “This is the place that you see from the house where I was born, and therefore, the first thing I saw in the world.” This key moment, close to the beginning of *El cielo gira* (*The Sky Turns*), seems to suggest a standard autobiographical film about the life of the filmmaker. Instead, we find a portrait of a small Castilian village on the verge of disappearing, composed of long, contemplative shots of the austere landscape and the old villagers who inhabit it. It may come as a surprise, then, to realise that we are confronted with a landmark in Spanish autobiographical filmmaking; a sensitive portrait of a village filtered through the gaze of Mercedes Álvarez, never visible on-screen though present through her calm voice over commentary. This subtle approach to personal filmmaking somehow speaks of the uneasiness of some Spanish documentary filmmakers about turning their cameras on their own lives. The case of the film *Retrato* [*Portrait*, 2004], with Carlos Ruiz refusing to consider the portrait of his parents autobiographical, seems to underline that idea: “In fact, autobiography is just a contextual level in which one can discuss many things – time, memory, past and present, being man and woman – and mainly the dichotomy of the son’s point of view – myself, in this case – because it is the point of view of the child and the grown-up.”ⁱ

This chapter intends to delve into that creative milieu, to examine in the first place why Spanish filmmakers have scarcely adopted an autobiographical approach to documentary, while commenting briefly on those that have appeared during the 2000s.ⁱⁱ Then, I will analyse closely *El cielo gira*, which can be considered the best autobiographical film to date from Spain. Its approach may serve as an example of a certain type of Spanish documentary, where it

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blends an auterist look with a contemplative style, in order to explore in this case the layers of our country with a microhistorical lens.

Mapping Out the Autobiographical Documentary in Spain

Tracing the autobiographical documentary in Spanish Cinema, it is surprising to note at first glance the absence of this type of film before 2000, as if the rise of personal documentaries that was happening in America and elsewhere in Europe had no impact

on the Spanish documentary. The artistic and industrial context of Spanish cinema, however, was not very different from those other countries, since during these last decades Spain also experienced a growing interest in documentary, in terms of production, exhibition, critical reception, and educational resources. Barcelona and Madrid have become the main centres of this activity, but signs of documentary life are cropping up elsewhere as well. Yet even with this growing interest (indeed production of) documentary, very few if any were made using the first person address.ⁱⁱⁱ

How can one explain then the absence of autobiographical documentaries during the 1980s and 1990s? It is not easy to find a simple answer, because some contextual explanations that account for the rise of personal documentaries in other countries, like the standardisation of digital technologies, also apply to Spain. One reason that may partially explain that absence could be the limited distribution of the best autobiographical works from other countries up until the 2000s. Names like Alan Berliner, Ross McElwee or Naomi Kawase, widely known nowadays in our documentary community, were quite unknown in Spain a few years ago. Berliner, for instance, became very well known after the retrospective organized in 2002, followed by a publication about him and the release of his films on DVD.^{iv} Kawase has gradually become better known, but it was not until 2008 that Las Palmas organised a retrospective and published a book about her work.^v This festival also organised a special program on film autobiographies in the same year, together with a book on the topic, *Cineastas frente al espejo [Filmmakers in Front of the Mirror]*.^{vi}

Another reason for the absence of this kind of documentary could be the lack of references within Spanish Cinema, since the country's most influential documentary filmmakers have not entered the autobiographical fray or they just have done it recently.^{vii} This is the case of one of the most influential documentary *auteurs*, José Luis Guerin. He has made documentaries with a very personal approach (at times bordering on experimental, as in *Tren de sombras [Train of Shadows]*, 1997), but not directly related to his own biography. His most successful documentary to date, *En construcción [Work in Progress]*, 2001, resorts to an observational approach, though filtered through

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the distinctively poetic approach that has become a signature of his work. However, his last film, *Guest* (2010), is a travel journal filmed during his trips to present his film *En la ciudad de Sylvia (In the City of Sylvia)*, 2007 in Festivals all around the world. It is worthwhile to notice that despite this autobiographical setup, Guerin is hardly onscreen and there is no first-person voiceover narration, though he is heard from time to time in the interviews he makes. His film ends up looking more as a kind of ethnographic travelogue – exploring the ordinary life of mostly unprivileged characters – than as a personal diary. Another key Spanish filmmaker, Víctor Erice, also relies on an observational approach in *El sol del membrillo (Quince Tree of the Sun)*, 1992. His only

‘documentary’ work, it adopts a detached point of view, far from the conventions of personal documentary. These examples relate somehow to a strong tradition of realism in Spanish art and literature – from Murillo to Antonio López, from the picaresque novel to Miguel Delibes – which may also help to explain that scarcity of first-person documentaries, since their foregrounding of subjectivity might seem to clash with that tradition of realism in narrative and representational arts.

A new direction has begun to develop during the first decade of the twenty-first century, with some filmmakers approaching their work with a style close to the films of Guerin or Erice, but now focused on topics and characters related to their own lives. One might even be able to trace an evolution towards a more autobiographical approach in Spanish cinema following some of the best documentaries of the decade. In 2001, Pablo García made *Fuente Alamo*, a film about a village in Castilla La Mancha. During one summer day, he follows the lives of children, women at work in a small factory, farmers and shepherds, elders at home or at church, and finally the whole village in a summer celebration. There is a sense of familiarity, of observation from the inside, of a shared history, something not easily explained by just examining its textual marks. The contextual data reveals the reason for this intimacy: Pablo García is making a film about the village of his parents, where he spent every summer of his childhood. These are his friends and relatives, and the life he is portraying is very much intertwined with his own biography.^{viii} Interestingly, though, this does not find explicit expression within the film. The first person perspective is suppressed, but nonetheless ‘felt’. Four years later, *La casa de mi abuela* [*My Grandmother’s House*] was released. The film, directed by Adan Aliaga, shows the lives of an old woman and her granddaughter in their daily routines at home, in a house about to be torn down to make way for an apartment building. The film presents the granddaughter’s perspective as the one from which the story is told (even resorting briefly to her voiceover in first person) linking therefore the ‘my’ of the title –*My Grandmother’s House*– to her character. But what is

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never explained is that the person behind that nervous camera silently observing both characters is actually another grandchild, the filmmaker Adan Aliaga. That information is hard to find even on the film’s webpage, which is also constructed around the character of Marina, the granddaughter, who introduces Marita as her grandmother, and the filmmaker as a ‘man who has followed me and my grandmother.’

A step further in this personalisation of family stories comes from two Spanish-Argentinean co-productions, *Diario argentino* (*Argentinian Diary*, 2006), and *Los pasos de Antonio* (*Antonio’s steps*, 2007). The latter, directed by Pablo Baur, portrays the daily routine of his grandfather in Cordoba, Argentina, with a focus on his daily walk between his home and the local church. We never see the filmmaker, though on few occasions we hear him off-screen and feel his presence through some awkward

camera movements. Furthermore, there is a written text towards the beginning of the film, stating explicitly: ‘This film follows my grandfather’s footsteps along the streets of Córdoba. He had promised he would walk every day to the local church. For four years, I walked beside him with my camera.’ Pablo Baur effaces himself to show the tiny details of the old man walking and his daily routines, with sporadic dialogue or sentences, and very few characters interacting, creating a minimalist impression where habit and repetition overtake the demand for narrative tension. His film therefore proposes a singular detour from the typical observational documentary, following closely the daily life of the protagonist, but inscribing the gaze of the film from an autobiographical perspective, that of the grandson.

Diario Argentino details the trip of the filmmaker, Lupe Pérez, to her native Argentina for vacation. This becomes the catalyst for another ‘journey’ into the recent history of her country, closely related to her decision to come to Spain with her family, and to her ambivalence about returning to Argentina. It is interesting to note that these films, *Los pasos de Antonio* and *Diario Argentino*, originated in Spain, each beginning as a project of its respective author’s M.A. in Documentary; however, both were made by Argentinean filmmakers, shot in their home country and with a story thoroughly steeped in Argentinean culture and political history. This also confirms the prominent position of Argentinean cinema in the autobiographical arena, with such accomplished examples as *La televisión y yo* (*Television and Me*, 2002), *Los rubios* (*The Blondes*, 2003), and *Papá Iván* (2000).^{ix} Despite their stylistic differences, these films nevertheless share a feature not commonly found in the Spanish documentary: a reflection on the national history through the personal perspective of the filmmakers and their family stories. This may be due to the more recent nature of the traumatic political events set in motion by the 1973 *coup d’État* and directly or indirectly affecting the childhood of all of these filmmakers, albeit in different ways.^x

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By contrast, the current generation of Spanish filmmakers, though more inclined to adopt an autobiographical approach than their predecessors, has not experienced first hand any traumatic historical events like the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the difficult postwar years.

The family portrait – the term proposed by Jim Lane (2002: 95-119) for autobiographical films built around family networks – clearly becomes the dominant format among the emergent Spanish autobiographical documentaries. This is the case of medium-length films like *Amor Sanjuan* (Luis Misis, 2006), about the grandmother of the filmmaker, and *La memoria interior* (*The Inner Memory*, María Ruido, 2002), about the filmmaker’s parents and their immigrant experience in Germany. In a feature format, we can mention *Bucarest, La memoria perdida* (*Bucarest, the Lost Memory*, Albert Solé, 2008), focused on the public profile of his father, the politician Jordi Sole

Tura; and *Familystrip* (Lluís Miñarro, 2009), based on the daily conversations of his parents during the painting of a family portrait at their home. Another variation on the topic comes with *Yo soy de mi barrio* (*I Am from My Neighborhood*, 2002), where Juan Vicente Córdoba offers a portrait of his neighborhood, strongly linked to his family history in that place. Two other short films, *Haciendo memoria* (*Making Memory*, Sandra Ruesga, 2005), and *El horizonte artificial* (*The Artificial Horizon*, José Irigoyen, 2005), similarly follow family history, but unlike those previously mentioned, these rely heavily on home movies as their visual source.^{xi}

The family portrait constructed around autobiographical themes continues as the pattern for two documentary features by Spanish filmmakers, in this case ones living outside of Spain: *Le Temps et la Distance* (François Gurgui, 2001) and *Retrato* (Carlos Ruiz, 2004).^{xii} One might be forgiven for thinking *Le Temps et la Distance* was French, judging from the title of the film and the language of the omnipresent voiceover.^{xiii} However, the filmmaker is from Catalonia (Spain), and the film is strongly rooted there, since it traces the story of his Catalan grandmother, who has recently died; a feeling reinforced by the use of home movies and family snapshots which increases the connection of the film to his homeland. The second film, *Retrato*, deals with the lives of the filmmaker's parents. He uses his parents' interviews in voice-over, recounting their memories, overlaid with a meandering visual track, *a la Last Year at Marienbad*, [1961] comprised of black and white images of his parents in familiar places. Completely detached from the setting and from each other, they appear distant from one another even when they share the same frame. Despite winning an award at Documenta Madrid, it never secured distribution in Spain and remains largely unknown even within the documentary community.

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The opposite happened to Mercedes Álvarez's film *El cielo gira* (2004). The film had a very successful run at Spanish and international festivals, winning top awards in places like Cinema du Reel, the Rotterdam Film Festival, and Bafici (Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival), and becoming a cult hit within contemporary Spanish documentary. It may come as a surprise to learn that it was her first film as a director, but Mercedes Álvarez came to this film with many years of experience in film and television behind her, working just before this project as the editor for José Luis Guerin on *En construcción*.

Four years after *El cielo gira*, a new feature autobiographical documentary, *Nadar* (*Swimming*, 2008), was released in selected festivals and theatres in Spain, proving the growing presence of this approach in our cinema. Its director, Carla Subirana, explores her own family identity through the figures of her mother and her grandmother (the latter died during the shooting of the film, which actually spanned several years). Her film is also an exploration of Spanish history, caused by her

curiosity about her grandfather, a mysterious figure executed in 1940, and about whom the grandmother never spoke. Subirana was working on this film while she was one of the cinematographers and assistant directors on another project partially shot at the same time, *Más allá del espejo* [*Beyond the Mirror*], the last film made by Joaquín Jordá, released posthumously in 2006. Jordá's film stands on its own as autobiographical, though it was hardly promoted as such. The film deals with people suffering agnosia and alexia, brain diseases causing serious perceptual distortion. Jordá, himself a sufferer, becomes the guide of the film as well as one of its protagonists, talking about his problems in the same way as the other

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interviewees, sometimes allowing them to interview him, thus reversing the standard roles of filmmaker and social actor.

El cielo gira (The Sky Turns)

Having examined the panorama of autobiographical documentary in Spain, I will now focus on a closer study of *El cielo gira* – an analysis that will nevertheless maintain some dialogue with the films already mentioned. *El cielo gira* portrays the life of a small Spanish village, Aldeaseñor, where only fourteen elderly people still reside. The filmmaker was the last child born in the village, forty years ago. She and her family moved to the city when she was three years old. Now she comes back to film the daily routines of the few remaining villagers over the course of one year. In that period, however, new things happen: a windmill park is built nearby and restoration begins on the old palace to turn it into a luxury hotel.

Within this set up, Mercedes Álvarez constructs a very compelling film, structured in four chapters, in which she combines an autobiographical perspective with the observational modes of an ethnographer and an austere style which echoes some realist traditions very akin to Spanish art (and specially to Castilla, where Aldeaseñor is located). Álvarez is never visible on-screen, but her calm and serene voiceover keeps her present throughout the film. Her presence, however, is not just to be found in the voiceover since she becomes a kind of invisible character within the film. This is more evident at the beginning when she states clearly the autobiographical force of her project. After a prologue, the first chapter of the film opens with a frozen shot of a landscape – a hill

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with a solitary holm oak at the top – with Álvarez saying: ‘This is the place that you see from the house where I was born, and therefore, the first thing I saw in the world. Or to be more exact: during the first three years of my life, this spot was *the* world. The rest

takes place beyond that hill. I have frozen the image because, according to those who stayed here, this place has remained unchanged since then. And because it is here that my father lies buried.' The connection of the film with her roots, material and familiar, places her portrait of the village therefore within a clear personal framework.

The challenge facing Mercedes Álvarez, then, becomes how to retain the requisite distance necessary to offer a faithful portrait of the village of Aldealseñor, while maintaining the personal force behind the project. She manages to find a delicate balance between those poles, offering an engaging variation of the standard ethnographic film, better described in this case as 'autoethnography,' following Catherine Russell's terminology (1999: 275-314). The filmmaker's literal kinship with the 'ethnographic subject' provides an intimacy with the people and routines of Aldealseñor that would be otherwise hard to achieve, overcoming the main obstacles traditionally caused by the tensions between ethnographer and subject. She actually applies the same techniques as Pablo García in *Fuente Álamo*, though here taken a step further by the inclusion of the filmmaker's voiceover narration which roots the ethnographic enterprise in her own self-narrative quest.

There is in fact another difference between *El cielo gira* and *Fuente Álamo*: the introduction of an interpretive presence, the nearly-blind painter Pello Azketa, invited into the village and the film by Álvarez so as to paint his impressions of the place. The painter and the village share a related fate with both at intersecting points in their existence: one will soon lose his vision, and the other will soon be lost from vision. Mercedes Álvarez, while relying on the indexical power of the film medium to capture the people and their routines, seems to need to go further and grasp what is beyond appearances. Azketa stands here as the medium between the filmmaker and Aldealseñor. He helps to achieve that deeper vision that enables the film to penetrate the surface, so as to better portray the soul of the village. As Víctor Erice has written, Azketa 'takes the role of the catalyst of the action – two of his paintings open and close the film – as a kind of blind guide – the ultimate paradox – of the narrator' (2005: 3).^{xiv}

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In terms of formal style, she catches the rhythms of the small village in long takes, avoiding any camera movement. She keeps a physical distance from the characters, using a telephoto lens in the few instances that she gets close to the faces of the individual people. Thus, at first glance, she seems to fit well into the observational mode of filmmaking described by Bill Nichols: an exhaustive description of everyday events, sync sound, long takes, rendition of present time, and so on (1991: 38-44). However, in actuality, she moves well beyond the mode of distanced observation, and not only by means of her personal voice-over and the presence of the painter Azketa; she also infuses the visuals with a stylisation perceived in the crafted compositions of each shot, constructed with careful lighting and without room for improvisation. The

overall result shows a creative tension between the visual distance of the shots and the proximity of her voice-over that becomes a key element in the creation of the mesmerising effect of the film. This approach permeates the entire film, but it is at its most acute in such scenes as the presentation of Pepa or the death of Eliseo. In the first case, we see a foggy view of a street and an old house, with a woman walking in the distance. The filmmaker introduces Pepa in a shot awash in a dream-like morning light, helped by an iterative narration which she links to the moment of her birth: ‘The woman I watched coming out every morning was Pepa. She had helped my mother the day I was born. Since then no other baby has been born in the village. I wanted to get a picture of that woman from afar before I entered her house.’

This restraint is further amplified in the scene outside her uncle Eliseo’s house. He was very sick and the filmmaker did not want to enter the house with the camera. Instead, she filmed the front with the empty chair where her uncle used to sit every day before he fell ill. Her uncle passes away and we never get to see him or the inside of the house. We do not even have an explicit account of his death; rather, Álvarez shows a similar outdoor shot of the house without the empty chair, plus a symbolic shot of a fox which was prowling around the place and the sound of a death bell. Clearly the filmmaker is not interested in a straightforward account; instead, she is trying to convey the inner life behind the appearances, in sharp contrast to mainstream trends, so enslaved to the superficial spectacularisation of society. In a move as paradoxical as the blind guide, Álvarez’s penetrating gaze is achieved precisely through its distance; it is through

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distance that the spectator can find a space for reflection, eschewing the immediacy so vaunted in contemporary television and cinema.

Interestingly, a similar strategy can be found in Carlos Ruiz’s *Retrato*, though to quite different effect. Ruiz also intends to create a tension between an intimate voice-over – containing the testimony of his parents – and a detached visual track. Nevertheless, Ruiz aims for something else: while both vectors – oral proximity and visual distance – seem to clash, they are also related in a sense, since his parents speak of their alienation from one another, and the visuals portray them entirely separated, not interacting even when they are in the same frame. Ruiz usually composes the image with his parents in familiar settings, but always posing, still, portrayed in black and white, provoking a strong estrangement effect, clashing openly with the familiarity of the voice-over testimonies. Ruiz wants to retain the indexical force of the images while removing their iconic resemblance, so the spectator is forced to read the images in a de-familiarised context. *El cielo gira*, in contrast, does not resort to such de-familiarising effects. The film instead blends such tensions into a single narrative,

with the visual distance working productively alongside the intimacy created by the filmmaker's voice-over.

El cielo gira presents another feature usually linked to observational documentaries: the long shooting period following the same characters and settings. Álvarez shot in Aldeaseñor from the fall of 2002 to the early summer of 2003, becoming just one more inhabitant of the village. The long production period allowed her to capture the slow rhythm of the village, so closely tied to the cyclical passing of the seasons. The scenes unfold slowly, letting the villagers express themselves with no hurry, getting the real flavour of life in a small rural village. Her formal approach also allows the filmmaker 'to catch the unexpected,' that quality associated with documentary since Dziga Vertov (Lioult 2005).^{xv} *El cielo gira* is full of those unexpected situations if we take the whole process of production as the temporal frame. The most unexpected events actually happened in the film's pre-production stage, when Álvarez found out about the construction of the windmill park and the transformation of the old palace. Other unforeseen discoveries include those of the elite Moroccan athlete and the Moroccan shepherd living in the area, with whom she meets serendipitously in the film, offering evidence of the significant demographic changes occurring in the region. Other minor though no less revealing events occurred during the shooting, such as the blaring political campaign songs heard on the soundtrack while the camera filmed some people reciting the rosary in the church, providing a neat palimpsest where crass contemporary politics clash unexpectedly with the more traditional cadences of the village.

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Alongside the stylistic approach of the film, *El cielo gira* stands out for its dense articulation of the temporal and spatial axes, around which the filmmaker proposes a fertile reflection on time, memory and history. At first glance, the film deals with a space, the village of Adealseñor. Yet in that space, time is inscribed in different ways, through different layers. As indicated earlier, the most immediate one is the cyclical time imposed by nature, that of the seasons, around which the four chapters of the film are structured. This cyclical time clearly captures the rhythms of the village, still very much dependant on agriculture. However, Mercedes Álvarez did not make this film simply to capture the life of a small village, but to film the decay of that place, the last days of a village founded one thousand years ago, the place where she was to be the last soul born. Focusing on this final period provokes a reflection on history, on the historical time accumulated in the different strata throughout the region. In this sense, Aldeaseñor is a fascinating place, as it contains remains from the time of the dinosaurs, the Celtiberians, the Romans, the Arabs, and the Medieval Age. Thus the film also reflects on the cyclical nature of human time, with civilisations and generations passing by, one disappearing and another emerging. This perspective helps her understand that

she is not in fact witnessing the final stage of that place, but the end of a cycle, just before another begins. This fact becomes even more evident with the appearance of the elements of a new ‘civilisation’: aerogenerators, excavators, and trucks to build the windmill park and construction workers to transform a derelict palace from a previous era into a modern hotel. Mercedes Alvarez explains her quest to address those questions:

Filming time is an ideal, a great ideal, but just an ideal. What is obtained is in any case the trace left by time in those people and objects, its shadow. And I like to think that there are places ... where it is easier to register those traces I think that the village and its region was a place like that, with remains of different historical times co-existing in the same space, ruins and buildings indistinguishable from the living trees, a place where the traces of time, like the dinosaur’s footprints, have remained. (2007: 175)

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El cielo gira goes beyond even the time imposed by nature and the passing of human generations, to introduce the biographical time of the old people living in the village, as well as the autobiographical time of the filmmaker. The villagers’ time constitutes a collective memory that goes from some of the major events of the 20th Century in Spain such as the Civil War, to the minor events of the village, like the inauguration of a fountain, or the death of the old elm growing in the middle of the village square. Álvarez collects those memories from the villagers’ ordinary conversations, and also by resorting to the only archival material used in the film: old photographs of those events, sometimes commented upon by their protagonists, at other times simply juxtaposed. Such juxtaposition is at work in the scene of Silvano playing on the pelota court. Álvarez fades to old pictures of the same court during an official celebration, while slowly blending them into a montage sequence that ends with a photograph of the villagers gathered around a fountain, which dissolves back to the same fountain in the present.^{xvi} The biographical time of the inhabitants of Aldeaseñor also includes contemporary time, currently amplified by television. In the film, the Iraq War has not yet begun and we witness an interesting crossover between the everyday remarks of the villagers and the international designs of world powers. The crossover becomes literalised by the military planes seen crossing the skies of Aldeaseñor, on their way to the Middle East. Again, it seems as if Aldeaseñor retains a magical power as a place where history is condensed, no matter the scale.

Alvarez’s interweaving of all these temporalities – the cyclical time of the seasons, the historical time of the generations and civilisations, the biographical time of the current villagers, as well as her own autobiographical time – becomes the main feat of the film, an achievement which gives *El cielo gira* a captivating, transcendental quality. Although the film as a whole can be seen as a meditation on the relationship

between time and history, there are some scenes where it finds a more productive expression, as in the construction of the windmill park on a foggy day. In that scene, the film cuts from the image of a life-sized dinosaur – a tourist lure – to images of machines at work, emerging from the fog, as if they were the monsters of our era. Another giant – the wing of an aerogenerator – appears immediately thereafter, completing the invasion of a new time in the region. The filmmaker, ever conscious of this imbrication and condensation of time, refers to the village as ‘a complete universe, where time flows from the very childhood of the world’:

Places, names, generations, memories of the past, wars, disappearances, alternation of cultures, annual seasons, metamorphoses of nature; all the elements forming the universe and human destiny, under the cosmic sky, were there. To convey this

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idea became an almost physical need, something that we experienced during the shooting of the film in the village. Then it comes – projected over that profound time – the time of individual lives, of the neighbors of that village. [...] We had to make a fabric with those two temporalities, the linear – biographic, historical – and the cyclical one. Weaving all of them took almost one year of editing. (2007: 175-6)

That temporal interplay also balances historiographical scale, combining the macrohistorical portrayal of the passing of civilisations and centuries with the microhistorical look at the daily life of the people at Aldealseñor. It is obvious that *El cielo gira* does not pretend to be a conventional historical documentary, but it contains a historical tension within it, built on a contrapuntal interplay of scales. The film even materialises that ‘play of scales’^{xviii} in the character of Silvano, who makes use of a telescope to look at the stars and of a magnifying glass to spot the people in old photographs. Silvano’s actions perfectly echo Paul Ricoeur, who refers to these optical instruments when talking about the historiographical questions related to the macro and micro scales: ‘History, too, functions in turn as an eyepiece, a microscope, or a telescope’ (Ricoeur 2004: 211).

There are some moments in the film where the macro scale becomes more visible, expressed through complex and interpenetrating associations capturing the passing of history. Two scenes stand out in this regard. The first one condenses thousands of years in just two shots, as the filmmaker explains in voice-over: ‘There has been a megalithic stone structure since the beginning, and a bit further up a shepherd’s hut. If anyone walked from one place to the other on a misty day, they could pass through thousands of years without any problem.’ The second takes place almost a full hour later in the film, after we meet the two Moroccans, the shepherd and the athlete.

The latter leaves running, in a long shot, while the filmmaker makes another macrohistorical remark in her voice-over: ‘The shepherd and the athlete said farewell, and in an instant they were again separated by 1,000 years of distance. While that instant stretched on, I thought that the history of the village, with all its generations, fit in between.’ The physical distance is taken in both scenes in a metaphorical sense, to work for the macroscale framework where Álvarez places her portrait of Aldealseñor.

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These telescoped historical moments notwithstanding, *El cielo gira* relies more on the micro scale, offering a rich portrait of a small community where history becomes ‘fleshed out,’ as microhistorians like to say. In this sense, the film finds itself closer to approaches like the *Alltagsgeschichte*, a ‘history of the everyday life’ proposed by Alf Lüdtke (1995), or the Italian *microstoria* of authors such as Giovanni Levi (1991) or Carlo Ginzburg (1992). This film becomes another example of the results achieved when the scale of observation is reduced, giving more relevance to ordinary people as the protagonists of history, with corresponding effects in the historical account (Revel 1996: 19-20). The contrast introduced, for instance, by the Moroccan characters in the quiet life of the region is one of those events unnoticed by macrohistory. Those characters – and what they talk about in their rather long conversation – bring back historical resonances from the time of the Moorish occupation of Spain, adding new insights in relation to problems like immigration, while showing some of the effects of globalisation, with an elite Moroccan athlete training in this remote area of Castilla.

The scenes showing the impact of the electoral campaign on the village provide more interesting samples of the knowledge acquired through micro scale observation. Two different cars come into the village to leave their political posters in the main square. They work quickly and to the complete indifference of the villagers, as is shown almost comically in the contrast between the political campaigners putting up posters while the whole village takes siesta. This attention to the micro scale does not intend to offer, as Paul Ricoeur says, ‘a resurrection of the lived experience of social agents, as if history were to stop being history and link up again with the phenomenology of collective memory.’ What we ‘must not expect to see is the lived experience of the protagonists. What we see remains social interactions, at a fine scale, but one already microstructured’ (Ricoeur 2004: 214). This is reflected in *El cielo gira*, which is delicately structured so as to reveal these social interactions. Álvarez organises the filmed material in four chapters following the seasons, as has been mentioned, searching for dominant threads to make it expressive, meaningful; a process developed throughout the months of shooting and the year of editing to which the filmmaker refers. Álvarez herself talks about that process: ‘When confronted with all the material shot, before editing, I felt like I was in front of a blank page. There it was, the memory of a whole year passed in the village. It was literally like living it again. But now we

had to tell it, to plow the memory and take out the narrative hiding in its interior, finding the writing' (2007: 178-9).

Actually, its elaborate interweaving of temporal layers within a singular place seems to call for the kind of chronotopical approach proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin. One can easily perform an analysis of the film focused on the study

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of chronotopes, those singular combinations of time and space in each work of art where narrative events become specific. As Bakhtin suggests, 'it is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events. And this is so thanks precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers – the time of human life, of historical time – that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas' (Bakhtin 1981: 250).^{xviii} In this regard, we may be tempted to explain *El cielo gira* as a single chronotope, with the region of Aldeaseñor as a privileged location showing the condensation of human dynamics through history. Its lands have literally been accumulating different civilisations, which have now become visible to the visitor, as a villager hints in the first scene in relation to the time of dinosaurs – or later on, as a guide explains while showing the ruins of Numancia, a city famous for its resistance to the Romans. However, this approach would not do much justice to the Bakhtinian concept of chronotope, being so general that it takes Bakhtin's ideas merely as inspiration. For the sake of the analysis, therefore, we may single out two places as the main chronotopes of the film: the village square, and the hill with its holm oak.

The village square is the most common meeting point of the few villagers remaining in Aldeaseñor. It is the place of their quiet conversations, where their reminiscences intermingle with their present routines and concerns. It is also the place to find such points of reference as the church and the fountain. It is the place, finally, where the old elm tree grew, now replaced by a conifer. The elm tree remains the central symbol of that space despite its absence from the square, or perhaps because of it. Álvarez's strong associations with it prompt yet another historical journey, tied to the life and death of that elm. The film thus revisits the history of the village, as we see in the scene when Antonino and Silvano go over old pictures of the village taken in the square, from the time when all the people met around the elm tree.

We also witness, through those pictures, the demise of the elm tree and its unearthing. One photograph reveals several skulls discovered among its massive roots, bringing forth again the density of the temporal markers of the place. The comments of Silvano and Antonino while viewing the pictures serve to underline the thoroughgoing identification of the village with this tree, whose death is seen as a harbinger of the demise of the town:

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Silvano: How many years must they [the skulls] have been under it! In 500 years that elm tree must have seen a lot of people pass by...

Antonino: It lived for too long, Silvano. In another 400 years, nobody will know what had been here.

The clashing of temporalities materialises again when the visible traces of the old photographs and oral memories of the villagers fade into the lifeless trunk of the elm tree covered by snow. Later on, the film will come back to that trunk, with the painter Azketa touching it, as if trying to understand the passing of time materialised in that trunk now placed next to the palace. The voice-over of Mercedes Álvarez assumes in this scene a most poetic tone, referring to the dead tree as a living being, staring at the future hotel with the different ‘faces’ visible in the old trunk, singled out in close-ups by the filmmaker.

The other central chronotope in the film is the hill with a single holm oak at its top. The filmmaker herself points out the relevance of this space, placing it as a kind of frame to the portrait of the village. After the ‘prologue’ with Azketa’s painting and the film’s title, the first scene of the film is the one already mentioned, of the frozen view of that hill from the window of Álvarez’s early childhood home. The foundational nature of that shot – coming from its placement at the beginning of the film and from its linkage to the autobiographical time of the filmmaker – finds its mirror shot towards the end of the film, with the long scene of Antonino and José walking up that same hill. Álvarez follows both characters in long shot, while keeping their synchronous dialogue audible. Their conversation deals mainly with their biographical time, stressing their being at the sunset of their lives. Their reflections about that sunset, drawing upon conventional wisdom, reverberate through the whole film, echoing the *leitmotiv* about the passing of generations and civilisations present throughout the film, mixing again historical and cyclical time:

Antonino: But now you see what’s ahead of you, that you’ve grown old and you see what the future holds. You realize that you are moving towards nothing. And you think, ‘Why was it that way for me?’ ... What a world!

José: The world changes...

Antonino: We don’t know who saw the beginning or who will see the end. ... Now you realize that we are only passing through, that life is just a jiff.

Just when they get to the holm oak at the top, the film fades into what could be the last painting of Pello Azketa, a landscape of Aldealseñor. The film closes with that shot, showing Azketa’s interpretation of this foundational chronotope. It is a landscape that shapes Álvarez as much as she has now given

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form to it. In its stillness, it evokes the film's reflection on time and history, on their dynamic condition displayed through generations, creating a rich strata of civilisations in which a new one is now on the verge of emerging. It also evokes the need for coming back to one's roots in order to build a narrative of the self, as Mercedes Álvarez carries on with *El cielo gira*, a film where first person narration blends with a certain tradition of realism, so ingrained in Spanish art, perhaps providing a prototype of what Spanish autobiographical films may offer us in the future.

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ⁱ Personal interview with the filmmaker. 06/20/2008.

ⁱⁱ In this essay, I will leave aside other approaches to first-person filmmaking addressed in this book, restricting the discussion and analysis to the more narrow terrain of autobiographical documentaries.

ⁱⁱⁱ These signs can be read in the number of MA degrees in documentary (at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and in the Universitat Pompeu Fabra), and the number of documentary conferences and festivals sprouting up in Spain, such as the one held in Cordoba by the Spanish Association of Cinema Historians (AEHC), or the three organized by the Malaga Film Festival. This growing interest has been instrumental in the growing number of books devoted to non-fiction cinema. New film festivals specializing in documentary seem to crop up every year, with two notable examples being Punto de Vista in Navarre and Documenta Madrid. Exhibitors are also more willing to program documentaries in the theaters, not only the well-known American titles, but also Spanish films, with *En construcción* (José Luis Guerín, 2000) and *La pelota vasca* (The Basque Ball, Julio Medem, 2003) having successful box-office returns.

^{iv} I was the co-editor of the (bilingual) book on Berliner, titled *The Man without the Movie Camera: The Cinema of Alan Berliner*. His films are distributed in Spain by BNC (www.benece.es), and the retrospective was organized by the Festival de Creación Audiovisual de Navarra.

^v The book was edited by José M. López, under the title *Naomi Kawase. El cine en el umbral*.

^{vi} The book *Cineastas frente al espejo* was edited by Gregorio Martín. In the same year, I co-edited another book on filmic autobiography, a bilingual edition focused on the work of Ross McElwee: *Landscapes of the Self: The Cinema of Ross McElwee*.

^{vii} One exception among the main documentary filmmakers might be Joaquín Jordá, who became himself a character in his influential piece *Monos como Becky* (*Monkeys Like Becky*, 1999), providing it with an autobiographical aside.

^{viii} This information comes from a personal interview with the filmmaker in November 2005.

^{ix} We may even speak of an Argentinean autobiographical 'spell' if we look, for instance, at the work of Ricardo Iscar, a Spanish filmmaker with a strong tradition of observational documentaries – like *Tierra negra* (*Black Earth*, 2004) or the award-winning *El cerco* (*The Siege*, 2005) – but who recently finished in 2008 his first autobiographical film, *Postal desde Buenos Aires* [*Postcard from Buenos Aires*], a medium-length diary piece about a trip he made to the capital of Argentina. For a further discussion of the Argentinean case, see Andrés di Tella's article in this volume.

^x The most directly affected filmmakers explore the phenomena of 'the disappeared,' as in the case of *Los rubios* and *Papa Iván*, which deal with the disappearance of the father in the former, and both parents in the latter.

^{xi} *Haciendo memoria* is part of a feature-length film –*Entre el dictador y yo* [*Between the Dictator and Me*]– composed of six pieces made by different filmmakers born after the death of Franco in 1975. *El*

horizonte artificial and *Haciendo memoria* are not the first Spanish films comprised of home movies, since there is a well known feature-length film made in 2003, *Un instante en la vida ajena* [*An Instant in Another Life*], compiled from the home movies of Mandronita Andreu dating from the twenties to the sixties. However the filmmaker, José Luis López Linares, had no biographical link to Andreu.

^{xii} François Gurgui lives currently in France, and Carlos Ruiz in Portugal.

^{xiii} Furthermore, his original name is not François Gurgui, but (Francesc) Xabier Juncosa i Gurgui. When he moved to Paris years ago, he changed his first name to French and chose the last name of his mother because it sounded more French.

^{xiv} All translations in this article are mine, except the English voiceover of *El cielo gira*, taken from the Spanish DVD edition.

^{xv} Lioult is talking mainly about the unexpected happening within the frame, but his remarks can be extended to the whole process of production. As he says, ‘filming the real may require setting up formal, sometimes strict constraints that allow the upsurge of the unexpected, the variable, the unsettled within a concrete and symbolic frame which organizes and orders spontaneity’s meaning’ (Lioult 2005).

^{xvi} It is worth noting that Mercedes Álvarez looks at this historical time from a distant position, despite the fact that she presents herself as part of the fabric of Aldealseñor, an approach rather common in the Spanish autobiographical cinema, as we already explained. A main exception to that detached position towards history would be the film *Nadar*. Its director, Carla Subirana, delves into Spanish history, mainly into the time of the Civil War and the postwar period, in search for the truth about her grandfather. She undertakes this quest, placing herself as the visible protagonist, looking at that period with a microhistorical perspective, searching for traces of her family in the official archives, in the original places of the events, or through the oral memories of her relatives. Nevertheless, her search does not unearth much of her family history, and her film *Nadar* ends up as more a reflection about the role of memory in the construction of personal and family identity.

^{xvii} That expression, ‘play of scales,’ is how Jacques Revel titles his well-known anthology on microhistory, *Jeux d’échelles. La micro-analyse à la experience*, published in 1996.

^{xviii} The chronotopical approach seems to fit the film medium very well, taking into account the spatial and temporal materiality of cinema, as authors such as Michael V. Montgomery (1993) and Vivian Sobchack (1998: 129-70) have shown. I have also applied this approach to the analysis of Jonas Mekas’s *Lost, Lost Lost* (2006: 54-72).