

RECONSTRUCTION OF MEMORIES AND RECOGNITION OF CARE WORK IN *NEDAR* AND *A METAMORFOSE DOS PÁSSAROS*

RECONSTRUCCIÓN DE MEMORIAS Y RECONOCIMIENTO DEL TRABAJO DE CUIDADOS EN *NEDAR* Y *A METAMORFOSE DOS PÁSSAROS*

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Recently, Spanish and Portuguese female filmmakers have shown an increasing interest in reconstructing family memories and unveiling its secrets, being the third generation after the far-right dictatorships that ruled both Iberian countries during almost half of the past century. Francoism and Salazarism promoted a model of State and family based on the traditional nuclear family with strict gender roles. By analyzing two autoethnographic documentary films, *Nedar* (2008), by Catalan director Carla Subirana, and *A Metamorfose dos Pássaros* (2020), by Portuguese filmmaker Catarina Vasconcelos, whose protagonists are the creators' grandmothers, this paper seeks to explore how these two films not only retrieve family and national memories, but also how they challenge the family patterns dictated by both dictatorships, placing life and care work at the center.

Keywords: Francoism; Salazarism; nuclear family; care work; memory.

Recientemente, las directoras de cine de España y Portugal han mostrado un creciente interés en reconstruir la memoria familiar y descubrir sus secretos, siendo la tercera generación después de las dictaduras de extrema derecha que gobernaron ambos Estados Ibéricos durante la mayor parte del siglo pasado. El Franquismo y el Salazarismo defendieron un modelo de Estado y familia basado en la familia nuclear tradicional con marcados roles de género. Mediante el análisis de dos documentales autoetnográficos, *Nedar* (2008), de la cineasta catalana Carla Subirana, y *A Metamorfose dos Pássaros* (2020), de la directora portuguesa Catarina Vasconcelos, cuyas protagonistas son las abuelas de sus creadoras, este artículo pretende explorar cómo estas dos producciones no solo recuperan memorias familiares y nacionales, sino que desafían el paradigma de familia impuesto por las dictaduras, colocando la vida y el trabajo de cuidados en el centro.

Palabras clave: Franquismo; Salazarismo; familia nuclear; trabajo de cuidados; memoria.

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1. Introduction

In recent times, female filmmakers in Spain and Portugal have shown a deep interest in reconstructing their family memories, especially when certain parts of those stories have been hidden from them. This is the case of two autoethnographic feature films that can be categorized within the genre of *inherited memory* documentaries (Sanjuán Bornay, 2015, p. 49): *Nedar* ('Swimming', 2008), by Catalan filmmaker Carla Subirana¹, and *A Metamorfose dos Pássaros* ('The Metamorphosis of Birds', 2020), by Portuguese director Catarina Vasconcelos². When portraying their families' stories on film, these two creators also revisit Spain's and Portugal's recent history, thus contributing to the understanding of a wide range of social concerns under the long authoritarian dictatorships that ruled both countries for the most part of the 20th century. Among the topics covered in both films, the following must be highlighted: gender roles and women's position during Francoism and Salazarism; political repression; the traditional nuclear family; and family secrets. This paper seeks to analyze how Vasconcelos and Subirana sew together family and national memories in these two productions, and how the portrayal of the topics mentioned above impacts the narrative of both Spanish and Portuguese history at *micro* (family) and *macro* (societal) levels. Particularly, it will examine how these two films challenge and debunk the mainstream discourses on homogeneous family values spread during the dictatorial regimes in both Iberian states, especially in the case of absent parental figures, as well as how they highlight the value of caring labor and daily lives as indispensable parts of a bigger picture of History.

2. Historical contextualization: gender roles and political repression under Salazar's and Franco's dictatorships

Portugal and Spain share a recent history of authoritarian far-right dictatorships that shaped their social and cultural values for almost half a century. Both the Portuguese *Estado Novo* (1933-1974), led by António de Oliveira Salazar, and the Spanish dictatorship under Francisco Franco (1939-1975) targeted women as keepers and reproducers of a social order succinctly summarized in identical slogans employed by both regimes that emphasized the importance of the Catholic religion, a national unitarian identity, and the family: *God, Fatherland, and Family*. This triad is interconnected and can be read at different levels: *God*, as the ultimate spiritual authority, shares this function as father with the Head of the State, which in turn governs a large *family* represented by an extended, united, and homogeneous *fatherland*, comprising multiple other families bound to follow the same conservative structure under strongly defined gender roles.

¹Carla Subirana (Barcelona, 1972) is a filmmaker, screenwriter, and film professor. She has written and directed documentary, fiction, and short films. *Nedar* (2008) was her directorial debut. Her other titles include *Volar* (2012, documentary), *Kanimambo* (2012, documentary with two other directors), *Atma* (2016, short) and *Sica* (2023, fiction).

²Catarina Vasconcelos (Lisbon, 1986) is a filmmaker. She has directed *Eu sou da Mouraria – ou sete maneiras de contar e guardar histórias* (2011, short documentary film codirected with Catarina Laranjeiro), *Metáfora ou a Tristeza Virada do Averso* (2014, short), and *Nocturno para uma Floresta* (2023, short). *A Metamorfose dos Pássaros* (2020) was her first feature film.

In 1945 Portugal, the publication *Economia Doméstica*, issued by the Portuguese National Propaganda Secretariat, compared the skills needed to lead a household under a tight and austere economy to those required to run a State, enhancing women's role as producers and reproducers of the family (Cova & Pinto, 2002). This has been analyzed as a successful strategy developed by the *Estado Novo* to have women complicitly identify with the regime, while creating a softer and milder image of political authority (Ferreira, 1996). Belo, Alão, and Cabral (1987) added to this that Salazar desexualized women to stimulate in them the one and only desire to help run the Portuguese Nation by managing their own houses under the dictates of Catholic submission, charity, and austerity. Along these lines, Hispanist scholar Jo Labanyi quotes a speech by José Antonio Primo de Rivera that follows the same patterns as the manipulative "tactics of seduction" (Ferreira, 1996, p. 136) employed by Salazar to have women on his side, in which the Falangist leader praises the 'feminine' virtue of self-sacrifice, and calls on all men to be as 'feminine' as possible in this sense, in order to be actually considered men: "*Ved, mujeres, cómo hemos hecho virtud capital de una virtud, la abnegación, que es, sobre todo, vuestra. Ojalá lleguemos en ella a tanta altura, ojalá lleguemos a ser en esto tan femeninos, que algún día, podáis de veras considerarnos ¡hombres!*" (Primo de Rivera, 1935, *apud* Labanyi, 2002, p. 46).

The Portuguese Constitution of 1933 established the equality among individuals before the Law regardless of any privilege by reason of birth, nobility, sex, or social status, but included an exception for women as a result of 'natural differences' (Cova & Pinto, 2002). This side note resonates with Salazar's discourses, which alluded to "popular myths about gender and authority, encouraging passive acceptance and identification with a natural order of things" (Ferreira, 1996, p. 136). Based on the ideas established in the 19th century, Francoism also drew on the naturalization of biological differences between a dualist conception of male/female to develop its educational model of the woman as mother and wife, that would later be widely disseminated by the propagandistic organization *Sección Femenina* (Rabazas & Ramos, 2006). In this case, the heavy task entrusted to women (i.e., to ensure the stability of the Nation by running a home and raising children) would abruptly contrast with the infantilization of the female as per Francoist's laws: it was not until 1973, two years before the death of the dictator, that unmarried women could leave their father's house before turning 25, the female age of majority until then (whereas men would reach legal age at 21), and the 'marital license' (i.e., husband's approval for women to work outside the home, participate in a trial, or open a bank account, among others), that equated women to minors and people with disabilities before the law, was in force until 1975 (Ortiz, 2006).

The desexualization of women under Salazar's and Franco's regimes while metonymically reducing them to being the "womb of the Nation" (Bergès, 2012, p. 101) clearly follows the same contradiction as one of the main pillars which Catholicism is built on: the equation of Virgin Mary as sublime Mother, while bereft of any sexuality whatsoever; the reproductive body dispossessed of eroticism and only considered under productive terms towards the progression of the Nation. Such domestication and control of the female body as conceptualized by Foucauldian biopolitics entails, as Silvia Federici has repeatedly pointed out, "one of the most pervasive manipulations, most subtle and mystified forms of violence that capitalism has perpetrated", that makes unwaged domestic and caring labor even desirable under the illusion of *love* (Federici, 1975, p. 76), or more specifically in this case, for the salvation and regeneration of the Spanish/Portuguese 'race' (Bergès, 2012; Cova & Pinto, 2002; Ferreira, 1996).

The naturalization of biological attributes to assign tasks based on gender as an incontestable product of God's will, could be framed within Barthes's concept of *mythology* as a type of speech deprived of history and depth. Barthes (2012) puts it in this way: "However paradoxical it may seem, *myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (p. 120, emphasis in the original). In terms of female representation, Franco's and Salazar's regimes did not *hide* women as such (even though they secluded them at home), but rather mystified them by praising so-called innate capacities that were extremely useful for both regimes to succeed. The various strategies taken by Salazarism and Francoism to discipline population into social values and gender roles within a Fascist-inspired ideology permeated society as a sort of internal colonization, a "control of consciousness" (Rich, 1980, p. 640) that falls into less directly identifiable (yet profound and long-lasting) acts of violence to reach their objectives. Nonetheless, aside from indoctrination, in both cases, the 'armed wing' of the State would spread fear and brutally punish any dissident defiance to the institutional power using violence the 'hard' way.

Resulting from a *coup* against the legitimate Republican government and ending with the victory of the Nationalist rebels led by Francisco Franco, Spain's Civil War (1936-1939), as well as the Postwar and dictatorship periods, were filled with cruel crimes that are being investigated still today. Such delay can be explained by the passing of the Amnesty Law in 1977, known as the 'pact of forgetting', during the transition to democracy after the death of the dictator. Under the purpose of safeguarding the process, this law established immunity for political crimes committed before the Transition period. Within this framework, both parties were considered to be equally responsible for the conflict, and the same logic was applied to the 40 years of dictatorship, even though there was "a clear oppressor (the right) and a clear victim (the left)" (Encarnación, 2014, p. 29). In 1939, after Franco took over, the preexistent *Dirección General de Seguridad* (Directorate-General of Security), which controlled the police forces, was reorganized, turning its essential goal towards the "violent retaliation of the defeated" (Pimentel, 2023, p. 43). As Ramón Arnabat Mata (2013) explains, in the period 1939-1948, several laws were passed with the goal of legalizing military court proceedings that offered no legal guarantee nor the right to proper defense for the indicted. To this day, an accurate quantification of victims is still far from being achieved, as many of the executions perpetrated by the Falangist and Francoist army were done 'outside the Law' and they do not appear in official registers. Currently, relatives of the victims and the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, alongside historians and archeologists, are the main agents in the process of locating common graves and identifying human remains.

In Portugal, the main apparatus in charge of controlling any subversive attitude or movement was the widely known as PIDE (*Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado*, International Police for the Defense of the State), denomination that it held between 1945-1969, but it had other previous and subsequent names: *Polícia de Vigilância e Defesa do Estado*, or PVDE (1933-1945) and *Direção-Geral de Segurança*, or DGS (1969-1974), during the rule of Marcelo Caetano. Gallagher (1979) draws attention to the wide network of spies and informers that the PIDE had across the country: as many as 20,000 people (one in 400 Portuguese) were employed as eyes and ears of the *Estado Novo*, and also mentions that, during the 30s, instructors from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy came to train PVDE agents on the latest police techniques. One of its main traits was the conception of its function as 'preventive' against insurrections, meaning that, by spreading terror, they would keep the population in a state of "political apathy" (Pimentel, 2023, p. 44).

This recent past of repression and violence led to silenced experiences that were passed on to the following generations. In the current artistic and audiovisual landscape, the grandchildren of those who lived and suffered the dictatorships are undertaking the task of recovering those memories and saving them from oblivion.

3. Granddaughters make history: contemporary woman filmmakers and the reconstruction of silenced family memories

In recent women's film production, some examples of documentaries based on the reconstruction of family memories can be found³. This cinematic approach has grabbed the attention of scholars, who have identified some characteristics regarding this autoethnographic genre from a gendered lens.

Distance in time gives depth of perspective, as both Carla Subirana and Catarina Vasconcelos are reconstructing the memories of their grandparents, contributing to what has been labelled as *transmitted* or *inherited memory* (Sanjuán Bornay, 2015, p. 49) or *postmemory* (Hirsch, 2008), especially regarding traumatic historical events. In the case of *Nedar* and *A Metamorfose dos Pássaros*, we could rather be talking, particularly in the first case, of *transmitted/inherited secrets* to be investigated and unveiled by subsequent generations, giving voice through film to silenced stories. *Voice* is certainly an aspect to pay attention to. Hanna Hatzmann (2015) recalls two concepts from Susan Sniader Lanser's work on women's narrative voice in literature (*Fictions of Authority*, 1992): *authorial voice* and *personal voice*. The first one refers to a heterodiegetic voice, a superior 'voice of God' that is external to the narration (in the same way as the audience is), and is therefore considered to be public, more objective, and to have more authority over the way of telling the story and the information provided. The second one includes narrators who are consciously telling their own private stories, in which the storyteller is also the protagonist. As Sniader Lanser (1992, p. 19) warns, if a personal voice risks being judged and seeing its credibility undermined, and cannot hide itself under a "gender-neutral mask" (meaning "passing as masculine" as default), female authors have sometimes avoided using a personal voice, aiming to have their discourse legitimized, even though society has told them not to "claim knowledge of men or the world".

In this regard, Elena Cordero-Hoyo (2020) alludes to the 'history from below' trend in the 60s, which elevated the stories lived and told by subjectivities that had been traditionally considered not worthy to be part of the official account of history. The linearity and apparent neutrality of official narratives would thus be complicated with fragmented, personal discourses that bring together pieces of both lived or inherited memories.

In view of this, the fact that Subirana and Vasconcelos use not only their family stories, but also (considering the specifications of the cinematic medium, as Hatzmann (2015) brings our attention to) *embody* them by using their voices for narration and putting themselves on screen, signals how these two documentaries vindicate their authority (and that of their grandmothers) to be part of a constellation of narratives, each of which contributing to a plural account of a collective *herstory*, and perhaps somehow

³ Some (by no means exhaustive) examples from women filmmakers, aside the ones analyzed in this paper, are the following: *Un'ora sola ti vorrei* (Alina Marazzi, Italy, 2002), *Los Rubios* (Albertina Carri, Argentina, 2003), *África 815* (Pilar Monsell, Spain, 2014), or *A Toca do Lobo* (Catarina Mourão, Portugal, 2015). I am grateful to the reviewers of this paper for bringing up some of these references along with insightful comments for improvement.

constructing a *communal voice*⁴ (to keep borrowing Sniader Lanser's terminology) amidst a bigger picture of works.

4. *Nedar* and *A Metamorfose dos Pássaros*: (re)creating family stories to question official discourses

Nedar is an autoethnographic documentary fueled by a specific goal set by its creator, Catalan filmmaker Carla Subirana: to reconstruct the story of her grandfather, Juan Arroniz, who was executed right after the Spanish Civil War in 1940, and about whom her grandmother, Leonor, has always been silent. *A Metamorfose dos Pássaros* (*Metamorfose*, for short, from now on), is an artistic, experimental documentary based on the family of Portuguese filmmaker Catarina Vasconcelos. More specifically, the film focuses on the story of her grandparents (Beatriz and Henrique), along with the orphanhood shared by Catarina and her father (named 'Jacinto' in the film) caused by the loss of their mothers.

4.1. Absence, family, and memory

Absence is a major topic in both documentaries that takes various forms, either literally or symbolically: orphanhood, oblivion, silence, and secrets as dimensions of 'lack' seem to drive both filmmakers' desire to go over the wounds from the past to recreate their family stories. Subirana conducts research to unveil the mysterious and ghostly figure of her grandfather, Juan Arroniz. By accessing the archives of the time when he was executed, she finds out that the reason given by the police in those reports was that he had participated in an armed robbery. A conversation with filmmaker Joaquim Jordà will reveal that he was most probably a member of an Anarchist union that planned this type of assault with a social goal: raising funds for political prisoners. The many lacunae and distortions that Subirana encounters while revising the official files related to her grandfather's execution accounts for the irregular judicial processes carried out after the Spanish Civil War, which were especially prominent in the years following the conflict, and also portrays the 'back-and-forth' progression in the reconstruction of history. Along these lines, Joaquim Jordà explains in the film that, at the time, it was way better to be a single mother than the widow of a Leftist executed by the Regime. Apart from the trauma caused by the fact of losing her partner and father of her daughter, Leonor's fear of revealing the identity and story of Arroniz is completely understandable if we take into account that, during Francoism, and especially in the aftermath of the Civil War, women (mothers, wives, or daughters) related to Republican men were also targeted vicariously by supporters and members of the regime in manifold, humiliating ways, as listed by Arnabat Mata (2013): arbitrary detentions, sexual abuse, public punishments, and unpaid forced labor, among others.

Vasconcelos does not do research around a silenced violent event, but reconstructs the story of her grandparents, Beatriz and Henrique, to get to know her grandmother, who

⁴ In general terms, Sniader Lanser (1992) defines *communal voice* as "a practice in which narrative authority is invested in a definable community and textually inscribed either through multiple, mutually authorizing voices or through the voice of a single individual who is manifestly authorized by a community" (p. 21). In the last chapter of her book, devoted to this third type of voice, while she emphasizes its political potency (and, most probably, precisely because of this) she also warns about how this mode does not automatically exempt discourse from (even unintentionally) imposing dominance or arrogating "to an individual author the self-reinforcing pretense of multiplicity" (p. 279).

she never met. Vasconcelos's grandfather was an official of the Portuguese Navy that spent prolonged periods of time in the sea alongside the African coast when Portugal still had control over those territories. The way of communicating with his family on the mainland was by mail, which dilated the waiting times to send or receive news, and whose delays drove the crew to desperation. The epistolary relationship between Beatriz and Henrique was nearly spiritual, as described in the film: "*a relação que a Beatriz tinha com o Henrique era semelhante àquela que tinha com Deus*"⁵. This permanent stand-by state would make use of objects as depositaries of memories to be shared in a deferred time in the future, as Beatriz expresses: "*Henrique, quando eles forem grandes, havemos de descer à cave os dois, e sem dizer a ninguém, visitamos os nossos filhos quando eles eram pequenos*"⁶. Due to these extended absences that depicted Henrique almost as a mythical figure, Jacinto and his five siblings developed a sort of symbolic orphanhood towards their father, while having Beatriz as a solid 'trunk' for them to grow, and as the main link between them and Henrique. Years later, when Beatriz suddenly dies, Henrique and his children will not know how to manage their relationship and will reduce to a minimum their oral interactions, and even avoid looking at each other in the eye.

The absence of a paternal figure in *Metamorfose* echoes Subirana's women-only family, which constitutes an essential rupture with the traditional model of the nuclear, heterosexual family. Her grandmother Leonor raised Ana (Subirana's mother) alone. At an early point in the movie, Subirana explains that her father and mother separated before she was born, and he moved to Puerto Rico, being just "a cross on a map for many years", in her own words. This female environment is portrayed in the film with a house meeting sequence whereby Subirana introduces us to a series of women in close shots (Ana's network of friends) that she has always considered to be her family: "*dones divorciades, separades, o simplement, dones soles*"⁷. In one of the interactions, one of those women and Carla Subirana herself, express the strangeness they felt when visiting other houses that followed a traditional family pattern and being asked about their parents. Sometimes, the easiest way was just to lie not to explain that there was no male parental figure in their households.

In *Metamorfose*, it is the death of Beatriz that makes everything abruptly change: her children felt lost and helpless, as if their 'trunk' had been cut down, and they, being the 'branches' of that tree, had fallen from it. This will be the first example of literal orphanhood that we will encounter. The second one is revealed shortly after, when a photograph slowly develops on screen, showing Catarina Vasconcelos's mother, Ana, at the hospital, holding her at the moment of her birth. Catarina's and her father's voices explain that, seventeen years later, they would be at that same hospital, when Ana died. Such 17-year time lapse feels even shorter when Catarina's birth and Ana's death are put together in less than two minutes of footage. This shared experience of orphanhood will be the meeting point of Catarina and her father: "*o meu pai e eu encontrámo-nos na ausência da palavra "mãe"*"⁸.

The reconstruction of troubled and hurtful family memories in *Nedar* intertwines with the increasing loss of memory of Leonor and Ana due to Alzheimer's disease. The dialogue between the progress that Subirana makes in discovering her grandfather's story and the erasure of her grandmother's and mother's recollections is especially powerful when put in contrast through montage. Ryan Prout (2012) draws the attention to the

⁵ "The relationship that Beatriz had with Henrique was similar to the one she had with God".

⁶ "Henrique, when they grow up, we will go down to the basement, and without telling anyone, we will visit our children when they were little".

⁷ "divorced or separated women, or simply, women on their own".

⁸ "My father and I came together in the absence of the word *mother*".

juxtaposition of two pairs of sequences. In the first one, Leonor shows symptoms of distress and exhaustion derived from memory loss, followed by an image of archival stacks containing historical registers. The second one puts together MRI scan images of Ana's brain with tissue damage caused by Alzheimer's, and a close-up of Subirana checking a criminal record that contains her grandfather's fingerprints: the indelible biometrics of Juan Arroniz are thereby opposed to the fast evaporation of Ana's memories. Nonetheless, the representation of Alzheimer's in *Nedar* does not follow the pattern of a horror or apocalyptic discourse, as it is usually the case according to Prout (2012). There is even room for humor in a scene when Ana is not able to draw a clock striking ten to ten as part of a cognitive test. The conversation between Carla and Ana gets so tangled around that exercise that, as dramatic as it might seem, they both end up laughing. Alzheimer's, in this case, could be seen as a macabre joke, as yet-another-challenge in Subirana's journey towards the recuperation of her family memories, and also, as pointed out by Maribel Rams (2018), as a metaphor for the 'collective amnesia' caused by the lack of political commitment to the recovery of historical memory related to the Civil War and Francoism.

Reflection on national history from the perspective of common people also takes place in *Metamorfose*, following the lead of the 'history from below' trend. Vasconcelos takes us on a linear journey that reviews Portugal's recent past. The remarks are not made by an *authorial voice* providing historical facts, but from the point of view of those who actually lived that period. Personal reflections and criticism against the constraining times of dictatorship and colonialism crave for a long-awaited change illustrated by quotes like the following: "*Beatriz convenceu-se que o filho tinha asma, mas o problema de Jacinto era o facto de não haver oxigénio suficiente naquela casa, naquele país e naquelas pátrias imaginárias onde tudo o que nascia tinha o nome daquele homem que sufocava tudo aquilo que tocava*"⁹. Shortly after, a touch of humor will show Beatriz reading a magazine with a big portrait of Salazar on the cover and the headline 'Salazar died'. The voice of Beatriz then says, "*Aconteceu o que tanto ansiávamos, Henrique*"¹⁰. Few seconds after, she continues, "*Os nossos filhos cresceram*"¹¹. The face of Salazar here works, parodically, as the symbolic, mythical icon of the Portuguese Empire, whose discourse naturalized colonialism under the lusotropicalist belief that the Portuguese were more prone to miscegenation with native peoples and defended a fraternal union of the colonized territories under a single authority.¹²

Hints of repression and revolution sprinkle the narrative: the PIDE is mentioned when one of the siblings (Pedro) is arrested and Beatriz says that she was not able to sleep for ten days. Teresa, the youngest daughter, says that she will not live like their parents, who think that first attempts work forever: the first job, the first house, the first marriage. She also reflects on roles and freedom associated with gender through a metaphor based on sockets and plugs, but while she criticizes the traditional seclusion of women at home, she underlines the importance of their role as essential basis for life: "*sem as tomadas não existia a luz*"¹³.

⁹ "Beatriz was convinced that her son had asthma, but Jacinto's problem was that there wasn't enough oxygen in that house, in that country and in those imaginary fatherlands where everything that was born bore the name of that man who suffocated everything he touched".

¹⁰ "What we have longed for finally happened, Henrique".

¹¹ "Our children grew up".

¹² Salazar's death (1970), and the collapse of the Portuguese Empire (1974) have been rigorously studied by Patrícia Martinho Ferreira (2021) in relation to the trope of orphanhood in contemporary Portuguese literature related to the loss of reference and protection from the State/Empire as a metonym of the patriarchal family.

¹³ "Without sockets there would be no light".

Several shots of the sea in *Metamorfose* represent Vasconcelos's grandfather's life on the sea, whose vastness underscores distance in space (from family back home) and time (due to extended waits, delayed experiences, and past memories). *Nedar* also takes an allegorical approach to memory through the use of water. At the beginning of the film, we see Subirana walking and jumping into a pool. This *motif* will recurrently appear in other instances. Carla Subirana talked about its symbolism in an interview with José David Cáceres Tapia in 2009, where she explained that the water is a metaphor for both the memory and the first liquid that surrounds us before our birth, the amniotic liquid, and *swimming* (the translation into English of *nedar*) is the way to approach and dive into unsolved, enigmatic family secrets. At the end of the film, the image of water and the pool will come full circle: we will find out that the ultrasound image and heartbeat sound that accompanied the opening credits belong to Subirana's son, Mateo. We meet him in the last minutes of the film, while the little child is swimming in the pool, and the director's voice explains that he broke the family's 'women-only' tradition. This closure evokes the fresh start of a new chapter, a sort of rebirth, un "*canto a la vida*" (an ode to life), as described by Subirana herself (Cáceres Tapia, 2009).

4.2. Embodiment, nature, and care

As mentioned earlier, both Vasconcelos and Subirana embody their films by projecting their own voice, gaze, and body onto the filmic material. In *Nedar*, Carla Subirana mainly narrates the progress of her discoveries with her own voice and includes conversations between her and people who might have useful information for her research. She also shares with the audience real footage of home videos of her grandmother, Leonor, with extreme close-ups that show her wrinkled face and hands taking care of plants or folding clothes, and progressively struggling more and more with Alzheimer's disease. By contrast, *Metamorfose* combines delicate, tableau-like close-ups captured by a static camera with a multiplicity of narrators: in the first half of the film, a male voice talks about the family members in the third person; Beatriz and Henrique read their own letters, and young Jacinto speaks for himself; there is even an astounding moment when several female anonymous voices accumulate and overlap when reading letters written to the Portuguese Navy crew members in the sea. Vasconcelos's voice shows up only in the second half of the film (as does her father's), after the death of her grandmother Beatriz and her mother Ana have been announced. This way, she 'adds' herself chronologically as a new character into the plot of the family's genealogy that she has been carefully building. At this turning point, she also stops using analogic film to continue with digital footage almost imperceptibly (Film at Lincoln Center, 2020 [interview]). Such motivated choices underscore the deep, disruptive impact of orphanhood and the technological gap between generations. It is also worth noting that *Metamorfose* holds a 'surprise' only revealed at the end: we are able to hear Beatriz's real voice thanks to a vinyl that she recorded with her children to send by mail to Henrique while he was in the sea. The presence of Beatriz's voice confers a 'hauntological' layer that reinforces her centrality and strengthens her survival over time through abstract memories and tangible materials.

Vasconcelos and Subirana also expose their bodies by putting them on screen, taking an ambivalent position both behind and in front of the camera. Nevertheless, such 'omnipresence' does not place them in an authorial narrator's point of view, in the sense explained by Sniader Lanser (i.e., objective, external, with command and authority over all information available), nor implies a tautological personal stance, but rather intensifies

the intimacy and emotionality that makes the audience participant of their private legacy, perhaps not without a certain voyeuristic guilt.

This embodied way of reconstructing memories involves the imaginary world of both filmmakers as well. In certain instances of *Nedar*, when Subirana reenacts the encounters between Arroniz and Leonor, she uses a silent, *film noir* style in black and white that resembles a photographic novel. The intentionality of this choice is explained by Subirana in the aforementioned interview: she locates these digressions within the realm of the mythical imagination (the dimension that her grandfather has always inhabited for her) and relates the use of still images to frozen memories that allow the viewer to pay closer attention, sparking the desire to fill in the gaps between shots. At the end of *Metamorfose*, it is revealed that, before dying, Henrique asked his sons and daughter to burn the letters that Beatriz and he had exchanged for years, and they carried out his wish. Vasconcelos then claims her right to reconstruct, and even make up, the content of those letters, to imagine and have Beatriz back again. In a sequence of the film, hands ‘repair’ plants by bringing tree leaves and bark fragments back to their original stems and trunks using footage in reverse, while we listen to Vasconcelos telling a dream in which she reunites and speaks with her mother who is still alive. Such visual restoration process engages in dialogue with the (re)construction of memories as parallel expressions of healing and care. In other instances, mirrors are used to create an illusionistic or *ostranenie* effect, e.g., a mirror returns Vasconcelos’s gaze directly to the audience, composition that will be repeated shortly after with her father’s eyes; mirrors ‘hidden’ in the middle of the woods captured in long shots move slightly to create a discreet but surprising disruption in the landscape. This *motif* reminds us of memory as a mirror game, which proves how ‘reality’ is multilayered, multiperspective, and fragmented by definition, and so are recollections.

Metamorfose offers diverse reflections on time, the origins of life, and its natural cycles. Existential commentaries on the different life lengths of the species (flies, rats, whales) challenge the Western anthropocentric perception of time that takes the average human life as its basic measurement unit. In one of those, Beatriz speculates about the beginning of time. After situating waters, trees, and birds at the origin of everything, she builds an argument in defense of caring labor carried out by female hands: Beatriz mentions Zulmira, their domestic worker, and acknowledges her work that, alongside her, sustains the house, raises the children, and provides with everyday nourishment (*os pequenos-almoços*, breakfasts) and hygiene (*as mudas das camas*, clean bed linen). The daily persistence of these tasks is portrayed in the form of cyclical habits: “*todas as manhãs do mundo começavam com o cigarro da Zulmira*”¹⁴. By using multiple natural *motifs* linked to Beatriz and Zulmira, and by identifying care work with the labor performed by Mother Nature as the basic support for life to exist, Vasconcelos is not perpetuating an essentializing perspective on women’s function as procreators and carers. Rather, she enhances the importance of such unpaid and overlooked labor by placing it at the level it deserves. The discourse that relegated women to the constraining walls of the private sphere imposed by Salazar’s and Franco’s repressive frames of thought, disguised under a naturalizing reasoning, is a ‘trap’ that Vasconcelos does not fall for, and even subverts by honoring those tasks.

Towards the end of *Nedar*, Subirana finally locates Arroniz’s sister and pays her a visit. Her voice explains that this is the first time that she sees her grandfather’s face in a portrait hanging on the wall. When Arroniz’s sister cries by the remembrance of her brother, Subirana realizes the following: “*Llavors em vaig adonar que la seva història*

¹⁴ “Every new morning began with Zulmira’s cigarette”.

poc tenia a veure amb nosaltres”¹⁵. After finally getting so close to unveiling and shedding light onto her spectral grandfather, she readjusts the focus: perhaps one of the main learnings of this personal investigation was acknowledging the foundations of the mesh of memories that supports her existence and position in the world, that is to say, her grandmother and mother and their lives in common. Now such mesh looks more complete as it has more pieces to it, but the essential prevails. The story of Juan Arroniz was the trigger for this documentary, and in a certain way is the backbone of the whole production, but Subirana, unpremeditatedly, went further to save in film the present time of Leonor and Ana in a moment when they are sadly losing their ability to store and retrieve past and new memories.

5. Final remarks

Not only did *Nedar* and *Metamorfose* reconstruct their family memories, but also contributed to the large picture of Spain’s and Portugal’s recent history by making art out of the lives of their grandmothers, whose locus of enunciation as aged, female subjects has traditionally been placed behind other more privileged narratives. Both movies, having as main protagonists two single mothers, albeit in different senses, contribute to the genealogy of other family patterns with their own complexities that defied the model idealized and promoted during the dictatorships.

Subirana’s realization that Juan Arroniz will always be an unknown figure to her (“my family is another one and he is still a stranger to me”) does not undermine the meaningfulness of her research, but underlines the fact that, even now that she knows about her grandfather, the core of her family still comprises three members, three women only: her grandmother, her mother, and herself. The director of *Nedar* does not need to know more, in the same way as Vasconcelos unapologetically recognizes that *Metamorfose* is not a film about facts. The stance of leaving questions open moves them away from an authorial position, and broadly stimulates the reflection on aspects such as who has the right to speak about the past and how. While rejecting an ‘authorial mode’, their choices also serve the goal of enhancing the richness of personal narratives at the level of, and as a counterpart to, official narratives, contributing to a plural and *communal* corpus of life histories.

In a lecture by Silvia Federici pronounced at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in April 2023, she vindicated the right of women to get paid for doing caring labor, or simply decide not to do it, even if waged. This statement widely summarizes what Vasconcelos and Subirana do in both films: reconstructing memory, fulfilling the desire to unveil secrets, and denouncing how our female ancestors’ lives were constricted by social standards and political contexts is, and will always be, urgent and necessary. But, once this task has been completed, there is an equally important step to take: to make them the protagonists of their own lives, however complicated they were or however many constraining obstacles they encountered, while avoiding a revictimization by comparison to an allegedly more desirable, idealized life, as well as resignifying their existence as points of reference for the generations that came after them. Vasconcelos, in one of the quotes that she pronounces in the film, says: “*Não é justo os mortos morrerem duas vezes*” (“It is not fair for the dead to die twice”). The following can be added to that: it is not fair for victims (or rather, survivors) to be so twice.

¹⁵ “Then I realized that her story had little to do with us”.

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