

The visual strategies of struggle: domestic workers in hybrid filmic forms of confronting reality in Spain (2000-2020)

Las estrategias visuales de la lucha: trabajadoras de la limpieza y del hogar en las formas fílmicas híbridas de enfrentar lo real en España (2000-2020)

As estratégias visuais da luta: empregadas domésticas em formas de filmes híbridos para enfrentar o real na Espanha (2000-2020)

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ABSTRACT | This article studies the critical and activist documentaries produced in Spain in the last twenty years that address the situation of invisibility and exploitation of domestic workers and hotel maids. In these films, the features of labor struggles permeate the filmic construction. These documentaries are characterized by the work on the dialectic invisibility-visibility –typical of their trade unions functioning– and by the use of expressive strategies to translate their working conditions to the film, concomitant with their ways of organizing the labor struggle: the choral account, the collective creation and the inclusion in film of their everyday life and families. These documentaries flee from the usual paternalistic view in commercial film productions. The sample of six films deploys an arc that reveals the advance of female precariousness from the Franco regime since nowadays, highlighting audiovisual productions increase since the irruption of the collective mobilizations of hotel maids. The films present a hybrid nature typical of the feminist, militant, and class documentary, confronting the hegemonic modes of representation, production, and distribution.

KEYWORDS: feminist documentary; militant cinema; activist video; collective cinema; feminization of work; labor exploitation.

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RESUMEN | *Este artículo estudia los documentales críticos y activistas realizados en España en los últimos veinte años que abordan la situación de invisibilidad y explotación de las empleadas del hogar y camareras de hotel. En estas películas, los rasgos de las luchas laborales impregnan la factura fílmica. Estos documentales se caracterizan por el trabajo sobre la dialéctica invisibilidad-visibilidad –propia de sus organizaciones sindicales– y por el uso de estrategias de traslación expresiva de las condiciones de trabajo al filme, que son concomitantes con sus formas de organizar la lucha: el relato coral, la creación colectiva y la inclusión de la cotidianeidad y de la familia. Estas producciones huyen de las miradas paternalistas habituales en las producciones cinematográficas comerciales. La muestra de seis películas traza un arco que revela el avance de la precariedad femenina desde el franquismo hasta hoy, destacando el aumento de producciones audiovisuales desde la irrupción de las movilizaciones colectivas de las camareras de hotel. Las piezas presentan una naturaleza híbrida propia del documental feminista, militante y de clase, confrontando los modos de representación, producción y distribución hegemónicos.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *documental feminista; cine militante; video activista; cine colectivo; feminización del trabajo; explotación laboral.*

RESUMO | *Este artigo estuda os documentários críticos e ativistas realizados nos últimos vinte anos na Espanha que abordam a situação de invisibilidade e exploração das empregadas domésticas e camareiras de hotel. Nesses filmes, os traços das lutas trabalhistas permeiam a feitura fílmica. Esses documentários se caracterizam pelo trabalho na dialéctica invisibilidade-visibilidade - típica de suas organizações sindicais - e pelo uso de estratégias de tradução expressivas das condições de trabalho para o filme, que são concomitantes com suas formas de organização da luta: a história coral, a criação coletiva e inclusão do cotidiano e da família nas narrações. Essas produções fogem das visões paternalistas usuais nas produções de filmes comerciais. A amostra de seis filmes traça um arco que revela o avanço da precariedade feminina desde o regime de Franco até hoje, destacando o aumento das produções audiovisuais desde a irrupção das mobilizações coletivas de camareiras de hotel. As peças apresentam um caráter híbrido típico do documentário feminista, militante e de classe, confrontando os modos hegemônicos de representação, produção e distribuição.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *documentário feminista; cinema militante; vídeo ativista; cinema coletivo; feminização do trabalho; exploração laboral.*

INTRODUCTION

“We are the invisible brigade (7’49’’)”, says a floor maid in *Organizar lo (im) posible* (Gomila & Matamalas, 2017). The body of the workers is hidden behind clean hotel rooms, luxurious houses in order, shiny bathrooms, and tiny lodges; in women’s documentary cinema it is rare to find that half of the wage earners living in households below the poverty line in Spain who are engaged in cleaning. This sector, mainly feminized and migrant, accounts for almost 4% of all workers in Spain, a higher percentage than that of construction or finance (Oxfam Intermon & UC3M Instituto de Estudios de Género, 2018). However, their rights are not equalized with the rest of the workers: Spain committed to ratify ILO Convention 189 on domestic work, in 2021 has not yet done so. Cleaning and domestic workers have been the active subject of some women’s documentary filmmaking in Spain in the last twenty years, managing not only to recover the memory of a forgotten labor sector, but also to make it visible to the point of having been included in the traditional political agenda, in the media agenda, and having obtained parliamentary promises, although still unfulfilled.

The six films chosen to develop this study are characterized by their hybrid nature, between the militant and the experimental, between documentary and animation, between portrait and fighting instrument. Some of them can be categorized as documentaries both in form and in the production and distribution process situated in film channels –*Hotel explotación* (Cisquella, 2018), *Organizar lo (im) posible* (Matamalas & Gomila, 2017), *En otra casa* (Rousselot, 2015), *A las puertas de París* (Horno & Fernández, 2008)– and others approach more experimental forms distributed in activist and artistic channels –*A la deriva (por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina)* (Colectivo Precarias a la Deriva, 2003), *Mémoires d’unes serveuses* (Fraj, 2006).

The representation of this group in fictional cinema has been relatively studied in Spain (Saenz del Castillo Velasco, 2013), but not in the field of real cinema, where films on the subject have not been common either. Hence the relevance of this proposal, which aims to study the relationship between economic situations, labor struggles, and the filmic form taken by the cinematographic pieces, i.e., the interweaving between content, creation, and production modes; thus, it is necessary to establish a representative sample of both the production and the nature of the experiences portrayed, and the construction of a theoretical framework that addresses the economic and social nature of care work, its representations, and its relationship with the ways in which they have been produced.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A definition of waged care work

The work of female cleaners, hotel maids, and housekeepers is in a non-place in the labor sphere. If care work is *non-work* from the capitalist economy point of

view and, therefore, is not remunerated, salaried jobs that focus on care –such as cleaning and housekeeping– are consequently devalued, because they come from the traditional division of the binarization of productive versus reproductive labor. Economist Amaia Pérez Orozco reframes the Marxist idea of the confrontation between capital and labor as a “capital-life” confrontation due to the “conflict that confronts capital with all labor, wage labor and that which is performed outside the circuits of accumulation, without the latter being able to be subsumed into the former” (2019, pp. 119-120).

Lisa Vogel focuses not on the “family and patriarchy argument” but on the “social production argument” (1979, p. 6), from which the maintenance and production of the labor force is excluded. For this reason, when women nevertheless manage to enter the paid labor market, they are not allowed to do so under the same conditions, because “the place that women occupy within the sexual division of labor that characterizes these activities has repercussions on their participation in the social work carried out for the dominant class and, at the same time, is affected by this participation” (Vogel, 1979, pp. 25-26). Hence, these jobs end up being relegated to women, who are not qualified or are but in their country of origin and not validated by Spanish institutions.

Naturalization and lack of qualification are intertwined (Carrasco et al., 2011), which easily transfers these services to the underground economy and contributes to the gender segmentation of a labor market that was not always female, but which has varied until “creating a class destined for domestic service: women, either in the form of paid work (domestic service) or unpaid work (wives, daughters, grandmothers)” (Oso, 1997, p. 163). At the beginning of the 20th century, domestic workers wanted to be placed in factories to gain greater personal, but also social and political autonomy (Todd, 2018): the industrial growth resulting from the Great War favored the movement, gradually relegating female and migrant sectors to care work.

In Franco’s Spain in the 1960s, internal migratory mobility quantitatively amplified an organization of care work that had already existed previously, as *Mémoire d’unes serveuses* (Fraj, 2006) shows. After the end of the dictatorship and the advance of feminist movements, by the 1990s and coinciding with the establishment of neoliberal policies, women entered the regular labor market, causing a vacuum in households and in paid housekeeping jobs. Spain becomes a country aligned in the North/South division (we must remember the colonial past that places it on this axis), and due to globalization migrant women begin to perform those tasks, previously occupied by Spanish workers. This adds yet another element to the invisibility of migrant and racialized women due to

immigration laws¹, which block the free movement of people and deny residence permits. The sum of these factors encourages hidden work, the absence of rights, and poverty wages for these women who often lack family and networks because they have emigrated and who, in turn, have left their children in the country of origin, thus generating a chain of transnational care, as can be seen in *A la deriva...* (Colectivo Precarias a la deriva, 2003). Invisibility is, therefore, legal, economic and corporal, since the work is performed inside homes or hotels, hidden spaces in the bourgeois division between public and private space. In the case of female hotel cleaners, although they are legally hired and depend on a collective bargaining agreement, they are subcontracted by other companies; employers take advantage of this to avoid taking responsibility for the development of occupational diseases, the overload of tasks, and the demand for productivity in impossible times.

Bodies in conflict and hybrid filmic forms of confronting the real

The body's presence is crucial in the filmic tradition of labor and, especially, feminist struggle, because filming it allows "locating the signs of latent conflict" (Ledo, 2021, p. 43). The overburdened bodies of female workers are presented as experience in the films, giving carnality to the story and turning it into "medium (...) because the body can be that threshold that, like the screen (...) assumes the function of door and passage" (Ledo, 2020, p. 21) from the interior to the exterior and, in our case, also from the individual as collective: the same professional ailments. In turn, as the sample is composed of films made by women and in collaboration with the protagonists, the process becomes a "double self-representation: we look at ourselves and, at the same time, we look at the other" (Klonaris & Thomadaki, 1980).

The writing in feminine also crosses borders and filmic canons, approaching from the real to the stories that happen to women who "do not cease to being part of existence because they are hidden from us" (Ledo, 2020, p. 84). The relationship between the body and the camera, the connection between the I and the we, and the hybridization of forms from the real are elements that are perceived in the chosen sample.

The hybrid diversity of feminist and class documentary practices also stems from a "zero-position in the field of recognition and industrial control, which has indirectly allowed it to develop in a space of freedom deliberately used to conjugate

1. The immigration law defines migrants as people who do not belong to the Schengen Area formed by 26 European nations. Hence their difficulty in obtaining the necessary residence permits, making legal employability more complex and favoring undeclared work (Ley Orgánica 4/2000, 2000).

a radical position of confrontation with hegemonic modes of representation” (Selva, 2005, p. 66). Selva distinguishes a series of *mise-en-scène* traits in this type of film that transcend thematic issues and question traditional modes of representation: the questioning of the document image (deconstruction of archival images and significant reassemblages) as in the film *Mémoires d’unes serveuses* (Fraj, 2006); their processual nature: they are films through which an investigation, reflection, or denunciation is developed as in *A la deriva...* (Colectivo Precarias a la deriva..., 2004); the unmasking of the structural concealments of images and the rupture with the technical preciousness that hides exploitation, as shown in *Organizar lo (im)posible* (Matamalas & Gomila, 2017), and the inscription of the everyday, the intimate, the personal in the documentary films *Hotel explotación* (Cisquella, 2018), *A las puertas de París* (Horno & Fernández, 2008), and *En otra casa* (Rousselot, 2015).

Selva follows the same line opened by Annette Kuhn (1991) in the early 1980s. Along with De Lauretis (1992) and preceded by Mulvey (1988), they combine psychoanalysis with semiotics to analyze both classical cinema and films made by women. Kuhn points out as a possible *counter-cinema* to the classical patriarchal one of those films situated in independent and social cinema, and opts for the documentary genre for “political, technical, and financial reasons” (1991, p. 160). She analyzes three U.S. documentaries made by women to conclude that, in addition to meeting the same material production conditions, they present a similar filmic style, where women appear narrating their daily lives and the stories are organized chronologically, in a similar way to how political consciousness-raising is organized. “Since autobiographical discourse structures the feminist documentary, and if the protagonists organize their own discourses, it is evident that the enunciative voice of these films belongs to the female protagonists themselves” (Kuhn, 1991, p. 161). Hence the absence of voice-over.

This article approaches the analysis from a viewpoint similar to Kuhn’s: the sample is composed by low-cost pieces, produced through crowdfunding or minor public subsidies, and made with inexpensive digital means. They also coincide in the narratives, as we will see, with that incipient feminist documentary based on first-person accounts and the absence of voice-over.

Filmic representations of care work

The figure of the female domestic worker in Spanish cinema had a certain presence during the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975) embodied in the maid’s figure, who represented the migration –from the countryside to the city– and labor phenomenon of thousands of women, creating a paradox: although female cleaning workers have a tradition of great impact as characters in Spanish fictional cinema, especially from the 1960s (Saenz del Castillo Velasco, 2013, p. 498),

this phenomenon is hardly quantifiable according to Carrasco et al., (2011) due to the absence of migration and labor records. De Dios Fernández (2013) puts historically situates care work during the Franco regime and the construction of subjectivities.

The collective was portrayed by women of rural origin, with little education, naive and infantilized, easily seduced and pseudo tutored; they are women unknown in their reality and filtered by the class and cultural distance of those who portrayed them (Saenz del Castillo Velasco, 2013), the epitome of these features being the film *¿Cómo está el servicio!* (Ozores & Coello, 1968). These cultural products were part of the creation of a macho imaginary, with plots where women's social ascent occurs through romantic love and marriage, which turned out to be disciplinary and ideological models. The emigrated Spanish domestic worker had her comic and classist representation in the adventures of *Cándida*, a Galician domestic worker in Buenos Aires. In the tradition of the *sainetes criollos*², this maid stood out for being “dirty, ignorant, noisy but honest, and loyal to the death” (Pérez Pereiro & Roca Baamonde, 2019, p. 272); in the films about her directed by Luis Bayón Herrera the “contradiction between her tragic renunciations to be accepted and her comic inability to fit into the new society” (p. 274) is observed.

This character loses importance after the end of Franco's regime, we only find three films: *Las chicas de la sexta planta* (Le Guay et al., 2010), a French production but with Spanish actresses, a somewhat stereotypical gentle comedy about migrant women in Paris who worked as maids; *Amador* (León de Aranoa, 2010), which portrays the precarious situation of Marcela, Amador's caregiver, when he dies and she is left alone, migrated and pregnant, considering lying about his death to collect his pension, and *Rabia* (Cordero et al., 2009), made in Spain by an Ecuadorian director that connects both sides of the Atlantic by highlighting the social normalization of sexual abuse of the worker and how her body inhabits the spaces (Restrepo & Hernández, 2020).

It is in Latin American cinema where the protagonism of cleaners and caregivers has had more relevance in the last 20 years; films as unalike as *Cama adentro* (Gaggero et al., 2004) – “spatializing duality” (Veliz, 2005, p. 235) of each social class during the Argentinean crisis of 2001–, *La nana* (Silva et al., 2009) –exploring temporal repetition and discriminatory replication among female workers–, *Una segunda madre* (Muylaert, 2015), *Roma* (Cuarón, 2018) –with its “class redemption upon itself” (Tirado, 2021, p. 56)– or *Xquipi' Gui'dani* (Sala, 2018) –where Mexican racism and classism are revealed.

2. One-act farce (translator's note).

However, the study of the documentary and militant side of the representation of these women does not have this analytical tradition. Domestic and cleaning work is the perfect territory to study non-canonical, feminist, class and struggle filmic practices, for being an “amphibious territory, intimate and public, domestic and political” (Veliz, 2015, p. 244) in which the dialectic of class, of the visible and the invisible, of the interior and the exterior, come together in suggestive practices and analyses that transcend the filmic.

METHODOLOGY

The film exhibition is composed of six non-fiction pieces produced in Spain between 2000 and 2020 that have been made by women and, of them, half are collectively authored. If usually these workers have been passive models of their filmic representation, thus adding to their situation “the loss of their own image” (Veliz, 2015, p. 230), most of this sample includes them as co-authors by including them in the production processes. It should be noted that the author of one of the pieces, Elena Fraj, makes the documentary on the stories of her mother as a worker and is the author of this article. In this way, the methodology includes self-investigation, breaking the division between subject and object.

These films chronologically trace an arc that shows the advance of feminine precariousness in the context of globalization first, up to a context of crisis and post-crisis. *A la deriva (por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina)* (Colectivo Precarias a la Deriva, 2003) combines research with documentary creation and the publication of a book. *Mémoires d’unes serveuses* (Fraj, 2006) contrasts the memory of Spanish female workers migrating from rural to urban areas with their filmic representations during Franco’s regime. The same type of protagonists, who went to France to work as porters, are interviewed in *A las puertas de París* (Horno & Fernández, 2008). Vanessa Rousselot focuses on female domestic workers in Madrid in *En otra casa* (Rousselot, 2015), while the last two films, chronologically speaking, deal with the specific case of hotel maids: *Organizar lo (im)posible* (Matamalas & Gomila, 2017) and *Hotel explotación* (Cisquella, 2018).

From the sample, the methodology will consist of a textual analysis of the films to relate them to the theoretical discourses presented. The method comes from cultural studies marked by the linguistic turnover towards the constructionist notion of language and representation, so that several theories and concepts are used in an interdisciplinary way. The constructionist notion of *representation* proposed by Stuart Hall (2010), as opposed to the reflective and intentional approaches, will be useful to combine semiotic and discursive analysis. Hall approaches semiotics from Saussure and Barthes to explain how language and sense are capable of producing

meaning, on the one hand, and, on the other, he takes up Foucault's notion of discourse as a form of knowledge production. The author does not propose the overcoming of semiotics motivated by the development of the concept of discourse, but the coexistence of both ideas. Following Hall's proposal, this text combines the analysis of cinematographic language, as a signification and producer of meaning, but also interpreting that meaning from the discursive practices provided by feminist and class theories on the economy and feminized jobs.

We approached these films with the following hypotheses:

H1. The constructive elements of the films in the sample respond to the traits of the struggles of female domestic workers and hotel maids.

H2. The style is characterized at a conceptual level by a work on the invisibility/visibility dialectic and by the development of specific strategies of expressive translation of working conditions (narrative, technical, sonorous, regarding the movies' temporality).

H3. The specifically feminized nature of the industry leaves its mark on aspects of filmmaking.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The invisibility/visibility dialectic

The theme of invisibility and the renunciation of self-identity (in the case of intern female³) is commonplace, signifying the symbolic continuity of that unrecognized work in the home that Federici (2010a, 2010b) speaks of, although in these cases it is paid and outside the economic nucleus of the family. This invisibility is also the first barrier they perceive to their struggle, because it denies their corporeality and their belonging to the working class. They overcome it by means of documentary creation and the union of voices and forces through chorality, which takes them out of isolation.

“We are the invisible brigade” (7'49”), says a hotel maid in *Organizar lo (im)posible* (Matamalas & Gomila, 2017). In *Hotel explotación* (Cisquella, 2018) invisibility is recognized by the workers, who state that “the client thinks it has been done with a magic wand” (4'19”) or it is “as if that work was not done by anyone” (5'30”); vivid descriptions that show the fetishizing operation of capital from the Marxist perspective on the concealment of labor in productive processes.

3. They are those who live with their employers, lacking a home of their own and available 24 hours a day. For them, there is no fracture between leisure and work spaces and times.

This work invisibility is also transferred to the legal and trade union field. Since 2012, the subcontracting of hotel maids⁴ has become widespread, which has made them not covered by the sector's collective bargaining agreement, reduced their protection, and distanced them from the radius of action of institutionalized trade unionism. Thus, they claim in *Hotel explotación* (Cisquella, 2018) that they were invisible to the hotel works councils and even to their colleagues, so they could not find a way to organize through traditional unions and decided to represent themselves by creating the Kellys collective.

Invisibility takes on an extreme degree in the female intern workers, who report a feeling of denial of identity and desire to such an extent that they relate it to death. In *Otra casa* (Rousselot, 2015) these women claim that in order to work as interns they have to forget everything, and “adopt my boss as if she were my mother, otherwise it is impossible” (12'43"). And this so that when they return to their country, they realize that “we were dead for them (...) it is as if you were bothering them when you come back” (39'16"). Or “Here I am nobody, at home I am the favorite child, they spoil me with whatever they have” (3'50") explains Milagros, who was a minor when she started working as an intern, in *Mémoires d'unes serveuses* (Fraj, 2006).

This invisibilization has another face, related to the denial of identity in a white and racist society. In *Organizar lo (im)posible* (Matamalas & Gomila, 2017) it is stated that “cleaners are Africans, East Africans, Latin Americans, those of us who arrived in the 2000s are already sick and are trying to leave the hotels” (4'10"), they pick up the testimony of the women protagonists in *A la deriva...* (Colectivo Precarias a la deriva, 2003) when the phenomenon of the globalized care chain was beginning to be visibilized. Thus, *Hotel explotación* (Cisquella, 2018) gives an embodied account of racialization: “I'm black, I know I'm the black woman here, but I'm not worried because I'm not going to bear with something I don't like. I prefer to be a worker but not a slave” (21'29").

For these workers, being seen is synonymous with gaining support for their struggles; some of them had the inventiveness to create a catchy name resulting from a play on words to refer to those who clean: the Kellys⁵.

4. With the crisis that began in 2008, Spain implemented two labor reforms that make it possible to outsource services in many labor areas, including that of hotel maids: during the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) government in 2010 and in 2012 (PP (Popular Party) government).

5. Kelly is also slang for house. Thus, the pun is between house and the set of phonemes coinciding with *keli*, which comes from those *that clean*.

“Who knew what maids were? No one. We were those invisible people who went down the hall with the cleaning cart and no one saw us (...), they always tell you not to make noise (...), not to let it showed that you have passed by” (1'56") said a worker in *Hotel explotación* (Cisquella, 2018). The director also highlights this idea when explaining how she approached the film: “They were invisible beings who are part of the struggle and you have to show the reverse shot” (Cisquella, 2021).

The space inhabited and worked by these bodies is a space segregated by class, organized to prevent their presence from being perceived. In the homes, different rituals separate spaces; for example, entering through a service door, different from the rest, and crossing oneself upon entering as indicated in *En otra casa* (Rousselot, 2015), or inhabiting rooms far from the life of the family she serves, as Victoria recounts in *Mémoires d'unes serveuses* (Fraj, 2016), whose bedroom was the laundry room: “We were close but distant, each one was in his or her place” (20'10"). In *A las puertas de París* (Horno & Fernández, 2008), there is the confluence of the space of paid work, the porter's lodge, with that of the porters' life, as they end up becoming private places suited to their taste, where they perform tasks such as cooking or sewing. However, these other chores are hidden in secondary divisions that are not visible to neighbors.

The service is even established in an illusory space that coexists with the main one, like the concierges' little dollhouses in *A las puertas de París* (Horno & Fernández, 2008)⁶.

This segregation occurs in common spaces, as the activities of each family member are different, women workers become a kind of functional and invisible furniture, as seen, for example, in the space of the washing machine in *En otra casa* (Rousselot, 2015). Going further, they would be like that “natural resource or personal service” (Federici, 2010, p. 20) for reproductive work inside the home, but salaried, because they are hired to be available twenty-four hours a day.

6. In the American documentary *The Queen of Versailles* (Greenfield & Renfrew, 2012), directed by a woman, the Filipina live-in maid lives in a disused dollhouse, originally built as a playhouse for the children of the lords of the house. When she asks the owner of one of the largest houses in the United States if she will let her use it as her home, the former does not believe that anyone would want to stay in a playhouse, but relents. Having a space of her own, a spatial autonomy filled with her own objects and decorations, brings relief to a woman absolutely tortured by the spatial and emotional dislocation in which she lives: saving to be able to build a house in her native Philippines, grieving for not having been able to provide her father with a concrete house before his death, and consoling herself that she has at least been able to give him a concrete grave and get a dollhouse for herself.



Image 1. Image capture from *A las puertas de París*

Source: Horno & Fernández (2008).

Thus, these workers acquire a hybrid character: although they are salaried, they replicate the canons of reproductive work within the home of which women were withdrawn by the process of primitive accumulation, also generating “differences and divisions within the working class” (Federici, 2010b, p. 94) while proceeding to “the accumulation of unpaid work” (Federici, 2010b, p. 116). Although the economic sphere is different, the nature of reproductive work (care and even affection towards children, in the case of female live-in housekeepers) and confinement (hiding at home or in the hotel) are imitated, being among the worst paid despite their salarization.

The dislocated affections of these women are again related to invisibilization: they have to survive emotionally being separated from their families, whom they have not seen for years, while they are attached to alien families with whom they live twenty-four hours a day in an integration simulation. As we have seen, they say that the only way to cope is to “adopt their bosses” (*En otra casa*, 12’13”). It also often happens that the emotional bonds that the children develop with them are so intense that their female bosses, jealous, dismiss them as soon as they perceive that these bonds have been established (Rousselot, 2015).



Image 2. Image capture from *En otra casa*

Source: Rousselot (2015).

The naïve but painful questions that the children in the houses ask them about their own sons and daughters, about why they are absent and why they do not take care of them all together, reveal a constant wound hidden under the salarization of care while they are deprived of their own families⁷. One of the protagonists of *En otra casa*, Vilma Ramona Cristaldo Florentín, stated in a collective presentation of the documentary that she always looked for houses with children because “I as a mother believe that those children are giving me the affection that my daughters cannot give me because I am in another house (...) that family is like our family” (Cineteca Madrid, 2016, 13’06”).

The creation of an emotional and social space of their own in *En otra casa* is built every Sunday in the parish of San Lorenzo in Lavapiés, where the protagonists of the documentary –many of Paraguayan origin– gather to celebrate festivities and eat together, generating their own family in the labor exile in which they find themselves. In fact, it is from Father Juan José of that parish that Vanessa Rousselot had access to the women protagonists of the documentary.

7. Going back to *The Queen of Versailles*, Nebab, the live-in worker, tearfully says that she has not seen her twenty-six-year-old son since he was seven, that her boss’s children tell her that they love her, something she has never heard from her children, and again consoles herself by saying “at least, I still have children, the Siegels’ [her bosses’] children” (Greenfield, 2015, 37’53”).

Expressive translation strategies to generate experience

One of the most relevant features of the works is the search for different expressive mechanisms that help the audience to feel, beyond seeing and hearing in the distance, the working conditions of these women. In addition to making visible, they also want to achieve a simulation of labor experiences through narrative, technical, sonorous and temporal strategies.

The temporality of the documentary contributes to simulate the rhythm of work: in *Organizar lo (im)posible* (Matamalas & Gomila) the choral testimonies are simultaneous and contribute to generate an accelerated rhythm that joins the duration of the documentary –the same as the time the waitresses have to clean each room– conveying the sensation of haste. This constant rush and the type of work leave marks on their bodies, which, in pain, force them to resort to painkillers almost as a daily work tool. Also in *Hotel explotación* (Cisquella, 2018) there is a continuous consumption of painkillers and, even, a visit to a doctor and a theatrical play about the bureaucratic labyrinths derived from the work injury.

The editing, with its rhythms and reiterations, and the use of animation are two technical elements that contribute to recreate this work experience.

The second sequence of *Hotel explotación* (Cisquella, 2018, 3'17") is particularly expressive: the reiteration, the fast pace, the fragmented bodies cleaning, the constant irruption of annoying and repetitive noises, unsettle the viewer who, from the armchair, has put him or herself for a moment in the place of a *kelly*.

In *Organizar lo (im)posible*, the editing facilitates the functioning of the sequence shot in stop motion, where a room is cleaning and tidying itself (Matamalas & Gomila, 2017, 2'23"). This sequence refers to *El hotel eléctrico* (Segundo de Chomón, 1908), where all the service jobs are performed magically and not by people. So it seems in hotels, where the users are not in the moment of cleaning the room, which appears clean and tidy as if that work was done alone. The stop motion technique helps to express two things: the speed with which the tasks must be done and the invisibility of the workers in an operation of fetishization. This expressive intention of narrating speed and hyper-productivity also appears in *A la Deriva* (Colectivo precarias a la deriva, 2003), where the sound editing of a sequence speeds up the story of the labor chores until it becomes unintelligible (10'45").

The use of dialectic editing facilitates the dissemination of the message. In *A la Deriva*, imaginaries of women in advertising, imaginaries of work are contrasted with the images of telephone operators, maids, and caregivers who appear in the film as protagonist subjects. We also find a dialectical montage in *Mémoires d'unes serveuses* (Fraj, 2006), where the representations of films about maids in the Francoist period are challenged by the testimonies of four maids.



Image 3. Image capture from *Hotel Explotación*

Source: Cisquilla (2018).

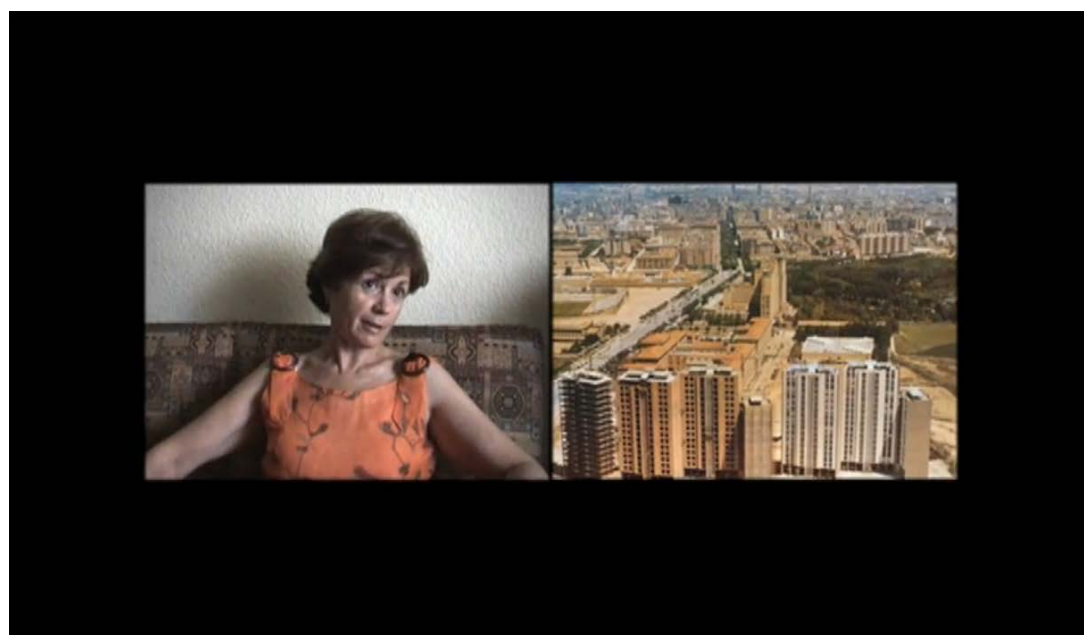


Image 4. Image capture from *Mémoires d'unes serveuses*

Fuente: Fraj (2006).

Organizar lo (im)posible presents as its hallmark the animation added to the filmed material to add expressive connotations to the discourse. Rotoscopy draws only the worker in movement thus isolating the body from the environment, as a way of highlighting the importance of the subject (Matamalas & Gomila, 2017, 1'10").



Image 5. Image capture from *A la deriva (por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina)*

Source: *Colectivo Precarias a la Deriva (2003)*.

That expressivity also enhances the voice narration, opening new fields of meanings, as occurs in the scene where a vertical travelling shot shows a kind of factory-hotel with its gears working, as well as washing machines and clothes hanging out (Matamalas & Gomila, 2017, 8'). This image transfers the manufacturing function of the productive industry to that of tourism, settled on care work as allegorized when, at the end of the shot, the silhouette of a woman literally holding the factory-hotel appears (Matamalas & Gomila, 2017, 8'50"). In this way, according to anthropologist Rita Segato (2018), the organization of the world would be illustrated with a pictographic image, that of an inverted pyramid seated on a woman's body supporting the structure.

The filming of the testimonies takes them out of invisibility and removes the voice-overs or expert figures from the domain of the narrative: the self-narrative created by the women takes center stage. In *Organizar lo (im)posible* the voice-over is a choral mix of voices of the *kellys*, but it is not a spontaneous account but a voice-over written in advance by the protagonists. This methodology allows both collective participation and control over the story of the *kellys* themselves, in addition to expressing through the mix of choral voices the collective work of this organization.

In *A la deriva...* many of the scenes have been articulated with the same participatory procedure between filmmakers and testimonies combined with interviews with each other. These films are based on interviews, conversations, and voices that constitute a set of oral life stories, which allows to build another history, to be a counter-image of the dominant stories and to introduce “the subjectivity of the one who remembers (...), to widen the present, and to confer a greater thickness to the past, present, and future” (de Dios Fernández, 2012, p. 98).

The way of facing the editing also refers to a clear strategy to highlight the social class and the work experience ascribed to it. The technique of the moving photographic portrait is used in *En otra casa* to generate a reflection about people living together in the same intimate space, but with opposite class relations. The boys and girls who appear dressed in the same way, in expensive clothes or private school uniforms, pose next to the maids, almost of the same height, in uniform –an iconic element of the servant class– or in clothes of a clearly different class. The reflective space of these portraits is facilitated by the stopped temporality of the shot which, in the case of film, is felt by the viewer and forced by the tempo of the montage. The frontality, the staticism, the pose, impel the viewer to position him or herself on the class marks of that image; in the gestures and position, the attitude of service and the habit of being served can be glimpsed (Restrepo & Hernández, 2020). Although the director understood that she was not intervening in a denunciation of working conditions in a strict sense –“My documentary is not about denunciation per se, but about telling how one copes with that situation and the inner life” (Cineteca de Madrid, 2016, 12’34”)–, the very construction of the portrait reveals a clear element of class, subordination and denial of self-identity through the condition of live-in in the house. If Marx asserted that only outside of work does the worker “feel himself, is in his own” (in Federici, 2010b, p. 72), the alienation of the live-in housemaids is total because only on Sundays are they in themselves: available twenty-four hours a day to provide care and affection as a natural resource of someone else’s home.

Transfer of struggle features to the movies

The characteristics of the labor struggle of these collectives become elements of filmmaking, either because the films are one more element in this struggle, a material to continue and reinforce union work, or because these features are also close to the outlines of a specifically feminized struggle. The story is choral, the creation is collective, and the everyday life and the family are reflected in them. These films go beyond the classic construction of main and secondary characters, characterized by individual psychologization, to elaborate a collective voice that shows that individual casuistry responds to a production structure, that problems and struggles are common. The protagonists are conscious and capable of organizing a narrative, moving away from the classist stereotype of the subaltern subject who

is not capable of enunciating herself or who does not understand her situation. The films are a conscious product of the practice itself; the enunciations are not made from an ideology applied to reality, there are no speeches of experts or intellectuals.

The chorality or polyphony of these works is a bet on the collective character as opposed to the biographies of great characters (Frideson in Descamps, 2019) for the empathetic discursive construction because “the whole is shaped by the interaction of diverse consciousnesses, none of which becomes an object for the other” (Bakhtin in Aston & Odorico, 2018, p. 64). This polyphony complexifies the discourses, turns them into open debate and shows the working class in its diversity: its accents, its expressions, its different points of view, thus revealing the heterogeneity of a class within the same material conditions, breaking the petit-bourgeois narrative of the individual character and its conflicts to open up to the complexity of life in collective (Barreiro et al., 2021).

This chorality “traps you, it can get to you, and it is difficult to focus on just one character” (Cisquella, 2021), says the director of *Hotel Explotación*.

The choral discourse joins a collective creation, both in the process and in the discourse, the collective is the norm. *A la deriva...* is a militant research work where the protagonists of the film are both subject and research object. The creative and research process is collectivized and an intersectional space is created between women with different levels of education, backgrounds, and feminized professions. Although among the authors there are women workers in the audiovisual environment, the processes of script creation, production, and editing tasks have been collectivized. From the industry’s point of view and its aesthetics, one could see shaky shots, sound failures or more or less adequate graphics, but one must consider how the collective writing process goes beyond these supposed requirements. It is the script and the editing that articulate the narrative force, and this is expressed in the film: the ability to write, think, and do together in a transversal way, bringing together in a whole the feminized works. We could say that it is a militant, *reflexive*, and action film.

In *Organizar lo (im)posible*, the directors write the script along with the *kellys*. The skill of the story lies in tracing an axis that crosses different tasks whose common link is feminization and precariousness. Instead of sectorializing the struggle, it agglutinates and shows a general framework in which to situate how that capital-life opposition that Pérez Orozco (2019) talks about works. In this case, unlike *Precarias*, the team is smaller, which facilitates coordination and expressive control. The two co-directors, Tonina Matamala and Carme Gomila, are professionals in the world of audiovisual creation and this is evident in the aesthetic control of the piece, the timing, the script, and the animations.

Finally, these films do not leave aside the emotional suffering or the management of the own family's care; there are references to the family and intimate environment of these women, to the daily management of pain, to the care of their children, and to the absences suffered. In *Hotel Explotación* we can see how some *kellys* take their sons and daughters to the collective meetings in order to be able to organize and fight.

Movies as struggle material

If the features of their way of organizing for labor improvements are reflected in the documentaries, they also feed their struggle. The processual character of these documentaries does not only refer to narratives in constant development with no immediate solution, but also to being part of an action to improve their cohesion, their organization, to become visible and to broaden their social base.

These films make us reflect on representation and the power of the political image, they convey the idea that not just any image or any visibilization works for the collective represented, so it is crucial the collective process of creating a story whose features emanate from its collective character, the type of work of these women, and their mode of organization.

Mémoires d'unes serveuses (Fraj, 2006) was part of a traveling group exhibition (*Dependencias mutuas. Empleadas de hogar y crisis de los cuidados*) through different venues in Spain (Madrid, 2012; Zaragoza, 2011; Vigo, 2011; Vitoria, 2012; Bilbao, 2012; San Sebastián, 2012), and in each installation a series of workshops were coordinated in collaboration with collectives involved in the struggle of care work, so that the exhibition pieces were part of the pedagogical materials.

Organizar lo (im)posible (Matamalas & Gomila, 2017) has been distributed in addition to festivals –it won the award for best short documentary at the Feminist Film Festival in London (2017)– as complementary material in activist conferences and the *Kellys'* platform⁸. The distribution of *Hotel Explotación* was mostly in “a parallel circuit, which allows you to debate” (Cisquella, 2021), to which the *kellys* went to present *our film*, evidencing its collective, agential, and militant nature.

The works analyzed seem to respond to the objective of elaborating a documentary for transformation –although some do so from memory, others from portraiture, and others from the narrative of struggle– they maintain the drive to confer an organizing

8. <https://laskellys.wordpress.com/>

function to the work⁹ and to include (to varying degrees) the participation of the workers in its construction to facilitate the subversion of the productive structures.

CONCLUSIONS

The analyzed works stand as ideological, productive, and aesthetic counterpoints. The first hypothesis proposed that the constructive elements of the films respond to the features of the struggles of domestic workers and hotel maids. Thus, we can affirm that these traits are chorality, collectivity, corporeality, and the inclusion of affective and familiar elements. This nature allows the films to access the material reality of their work and their emotional reality, overcoming both the representations of the submissive, fickle and scarcely autonomous maid –typical of the Spanish film tradition– and those of contemporary commercial cinema which, imbued with classist commiseration, seek to function as an act of contrition while neutralizing women's agency.

The second hypothesis proposed that the construction is characterized by a work on the invisibility/visibility dialectic and by the development of specific strategies of expressive translation of working conditions. As it emerges from the analysis, the cases constitute visibilization, class and feminist narratives constructed in an alternative way both in means of production and distribution, and in their configurations, their voices and their purposes. Visibilization is the fundamental trait of these films which, as has been exposed, oppose invisibility because of the place where the protagonists' work takes place.

The third hypothesis posed the existence of the specifically feminized character of the sector that leaves its mark on aspects of the filmic construction, mainly in the choral organization and in the inclusion of stories of daily, family, and personal life. These works introduce women into a space of representation, making contradictions visible and facilitating their economic and political organizational autonomy, taking them out of that space of reproductive work that de-socializes and isolates them.

9. Incorporating the documentary subjects into the production process is not new. Already in the 1920s, Tretyakov's operativist theories pushed the idea of the author as mere organizer to the limit (Gough, 2006); his ideas influenced Benjamin in the writing of *The Author as Producer* (1999), where he proposed that the political tendency of a work is not enough if it does not possess an organizing function of the struggle to achieve "*decisive difference between the mere supplying of a productive apparatus and its transformation*" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 125), for works and authors are not to supply the apparatus of production without at the same time transforming it.

The filmic features to achieve this visibilization are not only related to their bodies and their struggles, but also to their work, to make the audience experience through the filmic forms the working conditions characterized by low wages, the demand for high productivity in record times and isolation, conditions further aggravated by the consequences of migration policies, and all this is done by the embodiment to their reality from their perspective, challenging the paternalistic and classist representations that characterize the commercial audiovisual.

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