
Norberto Mínguez

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1964-6082>

norberto@ucm.es

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Cristina Manzano Espinosa

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4097-0151>

cristina.manzano@ccinf.ucm.es

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Submitted

April 12th, 2019

Approved

January 18th, 2020

© 2020

Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

doi: 10.15581/003.33.3.17-32

www.communication-society.com

2020 – Vol. 33(3)

pp. 17-32

How to cite this article:

Mínguez, N. & Manzano Espinosa,

C. (2020). The essay in Spanish

contemporary audiovisual media:

definition, production and trends.

Communication & Society, 33(3), 17-

32.

The essay in Spanish contemporary audiovisual media: definition, production and trends

Abstract

This article analyzes the Spanish audiovisual essay through a sample of 200 titles. Film essay is considered here as a means of expression and generation of thought whose characteristics perfectly reflect the fluidity of the contemporary condition. A study tool has been created with a threefold aim: to identify a corpus of representative works and authors of the Spanish audiovisual essay, to determine and classify the different essayistic trends according to their formal and thematic options and to deliver a productive contribution to the definition of the essay film. The results provide quantitative and qualitative data that reveal an atomized, authorial production, with predominance of short and medium duration films and with a wide thematic and formal diversity. The essay is revealed as an audiovisual form that articulates a line of thought and has some of the following features: it is self-reflective and asystematic; it presents a tendency towards subjectivity but can also take a stand on matters of public interest; it moves away from the more conventional audiovisual forms and engages with the viewer in an intellectual and emotionally active relationship. We found evidence of the political, social and aesthetic dimension of the essay film, as well as a tendency towards documentary and experimental forms.

Keywords

Spanish audiovisual essay, audiovisual production, essay film, documentary film, experimental cinema, contemporary art, audiovisual genres.

1. Introduction

In the 1940s, Astruc's insight (1992) foresaw a new life for cinema outside conventional narrative. First through the *caméra-stylo* metaphor which marked cinema as a flexible and subtle writing tool, and then by asserting the existence of various types of cinema equivalent to different types of literature. A few years later, Bazin (2017) would use the word essay to describe a film for the first time.

The assertion that the essay lacks pre-established standards is indicative of a consensus among literary essay research studying the phenomenon's fluidity. Whether the research focuses on the life experience of the essayist who provides origin and expression of form (Lúkacs, 2013), or whether the essay experiment has been conceived as a unique and unrepeatable circumstance (Bense, 2004), the essay can be found to be the study *par excellence* of the open form, without limits or moulds, to experiment with thought (Adorno, 2017). Our methodological tool mirrors these studies by indicating the asystematic discourse qualities

when defining the essay. This aspect is further emphasised and nuanced by Rascaroli's perspective (2009), who highlights the usefulness of essay practice as a response to the insecurity and fluidity of the post-modern world. This condition has led to the audiovisual essay, despite the limitations of its distribution channels, revealing itself as one of the most unique forms of contemporary media and art, developing autobiographical practices based on exercises such as video confessions or personal websites (Renov, 2004).

These initial considerations allow us to create a framework that serves as a basis for approaching the definition of essay: a vital content that, processed under the conditions of a unique experience, would yield an asystematic discourse. Henceforth, the essay offers a wide range of research perspectives that we have integrated into our own search for the features that characterize audiovisual essays within Spanish productions. Arenas (1997) places the literary essay in a genre system that makes it possible to determine the cognitive references within Western culture. As we enter the field of audiovisual essays, the question arises as to what extent the essay is a genre and what its taxonomy would be. Hence the interest of incorporating genre as an observational element into our methodological tool.

Lopate (1997) describes the essay's function as a reflection of the images that surround us and as a dialectical exercise with ourselves. Rascaroli (2017) also insists on this approach by pointing out how the essay integrates the thought process and how it is connected to philosophy. Matters of cultural identity expressed in essays have also captured the concern for the frailty of the concept of tolerance when it comes to reviewing discourses on equality (Bhabha, 2003), difference, individuality or temporality (Grossberg, 2003) due to the essay's natural tendency to be an expression of thought. These issues relate to the marker in which we verify the self-reflectivity of the films chosen for analysis. The introspective process involved in using the film essay to delve deeper into the knowledge of oneself arose, at first, from the division between fiction and documentary, and evolved from it. Miranda observes that "in late modernity, some films emerge that by using strategies similar to those of documentaries, examine images from two broad lines that tend to intermingle: on the one hand, the historicity of the use granted to the images being examined and, on the other, the possibility of an alternative use" (Miranda, 2007, p. 142-143). Although this approach provides us with the idea of the essay as a tool for aesthetic intervention which may also hold a social or political stance (a concept that we also include in our methodology), the development of the audiovisual essay broadened its interests by presenting it as a permanent avant-garde through its separation from more conventional media. This adds to our study the search of not only the rupture between the essay and those conventional forms, but also of those elements that hinder or encourage the decoding of discourses included in these films. We must take into account that there have not only been abundant theoretical fluctuations regarding the film essay via film analysis and criticism (García Martínez, 2006), but that aside from the audiovisual essays produced, those artists and directors involved have also contributed to is theoretical development (Mínguez, 2019). This contribution would have been made, on the one hand, through interviews, behind-the-scenes or discussions related to the distribution of these films. On the other hand, by introducing in their work an explicit discourse through narrative resources such as the voice over (Manzano Espinosa, 2018), traditionally reserved for the extradiegetic narrator in fiction films (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995; Bordwell, 1996), and which in the essay frequently tends to become at the same time a direct manifestation of the author and a way to address his interlocutor. This would provide us with a new study marker related to the dialogical structure of the essay, which proposes a pact between the author and the viewer.

The marker that addresses subjective focalization in our methodological tool has been provided by authors such as Lopate (1992) who ventured to delimit the qualities that the film essay must have, including text (spoken or written in the form of a subtitle or caption) and a single voice that eloquently suggest a line of thought. This discourse can take on a political

dimension (Catalá, 2005), become a space where different branches of knowledge converge (Catalá, 2014) or include autobiographical content (Cuevas, 2012). These contributions will also provide us with another marker for this study: the one that addresses subjectivity. This term, related to the narrator's activity as an abstract entity, is embodied in the essay by the author, which includes the emerging efforts towards collective creation (Roig, Sánchez Navarro & Leibovitz, 2017) where the concept of identity redefines its importance and current relevance.

All these contributions have helped define not only the characteristics of our research sample, but also the terminology chosen, which is abundant in keywords that describe it and which, in our study, are a reflection of both the creator's and distributor's interests and the researcher's perception.

Expression through audiovisual media opens the essay to a new semiotics that functions as a constant search for new communication possibilities. Extending the initial guidelines set by Morris (1985) regarding the combination of signs and rules, the audiovisual essay establishes its own for each case, proposing additions to the language dimensions described by Morris. Thus, the use in documentary and experimental cinema (Arthur, 2005) of the so-called found footage represents a new semantic achievement for films that reuse images in a new context (Weinrichter, 2009). Fernández Labayen explains this by pointing out that "the importance of found footage and other practices does not reside in a fortuitous encounter with the past, but in essence, in the exploration of the ruins and remainders from the past in order to build a continuous image of the present" (2007, p. 170). The reuse of audiovisual media is forced to coexist in the essay with the expression of the author's own point of view, which here faces its greatest challenge as the interpretation of those new images must be effectively received. Said reception is also characteristic of the distribution process itself, which is included in our methodological tool in the field that shows the access links to the films and which shows how a large part of them are directly available on-line, incorporating screening possibilities and new access options that did not exist for initial film essay.

In this sense, the uniqueness of the audiovisual essay not only contributes to the evolution of the concept in the literary sphere (Corrigan, 2011; Cruz Carvajal, 2019), but it also opens new paths for the contemporary idea of expanded cinema, considered as one of the ways to reinvent cinema as an art (Youngblood, 2012; Parente, 2011). Baraybar Fernández and Linares Palomar (2016) have studied the synergy achieved in on-line environments between audiovisual and literary content, as well as the relationship between digitalisation, the emergence of alternative production or distribution models and the empowerment of the viewer. Other authors such as Gómez Tarín (2004) warned of the new possibilities that technological change would imply in terms of innovation and transgression with regard to the hegemonic audiovisual representation model. On the other hand, García Martínez points out that academic research "acting a posteriori, has begun to assign this label to several films that, when first released, were received as documentaries or avant-garde films" (2006, p. 84) and also notes the use of the audiovisual essay to create a multiform reality.

The study on the audiovisual essay has therefore traditionally been carried out on an epistemological basis that shows a wide range of factors linked to the development of its different manifestations. This research would like to assess the validity of these theories and whether they are relevant or not to the development of the concept of audiovisual essay. Through this analysis we aim to seek a qualitative and quantitative approach for the definition and description of the Spanish audiovisual essay.

2. Objectives and method

As a starting point, we consider that the audiovisual essay is a medium with a great potential for thought and the generation of new expressive forms. It also plays an important role in our country's culture from an aesthetic, intellectual and political point of view (Catalá, 2005; Weinrichter 2009; Mínguez, 2012; Deltell, 2019). Moreover, some authors consider the

audiovisual essay to act as an advanced stage of other genres: “the film essay could be the culmination of documentary cinema, the evolution of which would have led to the birth of a variation it carried within” (Weinrichter, 2007, p. 23). We intent to study a little-known type of creation, systematically categorizing Spanish audiovisual productions that can be ascribed to the essay form. For this we set three objectives:

2.1. To identify a body of representative works and authors within Spanish audiovisual essay productions

To develop this corpus, we have followed a qualitative selection criterion, a chronological selection criterion and a systematization criterion.

2.1.1. Qualitative selection criterion

Based on available scientific literature and the essential traits found in 15 landmark films¹, we have determined seven traits that we consider to be defining of the audiovisual essay and which are explained in section 2.3. Once these traits were identified in the initial sample, we selected a total of 200 films². The general requirement to be part of the sample was that films should possess at least four out of those seven traits. In view of the asystematic nature of the essay, we have decided to include in the sample some titles with less than four traits, which has allowed us to achieve a greater diversity in our sample, consistent, on the other hand, with the diversity of the object of study and which is also representative of less intense essay forms. This group represents 19% of the sample, while 43% of the included titles show six or seven essay traits and 38% possess four or five essay traits.

We live in an age in which the very idea of cinema is evolving rapidly and, to some extent, is being questioned or revised. We do not intend to address this debate here, but we should point out that although the term film-essay is common in scientific literature, our interest is not only focused on cinema, but also on a broader spectrum that includes television, video and internet pieces, substantially extending the origin of the sample regarding other classic works such as Corrigan’s (2011). In fact, an important part of the sample has not been conceived to be exhibited in theatres. Some of the selected titles have been produced and broadcast on television channels such as Televisión Española, Canal Sur, Euskal Telebista or Televisió de Catalunya and 58% of the works analysed are accessible on-line, almost all of them free of charge (the reader will find the links available in the details for each work). For this reason, we have chosen the term audiovisual essay for the title of this research instead of film-essay because we understand that it better describes the variety of approaches found in the selected sample.

2.1.2. Chronological selection criteria

As stated in the title of this article, our object of study is the contemporary audiovisual essay. Although the very concept of the contemporary can be flexible, we understand it in a broad but not in an imprecise sense. The main focus of our study are recent productions, that is, those made in Spain during the past few decades. Therefore, 77.5% of the sample are titles produced after the year 2000. This does not mean that this is a cut-off date, since we have not

¹ The 15 titles accepted as essays are *Land Without Bread (Las Hurdes, tierra sin pan*, Luis Buñuel, 1932), *Night and Fog* (Alan Resnais, 1956), *Notes Towards an African Orestes* (Pier Paolo Passolini, 1970), *F for Fake* (Orson Welles, 1973), *Songs for After a War (Canciones para después de una guerra*, Basilio Martín Patino, 1976), *Sans soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983), *Dairy* (David Perlov, 1983), *Histoire (s) du Cinéma* (Jean-Luc Godard, (1989-1999), *Nobody’s Business* (Alan Berliner, 1996), *Looking for Richard* (Al Pacino, 1996), *Train of Shadows (Tren de sombras*, José Luis Guerín, 1988), *The Mist in the Palm Trees (La niebla en las palmeras*, Carlos Molinero, Lola Salvador, 2006), *The Double Steps (Los pasos dobles*, Isaki Lacuesta, 2011), *Map* (Eliás León Siminiani, 2012), *Correspondence* (Victor Erice-Abbas Kiarostami, 2006), José Luis Guerín-Jonas Mekas (2011), Isaki Lacuesta-Naomi Kawase (2011), Albert Serra-Lisandro Alonso (2011), Jaime Rosales-Wang Bing (2011) and Fernando Eimbcke-So Yong Kim (2011).

² The sample and the data collected on each film can be accessed at <https://cvc.cervantes.es/artes/cine/ensayo/catalogo.htm>.

foregone the incorporation into the sample of some titles from earlier dates because we have considered them relevant or significant insofar as they present some particularity that qualifies them as essay benchmarks. We find that these additions enrich the sample, without invalidating its essentially contemporary character. Thus, we have selected 4% of titles from the 60s, 8.5% from the 70s and 7.5% from the 90s.

2.1.3. Systematization criterion

One of the features of the audiovisual essay is its asystematic character; this absence of stable genre conventions provides the audiovisual essay with great creative freedom. Academic literature on audiovisual essays is mostly essayistic insofar as it adopts a non-systematic approach, either because it focuses on titles, authors or partial aspects of the essay or because it presents a critical analysis that is neither objectifiable nor subject to a verification process. This asystematic approach is logical and consistent with its object of study and has resulted in studies of enormous interest, some of which are reviewed in the first part of this article. Our proposal, however, is original and ground-breaking insofar as it seeks to apply the processes of scientific knowledge to an object that does not meet the conventional standards of cinematographic or audiovisual genres. Although we are aware of the limitations and even contradictions of this approach, we believe that a unifying and non-speculative approach such as ours can contribute to better understand contemporary Spanish audiovisual essays. In this systematizing effort, we have sometimes found it difficult to evaluate the presence of essay traits in the films analysed. In those cases where some doubt or ambiguity was posed, we have been conservative and have not included the feature in question in the title analysed.

2.2. To determine and classify the different essay trends according to their formal and thematic options, as well as the specificities of their production

To establish and classify these trends we have used the following criteria:

2.2.1. Production

Knowledge of the characteristics of the entities behind the audiovisual essays in the sample will help to determine the extent to which these titles take part in industrial production structures or whether they tend towards artisanal production models. It will also be possible to know the degree of centralization or atomization of productions and the role of cultural institutions in the production of audiovisual essays. Another factor to take into account will be the length of these productions, which will help to establish whether the longer films characteristic of more conventional industrial productions is predominant or whether there is a greater presence of shorter running times. These markers are relevant insofar as they relate different forms of production (standardized industrial system vs. artisanal production) with the potential for experimentation and renewal of the audiovisual language. In this sense, we understand that the industrial canon is closer to the feature film's length and that artisanal production, language renewal and experimentation are better suited to shorter film lengths.

2.2.2. Authorship and gender

By analysing the credits of each of the titles included in the sample, it is possible to determine whether films of an industrial nature that are subject to a process of professional division of labour within standardised production systems predominate or whether, on the contrary, pieces where the same person undertakes the main creative responsibilities are more frequent. The criterion used will be whether the authorship or the script and the film's directing responsibilities belong to the same person. The hypothesis is that since the essay is a self-expression project, the prevalence of auteur films can be expected, where the creation of the script and the task of directing it are the responsibility of the same person. In parallel to this consideration we will also take into account the present ratio of men to women

directing these films. This information is relevant to determine to what extent the audiovisual essay does or does not replicate gender patterns found in other audiovisual fields.

2.2.3. Ascription categories

Audiovisual products often reach the viewer with some form of labelling. This indexation is usually done by the producer or can be part of the context in which the work is received or consumed. The indexation of an audiovisual project is not aseptic but rather has significant consequences in terms of the expectations it generates, the markets it can access and the definition of a pact between producer and audience regarding its interpretation (Mínguez, 2015). The study of the ascription categories of the sample will enable us to know the status of the designation of essay itself as a label for a film genre, as well as establishing the status of essays in relation to fiction, non-fiction and experimental domains.

2.2.4. Descriptors

This criterion supplements the previous one and takes into account those semantic fields that best describe the form and content of the titles in the sample. This is not a matter of prior labels, but of keywords assigned in most cases by the researchers themselves. These descriptors or keywords will be used to establish the contents or topics most frequently found in the titles analysed. The keywords also provide information about the formal or discursive aspects most often found in the sample. Compiling this information will contribute to a greater precision in the very definition of the audiovisual essay.

2.2.5. Defining features

This criterion is bi-directional and has been useful to supply feedback to our methodology. On the one hand, our starting point has been some defining features present in the scientific literature on the subject and in the 15 benchmark films already mentioned; on the other hand, we have looked for those features and how they function in the analysed sample, which has allowed us to more precisely outline the specific features of the audiovisual essay. This is further explained in the following section.

2.3. *To help define the traits of the audiovisual essay*

Starting from a quantitative analysis and the subsequent qualitative interpretation of the extracted data, we have created a methodological tool that gathers the variables that we consider necessary to cover the three aforementioned objectives. Taking into account the conceptual fluidity of the audiovisual essay, we have used key literature as a starting point both to determine the initial corpus that has been used as a guide and to establish the categories that we have studied in our sample. The initial corpus, viewed by all the researchers participating in the project, was examined looking for common characteristics and peculiarities that would help create categories to be used in the study of the sample. Seven traits or markers were identified whose use was aimed at determining the internal behaviour of those works regarded by the industry, researchers or their authors as belonging to the category of essay. The fact that those titles chosen complied to a higher or lesser degree with the markers of the study has not been a determining factor in their choice but rather part of the research results themselves. The markers initially identified and their relevance to the study are described hereinafter:

1. Form-based creation of a line of thought: it involves the use of eloquent language where audiovisual media highlights the importance of the author's way of expression himself, indicating a stylistic will on his part.
2. Self-reflectivity: the author treats his work as a tool for self-knowledge, exposing the scope of his thoughts. If this marker appears in the title, it implies the presence of self-awareness and self-analysis, which are natural inclinations of the essay, and often entails depicting and reflecting on the thought process itself.

3. Asystematic discourse, not scientific, not closed: the essay would in this sense render the considerations of the film theories that define the modern paradigm (Pasolini & Rohmer, 1970; Bordwell, 1996) as opposed to the classical narrative paradigm and that would accept an incomplete or tentative approach to a subject (Pasolini & Rohmer, 1970; Bordwell, 1996).
4. Expression of an author's personal point of view or subjective focalization: we analyse the choice of narrative perspective based on the classification proposed by François Jost (1995), adapted to the particularities of film discourse, as opposed to other classifications that are founded on literary discourse, such as those by Todorov (1970) or Genette (1970).
5. Discourse understood as a tool for aesthetic, social or political intervention: the critical thought found in essays tends to transcend self-referentiality and to acquire the characteristics of a manifesto, of a stance. This marker would provide data on the presence of an *ethos* in the audiovisual essay.
6. Dialogical structure, viewer integration, essay pact: as a shared thought, the essay often seeks a conversational partner who is called upon with a variety of tools, among which are the voice over, the inclusion of the written word, directly gazing towards the camera or the heterodiegetic off-screen narrator.
7. It represents a rupture with more conventional audiovisual forms: within the film essay we find different degrees of experimentalism, *avant-garde* intentions, or decoding possibilities. The degree of experimentalism is an indication of the essay's ability to renew the audiovisual language as well as assessing its nature as an audiovisual product aimed at a specialised audience.

The presence or absence of these markers in the films covered by the study would provide information not only to establish the conclusions that meet our objectives but would also be valuable for further research. Once the study of the films had begun, trait 1 was dispensed with as it was considered to be *sine qua non*, that is to say, that it had to be present in order for a film to be considered an essay.

The catalogue (<https://cvc.cervantes.es/artes/cine/ensayo/catalogo.htm>) includes the following fields, in order: title, director, year, script, cinematography, editing, music, production company, genre, running time, distribution, link, synopsis, essay characteristics, keywords, doubts and notes. Technical information fields as well as keywords facilitate searching within the database. The doubts and notes fields are a reflection of the need to share those questions raised while the catalogue was developed, as the corpus was distributed among all the members of the research project, aware that the information would be influenced by personal ideas, which would also have to be covered by the study.

3. Analysis and results

Bearing in mind that the average annual production in Spain during the past 20 years is of 166 feature films and 200 short films³, it can be said that the essay is a minority in quantitative terms, since according to our data the year with the greatest production of audiovisual essays was 2011, a year where we can find 27 essays (11 feature films, 12 short films and 4 medium-length films). However, its ability to reflect on complex issues and renew audiovisual language places it a position of *avantgarde* and influence over other audiovisual forms, which makes it a relevant object of study.

³ Calculation based on data extracted from the *Film Yearbook* published by the Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisuales for the last 20 years.

<http://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/cultura/areas/cine/mc/anuario-cine/portada.html>

3.1. Production

24.5% of the essays studied do not list a production company, which shows that they are produced on an artisanal basis and outside the most conventional channels of the film and TV industry. In addition, 14.5% of the sampled essays have been produced directly by their authors and, on the other hand, there are a number of indications (the name of the production company, for example) which lead us to believe that a considerable number of essays are produced by companies created *ad hoc* by the authors to produce the film in question. As a result, we can say that more than half of the essays are created outside of the industry's conventional production processes.

Films that do list a production company, which are in total 151, are produced by a total of 111 production companies. These figures are indicative of a high atomization in audiovisual essay production as 77 of these production companies (69% of the production companies appearing in the sample) have only produced one audiovisual essay, 22 of them (20% of the production companies appearing in the sample) have produced two essays and four of them (3.6% of the production companies appearing in the sample) have produced three essays. Only 8 production companies have produced four or more audiovisual essays: Films 59 has produced seven essays, CCCB has produced six films, Víctor Moreno PC and La Casa Encendida have produced five films respectively and El Armadillo Productions, Tangana Films PCA, Televisión Española and Acción Cultural Española are each involved in the production of four films. In conclusion, the average production of each production company is of 1.3 films, and of the 151 films that report a production company, 35% are co-productions. These data also reveal the importance of cultural institutions and public entities in promoting the production of audiovisual essays.

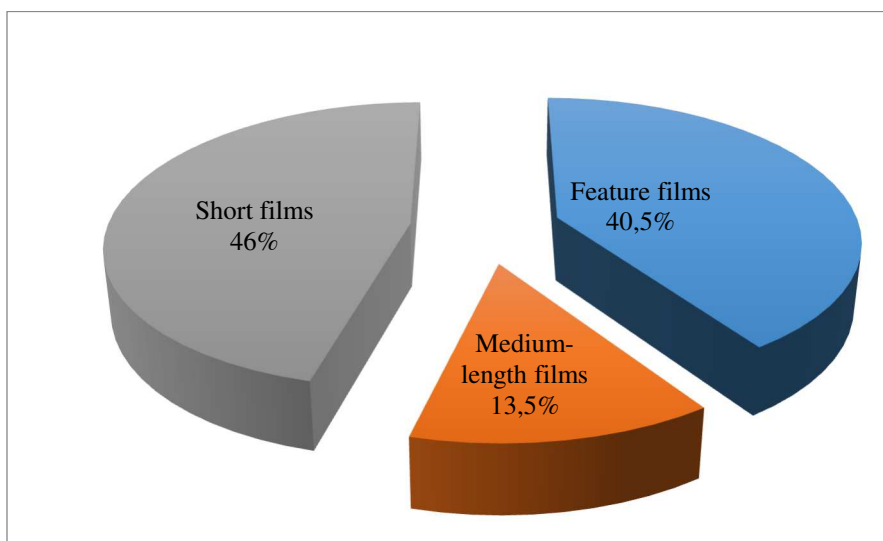
In order to accurately describe the features of those essays produced, we have examined the selected films according to their length and have considered as feature films those over 60 minutes, medium-length films those between 30 and 60 minutes and short films those under 30 minutes⁴. The 200 films selected amount to a total of 9450 minutes, with an average length of 47 minutes; the longest film has a maximum length of 180 minutes and the shortest a length of 2 minutes. 40.5% are feature films, 13.5% are medium-length films and 46% are short films.

The lesser number of feature films (40.5%) as opposed to medium-length or short-length titles (59.5%) is consistent with the widespread use of non-industrial or non-conventional production formulas and with formats and contents for which commercial profitability is not a priority. The fact that many are also auteur films also implies greater freedom when it comes to deciding whether or not they should conform to standardized lengths.

Finally, it should be noted that 58% of the projects analysed are accessible on-line, almost all of them free of charge. Out of the films available on-line, only 10% require paid access.

⁴ The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in its regulations for the Oscars considers a short film to be an original film with a length of forty minutes or less. Whereas a feature film is for the Academy an original film of a length of more than forty minutes. As for the rules established by the Spanish Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences for the Goya Awards, the feature film category stipulates a minimum length of sixty minutes for fiction and animation films and seventy minutes for documentary films. This academy considers films with a maximum running time of 30 minutes as short films. Considering the references set by these two institutions and with the aim of achieving greater precision in the assessment of the different footage lengths, we have chosen to consider the three aforementioned running times.

Graph 1: Essay classification according to length.



Source: Own elaboration.

3.2. Authorship and gender

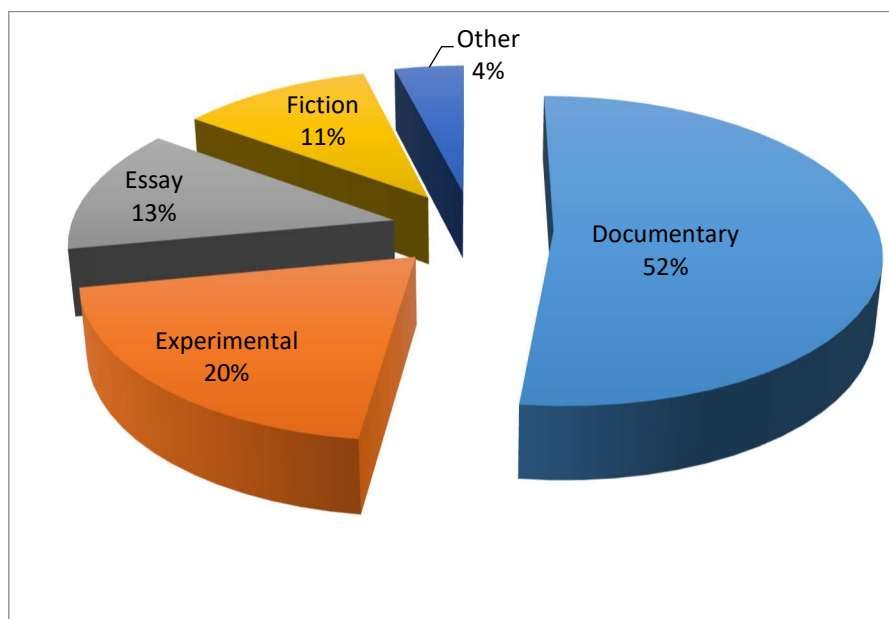
The audiovisual essay is revealed to be auteur work since in only 2% of cases studied is the script written by someone other than the director. This is related to the predominantly author-centred nature of the audiovisual essay, but also to the fact that many of these productions are small and not subject to the work division characteristic of more standardised industrial activities.

If we examine the number of essays directed by women throughout the sample, the overall percentage is of 13%, a figure that resembles that found in Spanish cinema as a whole (Cuenca Suárez, 2018; Zurian, 2017) and which is a clear indication of inequality. However, it should be noted that if we analyse chronologically the presence of female essay directors there has been a considerable increase in the last decade, from seven films (13% of all essays produced) in the 2000s to 16 films (17% of all essays produced) in the decade of 2010.

3.3. Ascription categories

To analyse this criterion, whenever possible, we have first taken into account the film genre with which the work has been submitted, either by means of the classification given by the producer or distributor, or by means of the genre with which the film is submitted to festivals or on-line platforms. When no previous ascription has been found, attempts have been made to identify an ascription category that is as descriptive as possible of the form and content of each piece. The result is that out of all the films studied 52% are catalogued as documentaries, 20% as experimental, 13% as essays and 11% as fiction.

Graph 2: Genre category ascription of the films analysed.



Source: Own elaboration.

This categorization is significant in many respects. In the first place, the fact that more than half of the films are labelled as documentaries indicates that the audiovisual essay is a way of writing that feeds on reality, on something pre-existing that is pondered upon. As a result, audiovisual essays are often classified as non-fiction (Mínguez, 2015). The experimental label in 20% of the films is a response to the essay's ability to renew language and push the limits of conventional audiovisual discourse, but also to the perception of the essay as a form of knowledge associated with observation, participation or vital experiences (Montero, 2012). This last aspect also defines the audiovisual essay as a creative space capable of relating writing of the self to experimental forms that would allow a language to be free from the bonds of the most conventional discourses. The fact that only 13% of the films have been specifically labelled as essays indicates the very marginality of this audiovisual form and points to the fact that the producers themselves have greater confidence in the ability of other more common labels, such as documentary or experimental, to identify their work⁵. Or perhaps they simply consider that the label has limited commercial potential. Finally, 11% of the films in the sample bear the label of fiction or drama, suggesting the essay's ability to shift if needed to one side or the other of the border between fiction and non-fiction (Mínguez, 2012).

⁵ In those cases where the label is a combination of two terms, such as documentary essay or experimental documentary, both terms have been taken into account.

Table 1: Descriptors used as keywords and number of times they appear in the essays that are part of the sample.

| Descriptor | F | Descriptor | F |
|---------------------|----|------------------------|---|
| Experimental | 53 | Found footage | 9 |
| Metacinematographic | 39 | Cinema | 8 |
| Social | 39 | Audiovisual experience | 8 |
| Filmed diary | 22 | Film history | 7 |
| Protest | 20 | Urbanism | 7 |
| Politics | 20 | City | 6 |
| Trip | 20 | Fake documentary | 6 |
| History | 18 | Photography | 6 |
| Rural world | 17 | Seville | 6 |
| Anthropological | 16 | Activism | 5 |
| Autobiography | 16 | Barcelona | 5 |
| Art | 15 | Drama | 5 |
| Memory | 15 | Family | 5 |
| Social criticism | 14 | Immigration | 5 |
| Documentary | 13 | Architecture | 4 |
| Biography | 12 | Culture | 4 |
| Black and white | 11 | Barcelona School | 4 |
| Portrait | 11 | Aesthetics | 4 |
| Recycling | 10 | Urban world | 4 |
| Poetic | 10 | Observational | 4 |
| Self-referential | 9 | Violence | 4 |

Source: Own elaboration.

3.4. Descriptors

Keywords and descriptors of the analysed works enable us to define the preferred thematic and rhetorical areas of the audiovisual essay. Considering the frequency of certain descriptors, it should be pointed out that among the subjects most dealt with by the audiovisual essay are those that have a social and political scope, the essay being a favourable space for criticism and protest (as in *Ana, Three Minutes* by Víctor Erice or in *Variations on Guernica* by Guillermo Peydró). History, art, and memory are also themes commonly encountered in essays (for example in *The Sky Turns* by Mercedes Álvarez). As far as rhetorical descriptors are concerned, the tendency towards self-referentiality, metalanguages and experimentalism stand out (as in *The Emak Bakia House* by Oskar Alegria). The essay's discourse is frequently conveyed through the subjective narrative of a diary, autobiography, or travel notebook, and may combine a documentary approach with a tendency towards poetry (as in the *Correspondence* of José Luis Guerín and Jonas Mekas). Biography or portraits sometimes intersect with essays and coexist with expressive forms such as recycling, found footage or fake documentaries (*The Mist in the Palm Trees*, by Carlos Molinero and Lola Salvador).

Figure 1: Word cloud with audiovisual essay descriptors.



Source: Own elaboration.

3.5. Defining features

In 51% of the films analysed, self-referential elements have been identified, showing that in the audiovisual essay there is a certain tendency towards self-awareness and discursive self-analysis, thus drifting from what some authors have called classical audiovisual writing (Casetti & Di Chio, 1994). This self-reflection can be manifested through the display of production mechanism or through the film-making process itself. 70% of the films in the sample are asystematic in the sense that they do not have a content or structure readily identifiable with a conventional audiovisual genre or a standardized model of thought or knowledge. This lack of a systematized structure is usually followed by an open-ended discourse and an incomplete or tentative treatment of the topic addressed. The essayistic discourse does not feel compelled by the epistemological rules of science, by a strictly rational logic or by conventional and classic audiovisual language, but instead freely adopts those languages and procedures that it considers most appropriate at any given time, without a pre-established order or strategy (as for example in *Evacuation*, by the collective Los Hijos). 73% of works included in the sample have a significant degree of subjectivity in the sense that a subjective focus is achieved either by observing and analysing reality from a manifestly authorial point of view or because the subject being observed and reflected on is the author himself and his experience as a subject (as in Víctor Erice's *La morte rouge* or in *Map*, by Elías León Siminiani). This feature that has just been mentioned is very closely related to the one described next and it is not by chance that they both reach the highest values. 74% of the films in the sample have been devised as a tool for social, political or aesthetic intervention, in other words, they are being presented as a discourse that is both a manifesto and a stance (this would be the case of *On Power*, by the Zavan collective). This implies that the essay can be developed along two tracks: a subjective one of an introspective nature and one oriented towards issues of public interest. The essay therefore emerges as a means of connecting the objective world, which is the raw material for documentaries, and the subjective world in which thought is rooted and where the author seems to be the most important element (Català, 2014).

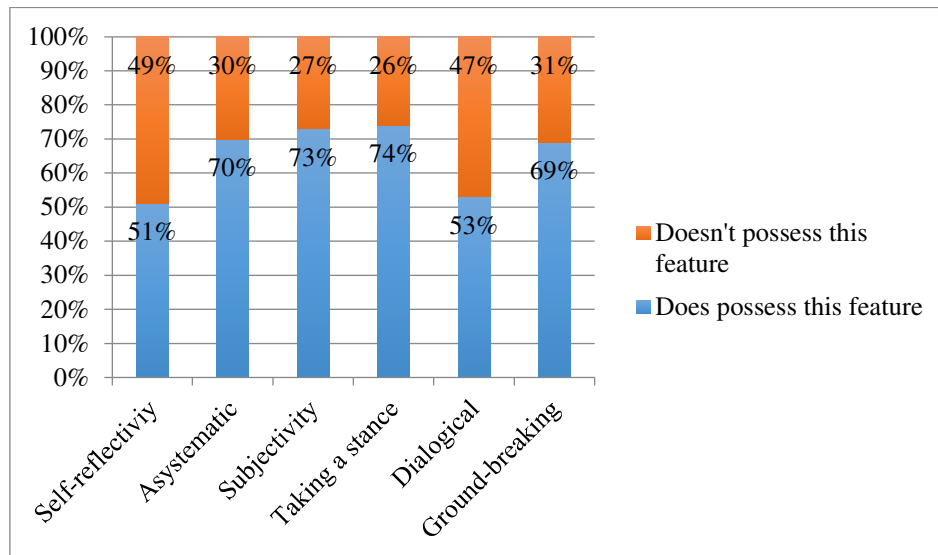
Within the group of films that express a certain stance, 43% express an aesthetic stance, 32% a social stance and 26% a political stance. It can be said that the audiovisual essay has the potential of inciting an uprising against political, economic and social institutions perceived

as obsolete, but also against a failed cinematographic model (Deltell, 2019), a critical attitude that manifests itself especially in times of crisis (Arquero & Deltell, 2017) in films such as *Futures Market* (Mercedes Álvarez, 2011).

53% of the works in the sample have a dialogical structure in the sense that they integrate the viewer into the discursive device, generating the appropriate conditions for the essay pact to work. In the audiovisual essay, therefore, the viewer tends to be challenged specifically and required to interact with the text by establishing an intellectually and emotionally active relationship (Rascaroli, 2009) as happens for example in *Yo me lo creo* (Terrorismo de autor, 2016). Some features that enable this dialogical quality are the essay's fragmentation or asystematicity which necessarily results in a very active viewer and in an intimate space which is often built around the subjectivity of the essay and which manages to appeal to each individual viewer in a particular way.

Finally, 69% of the essays in the sample are formally ground-breaking in comparison with more conventional audiovisual forms, in other words, the essay shows a clear tendency to move away from mainstream audiovisual structures and forms, which is in line with the asystematic character previously mentioned. This ground-breaking nature is sometimes manifested in a *mise en scène* that makes the viewer uncomfortable by breaking the 180-degree rule and using abnormal, empty or excessively long shots; at other times we find very open narrative constructions that create confusing temporal structures that are difficult to navigate and that experiment with time-lines compelling the viewer to question their chronological parameters; choices that are not usually found together are often used: for example, a blend of documentary and fictional images without a clear or easily recognisable pattern (as in *Train of Shadows*, by José Luis Guerín), or a succession of different formats that disrupt textual consistency (as in the works of María Cañas). Finally, we find cases that challenge the authority of more traditional historical or scientific discourses or simply that conventional film language is replaced by devices that draw our attention to the presence and use of the language itself, for example by substituting spoken dialogues for written text.

Graph 3: Essayistic traits present in the sampled films.



Source: Own elaboration.

4. Conclusions

The audiovisual essay is characterized by an artisanal production that is generally outside the formulas of standardized industrial production and more traditional distribution channels. Audiovisual essay productions are highly atomized as the production of most of the companies studied is limited to one film. Among the most productive audiovisual essay promoters we also find cultural institutions and public entities.

The audiovisual essay is predominantly author-centred, consistent with the use of non-industrial production formulas in which films of medium or short length (60%) are more prevalent, as opposed to a lesser number of feature films (40%). As for the genre categories ascribed, more than half of the pieces analysed are labelled as documentaries, which confirms the close relationship between audiovisual essays and reality, and strengthens its link with the non-fiction macro-genre. Another common label is that of experimental (20%), which addresses the essay's ability to renew language and push the limits of conventional audiovisual discourse. The descriptors of the analysed sample reveal the political and social dimension of the essay as a space open to criticism and protest; history, art and memory also appear as recurring themes in the audiovisual essay.

These results apply to Spain, but we consider that they can be used to improve the understanding of the complexity of the audiovisual essay in general, regardless of nationality, and that they therefore enable us to determine the defining features of this audiovisual form through the following characteristics: the audiovisual essay is a discourse that articulates a line of thought, that tends towards self-awareness and discursive self-analysis; it is asystematic and often presents an open structure and a tentative approach to the subject; it brings a significant amount of subjectivity, dictated by the author's point of view or by the subject being the author himself and his experience; it is a tool of social, political and aesthetic intervention that encourages thought and taking a stance on matters of public interest; the audiovisual essay tends to integrate the viewer into the discursive device by establishing an intellectually and emotionally active relationship with him; it exhibits a rupture with the more conventional formal options of audiovisual communication.

The Spanish film industry's essay production shows a high degree of thematic and formal diversity, proving to be a fertile ground for meeting and discovering other realities and ways of articulating thought. The analysis performed reveals the audiovisual essay's ability to absorb and mobilize different artistic practices that enrich contemporary audiovisual culture both intellectually and aesthetically.

Finally, we have been able to verify that the methodological tool designed has not only contributed to the theoretical knowledge regarding the essay in Spain but has also become a practical tool at the service of other researchers. This is how the Instituto Cervantes understood it, supporting our research by including our database in its official page (the link to which we have cited in this article), as knowledge transfer materials.

This text falls within the scope of the research project entitled "The Essay in the Contemporary Spanish Audiovisual" (Ref. CSO2015-66749-P), financed by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and the European Regional Development Fund within the State Programme for the Promotion of Scientific and Technical Research of Excellence.

References

- Academia de las Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográficas de España (2018). Bases de los Premios Goya 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.premiosgoya.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Bases33PG-1.pdf>
- Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (2018). 91st Annual Academy Awards Complete Rules. Retrieved from https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/91aa_rules.pdf

- Adorno, Th. (2017). The essay as form. In N. Alter & T. Corrigan (Eds.), *Essays on the essay film* (pp. 60–85). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Alter, N. (2018). *The essay film after fact and fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Arenas, M. E. (1997). *Hacia una teoría general del ensayo. Construcción del texto ensayístico*. Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha.
- Arquero, I. & Deltell, L. (2017). El ensayo audiovisual como metodología de la crisis. Visitando *Mercado de Futuros* (Mercedes Álvarez, 2010). In R. Eguizábal (Ed.), *Metodologías 3* (pp. 63–81). Madrid: Fragua.
- Arthur, P. (2005). *Line of sight: American avant-garde film since 1965*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Astruc, A. (1992). *Du stylo à la caméra... et de la caméra au stylo. Ecrits 1942-1984*. Paris: L'Archipel.
- Baraybar, A. & Linares R. (2016). Nuevas propuestas de distribución audiovisual en la era de la convergencia: el *documentary book*. *El profesional de la información*, 25(1), 135-142. <http://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2016.ene.13>
- Bazin, A. (2017). Bazin on Marker. In N. Alter & T. Corrigan (Eds.), *Essays on the essay film* (pp. 102–105). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bense, M. (2004). *Sobre el ensayo y su prosa*. México: UNAM.
- Bhabha, H. (2003). Culture's in-between. In S. Hall & P. Du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 87–107). London: Sage Publications.
- Bluminger, Ch. (2007). Leer entre las imágenes. In A. Weinrichter (Ed.), *La forma que piensa. Tentativas en torno al cine ensayo*. (pp. 50–63). Navarra: Fondo de Publicaciones del Gobierno de Navarra.
- Bordwell, D. (1996). *La narración en el cine de ficción*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Casetti, F. & Di Chio, F. (1994). *Cómo analizar un film*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Català, J. M. (2005). Film-ensayo y vanguardia. En J. Cerdán & M. Torreiro (Coords.), *Documental y vanguardia* (pp. 109–158). Madrid: Cátedra.
- Català, J. M. (2014). *Estética del ensayo. La forma ensayo, de Montaigne a Godard*. Valencia: Universitat de València.
- Corrigan, T. (2011). *The essay film: from Montaigne, after Marker*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cruz, I. (2019). Tendencias ensayísticas en el audiovisual español contemporáneo. In N. Mínguez (Ed.), *Itinerarios y formas del ensayo audiovisual* (pp. 75–89). Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Cuenca, S. (2018). *La representatividad de las mujeres en el sector cinematográfico español*. Informe Anual CIMA 2017. Retrieved from <https://cimamujerescineastas.es/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/INFORME-ANUAL-CIMA-2017-4.pdf>
- Cuevas, E. (2012). El cine autobiográfico en España: una panorámica. *RILCE. Revista de filología hispánica*, 28(1), 106–125. Retrieved from <https://revistas.unav.edu/index.php/rilce/article/view/2990/2791>
- Deltell, L. (2019). Oficio en las tinieblas. El ensayo audiovisual en un país en crisis. In N. Mínguez (Ed.), *Itinerarios y formas del ensayo audiovisual* (pp. 135–153). Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Fernández Labayen, M. (2007). El ensayo en la tradición del cine de vanguardia. In A. Weinrichter (Ed.), *La forma que piensa. Tentativas en torno al cine ensayo* (pp. 158–173). Pamplona: Gobierno de Navarra.
- García Martínez, A. N. (2006). La imagen que piensa. Hacia una definición de ensayo audiovisual. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 19(2), 75–105. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10171/8332>
- Gaudreault, A. & Jost, F. (1995). *El relato cinematográfico*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Genette, G. (1970). Fronteras del relato. In R. Barthes, A. J. Greimas, C. Bremond, J. Gritti, V. Morin, C Metz, T. Todorov & G. Genette, *Análisis estructural del relato* (pp. 193–203). Buenos Aires: Tiempo Contemporáneo.

- Gómez Tarín, J. (2004). Tres procedimientos discursivos en las cinematografías del cambio de siglo. In N. Mínguez & N. Villagra (Eds.), *La comunicación: nuevos discursos y perspectivas* (pp. 191-198). Madrid: Edipo.
- Grossberg, L. (2003). Identity and cultural studies: is that all there is? In S. Hall & P. Du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 87-107). London: Sage.
- Lopate, Ph. (1992). In search of the centaur: The essay film. *The Threepenny Review*, 48, 19-22. Retrieved from <http://www.essayfilmfestival.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Lopate.pdf>
- Lopate, Ph. (1997). *The art of the personal essay. An anthology from the classical era to the present*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Lúkacs, G. (2013). *El alma y las formas*. València: Universitat de València.
- Manzano Espinosa, C. (2018). Identity and identification through film essay. A synergy between sociological research and film theory. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies*, 13(3), 1-14. <http://www.doi.org/10.18848/2327-008X/CGP/v13i03/1-14>
- Mínguez, N. (2012). Pensar con imágenes: tres ensayos cinematográficos. *Revista de Occidente*, 371, 63-82. Retrieved from <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/ejemplar/304939>
- Mínguez, N. (2015). Más allá del marco referencial. Ficción y no ficción en la cultura audiovisual digital. *Telos. Revista de pensamiento sobre comunicación, tecnología y sociedad*, 99, 126-134. Retrieved from <https://telos.fundaciontelefonica.com/archivo/numero099/ficcion-y-no-ficcion-en-la-cultura-audiovisual-digital/>
- Mínguez, N. (Ed.) (2019). *Itinerarios y formas del ensayo audiovisual*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Miranda, L. (2007). El cine ensayo como forma experimental de las imágenes. In A. Weinrichter (Ed.), *La forma que piensa. Tentativas en torno al cine ensayo* (pp. 142-155). Pamplona: Gobierno de Navarra.
- Montero, D. (2012). *Thinking Images. The essay film as a dialogic form in European cinema*. Berna: Peter Lang.
- Morris, Ch. (1985). *Fundamentos de la teoría de los signos*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Parente, A. (2011). La forma cine: variaciones y rupturas. *Arkadín. Estudios sobre cine y artes audiovisuales*, 3(3), 41-58. Retrieved from <http://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/handle/10915/39957>
- Pasolini, P. P. & Rohmer, E. (1971). *Cine de poesía contra cine de prosa*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Rascaroli, L. (2009). *The personal camera. Subjective cinema and the essay film*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Rascaroli, L. (2017). *How the essay film thinks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Renov, M. (2004). *The subject of Documentary*. Minnesota: Minnesota University Press.
- Roig, A., Sánchez Navarro, J. & Leibovitz, T. (2017). Multitudes creativas. El *crowdsourcing* como modelo para la producción audiovisual colectiva en el ámbito cinematográfico. *El profesional de la información*, 26(2), 238-248. <https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2017.mar.10>
- Todorov, T. (1970). Las categorías del relato literario. In R. Barthes, A. J. Greimas, C. Bremond, J. Gritti, V. Morin, C Metz, T. Todorov & G. Genette, *Análisis estructural del relato* (pp. 155-192). Buenos Aires: Tiempo Contemporáneo.
- Weinrichter, A. (2007). El concepto fugitivo. Notas sobre el film-ensayo. In A. Weinrichter (Ed.), *La forma que piensa. Tentativas en torno al cine ensayo* (pp. 18-49). Pamplona: Gobierno de Navarra.
- Weinrichter, A. (2009). *Metraje encontrado. La apropiación en el cine documental y experimental*. Pamplona: Gobierno de Navarra.
- Youngblood, G. (2012). *Cine expandido*. Buenos Aires: Eduntref.
- Zurian, F. (Ed.) (2017). *Miradas de mujer. Cineastas españolas para el siglo XXI*. Madrid: Fundamentos.