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The people are missing: rethinking a collectivity that has come to pass through the traces of archive

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The small coal mining community in northern Spain where I grew up had a strong working-class movement with a rich history of anti-fascist struggles. Over the past decade, non-fiction filmmakers from the region have focused on expressing this history. Their work aims to address present audiences by constructing the collective memory of the community while questioning the medium of film. For example, the work of Ramón Lluís Bande recounting the Asturian commune during the 1934 Revolution (*Cantares de una Revolución* [2018], *Vaca Mugiendo entre Ruinas* [2020]); Celia Viada Caso's rescue of Benjamina Miyar's legacy, a pioneering Asturian photographer and member of the anti-fascist resistance (*La Calle del Agua* [2020]); and Tito Montero retrieving the traces of the death of his grandfather in the Civil War (*Hilos* [2022]). My work shares these thematic and aesthetic concerns, and also their political commitment. My films *Work or To whom does the world belong* (2019) and *El Cine, 5* (2023) explore the loss of class consciousness due to the decline and disappearance of the mining industry.

For several years, a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze has been central to my approach as a filmmaker representing my community. Deleuze argues that if modern political cinema were to exist, and this is very true for minor and Third World cinemas, it'd be on the basis that the people are no longer there, that the people are missing. Georges Didi-Huberman echoes this in *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants* (2014), contending that people are always in danger of disappearing, threatened in their very existence, either by the underexposure of censorship or, with the same effect, the overexposure of their being put on show.

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This fundamental question arises: How to represent a people that no longer exist, a people that are missing? Or, as Didi-Huberman would put it, how to think the community (2014, p. 104)?

Today, I will examine how my most recent film engages with these questions through the use of archive and testimony to construct the collective memory of a community that is no longer there. Additionally, I will argue that film can be a tool for constructing history and engaging in politics, understanding historical construction as inherently political (Benjamin), and politics as a form of dissent (Rancière).

El Cine, 5 tells the story of Barredos, the small mining town where I grew up, narrating its history of solidarity and resistance during the post-war period and Franco's dictatorship. The film's dispositif comprises the oral testimonies of the residents, which give comment to the photographic archive of a local photographer (my grandfather), and this is juxtaposed with images of the present which manifest a current post-industrial landscape in decline. My grandfather made a living as a miner and as a photographer of weddings, communions, religious processions and local festivities but he also managed to document both the everyday life and the sensibility of a community united in its common struggles.

With this film I wanted to rescue his archive, looking at it from the present, in an exercise of re-signifying his images and the purpose they originally had. But also I wanted to pay tribute to him and to the community that contributed to my constitution as a political subject. With this paper I aim to reflect on the aesthetic and ethical decisions that went into making the film. So, today I will be reflecting on one of the sequences of the film that lends itself to discussing the use of archive to bring up the anonymous in the creation of historical

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discourse; the role of the testimony in activating memory and how this process manifests two types of witnesses; and lastly how montage is the necessary tool to make political cinema.

Didi-Huberman interrogates the political and social implications of representing the people, their suffering and resistance. He warns about how these visual representations can constitute perils in their existence contributing to perpetuating its oppression and marginalisation. He finds a correspondence between the role of extras in film, and the role of anonymous people in history. The treatment of film extras in big budget productions underlines the contradiction between their individual physical presence and their depersonalised function within the film narrative. Extras have no active role but merely serve as backdrop, they blend into the crowd. (Didi-Huberman, 2014, p. 156). The question then for the political filmmaker becomes an aesthetic and ethical one: How "[t]o film them less as a mass than a community"? (Didi-Huberman, 2014, p. 157).

He gives a hint: "One of the great political virtues of archival cinema reassembled is to trace back history in search of lost faces." (Didi-Huberman, 2014, 153) In *El Cine*, 5 the process of remembrance takes all interviewees, when confronted with the archival images, to instantaneously refer to each person's name or nicknames. A silent funeral becomes an act of protest against safety issues within the mine, and an act of dissent against Franco's regime. By the very process of naming the unnamed within the mass attending the procession in the photograph, the people are *exposed*, *the lost faces* stop being extras and are given an active role in history, they are given "the rank of fully fledged political subjects" (Didi-Huberman, 2014, p. 107). The creation of historical narratives must be devoted to remembering those who are nameless, as Walter Benjamin suggests in the postscript to his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (2006, p. 406). But more than that, through the individual narrative of those who were witnesses, the personal acquires political and

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collective value and in doing so the community is thought. "A film will only have political justice if it gives back its place to the faceless, the nameless, those who are not part of the usual social representation. In a word, if it makes the image a place of the common people, where the common place of the images of the people used to reign." (Didi-Huberman, 2014, p. 163). Nonetheless, this is not a question of giving voice to the voiceless. As Deleuze points out in relation of the work of Michel Foucault, there is a kind of indignity in speaking for others (Deleuze and Foucault). It is rather a matter of speaking 'with' not 'in the place of' (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007, p. 51). And this is all the more true when I, the filmmaker, belong to the community that I am aiming to represent.

This *making the image a place of the common people*, in my film, amounts to granting the people in the mining community their crucial part in the advent of democracy in Spain. Their role, like the one taken by other working-class movements within the country, has been diminished or suppressed by established historical discourses. The archive then becomes a device by which to question those established historical narratives and creating a counter-discourse. And within this process montage (editing) reveals itself as the cinematic device that facilitates this construction. As Jacques Rancière claims, the means of reproduction in cinema do not have a political function in and of themselves, rather "the great political task in cinema is montage", as it is through the work of selecting and assembling that the political filmmaker constructs a discourse (Rancière, 2015). In *El Cine, 5* the selection of the photographs is made according with the level of engagement of those speaking about them, and the fragments of testimony selected are used in such a way that they are cut as little as possible so as not to alter either their original meaning or the inflections of the speaker. Their act of recollection is preserved insofar as the doubts, silences and hesitations inherent in the process of remembering are retained.

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During the period in which I collected testimonies, a clear division became evident between those who opted for silence as a mechanism for coping with the trauma of what they experienced, and those who assumed the status of necessary witnesses, taking on the oral transmission of lived experiences through to daughters and granddaughters. Primo Levi, also considers these two categories of being a witness: There are those who refuse to revisit or even discuss their experiences. They, despite wishing to forget, are haunted by nightmares or have managed to suppress their memories. And there are survivors for whom remembering is a duty, "they do not want to forget and, above all, they do not want the world to forget, because they understand that their experiences were not meaningless, that the camps were not an accident, an unforeseen historical happening." (Levi, 2009, p. 390) The unwillingness to forget, the refusal to let the world forget infects the task of the political filmmaker, and from this emerges a double articulation of the testimony: on the one hand the witnesses in the first person; on the other hand, the filmmaker, me, in turn becomes a new witness in the process of remembrance. And from this reflection arises the need, as a new witness, to be present through my voice in the film. After all, the witnesses don't just simply tell their story, they tell it to me, and I act as a mediator of their words through the editing process.

Going back to the funeral sequence, when Regli (the woman describing the photograph) concludes her account, we are presented with an image of the same place, from the same angle, six decades later. And this is followed by concatenation of images that simulate the route of the silent procession that took place and that she describes, from the house of the deceased to the church. Only now the streets are empty. The direct association of the

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photographic image of the past with the moving image of the present reveals that to cut a film is to cut time and from this also transpires what Roger Leenhardt considered the essence of cinema, the ellipsis (Andrew, 2007, p. 58). An ellipsis of half a century that manifests both what is shown and told and what is not: the absence of the people. Deleuze's point on the absence of a people is in no way an abnegation of political cinema, rather it's the foundation, a call to action for political filmmakers who, unable to represent a people that no longer exist, have to contribute to the invention of a people yet to come. So, in my paper, as well as conducting textual analysis of my own film I am also planning to contextualise my work within the broader work of other Asturian 'not reconciled' filmmakers (to borrow Straub and Huillet's title), and reflect on the future of Asturian cinema.

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