

Mapping a "triple periphery": shifts and continuities in contemporary Spanish documentary filmmaking by women

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Abstract

The documentary macro-genre is one of the areas of cinema where the participation of women professionals has seen significant growth, both globally and locally. This article explores the material, institutional and educational factors that have contributed to the increased presence of women filmmakers in contemporary Spanish documentary, with particular focus on the last decade –a period marked by the revitalisation of the feminist movement in the audiovisual sector. The analysis is organised around three key themes: the impact of digitalisation; the expansion of visibility through cultural spaces, festivals and feminist collectives; and the consolidation of specialised training opportunities. These factors have promoted greater accessibility, autonomy, diversity and recognition within a practice that, paradoxically, has often been regarded as peripheral. Eschewing exceptionalist approaches, this article provides a review of specialised literature, with a specific focus on production, circulation and training conditions that remain relatively underexplored.

Keywords

Cinema, documentary, women, feminism, Spain, crowdfunding, streaming, festivals, collective organising, master's programmes

Resum

El macrogènere documental és un dels espais cinematogràfics on la participació de dones professionals ha experimentat un creixement notable, tant a escala global com local. Aquest article analitza un conjunt de condicions materials, institucionals i educatives que han afavorit l'increment de la presència de cineastes en el documental contemporani a l'Estat espanyol, amb especial atenció als darrers deu anys, marcats per la revitalització del moviment feminista en el sector audiovisual. L'anàlisi s'articula en tres eixos: l'impacte de la digitalització; l'expansió dels circuits de visibilització a través d'espais culturals, festivals i col·lectius feministes, i la consolidació d'una oferta formativa especialitzada. Aquests factors han contribuït a un increment d'accessibilitat, autonomia, diversitat i reconeixement en el si d'una pràctica que, paradoxalment, ha estat sovint considerada perifèrica. Defugint enfocaments excepcionalistes, s'hi proposa un estat de la qüestió basat en la revisió de literatura especialitzada, amb un enfocament específic en les condicions de producció, circulació i formació, encara poc explorades.

Paraules clau

Cinema, documental, dones, feminisme, Estat espanyol, micromecenatge, streaming, festivals, associacionisme, màster

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Introduction: The so-called (misnamed) *eternal pioneers*

Until well into the 1990s, the documentary macro-genre experienced a prolonged "desert crossing" (Cerdán, 2008: 10) in terms of recognition and visibility, often relegated to a subordinate position within Spanish cinema. Yet, by the early years of the 21st century, non-fiction had begun to overcome this barren terrain, experiencing a period of flourishing, gaining international recognition and achieving releases in commercial cinemas (Araüna Baró and Quílez Esteve, 2017). However, this flourishing was sharply curtailed by the 2008 economic crisis, which drastically reduced public subsidies for the audiovisual sector, placing Spain among the Eurozone countries most affected (Kourelou, Liz and Vidal, 2014). As a result, despite the notable achievements of this cinema at the turn of the century, some authors argue that non-fiction remained a practice that was both marginal and "gloriously peripheral" (Cerdán and Torreiro, 2005: 9): marginal in relation to fiction cinema, and peripheral within an industry often marked by economic precariousness (De Pedro and Oroz, 2010). At the same time, academic research on documentary began to gain ground alongside these transformations (Weinrichter, 2004; Torreiro and Cerdán, 2005). Yet this initial body of work paid little attention to the intersection of documentary and gender, despite the long-established links between documentary and feminism in other academic contexts (Walker and Waldman, 1999; Smaill, 2019). Although early studies provided a tentative insight into this flourishing, publications in Spain often omitted the work of women filmmakers or confined it to specific chapters,¹ perpetuating a noticeably skewed historiography of cinema. This androcentric silence has resulted in the under-documentation and under-recognition of many women filmmakers, eclipsing the contributions of pioneering figures who paved the way (for us) (Selva and Solà, 2002; Zecchi, 2014).

Indeed, it would be inaccurate to suggest that women have only recently participated in documentary filmmaking in Spain. Documentaries can be found in the filmographies of pioneering women filmmakers from as early as the 1950s, such as Margarita Alexandre, Ana Mariscal (Selva and Solà, 2023) and Rosina Prado (Cánovas Belchí and Castro Muñoz, 2006; Camí-Vela, 2015; García López and Cavalcanti Tedesco, 2025); and from the 1960s, such as Nadia Werba (Cerdán and Rodríguez García de Herreros, 2024). These figures –brought back into scholarly attention to varying degrees in more recent studies– are part of a broader historiographical recovery movement, which also includes María Forteza, director of *Mallorca* (1932–1934), considered the first sound film made by a woman in Spain, thanks to efforts initiated by the Filmoteca Española (2020). In addition, several studies have moved beyond a sole focus on authorship to examine the forms of cinematic agency

exercised by women during the Franco dictatorship, incorporating multiple perspectives on their active participation within a repressive context. Research has addressed documentary productions by the self-styled *Nationalist* side in the early years of the regime (Oroz, 2014), as well as the use of documentary as a form of resistance against "the re-signification of the feminine imposed by the Regime" (Selva and Solà, 2023: 295). Notable figures in this politically and socially dissident use of documentary include Cecilia Bartolomé, Josefina Molina, Helena Lumberras, Mercè Conesa and Mirentxu Loyarte, who explored themes such as gender-based violence, divorce, contraception, abortion, lesbianism and labour and anti-Franco activism, while also founding and actively participating in various leftist film collectives (García López, 2021). Following in the footsteps of these predecessors, the 1990s saw a significant increase in female directors engaging in documentary filmmaking, with directors such as Eugènia Balcells, Isabel Coixet, Iciar Bollain, Chus Gutiérrez, Ana Díez, Helena Taberna, Patricia Ferreira, Silvia Munt and Cecilia Barriga (Ortega and Pousa, 2017). Until the end of the 20th century, women's presence in Spanish film direction was still widely regarded as an anomaly. The invisibility of many women filmmakers prior to the 1990s can be partly explained by the fact that they did not direct feature-length fiction films, which contributed to their exclusion from dominant historiographical narratives of Spanish cinema (Cerdán and Rodríguez García de Herreros, 2024). Thus, while documentary filmmaking has previously been considered doubly peripheral, female directors occupy a "triply peripheral" position: by their place within the audiovisual ecosystem, by the structural precarity affecting the sector and –most prominently– by their gender. Nevertheless, by the early 2000s, an emerging trend became apparent: the increasing number of female filmmakers, particularly in the documentary sector, which had previously been difficult to quantify (Camí-Vela, 2014; García Fernández and García Alonso, 2015). Historical recovery work shows that women's involvement in documentary cinema extends back to earlier, often invisible periods, while research focused on the early 2000s identifies an initial phase of growth in female participation. More recent studies confirm that, unlike in fiction cinema, the documentary sector in the last decade has a significant proportion of female directors and screenwriters, with sustained growth in their integration into the field (Ortega and Pousa, 2017: 293; Cuenca, 2023). Consequently, as documentary filmmaking has often been linked with periods of social agitation or commitment² (Cerdán, 2003; Guàrdia, 2022), it is important to ask to what extent a specific context has emerged in the last decade that has allowed women filmmakers to find in non-fiction a space for creative expression and social impact.

Indeed, the consolidation of women directors in Spain's public sphere coincides with the revitalisation of the

feminist movement internationally from 2008 onwards (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Watkins, 2018) and, more strikingly, with the surge it experienced in Spain from 2018 following the mass mobilisation of the 8M [8 March] labour and care strike (Campillo, 2019). In this context, the gender gap in the film sector “becomes a recurring topic in the press, is seen as demanding urgent attention and seems omnipresent at film festivals across Spain” (Scholz, 2018: 46). At the same time, various collective initiatives have emerged within the industry, directly challenging gender inequalities (Oroz *et al.*, 2021). As a result, over the past decade the number of women³ leading documentary projects has grown substantially. Building on the groundwork laid by the early pioneers discussed earlier, contemporary women filmmakers have developed their documentaries in a climate shaped by a reinvigorated feminist movement – nationally and internationally – and by advances in rights, support networks and funding mechanisms (White, 2015). This expansion, far from incidental, has been duly recorded and analysed in recent studies. In this regard, it is important to highlight the efforts of numerous researchers in the field of non-fiction cinema who, particularly over the past decade, have contributed to broadening reference points, identifying omissions and revising the canon established by dominant historiographies. Taken together, these studies show that analysing documentary production is crucial for recovering the contributions of women filmmakers, and that incorporating a gender perspective, alongside other intersectional approaches, makes women's documentary a particularly fertile site for research⁴ (Oroz, 2013, 2023; Feenstra, Gimeno Ugalde and Sartingen, 2014; Zurian, 2015, 2017; Araña Baró and Quílez Esteve, 2017; Scholz and Álvarez, 2018; García López, 2021; Quílez Esteve and Araña Baró, 2021, 2024; Selva and Solà, 2022; Fonoll-Tassier, Quílez Esteve and Araña Baró, 2022; Guàrdia, 2022; Ledo, 2022; Rams, 2023).

While categorising women's work can be problematic, gender still operates as a structuring force shaping both access to and continuity within professions such as filmmaking (Oroz *et al.*, 2021). From this standpoint, the aim of this article is to examine the material and contextual factors that have facilitated the growing presence of women –understood here in a plural and self-determined sense– in contemporary Spanish documentary. Moving beyond individualistic readings or narratives of exceptionality, it provides a mapping of the key factors that have driven this rise over the past two decades, with particular attention to the last ten years, during which feminism has had a significant impact on the audiovisual sector. The methodology combines a review of specialised literature on documentary and feminist film theory –with priority given to sources published in Spain– with quantitative data drawn from these publications, from independent sector reports and from direct requests to training institutions. While

representation studies and textual analysis have long been central to gender-based research, this article undertakes a selective exploration of production and circulation – areas still relatively underexamined – with the aim of encouraging further research in this direction (Arranz, 2010; Binimelis-Adell and Espasa Borràs, 2018; Oroz and Binimelis, 2020). Accordingly, the following pages are organised into three interconnected sections. First, they consider the impact of digitalisation on the environments and processes associated with documentary practice –seen as a factor that has, albeit unevenly, facilitated women filmmakers' access to the field. Second, they examine the expansion and diversification of distribution and exhibition circuits, highlighting the role of festivals, specialist screenings and associations in increasing the visibility and circulation of non-fiction works directed by women. Finally, the third section addresses the consolidation of documentary-film training, with particular emphasis on master's degrees and specialist programmes that have helped professionalise new generations of filmmakers –not exclusively women, though their presence in these programmes has been especially significant.

Digital and extraradial technologies

It is widely acknowledged that the digitalisation of recording and editing processes –coinciding with the gradual abandonment of analogue formats– has played a transformative role within documentary filmmaking. Together with the popularisation of the Internet, it has marked a new turning point for the genre (Russell, 1999). Access to more affordable, manageable and lightweight technologies has been a key factor in increasing the participation of women filmmakers –and other minoritised groups– in documentary film. The digital transition, characterised by the reduced cost and democratisation of equipment and editing software, has enabled the proliferation of non-fiction projects with a high degree of autonomy, often driven by one person or by very small teams. This revival of documentary practice has been led by a new generation of filmmakers who, thanks to these new tools, have produced –or self-produced– a large number of films with very limited funding. Indeed, some women documentary filmmakers have established their own production structures⁵ to develop their own work, or that of their colleagues, in order to secure greater control over both the creative and production processes (Oroz *et al.*, 2021). Within this more accessible landscape and supported by technological improvements over recent decades, works have emerged with a strong subjective dimension and an expressive freedom that, in earlier periods, would have been far more difficult to achieve (Quílez Esteve and Araña Baró, 2019). The growth of non-fiction directed by women has therefore brought about a

renewal both in formats and modes of production, and in the discursive strategies of contemporary Spanish cinema. On the one hand, many of these films have explored hybrid languages, experimental formats and collective processes that challenge the formal conventions of traditional documentary (Fonoll-Tassier, 2024). On the other hand, a significant number of these filmmakers have incorporated central issues from the feminist agenda into documentary practice (Fonoll-Tassier, Quílez Esteve and Araña Baró, 2022). This heterogeneity has also been accompanied by the support of various publications and independent online media outlets, which have helped promote interest in, and stimulate debate on, documentary filmmaking by women. Looking back, a key example is the pioneering work of the now-defunct magazine *Blocs&Docs* –active from 2006 to 2016– which was characterised by its firm commitment to "making visible both international audiovisual feminism and the work of women filmmakers within our borders" (Ortega and Pousa, 2017: 303). More recently, *Filmtopia* has emerged as the first website in Spain specialising in cinema made by women which, with the aim of encompassing different fields and professions, "informs, promotes and celebrates the work of women filmmakers of the past, present and future" (Filmtopia, n.d.).

Closely linked to the impact of digital technology and the Internet on the contemporary media landscape, various digital platforms have also expanded the possibilities for producing this type of work. According to Binimelis-Adell and Espasa Borràs, in a study of Spanish women filmmakers' participation on the crowdfunding platform Verkami, digitalisation has enabled the emergence of professional spaces that are more accessible than those offered by the traditional film industry, facilitating the viability of projects that would have struggled to succeed through institutional or commercial channels (2018). Furthermore, with the arrival of online video-sharing services, documentary filmmakers have benefited from new digital circulation spaces that "have revitalised the potential once represented by the video format in filmmaking" (Mayer, 2011: 21). Today, multiple video-on-demand platforms⁶ coexist, ranging from open, participatory services to curated, auteur-focused programming. At an international level, Vimeo, Docsville, Tènk and Mubi are particularly notable; within Spain, platforms such as Filmin, Movistar Plus+, HAMACA and PLAT stand out; and regarding initiatives specifically aimed at promoting women's cinema, Mujeres de Cine VOD is especially prominent, seeking to enhance access and visibility both nationally and internationally. Thus, while digitalisation has made it possible to realise projects that previously had little chance of production and opened alternatives to screening in cinemas (Kourelou, Liz and Vidal, 2014), crowdfunding cannot be considered a genuine alternative to the film industry (Binimelis-Adell and Espasa Borràs, 2018). Likewise, the hegemonies established within streaming platforms

have not necessarily led to transformations oriented towards gender equality (Izquierdo-Castillo and Latorre-Lázaro, 2021). As a result, longstanding asymmetries within the industry persist, and Spanish non-fiction remains a male-dominated sector, in which women manage budgets around 6% lower than those of documentaries directed by their male counterparts (Cuenca, 2023) –a reality that, according to Quílez Esteve and Araña Baró (2024), must be problematised, as it directly links women's work to precarity and lack of recognition. Nevertheless, with more accessible technologies and the emergence of certain independent media and online platforms, women filmmakers have claimed a space for expression that, until relatively recently, was far more restricted, contributing to the discursive and formal revitalisation of the documentary genre.

Deterritorialising dissemination: hybrids between old and new channels

Faced with the growth in production brought about by the democratisation of digital media, one of the main challenges facing contemporary documentary female filmmakers is the need to sustain existing dissemination channels while also identifying new ones –beyond the digital platforms already mentioned. In this context, a significant number of female creators have contributed to the deterritorialisation of documentary practice through mobility expressed in the multiple circulation of their works (Ortega and Pousa, 2017). This process has involved a range of agents –including museum spaces, film festivals and associations– which have expanded the "channels of dissemination and encounter with increasingly segmented audiences" (Araña Baró and Quílez Esteve, 2018: 430).

Perhaps because video was accepted earlier in artistic contexts than within cinema institutions, women filmmakers have found alternative distribution and exhibition circuits in museum spaces and environments aligned with contemporary art. Across Spain, museums, film archives, cultural centres, distributors and independent associations of diverse kinds⁷ have hosted and supported emerging documentary female filmmakers –including, though not limited to, some of those discussed here– through their processes of experimentation, creation and dissemination of their works. This support has taken the form of curated programmes, artistic residencies and even forums for critical reflection. Illustrative examples include the trajectories of filmmakers such as Sally Gutiérrez Dewar, Virginia García del Pino and María Ruido, whose practices move between essay film and contemporary art and whose work is regularly shown in venues of this kind; the laboratory for new audiovisual formats *Soy Cámara*, produced by the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona and coordinated by Íngrid Guardiola between 2015 and 2020; and the recent *Residencias Joaquim Jordà*, promoted by

the Museo Reina Sofia in collaboration with the Marseille and Lisbon film festivals, to name just a few. As Oroz points out, contemporary independent documentary with feminist affiliations has found refuge and broader dissemination in what she terms “hybrid” channels (2018: 108). By blurring the boundaries between cinema, art and critique, these channels have become key agents in projecting the careers of these female filmmakers while also fostering synergies and networks of collaboration among them.

Likewise, over the past two decades, documentary film festivals –as well as festivals devoted to genres traditionally considered minor, such as animation, short films and experimental cinema, and those focusing on themes related to diverse identities such as gender or nationality– have “experienced unprecedented growth” (Vallejo, 2020: 77) across Spain. For example, the long-established Zinebi in Bilbao and the Punto de Vista Festival in Pamplona, active since 2005, have rekindled interest in and programming for this practice from the Basque Country. Indeed, at its seventh edition, Punto de Vista organised a retrospective on feminist documentary cinema, which later became a landmark book on the intersections between gender and non-fiction, edited by Mayer and Oroz (2011). Similarly, DocumentaMadrid and the Alcances Documentary Film Festival in Cádiz have this year celebrated their 27th and 19th editions respectively, while DocsBarcelona has reached adulthood, despite having existed as a professional market since 1997. In parallel, since the early 2000s, the Málaga Film Festival has promoted a series of encounters through its Málaga DOCS section “in which academics, filmmakers, programmers and students have come together to debate the state of cinema of the real from different perspectives” (Torreiro and Alvarado, 2023: 14). It is no coincidence that many publications devoted to Spanish or Ibero-American documentary cinema have emerged from this context (Viveiros and Català, 2010). At the same time, women’s film festivals have played a key promotional role, incorporating non-fiction, experimental cinema and short formats into their programmes, while also highlighting the work of women filmmakers in these fields. This is the case of the *Mostra de Cine y Mujeres* in Pamplona and the *Mostra Internacional de Films de Dones* in Barcelona, founded in 1987 and 1993 respectively, as well as more recent initiatives such as the Madrid International Films by Women Festival, launched in 2018; alongside other competitions, festivals and showcases that are part of TRAMA, the Coordinating Network of Film, Video and Multimedia Festivals Made by Women, created in 2002 (Oroz *et al.*, 2021: 13). Although some authors have argued that creating parallel circuits –such as festivals specialising in films made by women or with a gender perspective– could generate a potentially harmful divide (García Fernández and García Alonso, 2015), their existence cannot be interpreted as a setback

or an exclusionary measure. On the contrary, far from representing regression, or suggesting that specialised film festivals should be the only destination for films directed by women, these platforms have been –and continue to be– beneficial not only for female filmmakers, but also for the film industry, which values the discovery of new talent, and for audiences seeking alternative narratives and perspectives (Paris, 2015). Although one might argue that there is no direct causal link between this growth of visibility platforms and the sustained increase of the presence of women in the documentary field, the consolidation and expansion of exhibition opportunities across the country has inevitably opened up new avenues for a diverse range of participants, including emerging women creators. However, for these channels to genuinely foster equity and professional development, coherent, long-term policies need to be established within the broader cinematic ecosystem (Verde, 2022).

In this context, the role of women filmmakers’ associations is crucial for understanding the logic and circumstances behind the numerical growth and increased visibility of women in the sector. In 2006, the association CIMA⁸ – *Asociación de Mujeres Cineastas y de Medios Audiovisuales* [Association of Women Filmmakers and Audiovisual Media]– was established in Spain, creating a platform of advocacy to address the need for equal representation of women within the industry (Paris, 2010). Since then, CIMA and other associations that have emerged more recently across the Iberian Peninsula⁹ have put forward a range of demands and become main points of contact with national and regional film institutions (Oroz *et al.*, 2021). The work of these associations, while encompassing far more than documentary practice alone –through the preparation of reports or codes of good practice, the creation of professional directories, the organisation of industry events and the establishment of laboratories and mentorship programmes– has been vital in addressing the quantitative imbalances outlined earlier in this article. In this regard, associations such as CIMA have acted as lobbyists to ensure that Law 55/2007 on Cinema¹⁰ regulates matters relating to gender inequality, overseeing women’s participation and promoting parity in teams when applying for ICAA (*Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Visuales* [Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts]) grants. Nevertheless, some sectors consider these legislative measures to be of limited effectiveness (Binimelis-Adell and Espasa Borràs, 2018). Indeed, as Jara Fernández Meneses points out in her analysis of public cinema policies in Spain from a gender perspective, the increase in women’s presence within the film sector cannot be attributed solely to recent legislative actions, but largely reflects internal dynamics within the industry itself (2025). Consistent with this, all evidence suggests that the formation of a hybrid network –comprising cultural and/or museum spaces, film

festivals and associative collectives— has had a positive, and perhaps even more decisive, impact than legislation in promoting and advancing the careers of contemporary women documentary filmmakers within the Spanish film circuit.

Teaching the reality of gender parity

Non-fiction cinema would not have gained momentum without the development and implementation of higher education programmes at certain universities. In the early 1990s in Galicia, the first significant initiative emerged, led by film theorist and documentary maker Margarita Ledo, who was responsible for “carrying out the first documentary film programmes at the University of Santiago” (García Puente and K. Hogan, 2022: 130). Later, in Barcelona, similar paths were followed through the documentary classrooms and master’s programmes at the Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). Studies indicate that these programmes have been a driving force for many contemporary women filmmakers, helping to establish Barcelona as a distinctive hub for learning, knowledge transmission, production and reflection on non-fiction cinema (Torreiro, 2010). This environment has also nurtured and facilitated the emergence of women in documentary production in Catalonia (Merino, 2023). Over the past decade, training programmes in documentary cinema¹¹ have grown exponentially across a variety of formal and informal settings. They have innovated in format —on-site, online, intensive or long-term— and in access conditions, ranging from free courses to master’s programmes with high tuition fees. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the existence of these new opportunities —and the access they provide to documentary practice for individuals from non-specialised backgrounds or without formal training— this text focuses on the two master’s programmes with the longest-standing trajectory nationally, due to their sustained educational impact and the availability of comparable data over time.

Several nationwide studies have highlighted a significant imbalance between the composition of the audiovisual sector and the gender distribution among students at leading film schools, as well as in university-level Audiovisual Communication programmes (Scholz, 2018; Izquierdo-Castillo and Latorre-Lázaro, 2021; Jirari Kouaihi *et al.*, 2025). According to empirical data collected for this article, female participation in the Master’s in Creative Documentary at UPF has been both significant and sustained over the past fourteen editions,¹² resulting in an overall average of approximately 50.4% —a figure that indicates gender parity in access to training. The UPF programme has produced notable non-fiction female professionals, including: director Mercedes Álvarez, whose documentary *El cielo gira* (*The Sky Turns*, 2004) won the Tiger

Award at the Rotterdam Film Festival and the top prize at Cinéma du Réel in Paris, among other accolades; Ariadna Pujol, awarded the Audience Award for Best Documentary at the Málaga Festival for *Aguaviva* (2006); sound designer Amanda Villavieja, with an extensive filmography from 2001 to the present; producer Marta Andreu, who produced *108 cuchillo de palo* (2010), directed by Paraguayan filmmaker Renate Costa —also trained in the master’s programme— which premiered at the Berlinale; and screenwriter Laia Manresa, who made her directorial debut with *Morir de día* (2010) alongside editor Sergi Dies, and whose most recent work is *Casa Reynal* (2023). In the second decade of the 2000s, a new generation of women filmmakers emerged from the programme, including former students Neus Ballús, who won four Gaudí Awards for *La plaga* (2010); Eva Vila and Laura Herrero, whose films *Bajari* (*Bajari: Gypsy Barcelona*, 2013) and *La mami* (2019) were screened at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), one of the world’s leading documentary festivals; Pilar Monsell, who premiered *Africa 815* (2014) at DocLisboa and won an award at Festival Márgenes; Sofia Esteve, Isa Luengo and Marina Freixa Roca, whose short film *Els buits* (2024) received the Silver Biznaga for Best Short Film at both the Málaga Festival and Alcances in Cádiz; and Celia Viada and Elena Molina, who premiered *Volver a casa tan tarde* (2025), produced by the Punto de Vista Festival, and *Flores para Antonio* (2025), co-directed with Isaki Lacuesta, respectively.

The pattern observed in the UPF master’s programme is mirrored in the Master’s in Theory and Practice of Creative Documentary at the UAB, which also shows a significant and consistent female presence over the first two decades of the 2000s,¹³ with student numbers ranging from 50% to 65%. This indicates a gender balance, and in many cohorts even a female majority. Among the female professionals trained in the early years of the UAB programme are filmmakers such as Virginia García del Pino, who began with the short film *Lo que tú dices que soy* (2007) and premiered her first feature, *Basilio Martín Patino. La décima carta* (2014), at the San Sebastián International Film Festival; Alejandra Molina, who won Best Documentary at the Alcances Festival in Cádiz for *No tiene sentido... estar haciendo así todo el rato sin sentido* (2007); and Carolina Astudillo, whose *De monstruos y faldas* (2009) screened at festivals worldwide —from France to Taiwan, including Chile— and ultimately won Best Experimental Documentary at the Female Eye Film Festival in Toronto. In the more recent cohorts of the UAB Master’s, notable graduates include María Zafra, director of *Memorias, norias y fábricas de lejía* (2011) and current director of the Mostra Internacional de Films de Dones in Barcelona; Núria Araña Baró, now a leading researcher in feminist non-fiction and related fields; documentary filmmaker and editor Nila Núñez, whose debut feature from the programme, *Lo que dirán* (2017), was selected for the

International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) and won Best Film at the Gijón International Film Festival; and Ulrika Andersson, Marta Codesido, Núria Ubach and Dubi Cano, whose *Les més grans* (2023) won the Silver Biznaga Audience Award for Best Short Documentary at the Málaga Film Festival.

The data and cases presented here show that, at least in the educational sphere, women's participation in documentary filmmaking is far from marginal. It forms part of a sustained dynamic of interest and engagement, highlighted by the generational continuity of women filmmakers trained in these programmes. At the same time, they reveal a persistent gap between education and professional practice –a phenomenon already noted at other levels of study or specialisation. This disconnect is often due to systemic or structural biases, and to the challenges women face in sustaining professional careers, which are unrelated to training, vocation or even recognition (Scholz, 2018). Indeed, as Ortega and Pousa note, some films directed by women who have been, or are, students of these programmes “have significantly contributed to shaping new languages and consolidating the field of non-fiction through the circulation and recognition of their works in national and international festivals” (2017: 297). In summary, while the impact of these specific educational programmes has yet to produce a full structural transformation in the documentary sector, their consolidation and outcomes can be seen as a catalyst for the evolution of the field. These programmes have created gender-balanced learning environments that promote access and critical reflection, encourage the emergence of new voices and career trajectories in documentary filmmaking, and, importantly, provide a record for current and future research.

Conclusions: a cinema par excellence

In the current phase of maturity in Spanish documentary cinema, following the boom almost two decades ago (Torreiro and Alvarado, 2023), the role of women filmmakers has been –and remains– essential. Although most of these documentaries do not generate substantial economic returns, sell out or attract major media recognition, their contributions –which range from formal to discursive matters– constitute an intangible value for Spanish cinema. The “triple peripheral” position of both pioneering and contemporary women documentary filmmakers is, however, the source of their paradoxical strength: compelled to challenge the margins, they have simultaneously helped to redefine them and created alternatives. As this article has sought to map, non-fiction cinema directed by women over the past two decades –particularly in the most recent years– revolves around three interconnected currents: the evolution and gradual expansion of digital cinema, a

deterritorialised rhizomatic circuit and the consolidation of multiple educational pathways. With varying degrees of intensity, concerns and opportunities –yet all moving in the same direction and producing tangible outcomes– these factors and drivers have contributed to supporting and advancing documentary filmmaking by women. As Selva and Solà argued more than twenty years ago, this is not merely a loose collection of categories, but cinema par excellence (2002). Ultimately, the study of this phenomenon cannot be confined to bibliographic reviews or quantitative indicators. It requires sustained qualitative research over time, enabling a more precise understanding of the material and symbolic factors that facilitate –or impede– the participation of women and other underrepresented groups in the cinema of the real.

End note

This research has received the award in the open category of the 36th CAC Awards for research in audiovisual communication.

Notes

1. For example, in his book *Desvío de lo real. El cine de no ficción* (2004), Weinrichter lists numerous Spanish filmmakers, yet the work of an individual woman filmmaker is not mentioned until the very last page, in this case the Basque director Helena Taberna. Similarly, in *Documental y vanguardia* (2005) and *Al otro lado de la ficción: Trece documentalistas españoles contemporáneos* (2007), both edited by Torreiro and Cerdán, either only a single –and pioneering– chapter considers documentary cinema from a feminist perspective (Selva, 2005), or just two of the thirteen included texts engage with the work of filmmakers Mercedes Álvarez and Margarita Ledo.
2. Particularly during the Second Republic and the final years of the Transition, as well as in response to various environmental and colonial conflicts stemming from the globalising tendencies of the contemporary era (Fonoll-Tassier, 2024).
3. While it would be appropriate to mention many more women filmmakers, space constraints in this article require us to focus on a representative and concise selection: María Ruido, Carolina Astudillo, Virginia García del Pino, Carla Subirana, Mercedes Álvarez, Ariadna Pujol, Alba Sotorra, María Cañas, Neus Ballús, Anna Giral, Nila Núñez, Diana Toucedo, Laia Manresa, Pilar Monsell, Núria Giménez Lorang, Marta Romero, Maddi Barber, Raquel Marques and Patricia Franquesa, some of whom are discussed as case studies throughout the text.
4. Although the broader landscape is far more extensive, the length of this article does not permit a detailed examination of all initiatives, so only a limited sample is included.
5. This applies to female filmmakers and producers such as Neus Ballús, Isa Campo, Tania Balló and Alba Sotorra, among others.
6. While platforms such as Netflix, HBO and Amazon Prime have played a major role in popularising documentaries and docuseries –such as the true crime boom or celebrity-focused titles– they are not discussed in the main text, given the significant differences from the type of non-fiction content analysed here.
7. In Spain, many of these venues are concentrated in the Basque Country, Galicia, Madrid and Barcelona. Examples include the Centro-Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporáneo in Vitoria-Gasteiz (Artium); the Centro Internacional de Cultura Contemporánea Tabakalera in San Sebastián; the worker cooperative Numax in Santiago de Compostela; La Casa Encendida, the Museo Reina Sofía and the Centro de Creación Contemporánea Matadero in Madrid; and in Barcelona, the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB), the Centre de Producció i Recerca Artística Hamaca and the Centre de Cultura de Dones Francesca Bonnemaison (LaBonne), to name just a few.
8. CIMA was founded in 2006 and, since 2015, has produced an annual report which, according to its founders, aims to tackle gender inequality in the film industry and in Spanish public funding (CIMA, undated).
9. In recent years, several associations have been established to promote the visibility and equality of women professionals in the film sector across Catalonia, Andalusia, Murcia, the Valencian Community and the Basque Country, including Dones Visuals, Asociación Andaluza de Mujeres de los Medios Audiovisuales, Asociación de Mujeres Audiovisuales de Murcia, Dona i Cinema, Hemen and Mujeres en la Industria de la Animación (MIA). CIMA also maintains seven regional branches in Andalusia, the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands, Catalonia, Galicia, Navarra and Valencia.
10. At present, Law 55/2007 of 28 December is still in effect, although a new legislative proposal –the Cinema and Visual Culture Act– is under review, intended to align with evolving audiovisual production and consumption habits (Castellví, 2025: 157).
11. Examples include the master’s programmes at the Escola Superior de Cinema i Audiovisuals de Catalunya (ESCAC) in Barcelona, or the Diploma in Documentary Film at ECAM and the master’s programmes offered by Universidad Carlos III in Madrid. There are also specialised courses and workshops at the Escola Libre Date Cuenta and the Centre de Cultura de Dones Francesca Bonnemaison. The latter recently launched “9 mesos” [9 Months], a feminist writing lab for documentary projects led by screenwriter and director Laia Manresa. This lab aims to support work-life balance in the profession and is notable for being free, while also providing a care space for participants with dependents.
12. The data were kindly compiled and shared by Eva Vila, filmmaker and director of the Master’s in Creative Documentary at the Pompeu Fabra University, and we are grateful for her collaboration.
13. The figures were generously provided by Virginia Luzón, director of the Master’s in Theory and Practice of Creative Documentary, and Jorge Tur, filmmaker and coordinator of the same programme, and we sincerely thank them for their cooperation.

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