

In praise of distance, The documentary's vision

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When you go to photograph a documentary in the mountains, with hidden nooks, full of fog and ancestral traditions that still survive today alongside modern achievements, the elderly that guard places, the young ones that stayed behind, others that left and came back, some that came and stayed, where does one stand to look in order to capture all of this? What attitude must one adopt to be able to see and then film it all?



The distance that envelops us during the shooting is not just that of the great, open spaces, mountains that disappear behind mountains that climb along winding paths, but also the distance in time that leads us to ancient blacksmiths', fountains and paths trod in other eras, trades that come from ancient times, religious devotion and pilgrimages that fill the valleys with saints. When you take more than just your eye, or another one, like the camera's eye, it should let itself be seen by the distances, let itself be enveloped by what is seen and heard: the echo of animals, machine and men continuously repeating themselves throughout the journey. From the car that transports us, we see the landscape passing by, where do we stop and place the camera? Why here and not over there? It is true that composition is fundamental when configuring a significant image, but in this case, it seems like you expect the composition to trap you instead of you conditioning it; not search for it, but be attentive to its call; live with your sight ready to capture the instant, as pointed out by Henri Cartier-Bresson. And for the instant to happen, how do you place yourself so as to not alter the natural course of events? Can the course of events even be altered so that it appears in its true nature? In what way?



In this documentary, the instant appears with the attitude one expects to have in a certain place, be it a landscape, a forge or a workshop that makes instruments. That state demands silence and humility from which reality shows itself and jumps into the camera. It is the detailed attention to small objects, in dark corners, in barely perceptible sounds. You have to let yourself be enveloped by the things that appear on the horizon, wait patiently for it to reveal itself and then press the record button.

Try to imbue each image with the punctum that Roland Barthes spoke about, that which makes the shot acquire the necessary density, the exact spot in the edit, that which leads the spectator to evoke the distant, the far-away, what was left behind in time.

One diligently seeks that state, that place, that time, only later to become a vehicle for the visible, a transmitter, a soundbox for the very echo of the mountains, of the people that live in them. This state arises from silence and attention, not from that which surrounds me but from what surrounds the object or subject I photograph. What passes before the camera is the entrance to a foreign world, and there, even though it is strange, one accepts it, because from a corner, one sees how distance is built on faces and places. Everything one does has to help create, develop and maintain that attitude, even when you're done shooting, in the hotel, one hopes to still be in a place from where to look, with music, readings, conversations, long silences and dreams.



How to photograph beautiful landscapes so that they retain their significance and lose all of that postcard quality so easily acquired? Or, to use Roland Barthes' words, how can you make pictures of landscapes inhabitable and not just tourist attractions? Only from the other's perspective, those who live there, can you see and capture the landscape as they see it.

I was able to see that the people that live there feel the beauty of their land and that feeling is not at all like those of us who arrive there and see big valleys and mountains easily turned into digital postcards. You have to listen to the people that live in the places you photograph and not just what they say; and also how they relate to those places, places that send them to their childhoods-distance- to the memory of those that shared the mountains with them, the cold winters and the colors of the springtime.

As a photographer, one attentively awaits the details, the gestures, the words. But, in my case, that attention doesn't spring from my will but from an act of impregnation. And if the instant is visible, then the camera places itself and naturally finds its place.

Sometimes one places oneself with the camera in the cracks of reality, but at other times I've been able to verify that a well-directed intervention teaches more than what is hidden, especially in a place like this one where cameras are not common. The director and the cinematographer's skill in knowing when to wait or intervene end up entering the world we are shown. There are no rules, one must simply wait in that humble pose, waiting and understanding, to decide what road to follow. There are many things about the people that live in these places that are told through objects used in everyday life: a knife, a coffee pot, some rope, a pulley. You have to capture the meaning these objects have for their owners from the framing and the lighting. The lighting appears in its own being in each object; you don't need to light more and if you do it ought to be the lighting that the object demands. Objects have found their place in the world throughout the ages and this has to be respected; a way has to be found so that the camera can see without the need to imitate, change or destroy.

The camera in the modern world constitutes itself as the scissors that cut and re-cut reality into many pieces, instead of acting as a scalpel that precisely opens reality at a specific point to reveal its truth. It's enough to see how people jump out to record everything with their video cameras, absolutely everything that passes in front of them. The camera thus loses its ability to unravel the moments of each place and time. The documentary requires the elimination of this anxious and desperate effect of the camera.



When you first arrive in the mountains, you feel that impulse for the scissor effect; you have to stop and rest, be watchful, to know what the camera has to see. Only deep knowledge of the photographic technique, which includes the “mechanical” knowledge of the camera and post-production processes, lets you record that distance– time. To evoke that distance, the image has to be constructed without noise, without exaggeration. As Felipe Vega, the director, pointed out to me wide-angle lenses do not evoke our distances. There is something false in the vanishing points and the vertical line distortions. It is precisely the wide-angle lens with its capacity to see more space that destroys distance; to create it you need a telephoto lens. If technique reveals itself as important with objects and their being in time, it is no less important when it comes to seeing the faces of those that live with them. The face, that place that reveals all distances, ought to be filmed as part of the surroundings and vice-versa. To see the tools, the objects that surround them, reflected in their faces, and the shape that use has given the tools with the passage of time; you have to get to that place where the face begins: the eloquent silence of the passage of time. There could be something immoral in filming the faces of the people that inhabit these valleys if when you do it you don’t allow yourself to be looked at by them, with their distrust, doubts and reservations. Somehow, you have to allow them to be the ones that film themselves, even without knowing it. That it be them that guide you through their faces, their hands, the ones that carry you with their silence and brief words.



When I approach a place where I’m going to film a peasant doing something, first I look at what he’s doing, how he moves, the space that surrounds him and how he feels in it, and I have to find the way, with the camera, to become his space so that the camera can see the truth, and he can perceive me, not as a strange element in a common place for him, but as something that could be an everyday

thing for him. Impossible? I don’t know; what I do know is that we were very close to it many times and we were able to see it in the images later on.

Just as objects have found their place after many years, people have found their place and relation with places. You have to be scrupulous and respect that relation and not just arrive and place people in places that are convenient to the camera. No. The camera ought to find a spot in the place that belongs to the objects and the person that uses them and relates to them; and the camera, though a new object in the place, must manage to be as if it had always been there. It might take a long time to achieve this, depending on the places and the people that move in them, but it can be achieved if one looks with patience and listens to everything that presents itself with humility. One mustn’t make oneself invisible with the camera or hide or deceive anyone. The documentary requires honesty from those who make it, there with a camera and a microphone, they are our tools and they have to be inserted naturally into the life we want to retain with images. You don’t have to disappear; you have to become part of the very reality you want to photograph.

In Praise of Distance

Produced by: Bren Entertainment S.A.

Directed by: Felipe Vega

Screenplay: Julio Llamazares and Felipe Vega

Photography: Alfonso Parra AEC

Sound: Eva Valiño

Editor: Ángel Hernández

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