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Searching for Ramuntcho: foreign filmmakers in the French Basque Country

Abstract

Since the earliest days of the cinema, the French Basque Country has been a place of pilgrimage for great filmmakers from different nations. Since the XIX century Romantic travellers and intellectuals had portrayed it as an exotic, timeless and differentiated *topos*. Following in their wake the cinema, with its immense capacity for symbolic representation, contributed to popularizing a mythical image of Basqueness, an image that was finally even adopted by the inhabitants of the place themselves. Through an historical analysis of three documentaries made by three great directors and produced in three European countries in the first half of the XX century, this article sets out to describe the filmic origin of that often hegemonic Basque imaginary based on a rural arcadia, understand how it was produced and highlight the different readings made of it; thus reaffirming the complex polysemy of that image of Basqueness.

Keywords

Cinema, history, French Basque Country, imaginary, Romanticism

1. Introduction

From the very start of cinema down to the present, the French Basque Country has been captured a thousand and one times on the big screen by filmmakers proceeding from different parts of the world. One of the first films in the history of the seventh art, *Le rochers de la vierge*, was shot in Biarritz by the Lumière brothers in 1896, only one year after the invention of the cinematograph. Since then the landscapes and people of this region of the Atlantic Pyrenees have attracted innumerable filmmakers, who in most cases have filmed it as an exotic and culturally differentiated place.

In recent decades, different authors have referred to this filmic tradition (Unsain, 1985; Zunzunegui, 1985; Izagirre, 1997; De Pablo, 2012; Martínez, 2015). Furthermore, some of these films have recently been screened again, after their rediscovery by Basque filmmakers and spectators. For example, the 2015 edition of *Punto de Vista* (Point of View), the International Festival of Documentary Cinema of Navarre,

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included a cycle titled *Chez les Basques* (At Home with the Basques). This consisted in projecting films made in or about the French Basque Country over the course of the XX century by filmmakers of the stature of Louis Delluc, Orson Welles, Otar Ioselliani and Huber Knapp. The Festival introduced the films that were shown as follows:

The cycle titled *Chez les Basques* brings together for the first time the important documentary legacy that has focused on life in the corner of South West France that joins Bayonne to Hendaye and Mauléon to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port on a map that has the Atlantic and the Pyrenees as its frontiers. Since the start of cinema few places in the world can boast of having a host of internationally recognised filmmakers who, decade after decade, have gone there to portray the life and culture of one of the oldest living peoples of Europe. That ethnographic interest, which goes beyond the folkloric and is totally removed from the political, is what is sketched by the selection (*Chez les Basques*, 2015).

It is striking that practically all of the twelve titles that were screened shared an identical vision of the filmic subject: an ancestral, almost primitive country, possessing an old culture at risk of dying out, which it proudly holds onto in a vain struggle against time. In this article, I will tackle the origin of that imaginary about Basqueness that is so widespread outside the country and at times even inside it, its representation in the cinema, as well as the different meanings that have been attributed to it, according to the time and the ideology of the spectator.

For that purpose I analyse three of the documentaries: *Au Pays des Basques*, made by Maurice Champreux in the 1930s for Gaumont, the big French producer; *Im lande der Basken*, made by Herbert Brieger in the 1940s for UFA, the German state production company; and *The Land of the Basques*, made by Orson Welles in the 1950s for British television. Apart from reasons of space (it would be impossible to analyse all the films of the cycle in the necessary depth in the space available), these three documentaries were selected because they speak about the country in general (not about one of its aspects), and they were made by famous directors proceeding from three European countries, funded by important producers and filmed in different periods. That is, a French film from the 1930s, a German film from the 1940s and a British film from the 1950s, all of which share an almost identical title.

Employing an historical approach, I analyse the following diachronically: the origin and main features of the foreign Romantic imaginary about Basqueness; the context of the films' production and the filmmakers' motivations; the symbolic representation of the French Basque Country that they provide; the echoes and different readings they aroused in spectators. To that end, besides repeatedly viewing the documentaries in the Fimoteca Vasca, primary and secondary sources were used. A bibliographical, newspaper and epistolary¹ analysis was made of the subject and interviews were conducted with people close to the films: Maurice Champreux's son, Jacques Champreux, in Paris (January 2013) and the North American child who plays the role of Orson Welles' *guide*, Chris Wertenbaker, by means of a written questionnaire (December 2015).

2. Imagining the "Indians of the Pyrenees"

The coming of Romanticism marked a great change of historical cycle for the image of the Basque Country, resulting in its inclusion on the cultural map of European intellectuals and the invention of a whole exogenous narrative on its difference. In that sense, practically from the outset the Romantic ideology converted the Basques into a literary subject. Johann

¹ The correspondence of Maurice Champreux and notes on the filming of *Au pays des Basques*, documents of Jacques Champreux, donated to the Fimoteca Vasca in January 2013.

Gottfried Herder, one of the fathers of cultural relativism, while assigning to each people a *Volkgeist* arising from its language and popular culture, urged the Basques to create their own literature, following the model of the Scottish renaissance (Herder, 1784-1791: 161). That was the context in which novels were written in the Basque Country like *Peru Abarka* (J. Mogel, 1802), whose protagonist Peru, an illiterate, Basque-speaking peasant, has been seen as “the proto-nationalist hero of Basque difference” (Apalategi, 2013).

However, it was unquestionably Wilhelm von Humboldt who, through his studies on Euskera (the Basque language) and the Basques, was to mark a turning point in the discourse on *Basqueness*. This Prussian intellectual, after several journeys to the place, was fascinated by “The Country of the Basques” (sic). Convinced that he had found the oldest language in Europe in the Pyrenees, he wrote an abundant literature about it, providing a Romantic vision that was to be taken up again by many intellectuals and travellers from then onwards. Humboldt wrote about what he saw as follows:

Hidden amongst mountains, a people lives on the two sides of the Western Pyrenees that has conserved its primitive language over a series of long centuries and, to a large extent as well, its old regime and customs... Even in more modern times, torn into two very unequal parts and subordinated to very powerful nations, the Basques have nonetheless not renounced their way of being in any way. The Basques have always conserved the peculiarity of their national character, and above all the old spirit of freedom and independence, which was already extolled by Greeks and Romans (Humboldt, 1801).

In reality this fascination with the Basque Country was in part preceded by a fascination with Spain, the favourite destination of Romantic travellers in search of adventures in exotic lands. “Africa starts in the Pyrenees”, wrote Alexandre Dumas, referring to the Iberian Peninsula. And clearly, the Basque Country, a transit route since remote times, became an obligatory stopping point. Over the course of the XIX century writers like Victor Hugo, Prosper Mérimée and Gustave Flaubert thus arrived in the Basque Country on their way to Spain and wrote of their impressions and experiences; as did dozens of anthropologists, archaeologists and linguists, attracted by the mystery of “the Basque race”.

According to Zulaika (1996) it was these European intellectuals coming on pilgrimages over the decades who wrote, before the natives themselves, the discourse of Basque national difference. They were the ones who discovered the “Indians of Europe” in the Pyrenees and constructed a narrative that by highlighting certain cultural features (the language with its mysterious origin, the race, the rich folklore and mythology, religiousness, the customs and rites of traditional life...) and concealing others (life in the cities, the class struggle, the incipient industrialisation of some areas), converted the Basques into a “living ethnographic museum”. Thus, in Zulaika’s opinion, “every Basque is to a certain extent a Basque invented by cultural anthropology” (1996: 8).

2.1. *Ramuntcho, a Basque Nanook*

Amongst the travellers and scientists, there were those like Pierre Loti who decided to remain in the country, bewitched by its “*authenticity*”. This writer, a great lover of the exotic (he was also enamoured of Turkey and oriental cultures), lived for a long time in Hendaye and in 1897 published his novel *Ramuntcho*, which was set in the Basque Country. This immediately became a great bestseller; it was constantly reprinted and a dozen film adaptations were made.

The story, set in the small village of Ascain, recounts the typically Romantic, impossible love between Ramuntchu (a young fisherman and smuggler, a bit primitive and very proud of being Basque) and the young Gaxuxa. Theirs is a world full of beautiful red and white

houses, situated between the blue sea and green hills. As described by Loti, the life of the Basques is lived between the frontier, the fronton and the church, between respect for traditions, communion with the land and a peaceful religiousness. According to this imaginary that was soon widely accepted (incidentally becoming a tourist lure for the Côte Basque of Biarritz and its surroundings), the Basque Country was a “pure” or “authentic” world, into which the elements of modernity had still not been introduced (industry, class struggle... or even the French language); a “primitive” world, outside the passage of time. “The years pass, but nonetheless, things do not change” (1897: 76), wrote Loti in his novel. However, beyond the fictions of timelessness, time inevitably passed and changes took place. That is why *Ramuntchu*, like all the Romantic literature on Basqueness, exudes an air of melancholy for a world that really is disappearing.² The nostalgic feeling of facing a culture in its death throes was to be the principal *leitmotif* of that imaginary about Basqueness made fashionable by European travellers and scientists and symbolically incarnated by *Ramuntchu*, the “Nanook of the North” of the Basque people.

2.2. *Costumbrist painting*

Just as in literature, the Romantic taste for popular culture also found expression in the visual arts, concretely in painting. Throughout the XIX century in many European countries there was a certain fashion for costumbrist themes, based on an idealised vision of rural life, traditions and folklore, counterposed to those of the city and industrialisation. This type of paintings, greatly liked by the bourgeoisie, showed simple scenes of peasant life as if they were postcards.

In the Spanish Basque Country there were numerous painters who developed regionalist themes, giving rise to a pictorial tradition that lasted for decades and helping to popularise the imaginary about Basqueness created by scientists and writers. According to Manterola their work contributed decisively “to strengthening a belief about a lost society, a happy world adorned with all the data constructed by Romantic utopias: natural, simple, harmonious and beautiful”. With the result that this held

“the chief responsibility for shaping a biotype of the Basque man with such highly defined morphological features that not even the studies of Aranzadii or Barandiarán would have made it prosper without the presence and success achieved by paintings like the one depicting the “Layadores” by Arteta or the powerful and solemn god of the sea “El marinero vasco Santhi Andia” by Ramón de Zubiaurre” (Manterola, 1985).

Without any doubt, the paintings of artists like Zubiaurre and Arteta, but especially those of Ramiro Arrue (who lived for many years in the French Basque Country), served as an inspiration for foreign filmmakers who came to portray Basque life. The visual motifs had been created, all that was needed was to set them in motion.

3. The Indians of the Pyrenees on screen

The scientific, literary and visual imaginary bequeathed by Romanticism and the French Basque Country’s relative proximity to Paris soon made it into a special destination for the cinema. It should be recalled that at the start of the XX century Biarritz had become a distinguished tourist centre frequented by the wealthy classes of all Europe, since South West France offered great visual possibilities (sea, mountains and exoticism) without the need to make long journeys. Thus, while in the XIX century books and paintings shaped and popularised the image of “the land of Ramuntcho and the Indians of the Pyrenees”, the

² Already in 1867, the anarchist geographer Elisée Reclus had written his book *Les basques, un peuple qui s’en va*.

cinema, with its unrivalled power of reaching the masses and showing “the real” in movement, was to end up widely disseminating this image.

In those early years the Spanish Basque Country also attracted filmmakers. This was logical given that, besides sharing culture, language and landscape with the north, San Sebastián was also an important tourist destination. Thus, according to professors Letamendi and Seguin:

The number of films shot in the Basque Country during the first two years of the cinematograph's existence is unusually high with respect to other territories and of better quality, because nearly all the images were captured with the most perfect camera and film of the time: those of the Lumière firm (2000: 26).

However, little by little, films with a Basque theme became increasingly concentrated to the north of the Pyrenees. This was probably because the French zone was a more favourable place for the image they sought to project: both from the social point of view (unlike Biscay and Gipuzkoa, there was no presence of industrialisation and the picturesque way of life was more in evidence), and from the political point of view (there was no nationalism and, as a result, there was no repression of Basque difference; while in Spain the dictatorships of Primo de Rivera and Franco were very belligerent). If to these factors we add the fact that the film culture and industry of France (the country where cinema was born) was much more advanced than that of Spain, it is not surprising that until Franco's death the brand image of the Basque Country was manufactured in the French Basque Country above all. However, many films alluded to the country's existing on both sides of the Pyrenees and some even included scenes shot in the south, basically in coastal towns and Gernika.

Of the dozens of films dedicated over the course of the XX century to the French Basque Country, or to some of its favourite elements (pelota, music and dance, frontier-smuggling, emigration), the following, which only include documentaries, can be mentioned: *Noce au Pays Basque* (Pathé, 1913), *Le chemin d'Ernoa* (Louis Delluc, 1921), *Au Pays des Basques* (Maurice Champreux, 1930), *Im Baskenlande* (H. Körösi, 1931), *Euzkadi* (René Le Haff, 1936), *Im lande der Basken* (Herbest Brieger, 1944) *Der Basken* (director and date unknown); *Das Volk der Basken* (director and date unknown), *The Basques and their Country* (Raymond Bricon-Walt Disney, 1955), *The Land of the Basques* (Orson Welles, 1955), *The Basque Pelote* (Orson Welles, 1955) *Le curé basque de Gréciette* (Hubert Knapp, 1958), *Euskal Herrian* (E. Naillon, 1959), *Retour aux Pyrénées* (Jean Faurez, 1960), *Basque River* (Matthew Nathan, 1960), *Euskadi été 1982* (Otar Ioselliani, 1982), *Pays Basque* (David, Pritchard, 1987). Unfortunately many of these films remain lost and we only know of their existence through the press, film catalogues or censorship files from the period.

I will now analyse three documentaries that were conserved and have been screened in different contexts in recent years. They were made in different decades by recognised filmmakers from different countries, but they share many elements: even to the extent of having an almost identical title. They are *Au Pays des Basques* (Maurice Champreux, 1930), *Im lande der Basken* (Herbest Brieger, 1944) and *The Land of the Basques* (Orson Welles, 1955).

3.1. *Au Pays des Basques*

At the start of 1930, barely a few months after the release of the first sound film in France (*Les trois masques* by André Hugon), the powerful firm Gaumont Film Aubert set up a documentary project in order to exploit the new form of making cinema. The Basque Country, rich in mysterious songs and exotic, popular music, was an attractive subject. Thus, taking the book *Le Pays des Basques* by Gaetan de Bernoville as a literary starting point, the idea of a film about the Basques was hatched in Paris.

According to the producer's advertising this work was to be "*parlant et chantant*" (spoken and sung). In reality, however, since this was in the midst of the transition from silent to sound film, practically the whole soundtrack was to consist of music: there would be no dialogues and the narration was developed using the typical intertitles of silent cinema. In any case, it was an ambitious project, to the extent of being the first French film shot entirely outside the studios in natural exteriors.

Gaetan de Bernoville (Saint-Jean-de-Luz, 1889 – Paris, 1960) was a renowned writer of French Basque origin based in Paris. Editor of the journal *Les Lettres*, he was later to become an academician of the French language. An ardent Catholic and admirer of Carlism, he wrote half a dozen books about his native Basque Country, cultivating the melancholy and exoticism made fashionable by Loti. Shortly after the publication of his *Le Pays des Basques*, the director of documentaries at Gaumont, Jean Fauguère, proposed that it should be made into a film and Bernoville accepted at once. The production firm entrusted the making of the film to Maurice Champreux, a promising filmmaker working for the company ("Au Pays des Basques. Comment est né le film. Ses caractéristiques et son esprit", 1930).

Apart from the fact that his father-in-law Louis Feuillade had made a short film in 1913 titled *Drame au Pays Basque*, Champreux (Paris, 1893 – Paris, 1976) had no connection with the Basque Country. Nonetheless, at the time he was an experienced filmmaker. After being wounded in the Great War and receiving a certificate for invalidity, he began his career in the cinema with the help of Feuillade and by 1930 he had already been involved in over twenty of Gaumont's feature films.

Following its release, Champreux declared in press statements that the beauty of the Basque Country had captivated him from the very beginning. In his opinion the Basques lived in perfect harmony with nature and for that reason were admirable. His completely idealised gaze left little room for nuances:

One afternoon while I contemplated the Ascaïn, I saw a peasant with his ox-drawn cart appear, coming down out of the hills that surround the village. The man held a stick over his back, following the family tradition. His outstretched arms seemed to embrace the landscape and he gave the impression of a calm strength, which impregnated all the surrounding nature. His singing rose. Music, the language of feelings. I didn't understand the words, but nonetheless I felt what he described. [...]

I understood what incomparable artists these peasants were, expressing the soul of the country with such happiness in their songs, and I thought that those melodies should be indissolubly united to the images of the Basque Country, on pain of depriving it of all its meaning. ("Les artistes et le Pays Basque: Maurice Champreux", 1931).

Asked about his father's motivations, the son of the filmmaker, the actor Jacques Champreux, gave me a very graphic summary of the origin of this mythical gaze. "My father came to the Basque Country because he had seen Nanook of the North" (Champreux, 2013). Thus, for the Parisian filmmaker, the young shepherd of Ascaïn was the European equivalent of the Inuit Nanook, filmed by Flaherty: a likeable native who lives in harmony with nature, away from civilization.

Au Pays des Basques was shot in May and June 1930, mainly in the interior of the French Basque Country. Some towns on the Spanish Basque coast were also filmed, as well as Gernika, the symbolic capital of the Basques on both sides of the Pyrenees. Several press articles of that time drew attention to the fact that what could be seen on the screen were "true Basques" involved in their everyday labours, and not professional actors interpreting a role. In this way they wished to emphasise the film's "authenticity"; it starred authentic natives representing themselves.

A daring and innovative film. No studio actors. All of them are people of the land and sea, filmed live at work and play. No tricks. The director's art has consisted in respecting, understanding and selecting the most direct and harmonious movements of nature. The Basque songs that sustain and explain the images are the same ones that normally accompany everyday work and popular fiestas. The Basque character contributed a spontaneous collaboration to this attentive will to capture naturalness. This small people is so naturally itself that, when facing a lens or a microphone, it does not "pose". It simply continues doing what it does every day. ("Au Pays des Basques. Comment est né le film. Ses caractéristiques et son esprit", 1930).

The final result was a 40-minute documentary, highly accomplished in technical terms, which exudes a deeply nostalgic air. A melancholic gaze directed at a "pure" world that is condemned to disappear. Without a classical structure of beginning, development and denouement, the film is made up of a series of beautiful landscapes of the different historical provinces and typical scenes of Basque traditional life, filmed harmoniously.

The first scene is representative of the whole film, since in a certain way it summarises the elements and symbols that are associated with Basqueness. After the opening titles, we see a map of Euskal Herria (The Basque Country – the seven Basque provinces on the two sides of the Pyrenees). The camera focuses on the province of Biscay, where we can read "Gernika". In the Assembly House of the town, some twenty men are prostrated before the Tree of Gernika, dressed in traditional costume for the occasion. In unison they remove their berets and sing the hymn *Gernikako arbola*. Next, the leaves of the sacred oak merge into the first image of the following scene. This shows the young shepherd of Ascain, about whom Champreux had spoken to the press. Carrying a stick across his shoulders, he leads a pair of oxen in a mountainous landscape. An intertitle explains that "The Basque soul is a simple one, full of life and pride, just like the Basque mountains". A close-up of the shepherd's eyes merges with the waves of the Cantabrian Sea, suggesting freedom in the depths of his gaze. After the *Basque man*, we are introduced to the *Basque woman*, and another intertitle tells us that "the women have the fragile grace of corn when it is in flower".

The rest of the film continues in the same bucolic tone, with written explanations of a poetic type. We are thus shown the most clichéd places and customs of the Basque Romantic imaginary, accompanied on the soundtrack by songs in Euskera sung by Basque choirs. The result is a melancholic vision of a type of rural and fishing arcadia, inhabited by pleasant and good people; the last representatives of an ancestral culture.

The following are other visual motifs that appear in *Au Pays des Basques*:

- The farmhouse (*baserr*).
- A people that sings. We see a youth coming down from the hills with his donkey while he sings the song "*Ikusten duzu goizean*"³. At the end of the song he shouts an *irrintzina*⁴.
- Religiousness. We see bells ringing in different churches of the country.
- Artisanal work: espadrilles of Maule and the *makhila*⁵.
- Dance and traditional music. *Txistularis* (flautists) and *dantzaris* (dancers).
- Fishing. We see elderly fishermen in the coastal towns. Women selling fish in the harbour.

³A song that pays tribute to the family house and the Basque family system, repeating the clichés of the Romantic imaginary about Basqueness. Written by the popular poet Jean Baptiste Elissamburu (1828–1891), it became a type of hymn to the good Basque. It appears in other documentary films that depict the life of the Basques in a similar way, such as *Sinfonía Vasca* (Adolf Trotz, 1936).

⁴A characteristic shout of the Basques, it can have a festive or combative character.

⁵A traditional Basque walking stick, a symbol of great honour. Carefully produced by a few artisans, it contains a type of sharp knife inside.

- Transmission of culture. Symbolised by the fire in the family house. We see the kitchen of the farmhouse, the central place in the house. There, next to the fire, the grandmother sews and the mother sings a lullaby to a newly born child.
- The frontier and smuggling. We see a group of men cross the border at night, pursued by the police.
- Funeral rites. Discoid steles. We see the rite at which the first-born tells the bees of the death of the father and that he will replace him as the head of the house.
- Emigration. The departure for America of the sons who do not inherit the farmhouse.
- Pelota, a national and popular game. We see different modalities in different frontons, practiced by everyone.
- The Cantabrian Sea as a symbol of the courage and original freedom of the Basques.

The film closes with wild waves on the coast at Biarritz.

The film was premiered on 12 December 1930 at a gala organised by Gaumont in the Champs Elisées Theatre in Paris. It was introduced by Leon Berard, the senator for the Basses-Pyrénées (the region of which the French Basque Country forms part), at that time Minister of Justice of the Republic, who told a hall full of illustrious guests: “You will see a country and a people” (Marca, 1931).

In 1932 the film arrived in Spain with the title *En el País Vasco* (In the Basque Country) (Cerdan, 1998: 101) and was successfully screened in the provincial capitals of the Spanish Basque Country. After the Civil War, it once again passed the censor and was released in cinemas for a second time in the 1940s (Heinink, 1986). On the other hand, according to diverse sources, it was released in Argentina in 1934, where it was very well received by the Basque diaspora that had settled there.

But apart from being well-distributed, as befits a film of its category, what is most striking are the different readings made of what was shown on the screen, depending on the ideology and origin of the spectators. Like senator Berard, all of them saw “a country and a people”. However, antagonistic political meanings were attributed to that cultural vision.

What the French press saw above all was a “great tourist advertising film” (“Les artistes et le Pays Basque: Maurice Champreux”, 1931) and a discourse that ennobled France, a country rich in “special features”. The critic of *Le Griffon Cinématographique* declared that “this is a film that makes us love France” and he wondered about the need to go elsewhere in search of Nanook when they already had their own “good savages” in the French hexagon. “Why escape outside our own frontiers, when we have all the grace, all the fiery savageness, all the varieties of heaven and earth?” (Faneuse, 1931).

On the other side of the frontier, however, Basque nationalists gave a completely different meaning to the film. In Argentina the magazine *Nación Vasca* spoke of an “incomparable documentary film” that fully tied in with the national construction of the Basque homeland, calling it a “living exhibition of the rebirth of the Basque people” (“Naskaldija”, 1934). Father Donostia, a well-known musician and folklorist based in Paris at that time, wrote about it as follows:

Au Pays des Basques is marvellous. Not only because of its materially irreproachable photography, but because the Basque Country is expressed there with a reality, with a truth, which can be confirmed by those of us who live in and are from the Country [...] Not a word is heard in a foreign language during the hour and a half that it passes before our eyes. Everything is sung and spoken in Euskera (Donostia, 1931).

With time this admiration of the Basque nationalists resulted in the recurrent inclusion of images from *Au Pays des Basques* in different nationalist films. The latter were often very modest and amateur productions that benefitted from the beautiful, pristine shots of the Gaumont film. Thus, it is possible to see shots from *Au Pays des Basques* in films like *Guernika* (Nemesio Sobrevila, 1937), or *Los Hijos de Guernica* (Segundo Cazalis, 1968), amongst others.

With respect to the French Basques themselves: how did they see the film? According to a press report of the premiere, at least those who were present in the Champs Élisées Theatre recognised themselves and their country in the images. So much so that when the Basques on the screen shouted an *irrintzina*, they were answered by loud *irrintzinas* from the Basques amongst the public in the hall (Marca, 1931).

3.2. *Im lande der Basken*

The occupation of France by the Germans in 1940 left the French Basque Country divided into two zones: the eastern part of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port was a “free zone” under the Vichy regime, while the west (including the coast and the capital Bayonne) was under German occupation.

While South West France was not a battlefield during the Second World War, the four years that the occupation lasted for were a period of tense calm in the French Basque Country. Although it was an apparently peaceful territory governed by traditionalist forces that supported Pétain, its geographical position on the frontier with a neutral country, together with the presence of Spanish Basque refugees (basically nationalists) who had fled from the Civil War, made it into a rear-guard with significant underground activity.

In that context, some Nazi intellectuals and politicians became interested in the local culture. In reality this interest was nothing new given that since Humboldt study of the Basques, their race and their culture had been a constant subject of interest in German scientific literature. However, during the period of the III Reich with its racist ideology such interest was able to suggest new political meanings, according to De Pablo and Sandoval (2008).

In fact the research done by these two historians in the German film archives uncovered the existence of several films from that period dedicated to the Basques and, most importantly, Sandoval found a copy of one of them: a documentary from 1944 titled *Im lande der Basken*.

This was a 13-minute short film directed by Doctor Herbert Brieger, who was a renowned filmmaker from that period, a specialist in cultural documentaries and a member of the Nazi party. It followed in the wake of the Romantic vision of Basqueness, providing a cultural image that is very similar to *Au Pays des Basques*, and lacked political references. Even so, the fact that it was a film produced by UFA, the German state production company, and that the credits include the name of the Nazi leader Victor Von Ihne (head of Hitler's private chancellery from 1933 to 1944) could indicate, according to De Pablo and Sandoval, that *Im lande der Basken* responded to something more than a mere cinematographic and anthropological interest in Basqueness.

Leaving aside political hypotheses about the reasons for its production, what an analysis of the film does show – apart from certain features that denote the period in which it was filmed (particularly the interest in discoid shields and symbols) – is the vision of an exotic and primitive French Basque Country, which is in proud possession of a different language and culture. A discourse that is more reminiscent of Humboldt than Nazi ideology.

The commentary of the narrator that accompanies the images points in that direction. The film starts with the following phrase: “The wild and broken terrain of the Pyrenees is the land of the Basques. Scientists have not yet managed to get to the bottom of their

language, uses and customs. The international bridge at Hendaye is half French, half Spanish”. And a similar sentence is reserved for the end: “That is how the life of the Basques goes by, in dark woods and steep valleys. A life plagued with secrets about their origins. An existence full of melancholy and solitude, like the land that has been their home for centuries, full of strength and ferocity like the sea of Biscay”.

Apart from that, the film shows different scenes of the Romantic imaginary about Basqueness, repeating visual motifs already seen in *Au Pays des Basques* almost like a carbon copy. According to Brieger’s film:

- The Basques are fishermen, with a glorious past as pioneers of whale hunting.
- The farmhouse is the “pride” of the Basques. Within it, the place of honour is the seat in the kitchen (next to the fire) occupied by the master of the house (*etxeko jauna*).
- The Basques are also shepherds and livestock farmers; they love animals.
- They have ancestral rites and funeral symbols. A deep sense of religiousness is transmitted through discoid steles and the ringing of church bells. They also have a deep sense of honour, symbolised by the *makhila*.
- Pelota, in its different modalities and with its own rites and codes, “*is the national game of the Basques*”. Everyone plays it, as we see in the images. Children, the elderly and even priests in their cassocks.
- “National dances” are also very popular. The *arin-arin*, the *mutxikoak* and the *fandango* are referred to. We see two couples dancing the fandango, accompanied by an accordionist.

The last images of the film are also similar to the end of *Au Pays des Basques*, with the wild waves of the Biarritz coast. As can be seen, there is a very strong resemblance between the two films. There are of course differences. Brieger’s work is more modest and superficial than Champreux’s. Besides its shorter length, this is apparent in the soundtrack, which is composed of generic music without reference to Basqueness (with the only exception of the *fandango*); or in the inclusion of shots of mountains, viaducts and villages that are not from the French Basque Country.

According to De Pablo and Sandoval’s research, *Im lande der Basken* was rated as excellent by the censor (2008: 158). Bearing in mind that the copy found by Sandoval was subtitled in Czech, and that UFA used to distribute its productions in all the countries occupied by Germany, it is likely that a wide distribution awaited it. However, Brieger’s film was released in 1944, one year before the fall of the III Reich; which is why, according to all indications, *Im lande der Basken* did not have a long commercial life and remained lost in the archives for decades.

Following Sandoval’s discovery of a copy, and the study he made with De Pablo (2008), the film began to be watched again, six decades later. Thanks to the work of these historians, it was available for some time in the Fimoteca Vasca, but it was following the production of the documentary *Una esvástica sobre el Bidasoa* (A Swastika over the Bidasoa) (A. Andrés - J. Barajas, 2013), which spoke about the film and the Nazi presence in the French Basque Country, that it acquired real notoriety.

Following the discovery of *Im lande der Basken*, *Una esvástica sobre el Bidasoa* explored the relations between the Nazis who occupied the French Basque Country and the Basque nationalists of the PNV (*Partido Nacionalista Vasco* – Basque Nationalist Party). In spite of the film’s finally reaching the conclusion that there was no great connection between the two, and much less any collaboration, Brieger’s film led to some Spanish news media opposed to Basque nationalism publishing articles like “Nazis in berets, the race that Hitler and the PNV dreamed of” (Zurro, 2013), “The Basque Country formed part of the strategy of the III Reich” (Arrizabalaga, 2013) or “The Nazis wanted to give independence to the Basque Country”

(Ribera, 2015). The fact that the Germans of the 1940s were (also) interested in the Basque Country and portrayed the Basques as a people thus became a proof of the racist character of Basque nationalism.

3.3. *The Land of the Basques*

While the 1930s saw the release of a French documentary called *Au Pays des Basques* and the 1940s a German documentary called *Im lande der Basken*, it was the turn of the British in the 1950s. Thus, the documentary *The Land of the Basques* was broadcast on British television in 1955. In reality, although produced in the United Kingdom, it was the work of a North American director: Orson Welles himself. In order to make use of the material shot in the Basque Country that had to be omitted due to the 30 minute format imposed by television broadcasting, Welles made a second documentary on the Basques: *The Basque Pelote*.

Although it is widely believed that Welles directed these documentaries for the BBC, the truth is that it was the commercial channel ITV that bought them from the producer Associated Rediffusion and broadcast them in 1955 (Berthomé, 2006). One year previously it had become possible to create private television channels in the United Kingdom and ITV (Independent Television) had thus emerged, following the American model.

The idea of a series of documentaries directed by Orson Welles that would show different corners of the planet began to receive consideration in the early 1950s, but did not materialize until spring 1955. This was when, facing the new television market that had opened in the United Kingdom, the famous director of *Citizen Kane* signed a contract with Associated Rediffusion to make 28 documentaries each lasting 30 minutes for ITV. The series was to be called *Around the World with Orson Welles*.

In reality, rather than the places, the main protagonist was Orson Welles himself. With his overwhelming personality and his worldwide fame he became an irresistible lure for the British public. It was as if he had come face-to-face with the spectators, showing them the places and speaking to them directly in a relaxed way, while smoking a cigar like a charming gentleman.

The majority of the destinations chosen by Welles were big cities, where he demonstrated that he also had an enormous talent for making documentaries; in the shooting (involving more than one camera), in the rhythm and as an interviewer. According to Berthomé and Thomas, the television experience enabled him to experiment with new forms of narrating.

Television, to which he dedicated his efforts in parallel to the cinema from 1955 onwards, provided Welles with a new field for experimentation. His conviction was that it should not be seen as a dramatic form but as a narrative form. Following the line of his radiophonic work and the films of Sacha Guitry, an influence he himself recognised, he took the role of first person narrator, seeking to communicate directly with the spectator (Berthomé, 2006:198).

Due to disagreements with the producer, only six of the 28 episodes he had signed up for were completed. These were broadcast every two weeks starting in the autumn of 1955. It was precisely *The Land of the Basques* that opened the series on October 7th, followed two weeks later by the second episode, *The Basque Pelote*, also set in the Basque Country. Welles worked with the same team in all the documentaries: the director of photography was the Frenchman Alain Pol and the editing was done by Colette Cueille and Michelle Daviden (Berthomé, 2006).

In the opinion of Bernardo Atxaga, it was pigeon hunting in border villages like Etxalar, Sara, Osquiche or Aldude that possibly led to Orson Welles' taking an interest in the Basques. The North American writer Charles Wertenbaker, a friend of the filmmaker who had settled with his family in Ciboure, had written an article in *The New Yorker* in 1950 on

this Basque technique for catching pigeons with nets, something unique in the world. Welles himself explained admiringly in the film that the Basques caught pigeons in the sky just as others caught fish in the sea.

Wertenbaker died of cancer in Paris in 1955. As a result, according to Atxaga, Welles decided to dedicate one of his documentaries to the French Basque Country in order to pay tribute to his friend, who had lived there with his wife and children, and to speak about pigeon hunting (Atxaga, 2015). On the contrary, Charles' son, Chris Wertenbaker, recalls that Welles "hired" his mother (the writer Lael Tucker Wertenbaker) to write the screenplay for the documentary and to show him around the country, although she does not appear in the credits (Wertenbaker, 2015). Certainly, Lael and above all Chris play a prominent role in the film, since Welles interviews them and it is through them, English-speakers residing in that remote and primitive place, that the filmmaker is able to discover the idiosyncrasy of the Basques.

Concretely, the boy, Chris, plays an almost shaman-like role as the intermediary between two worlds: the civilized English-speaking world of Welles and the spectators, from which the boy himself proceeds, and the primitive world of the Basques, in which he lives. Welles needed him in order to penetrate into this latter world, to translate it to him so that he could understand it. In addition to Chris Wertenbaker and his mother, Welles interviews other English-speaking witnesses from the place itself, like the emigrant who has returned from Colorado. He also belongs to two worlds. In North America he had a lorry and even a television. Nonetheless, he preferred to return in order to marry a Basque woman.

Orson Welles' imaginary about the Basques is summed up at the start of *The Land of the Basques* and was repeated in the second episode of the series *The Basque Pelote*. We see a camera pointing at us and hear Welles' voice "This is Orson Welles behind the camera. A camera focused for this program on a fairly out-of-the-way and little-known corner of Europe: the Land of the Basques". The filmmaker then appears, looking at the Basque mountains that divide France and Spain, and the customs post with gendarmes and civil guardsmen on each side. Welles continues: "We've placed this camera directly on an international border. Over on that side is the ancient kingdom of Navarre, and there, where the low Pyrenees start ambling down to the sea, is France. It's still pretty heavily guarded up here and until quite a time after the war in Spain this border was closed tight, a sort of miniature iron curtain". The camera shows a slow panoramic shot of the mountains, as if there were no "natural" frontier and Welles' voice in off stresses that, "But in war or peace, all times are new to the people who actually live up here, this border has always been more of a theory than a fact. A theory of the French and Spanish governments whose vigilant customs officers patrol it". Next, entering the squares of the small villages of Iholdy and Ossès, we see "the Basques". Elderly people playing the card game *mus*, youths playing pelota, a robust man who shouts an *irrintzina*, etc. Meanwhile, Welles relates:

The people who live here are neither French nor Spanish. They are Basques. The rise and fall of other kingdoms, other republics, has never made them forget it, that they are Basques. And that Basques are... what Basques are. Well, what is a Basque? All we know for sure is what a Basque is not. Besides not being French or Spanish, a Basque is not Mediterranean, Alpine, Magyar, Celtic, Germanic, Semitic, nor Scandinavian; he isn't even Arian. Nobody knows who his ancestors were. According to him, Adam and Eve were pure Basques. And it's true his position is something like the Red Indians of America, he's an aboriginal. He was in Europe before the other Europeans came along. To this day he speaks his own weird language, a tongue no expert has ever been able to trace.

From this opening scene on, the rest of the film follows paths that we are already familiar with: the question of emigration to America; the importance that maintaining their language and culture holds for the Basques; the role of the family house and the family

(“basic social structure”), and especially the role of the Basque woman; as well as the popularity of the *fandango* and pelota as the national dance and sport practiced by everyone. These are some of the themes that Welles deals with, as Champreux and Brieger had done before.

This is an imaginary that can be summed up in the words of the song that all the children of Ciboure play on their bandurrias in the music group of the local school: “*Haurrak ikasazue*”. Chris Wertenbaker, as a child from the town, also takes part and translates its meaning for Welles: “*Haurrak ikasazue euskaraz mintzatzen, ongi pilotan eta oneski dantzatzan*”⁶ This is the nucleus of the “Basque being”: the language, dance, pelota and, in short, the intergenerational transmission of the past to the present.

It is hard to gauge how Welles’ work was received when it was broadcast in 1955: there are no audience figures available for the time and it seems that it wasn’t broadcast again for many years. According to Chris Wertenbaker, he and his mother had understood that Welles was unable to finish the work due to lack of funds and that the film was never shown. This was until the 1990s, when a friend living in England phoned him to say that the BBC was showing a documentary by Orson Welles in which he appeared aged 11 (Wertenbaker, 2015). Whatever the case, from the 1990s onwards Welles’ two films on the Basques had a “second life”. In France a DVD was published with all the episodes of the series; in 2004 Julio Medem used several fragments of the films in his documentary *The Basque Ball*; and following their appearance on Internet via YouTube the films have been frequently viewed, cited and commented on in order to speak of *Basqueness*, although not always with the same meaning.

Sometimes they were seen as cinematographic “*gems*”, at other times as simple curiosities, almost as an extravaganza by the great Welles, and on the majority of occasions they served as an authoritative argument for patriotic sectors to defend the nationality of the Basque people. “How can we not be a nation if even the great Orson Welles said that we are?” (Paia, 2009). In short, the Basques once again defined themselves on the basis of a portrait made of them by a prestigious foreigner.

4. By way of conclusion

Throughout the XX century the French Basque Country was a place that was visited and filmed at length by prestigious filmmakers; a filmic tradition that began at the very start of the history of cinema and has continued down to the present. The second half of the century saw the appearance of foreign documentaries on Basque issues that focused on the political violence, like *Euskadi hors d'état* by Arthur MacCaig, released in 1983. On the other hand, the French Basque Country was almost always excluded from this question, with the result that from the silent cinema until today the greater part of its filmic vision has answered to a bucolic and timeless image of “the Indians of Europe”. Proof of this is that the writing of this article coincided with the release of the documentary *Hitz egín / Faire la parole* about the French Basques. Directed by the renowned North American filmmaker and writer Eugen Green, it fits in perfectly with this imaginary.

This article has examined three documentaries on the French Basque Country that were screened as part of the cycle titled *Chez les Basques at Punto de Vista*, the International Documentary Festival of Navarre, in 2015. Produced in different decades of the XX century by three filmmakers proceeding from different European countries; *Au Pays des Basques* (Maurice Champreux, 1930), *Im lande der Basken* (Herbert Brieger, 1944) and *The Land of the Basques* (Orson Welles, 1955) share much more than their title, which was taken from an expression used by Humboldt when referring to the Basque people in 1802.

⁶ “Children, you must learn to speak Basque, to play pelote and to dance properly”.

The three films analysed provide a portrait of the French Basque Country that is practically identical, filming scenes that are almost interchangeable amongst the different films, using very similar visual motifs and metaphors to refer to *Basqueness*.

This discourse speaks of an exotic people with a mysterious origin that sings, dances and plays pelota between the Cantabrian Sea and the Pyrenees. Rather than arising out of what the filmmakers saw when visiting the country, this discourse is the direct result of a dominant imaginary about the Basques, created in the XIX century by European Romantic intellectuals, anthropologists and writers, and finally adopted by the natives themselves. In that sense, it seems that Champreux, Brieger and Welles did not come to the French Basque Country to describe a place and film it according to their impressions, but instead came to recreate in images a mythical world that they had read about in books or seen in paintings, before it should disappear.

Their gaze thus seems preconceived and schematically superficial, as if they had not departed by even one millimetre from the screenplay on Basqueness that they possessed before coming to the French Basque Country. In that sense, they appear to be fascinated by a world that is in danger of extinction, but they do not delve deeply into it or into the political, social and economic causes that have led it to that situation. They portray a country frozen in time, as if it were a still photograph, and they restrict themselves to observing the cultural and landscape beauties of the place as tourists. They do not take part.

According to the program introducing the cycle titled *Chez les Basques*, the Lumière brothers arrived in Biarritz in search of “the waves” of the Cantabrian Sea. Louis Delluc, on the other hand, arrived in Ascaïn looking for “the light”. Champreux came because of “the songs”. Brieger was attracted by the discoid symbols and steles. And Welles by the pigeon hunting. In short, all of them forgot about “*the Basques*”.

The Basques of France, as individuals and as a social group, are what are overlooked in the numerous films made about them by dozens of foreign filmmakers during the course of the XX century. Nobody speaks of diglossia, of the devastating effects of the First World War on the region, of the feudal power of the notables and the church, of the poverty derived from the lack of industrialisation and a social structure based on primogeniture, of the ravages caused by the massification of tourism on the Côte Basque, etc. All of these problems have kept Basque society antiquated and without any capacity for development (Bidart, 1980; Etcheverry-Ainchart, 2005; Ahedo Gurrutxaga, 2006; Itçaina, 2012; Bidegain, 2013).

Like those of *Nanook of the North*, the problems and lives of the Basques are of no interest. That is why they are never allowed to speak. In short, we hear them singing or reciting some rite, and to get closer to them someone acts as a shaman-like intermediary: the priest, the scientist, the Basque emigrant who has experienced civilisation or the North American boy who lives with the natives.

The vision of Basqueness that is offered by the documentaries of Champreux, Brieger and Welles, amongst others, was taken up and adopted by the natives themselves from the beginning. Nonetheless, different meanings have been given to this vision depending on the period and the ideology of the spectator, in an attempt to use it for or against different causes.

On the one hand, the image of an exotic arcadia has served as an advertising lure for the tourist industry of the Côte Basque, which at times has exploited this image to the point of making the French Basques into a caricature of themselves. On the other hand, Basque nationalists have made use of it to build their ideology and argue in favour of their national claims. In that sense, the reuse of images from *Au Pays des Basques* or *The Land of the Basques* in Basque films like *Guernika* (N. Sobrevila, 1937), *Los Hijos de Gernika* (S. Cazalis, 1968) or *The Basque Ball* (J. Medem, 2004) is worth noting. Conversely, the rediscovery of *Im lande der Basken* has been used by certain sectors to try and discredit Basque nationalism

itself by highlighting the coincidence of some of its views with the discourse of Brieger's film. That is, the same discourse from the mouth of Orson Welles or from a Nazi filmmaker becomes an argument for or against something that for certain neither of the two wanted to deal with.

Finally, it is worth underscoring the influence that this Romantic imaginary was to have on native filmmakers. When making documentaries about their land – *Gure Sor Lekua* (A. Madré, 1956), *Aberria* (G. Elortza, 1961), *Ama lur* (N. Basterretxea and F. Larruquert, 1968 – they would in many respects follow a path similar to that traced out by the foreigners.

In summary, the works of the numerous filmmakers who came to the French Basque Country “in search of Ramuntchu” have served to give the territory international visibility, place it on the map and give value to its cultural wealth, thus contributing to the self-awareness of the natives. However, the latter's uncritical or interested adoption of this vision has often made them into their own victims.

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