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## The Way We Live Now: Carlos Saura's *Deprisa, deprisa* and the Documentary Mode

Julie Jones

*University of New Orleans*, [jjones1@uno.edu](mailto:jjones1@uno.edu)

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Julie Jones  
University of New Orleans  
jjones1@uno.edu  
504-280-6931 (ph)  
504-280-6965 (fax)

The Way of Live Now:

Carlos Saura's ¡Deprisa, deprisa! and the Documentary Mode

Carlos Saura's Deprisa, deprisa [Hurry, Hurry], shot in 1980, was part of a run of "cops and robbers" films responding to the crime wave that had begun in the early 1970s and accelerated in the years following Franco's death. The film is notable for its effort to represent Spanish actuality at a very specific point. In contemporary interviews, Saura underscores his efforts to treat the material with veracity. Both reviewers and critics, as well as Saura himself, who had started his career with the nonfiction Cuenca (1958), have referred to the film's documentary dimension. However, no one has studied in detail the extent to which the film aligns itself with documentary practices. This is what I intend to do in the following pages, not with the idea of "proving" that Deprisa, deprisa is--or isn't--a documentary, but rather to show the use Saura makes of documentary techniques in order to bear witness to what was for Spain in 1980 a new reality.

Saura's interest in juvenile delinquency wasn't new. He claims that he had always kept a file of clippings on the subject (D'Lugo 163), and Los golfos ([Hooligans], 1959), his

first feature film, concerns a group of small-time hoodlums. By the late 1970s, the crime rate in Spain had skyrocketed, particularly in the metropolitan areas and particularly involving teenagers. This rise was fueled by a combination of extremely high rates of inflation (24% in 1977) and unemployment, especially among the young and undereducated, combined with the high expectations created by the advent of democracy and the consolidation of a consumer society. The growing use of illegal drugs also played a part. Finally, the take-off of the banking sector, which was opening branches at a dizzying rate in an effort to lure new customers, provided thugs with an easy target in the form of small banks with limited staffs and inadequate protection.

The newspapers were full of crime stories: "Almost thirty bank robberies in Madrid in August" ("Casi treinta"); "In eleven years the number of bank robberies has multiplied by eighty" ("En once años"); "Jewelry stores and banks targeted by robbers" (Iglesias); "Four bank robberies in five hours" ("Ayer por la mañana"); "Branches of the Caja de Ahorros, robbed four times in four days" ("Cuatro atracos en sus días"); "Six million pesetas in three bank robberies" ("Seis millones"); "Tuesdays and Fridays, the best days for robbing a bank" ("Viernes y martes") and so on.

Crime was a hot topic, then, in the late '70s, and filmmakers responded with a series of what were called "knife dramas"--starting with Perros callejeros [Stray Dogs] in 1977 (D. José Antonio de la Loma)--although by this time criminals

were usually armed with more than knives. Francisco Querejeta, the brother of Saura's producer Elías, had the idea of making a documentary series on suburban youth gangs to be called Marginados [Outsiders]. The series was never realized, but Francisco's extensive filming meant that he was in a position to introduce Saura to that world and the kids who populated it. It was an opportune moment for Saura to return to a topic that had assumed very different dimensions since Los golfos. He made Deprisa, deprisa as much to understand this new phenomenon, as to take advantage of a trend. Later he would describe it as an ideal shoot, because it provided him with a new sort of knowledge (Saura 57).

First-hand knowledge is important to any documentary, and critical in a film that would use nonprofessional actors and take place largely on site, as is the case with Deprisa, deprisa. Saura admits that when he decided on the project, "I didn't know how those people talked, who they were, or how they acted" (qtd. in Sánchez-Vidal 146). Querejeta took him to the working-class suburbs in the industrial belt that rings Madrid and introduced him to the kind of young people who figured in the headlines. In interviews, Saura makes a point of the amount of time he spent visiting neighborhoods, looking for actors, trying to find kids from the same micro-environment, and then revising the script with them. "It seemed fundamental to me," he commented, "to capture their language.... there are very few words in the film that are from the original script" (qtd. in Alberich 66). And it is the music they actually played--los

Chichos, los Chunquitos, el Fari--, used both intra- and extra-diegetically, that gives the film much of its energy and excitement.<sup>2</sup>

For Saura, and for most of his audience as well, the environment that produced these kids was terra incognita, a product itself of the recent changes in Spanish life. "It was surprising," he writes, "how little I knew a city in which I had spent the better part of my life, for the changes that had taken place during the last few years had completely modified its structure" (qtd. in D'Lugo 164). Deprisa takes place primarily in the bleak suburbs that lie to the south of Madrid, including older working-class neighborhoods, but also new "satellite cities." These isolated urbanizations, comprised of cheap, new constructions with few conveniences, replaced the old shanties of the 50s and 60s, but they themselves soon became known as "vertical shanties" (Molinero and Ysàs 205). In the film, Angela buys an apartment in one of these blocks, its only view limited to the train tracks. A long article on the Usera District published in El País in 1979 refers to the prevalence of armed gangs of children in the area. It quotes the police chief, who points out that there are almost no schools in the district and who blames many of the problems on "insufficient education and the district's urbanistic and social shortcomings ("Usera, periferia sur" 2). In Saura's film, the camera focuses equally on the young toughs and the scene, linked together other in a dangerous symbiosis.

Deprisa documents the transformation of Madrid--and by extension other metropoli--at a critical point in Spanish history, and if it makes a great effort to be truthful to that reality, it does so without the editorialization that so often accompanies documentary. Missing--or almost missing, a point to which I shall return--is the "voice of god" commentary and the rhetorical framework common to much, but certainly not all, documentary. Missing, too, is the problem-solution structure characteristic, again, of much documentary. Here we are presented with a serious social problem, but no apparent solution. Missing, finally, is the distance between observer and observed that declares the filmmaker's objective stance. Instead, the camera situates us repeatedly on the side of the delinquents, who evoke a complicated mixture of revulsion and empathy on the part of the audience.<sup>3</sup>

This position, which eschews commentary and which involves sympathetic observation on the part of the filmmaker, positions Deprisa closer to those observational documentaries--often used as aids to ethnography--that involve what Bill Nichols calls "an empathetic, nonjudgmental, participatory mode of observation that attenuates the authoritative posture of traditional exposition" (42). Documentaries of this type record real time and, although they may include epiphanic moments, they rely on empty stretches that convey the texture of routine (Nichols 40). Certainly this is the impression left by many of the scenes in Deprisa, which show us how the characters live, but do little to advance the story.

There is, however, an important difference between Deprisa and the observational documentary: the script. Saura had a screenplay written before Querejeta ever took him to the suburbs. He revised the dialog and the individual scenes extensively with the nonprofessional cast in order to transmit their particular idiom and their modus operandi, but, although he changed the screenplay, he never abandoned it, and the story line survived intact. What we see in the film is staged and rehearsed.

Because of this degree of intervention, Saura himself argues that Deprisa "is primarily a fiction film," but then adds, "I don't think that anything I've ever seen on film is pure documentary, and maybe not even what I've seen in my life. When you manipulate the material, it stops being a documentary..." (qtd. in Alberich 68). By this definition the nonfiction film doesn't exist. In fact, as Saura himself certainly realized, documentary convention allows for considerable manipulation, not only in the way facts are handled, but also--this was especially true in the early days before the advent of a portable synchronous sound apparatus--in the use of so-called "reconstructions" involving both actual and hypothetical events.

Narrative always plays a role in the documentary film, but many commentators argue that rhetoric takes precedence. Nichols insists that documentary is an argument about the real, not a representation of reality (Representing 169), and Steven Lipkin suggests that subject trumps story, even when re-creation is

used (x). Brian Winston, however, points out that although this is generally the case in documentary, the number of exceptions make clear that it's not the rule (253). William Guynn argues that "what distinguishes documentary from fiction film is not the simple presence or absence of narrative," since all documentaries rely to some extent on narrative (154). He adds that "certain documentaries closely resemble the fiction film in that they deploy its basic signifying structures" (154). Carl Platanga insists that, considering the critical role of reenactment in early documentary practice, there's no single formal quality that determines a film's status, but rather the context in which it is presented (38). Nichols himself acknowledges that the difference between fiction film and documentary lies not in the formal elements, but in "what we make of the documentary's representation of the evidence it presents" (125). Winston concludes simply that the difference between the two lies "in the mind of the audience" (253).

The line between documentary and fiction film is, then, blurred at best. Although the docudrama might appear to be a tempting category for "borderline" films, the genre is characterized by a movement toward recuperation very foreign to Deprisa, which leaves the audience with a marked sense of uneasiness (Lipkin 44, 46). As we have seen, Saura did not describe his film as a documentary, nor did he provide it with the sort of insitutional credentials that, according to Nichols, help an audience situate a film as such, but he did insist repeatedly in interviews on his efforts to make Deprisa



accurate, and he relied heavily on documentary-related methods and techniques to give the film its remarkable sense of immediacy.

The most obvious measures are Saura's use of location shots and of nonprofessional actors. He shot the film almost entirely around Villaverde Alto, the suburb that was home to most of the actors. Setting is important: the ugly blocks of apartments, the expressways and the train, the factories, the ruined countryside. The camera focuses on things almost as attentively as on people.

But, of course, the surroundings are important because they somehow explain the people. Instead of using a random sample, Saura chose the cast carefully, not only for appearance and ability, but also with the idea of gathering friends who would feel comfortable with each other on screen and who shared the same argot (qtd. in D'Lugo 164). The language itself is particularly important. As we've seen, Saura worked with the actors to fit the dialog to their patterns of speech, and the scenes to their patterns of behavior (in D'Lugo 164). He used a video camera to test potential actors and to record their language, and while actually filming, used a video camera synchronized with the film camera. New to Saura at the time, this method allowed him to check the takes immediately and to change them on the spot, providing for a much greater degree of flexibility.

The use of a nonprofessional cast is critical to the film, not only because the actors were a source of information and

because they fit--virtually created--their roles, but also because the presence of unfamiliar figures on screen creates an impression of credibility, which is reinforced here by the understated performances. Instead of asking his cast to perform, Saura contemplates them in long close-ups as though hoping that somehow the camera will discover what lies within. The flat dialogs are equally understated and totally convincing. Pablo and Angela plight their troth, for example, in these words:

Pablo: "I want you to live with me."

Angela: "Okay."

This brutally realistic dialog undercuts the melodramatic potential of the material, as too do the transitions between scenes and the structure of individual scenes.

The transitions are functional but not overly smooth since prompts, like dialog hooks and establishing shots, are kept to a minimum. Sound bridges keep the film moving, but don't really fill the audience in, and when there is an establishing shot, it often does little to situate the viewer because it features yet another anonymous view of the wasteland the kids inhabit. All this gives the film an ad hoc quality and breaks up the "packaged" feel of strict continuity editing.

The structure of individual scenes contributes to this somewhat hit-or-miss quality. Many are meandering and inconclusive as though the cameraman had just come upon the kids by chance at a time when not much was happening. "... my principal aim was not to tell a story. Here, the plot is a bit secondary. I don't see why all the scenes in the film have to be

justified," Saura argues, but in fact he does justify them, not in terms of plot, but in terms of their truth value. Of the pond sequence, he comments, "the pond is there, it's in Villaverde... and it's like a tradition there" (qtd. in Alberich 67). Along with other episodes that do little to further the plot--the horseback ride, the second disco scene, the visit to the grandmother, and so on--this forms part of the dense background that shows us what life is like for a large sector of young people at that time and in that place.

These apparently desultory scenes also provide a kind of running critique of the degraded living conditions prevailing in the industrial belt, which is all the more effective for being conveyed intradiegetically. Take, for example, Pablo's offhand remarks about how they used to swim as children in the now contaminated pond. He gives the matter little importance, but the image of the two lovers strolling hand-in-hand through the garbage-strewn countryside makes the point.

Not surprisingly, then, what seems haphazard in Deprisa is actually tightly controlled. There's no "moral" to the story, nor is there exactly a thesis, to use the documentary term, but Saura shapes the film to communicate his understanding of the situation, his reaction to this newly discovered, and actually quite new, development in Spanish urban life: the burgeoning rate of juvenile crime that accompanied the metastasizing city in late 1970s Madrid. Beyond this problem, however, I believe what captures Saura's interest, and what he focuses on in Deprisa is the way the issue of juvenile crime dramatizes the

question of how to live now--i.e.1980, the year the film was made--in a democratic, consumer-oriented society.

Spain became a consumer society within a very short--and therefore intense--period of time. Between 1963 and 1975, to give one example, the percentage of people who owned a car rose from 8 to 48 percent. In the film, traditional and new meet in Pablo's grandmother, who still lives in the pueblo, but who greets the gift of a color television with delirious happiness: "Just what I've always wanted!" Carme Molinero and Pere Ysàs comment that in the '70s, "everyday life underwent a radical change. For a considerable majority ... life now was based on the work-income-consumption cycle; people worked harder and harder in order to increase their income so they could buy more of the things they wanted" (207). Since prosperity was not accompanied by a redistribution of wealth, the longer work day, even though it hit every class, fell especially hard on laborers. Consumer goods became the new measure of social status, but they took a heavy toll in the form of longer hours at work.

The kids in Deprisa, born at the very beginning of the economic take-off, are perfect consumers, with no political interests and no sense of history. Some of them, like Angela and Pablo, are beginning to adopt typical accoutrements of bourgeois life: the apartment, the refrigerator, the television set. But they explicitly reject the bourgeois obligations. Angela insists that she has no intention of marrying Pablo, because "marriage

is a job." And work, in the usual sense of the word, doesn't fit into their scheme of things.

It is their attitude toward getting a job that sets these adolescents off from the new form of middle-class life taking shape around them. They realize quickly that, given their education and social background, employment--if they can get it, and that's a big if--will be pure drudgery. In an interview, Saura quotes one of his informants telling him: "Look, to get the car you see over there, I'd have to work like a dog for 5 or 6 years. Hey, I want it now; I take it, and that's that" (Sánchez Vidal 148). Angela and Pablo joke about their "work," but what they have in mind is better paid and doesn't involve taxes.

At one point, looking down on the stream of rush-hour traffic, Meca laughs at the workers heading home from their factories:

They're dying to get home. The wife opens the door, gives him a little kiss, "How'd it go, Juan? How was work?" and the guy says, "Fine, fine, a little bit tired." Then he turns the TV on, and all hell breaks loose with the kiddies. "I'm getting my belt out!" Shit, I'd kill them.

In another scene, when they are divying up their loot, Meca again jokes, "This part is for the apartment; this part for the car payment; this part for the little ones' education... and a thousand left over for taxes."

Much of this meditation on work occurs against the background of the ruined countryside, where the kids gather to chat, smoke dope, rent horses and generally chill. At a time when most Spaniards were seeing their leisure time, which had once been plentiful, reduced to an hour or so of television, and who found themselves scrimping and saving in order to get ahead, these young people are enjoying a life free of toil, of social obligations, of the weight of history. Their allegiances are private and off record: to their friends and lovers (there are no parents on the scene). Their Garden of Eden may be contaminated, but it still provides generously. They take what they want, but don't hoard--in fact, they burn the cars they steal and blow most of the money. There's no sense of greed and no sense of bad blood. It's tempting to say that here there is honor among thieves, except for the connotations of "honor," which have no place in a dispensation remarkably close to the pastoral.

Clearly Saura's sympathy is with the young people and their conception of freedom, if not with their (very unpastoral) resort to violence. The images he presents of "decent" society here are more frightening than the delinquents, rendered so because the camera, and therefore the audience, shares the kids' point of view. This editorial use of camera angle is particularly evident in the first scene, where we find ourselves alongside Pablo and Meca in the car they are trying to steal, looking out at the outraged citizens, who have surrounded the car. From our vantage point, the upright public is menacing,

almost rabid. Later, as Pablo lies dying, Angela turns on a television program about the bungled bank robbery. The camera zooms into an extreme close-up of the faces of bystanders. Again, distorted by the angle and their anger, they seem to form part of a bloodthirsty mob.

Then there are the police, those guardians of order, who are a constant threatening presence. I'm thinking particularly of the scene when we just see the lights on the top of the police car appearing sinisterly over the long grass in an otherwise peaceful field, but it's also the police who hassle the boys at the monument that marks the center of Spain just because they can, the police who shoot an innocent woman caught in a phone booth at the bank robbery scene, and finally the police who gun down all the boys.

The kids, those cardinal consumers, are ultimately consumed by the system that engenders them, as, in a different way, are the laborers who spend longer and longer hours at the factory trying to pay for the products they produce. The film's title--Hurry, Hurry!--refers to the getaways, but also suggests the frenetic pace of life in 1970s Spain, where the freedom promised by democracy is seen largely in terms of purchase power.

Deprisa, then, is Saura's response to a rapidly evolving society. As we've seen, he was determined to make the film as authentic as possible. He goes to much trouble to include indices of the changing scene, but does so in an apparently offhand way, so that they form the texture of the film. Although he refused to provide Deprisa with the kind of obvious thesis

avored by most documentarians, it is clear that it has a serious social purpose: to make viewers aware of the contradictions involved in this new culture. If Saura structures Deprisa as a narrative, instead of an argument, it is to give the film a sense of life lived, rather than analyzed. His proximity to the material validates the treatment, suggesting that he has somehow accessed the real when others have failed, a claim that is the very stuff of documentary.

In an ironic note, Deprisa's congruence with reality was perhaps too great: life began to imitate this work of art that itself imitated life. Shortly before Deprisa was released in Spain, Jesús Arias (Meca) and José Antonio Valdelomar (Pablo) were arrested in separate bank robberies. According to El País, "Valdelomar turned the film he had worked on into real life when he was apprehended during a chase by detective José Antonio González Pacheco, better known as Billy the Kid" ("Perros callejeros" 3). When he was arrested, he was still carrying the movie contract with his papers ("El protagonista" 1). It was soon revealed that this was his second bank robbery that month and also that he had taken heroin during the filming, "in an effort to make it more realistic" ("Valdelomar se drogaba" 1). Arias was released in July 1981 and then rearrested for another bank robbery ("Otro actor" 1). Valdelomar, too, was released and rearrested--apparently his face had become so well known because of the film that he was easily recognized ("Perros callejeros" 3). After that, he dropped out of the public eye, only to reappear some ten years later in his last headline: "The



protagonist of !Deprisa, deprisa! dies of an overdose in prison" ("Muere" 1). This was on 11 November 1992, and he died in the Carabanchal Prison, where he was confined in the hospital section because of AIDS. It was suspected that his wife, Genoveva López, the companion from Villaverde Alto whom he'd married just after the shoot, brought him the drugs that led to his death ("Muere" 1).

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>All translations, except for quotations cited in Alberich and D'Lugo, are my own.

<sup>2</sup>For an extended commentary on the role of music in the film, see Insdorf.

<sup>3</sup>Marcel Oms argues that the viewer is never allowed to identify with the delinquents and that the camera views them "with an etymologist's eye," but I would argue that the number of scenes in which the audience looks not at but *with* the young people preclude any sensation of neutrality.

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