

REVIEW

## DOCUMENTARY

# *Canción a una dama en la sombra* [Song to a lady in the shadow]

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Filmmaker

**M**y work as a filmmaker focuses on collecting stories featuring women in different eras, generally marked by war, exile and/or dictatorship.

In my films I use materials that were for many years considered to be secondary, as they are related to private life: letters, diaries, family films and photographs.

The British theorist and filmmaker, Laura Mulvey<sup>1</sup>, states that while it is true that oral history has not been exclusive to women, and that documenting and narrating the past through interviews is one of the favourites formats of the feminist methodology, so too is the reconstruction of the past through letters, diaries and other objects.

These necessarily informal sources can reveal an image of the past in which women were central as opposed to marginal and in which –in the absence of public events– their daily struggles defied the frontiers that were created.

In 2015 I produced *El gran vuelo*, a documentary that tells the story of Clara Pueyo Jornet, an activist from the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC), who –having been sentenced to death in the prison of Les Corts in Barcelona– escaped with a false release order in June 1943. Since that moment, there has been no trace of her.

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<sup>1</sup> *Where Is History Today? New Ways of Representing the Past.* Marcel Arbeit / Ian Christi.  
*Women Making History: Gleaning and the Compilation* - Laura Mulvey.



In this documentary I used photographs, letters from activists –including those that Clara herself sent to her friends and party comrades–, family films from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s (filmed by people from the Catalan and Valencian upper middle class as a means of contrasting and reflecting on the lack of images of the protagonist) and the witnesses who knew her.

Clara had two brothers: Salvador –who died in the Battle of the Ebro– and Armand, who at the end of the Civil War began the route to take up exile in France. He enlisted as a worker in a French company and after being sent to two Stalags, he was sent to the Mauthausen Concentration Camp. He was murdered in Gusen, in May 1941.

The years went by and I decided to rescue the valuable material I had about Armand Pueyo Jornet. Not only the testimonies from his children (Albert and Eugenia) and the photographs, but all the letters he sent to his wife Soledad Tartera i Vilanova.

*Canción a una dama en la sombra* situates us in the Spanish Civil War and in the Second World War through twenty-eight letters that Armand Pueyo Jornet wrote to his wife Soledad from when the retreat began to his time in the last *Stalag* –between 1939 and 1941– and fragments of *El dolor* (War: A Memoir) by Marguerite Duras, adapted by the Chilean playwright Marcela Torres.

In the films I have produced the family archive is used as a counter-shot to History told with an uppercase H. A family image does not only reveal the mood of those who appear in the film, but it also sheds light on the relationship between a document and its political context. The person filming has a perspective of class and genre that can be discovered in the images. That which is personal can also reveal that which is political.

Taking ownership is a subversive act. Assigning new meaning attacks images created by power. The trace of intention is erased when the images are taken to be re-edited and

dissolved in another discourse different to that originally intended by means of a new approach in the editing proposal.

In *Canción a una dama en la sombra* the family images from the 1930s and 1940s are of Catalan families who lived a different post-war period to the protagonists, as they belonged to the upper middle class. At that time, a camera was the equivalent of three average salaries in Spain. For that reason, like in *El gran vuelo*, the images cause a fracture between image and word.

This reflection on the images is explicit in the film through the off-screen choir that shows that there are no images in movement of the protagonists of the film as they belonged to a social class that could not afford that luxury.

*Oh! Soledad, Armand,  
Eugenia, Albert!  
How we would love to see  
your bodies moving!  
To hear your voices!  
Impossible.  
Our only consolation:  
Alas here: Images  
borrowed, robbed,  
orphaned.  
Anonymous faces that do  
not conceal the privileges of  
their class.  
And that despite  
everything, can illustrate  
an imaginary Sunday.*

## About Armand Pueyo Jornet

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> November 1939

To Soledad Tartera–Caldes de Montbui

*Dear wife and children: like every Sunday, I will spend, in my imagination, a little while with you.*

At the end of the 1920s, Soledad Tartera i Vilanova, from Caldes de Montbui, met Armand Pueyo Jornet, a young man from Vilanova who had arrived in Caldes de Montbui a few years previously to start a job as a foreman. After some time, they got engaged.

Armand was part of a group of friends and intellectuals who revolved around the figure of the Catalan painter and sculptor, Manolo Hugué, and he was known for his talent as a writer. As a result of this he began to write in the local newspapers: *Farell* and *Esbarjo*. In some of his political and philosophical articles he highlighted the importance of education for any labourer. He also advocated for the creation of a free school for labourers and illiterate women. He also apparently wrote some plays. But there is no record of them.

With the advent of the Civil War, the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC) and the General Union of Workers (UGT) organised the Carlos Marx column, which initially had 2,000 troops. Armand enlisted in this column with other party comrades. His first destination was the Aragon Front.

The Republic defeat forced 453,000 Spaniards to take refuge in France. One of those men was Armand. It was the beginning of a hard journey in a foreign country of which the majority did not speak the language. In addition, they had to cope with the harsh attitude of the gendarmes, the colonialist troops and the French army.

At the end of March 1939, the Spanish refugees settled in camps in different French departments: Argelès-sur-Mer, Saint-Cyprien and Barcarès, Judes in Septfonds, Sant Cebrià, Vernet d'Ariège, Agde and Rivesaltes.

Of the exile route that Armand Pueyo Jornet took, there are only letters from Septfonds and Vernet d'Ariège.

In May 1939, France extended the proposal to regiments in operation and companies of foreign workers. Armand Pueyo enrolled in one of these foreign companies, doing manual work in different towns in France.

In June 1940, when France was occupied by the Nazis, one million political prisoners occupied the *Stalags*, the name Nazi Germany gave to the camps of war prisoners, where there were 1,000 Spaniards.

Armand Pueyo was sent to *Stalag VIII C*, near current Zagan in Poland, and from there he wrote a letter to his daughter Eugenia. It was the last missive his family received.

## About Soledad Tartera i Vilanova

*No one will know more of you, Penelope, than the design  
Homer and the mythologies forged for you*

Olga Zamboni

*Canción de una dama a la sombra* (title of a poem by Paul Celan) dismantles the story of Penelope, narrated by Homer three thousand years ago in *The Odyssey*. This myth tells the legend of Odysseus –a magnificent hero who fought in the Trojan War and who took twenty years to return home– and his wife, the Queen Penelope, who waited for him all that time in her house –weaving and unravelling a shroud on a loom–, rejecting a group of suitors who relentlessly pursued her. Historically, Penelope has become the female ideal of the passive wait, marital fidelity and absence.

The Spanish Civil War transformed the lives of thousands of women in many aspects. In the words of the historian Mary Nash: it gave them autonomy of movement and decision which they used immediately. The new participation of women in male tasks such as trench warfare, community service and social work, work in factories and on transport, was for many women a liberating experience.

Civilian resistance and everyday survival during the war can be explained by the enormous effort and

energy of thousands of anonymous women, whose voluntary aid work was a major contribution to the war economy and the functioning of civil society.

The experience of the war brought with it a new dimension to the classic functions of a mother, housewife and household provider, because now women provided food, care services and basic needs for the daily survival of the entire civil population.

All of these women shared the experience of waiting for their husbands, lovers, sons, fathers and brothers who had been sent to the front.

With the end of the war and the arrival of the new regime, a tremendously conservative female ideal was imposed. Under the Franco dictatorship, the main social function of women was to be mothers, which is why work, education, social activity and emancipation were considered to be threats to “their biological destiny as procreators of the future generations of the Spanish homeland”.

The repression of the Franco dictatorship brutally closed off women’s path to freedom. However, there were many women who secretly fought against fascism, or who reverted the prototype of “the angel in the house” as they needed to continue working.

I wanted to construct an account from the perspective of the women who waited, focusing on the figure of Soledad Tartera i Vilanova, Armand Pueyo Jorner’s wife.

For obvious reasons, I managed to gather more information about the life of Armand, than that of Soledad. Even the twenty-eight letters that have been saved from their epistolary relationship, are his, logically kept by Soledad. Those that she wrote, were probably destroyed when Armand entered Mauthausen.

Armand Pueyo Jorner was murdered in Gusen in May 1941. Soledad found out that her husband had died almost ten years later. For her whole life she had to live with the stigma that it meant in Franco’s Spain to have a “commie” husband, a sister-in-law who escaped from prison, and was “under search and arrest” and to be a woman who worked, contradicting the ideal of “the perfect wife” and the “angel in the house”.

For me it was important not only to tell Soledad Tartera i Vilanova's story, but also to bring attention to the stories of other women through intimate micro-stories and testimonies from their relatives, mainly their children and grandchildren. These personal stories have been silent and invisible, and so, by bringing them together, they become the story and voice of a collective. And that story and that voice, combined with the reflection on certain issues, make *Canción de una dama a la sombra* a piece about absence, courage, the right image and oblivion.

The diary of Marguerite Duras, which she wrote in April 1945, in the weeks prior to and following the return of her husband, a prisoner in the Dachau Concentration Camp, moved me deeply.

For the first time I read a corporeal and emotional description of what it means for a woman to wait for her husband not knowing if he is alive or dead. This story connected me with the story of my country and the women who still do not know where the bodies of their disappeared, arrested husbands are.

*We're in the vanguard of a nameless battle, a battle without arms or bloodshed or glory: we're in the vanguard of waiting.*

*Behind us is civilisation in ashes, and all the thought, treasured for centuries—writes Duras—. Words that in the current context echo like waves.*

## APPENDIX

*No date*

*My dear Eugenia*

*How it made me feel to hold a letter written by you .... I think you have learned to read enough to understand my handwriting, and you will know how to answer me, by yourself.*

*I want you to write to me, without your mother dictating what you have to write. I want you to tell me what you and Alberto do, how you live, what you play, what you do at school, everything you have learned.*

*I also want you to send me a drawing, I really like them.*

*I would love to be with you to make you into a diligent and hardworking young woman, but you know that now that is impossible. I am very far away, in Germany, and to come back, it would take me at least a week by train....non-stop. It is very cold here. We have already had snow. But I'm fine (...)*

*Sunday, 18<sup>th</sup> February 1940*

*My dear Soledad,*

*In the small café in the town there is a jukebox and they often play a song, French of course, and when I hear it, it always feels as if it is you singing it. The song goes like this:*

*"J'attendrai, le jour et la nuit . J'attendrai toujours ton retour. J'attendrai ..."*

*Which means:*

*"I will wait, day and night. I will wait for you to come home. I will wait..."*

*I can see you, with our children, thinking about me, almost pronouncing the same words as the song.*



2 | 3. Stills from the feature film *Song to a lady in the shadow* (2022)