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The Galician *Correspondencia* Film: A Documentary Subgenre and an Early Form of Communicative Travel

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Abstract

The 1896 arrival of the cinematograph in Galicia (northwest Spain) coincided with a period of massive economic migration to the Americas (1850s–1950s) and also with the nationalist awakening, which aimed to recover a language and a culture subjugated for centuries. In the 1910s, film pioneer José Gil created a subgenre called *cine de correspondencia* (“epistolary cinema”): documentaries showing the landscape and celebrations, exported to the Americas as visual letters with the specific purpose of communicating with the Galician diaspora. I propose an interdisciplinary methodology to study the *correspondencia* documentary, regarding it both as a cinematic expression and an early form of communicative travel (Urry, 2007). I evaluate the use of the Galician language in this subgenre and its impact on the sense of belonging in the migrant community. Finally, I establish a parallel between José Gil’s *correspondencia* documentaries and the modern expressions of this subgenre, produced within the Novo Cinema Galego movement.

Keywords: Galician cinema; José Gil; *correspondencia* documentary; migration; communicative travel; Galician language; Novo Cinema Galego

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Introduction

Galicia (northwest Spain) is one of the “historical nations” within the Spanish state which has its own culture and language. The Galician language has around 2,400,000 speakers (much more if we count the huge population in the diaspora), and nowadays it is co-official in Spain. However, the language has historically suffered long periods of subjugation, where its use was restricted or forbidden by the authorities, including in cinema. In addition, the lack of economic development has provoked the huge migration of Galicians to other parts of the world. Both factors have impacted the development of an autochthonous film industry. The Galician audiovisual industry is nowadays established and expanding, with healthy numbers of production in film and TV, but the industry has experienced a convoluted 125 years of history, at times struggling for its very existence.

In this article, I study a subgenre specific to the Galician audiovisual industry, created in the 1910s by film pioneer José Gil with the purpose of communicating with the migrant community. Historian Manolo González calls this subgenre *cine de correspondencia* (translated as “mail, epistolary cinema”) (2022, pp. 148-149). It is also known as *cine de emigración* (“migration cinema”) (Barreiro González, 2018, p. 60). I suggest that the *correspondencia* documentaries should be regarded both as a cinematic expression and an early form of communicative travel, as identified by Urry (2007) in his paradigm of mobilities.

The Galician audiovisual industry

The cinematograph arrived in Galicia in 1896, a year after the invention had been presented in Paris, with the first projections in A Coruña (Galán, 1997, p. 3). In fact, Galician cinema and Spanish cinema started exactly at the same time, because one of the first-ever Spanish films (probably the first) happened to be shot in Galicia. On 20 June 1897, photographer José Sellier shot *El entierro del General Sánchez Bregua* [*The Burial of General Sánchez Bregua*]¹ in A Coruña. This dual identity (as both part of the Spanish state and a community with a specific culture) exemplifies the inadequacy of the term “national” to specifically define what constitutes Galician cinema. Ledo Andión et al. (2016, p. 310) have suggested some alternative terms: “identity cinema” is more accurate for an industry whose main aim is to represent the idiosyncrasy of the Galician people, whether they live in the motherland or in the diaspora. “Cinema in minoritized language” is a suitable but problematic label, due to the prohibition and obstacles in using the Galician language in cinema at several points in time (Ledo Andión et al., 2016, p. 311).

The arrival of the cinematograph coincided with a period of massive economic migration of Galicians to the Americas, which had started in the second half of the nineteenth century and continued during the first half of the twentieth. The population barely grew in Galicia during the twentieth century due to migration; Latin America was the main point of destination for these migrants: around 55 per cent of Spanish migrants in Argentina were Galician (see Barreiro González, 2018, pp. 58-59). In fact, the “gallego” became a comedic

stereotype in Latin American film and theatre (Fernández and Cabo Villaverde, 2008, p. 238). Migration has always been an essential topic in Galician cinema (as it was already in literature) from multiple perspectives (Redondo Neira & Pérez Pereiro, 2018, p. 108): those who leave (*Canto de emigración*, 1935) (Redondo Neira & Pérez Pereiro, 2018, pp. 109-110), those who stay in the land (*Sempre Xonxa*, 1989) (Redondo Neira & Pérez Pereiro, 2018, pp. 118-119). Sometimes they are stories of success (as we will see in the *correspondencia* documentaries) but, more often than not, films depict the most tragic aspects of migration (*Camarote de lujo*, 1959).

The documentary genre has crucial importance in the Galician audiovisual industry. In 1956, exiled Galician film director Carlos Velo presented his paper “*Proposta de Creación do Centro Cinematográfico Galego*” [“Proposal for the Creation of the Galician Cinematographic Centre”] at the *First Congress on Galician Migration* in Buenos Aires. It was part of the section “Galician migration and culture”, which discussed the “obligation to preserve and nurture” the Galician language, as “the most valuable heritage of our culture” (Redondo, 2002 p. 2)². Velo’s paper described cinema as “the most powerful tool of our time” to build national identity:

“Cinema is the only means of expression that can objectively demonstrate the different characteristics of the personality and behaviour of native Galicians and, what is more important, the acquired characteristics and influence of the environment of migrant Galicians” (Velo, 1956, p. 186).

Velo’s statement is significant because, first, he established the main aim of Galician cinema as communication and cultural cohesion with the diaspora, in order to make “the ideal of union between the two Atlantic Galicians” a reality. Film should contribute to “the mutual knowledge of Galicia in Spain and America and of the Galician communities from America, in Galicia and in Spain” (Velo, 1956, p. 186). Second, he identified documentary as the specific genre with which to educate and awaken political conscience. He called for this proposed Galician Cinematographic Centre to specifically focus cinematic activity around three genres: “educational, documentary, and informative” (Velo, 1956, p. 186). Carlos Velo’s wishes took many years to be fulfilled, and only after democracy returned. However, Velo was not setting the foundation of an autochthonous audiovisual industry, but was building on the legacy of José Gil back in the early twentieth century, at a time when film was still a curiosity and the term “documentary” did not even exist.³

José Gil and the *correspondencia* documentary

José Gil (1870–1937), was a Galician photographer, inventor, and entrepreneur. He decided to start experimenting with cinema in 1907, combining it with his other passion, which was automobiles.⁴ Gil was the Vigo representative of the American company Ford. Around 1911, he produced a promotional reel for the firm, which earned the praise of Henry Ford himself (Romero, 2014). In the 1910s, Gil patented the “automotor cine”, a car with a film camera and a small processing lab, with which he travelled around villages and municipalities (González, 2022, p. 169). He recorded images of those places, developed them inside the car, and projected

them at night for the villagers. These documentaries and film reports about the Galician region were part of Gil's long-term aim: the creation of a "regional cinematography" (Fernández & Cabo Villaverde, 2008, p. 306), representative of Galician culture and identity. To achieve his dream, in 1919 he founded the first Galician film production company, Galicia Films and later, in 1922, Galicia Cinegráfica Vigo (Fernández & Cabo Villaverde, 2008, p. 307). The logo of this production company (with which they opened their films) was a lady in regional dress with an oil lamp, the shield of Galicia displayed between two bagpipes on her right. They also included a promotion intertitle, in which they specified that they accepted commissions to film "comedies and beauties of Galicia".

Gómez Viñas (2018, p. 16) credits the "automotor cine" with being "an agent of image democratization", as the device spread cinema outside urban spaces, into the rural, between the Galician popular classes. Besides, José Gil's films showed the working classes and their reality (Gómez Viñas, 2018, p. 17). Gil also created the first cinematic newsreel of the region (Romero, 2014). However, Gil's "democratization of the image" also happened on a transnational level, with the creation of the *correspondencia* films in 1910s (González, 2022, p. 148). At that time, the typology of film genres had yet to be established, but *correspondencia* had the structure we now associate with a documentary. Films like *Nuestras fiestas de allá* [*Our celebrations from there*] (1928) focused on the landscape and traditional celebrations. They were exported to America, like visual letters and postcards, with the Galician diaspora as target audience, appealing to their homesickness and nostalgia. Gil's *correspondencia* documentaries provided a specific means of communication between the motherland and the migrants. They soon started travelling both ways. The Galician centres created by the migrant communities commissioned films about their events or the places where they lived, which they then sent to Galicia. In a community where nationalist feeling is mainly defined through the attachment to the motherland, this subgenre allowed the Galician migrants to keep their sense of identity, belonging, and their cultural cohesion, even from a distance. For future generations, they offered archive material and historical documents about Galicia and the community in migration. Although José Gil shot around fifty *correspondencia* documentaries between 1910 and 1935 (see Redondo Neira & Pérez Pereiro, 2018, p. 111), only a few of them have been preserved.⁵ From the 1990s onwards, the Filmoteca Española, the Centro Galego das Artes e a Imaxe (CGAI), and the Consello da Cultura Galega have worked on the restoration of films from the Galician silent era. New material keeps being found in film archives around the world: *Tranvías de La Coruña* (*A Coruña Trams*) (dated 1926), believed to be the oldest *correspondencia* documentary still kept, appeared in 2016 at the Cinemateca Uruguaya in Montevideo (a city with a big Galician migrant community). It is unknown who shot it or in which circumstances.

Galicia in the early twentieth century: a time of transition

Gil's desire to create a "regional cinematography" was coherent with the anxieties of Galician society in the early twentieth century. This was a time of transition: there were big economic constraints (resulting in massive migration) and the Galician language was in a precarious

situation. However, it was also the culmination of a long period of redefining Galician identity as a nation and recovering the lost prestige. In the late Middle Ages, the old medieval kingdom of Galicia was incorporated into the crowns of Leon and Castile, leading to three centuries known as the “*Séculos escuros*” (“Dark Centuries”). Spanish was imposed as the language to be used in administration, education, and government, while Galician was relegated to the oral sphere and mainly spoken in rural areas. Being Galician became “a negative social marker” (Beramendi and Nuñez Seixas, 1996, p. 83), stereotypically associated with being “unrefined”, “ignorant”, and “low class”. These prejudices remained unchallenged till the second half of the nineteenth century, when the European regionalist movement (*Rexurdimento* [“Reawakening”] in Galician) caused the resurgence of regional literatures: the book of poems *Cantares Gallegos* by Rosalía de Castro (1863) inaugurated modern Galician literature. The revival continued thorough the early twentieth century with the emergence of the Galician nationalist movement; the intellectual organisation *Irmandades da Fala* [Fraternity of the Language] was created in 1916 to promote the language and the culture, and progressively turned to political initiatives. The *Grupo Nós* [Group Ourselves] arose from *Irmandades* in 1920. With the aim of challenging the stereotypical association of the language with ignorance, they created a journal totally in Galician (*Revista Nós*) where they published not only fiction and poetry, but also scientific, philosophical, and ethnographic articles. They defended the use of Galician language in the public sphere in order to create a nationalist identity.

At the time, the Galician language suffered from a situation of diglossia. It was widely spoken by lower-class people, but it was not associated with prestige: many speakers would abandon Galician for Spanish as soon as they acquired status. The vast majority of the population spoke Galician at home and in the street, but the administration and institutions exclusively used Spanish. A 1902 Royal Decree imposed Spanish as the language of use in education, threatening teachers with sanctions if they did not comply (Rivas Barrós, 2001, p. 169). The education received in schools aimed to silence Galician voices: Rivas Barrós (2001, p. 171) describes how Galician speaking children were forbidden from speaking the language in school. Then, they were mocked or punished for their mistakes when trying to speak Spanish. Finally, they opted for silence out of fear. They were instilled the idea that speaking Galician meant “speaking badly”, while speaking Spanish meant “speaking well” (Rivas Barrós, 2001, p. 172). From 1932, the Galician nationalist movement focused on fighting for the inclusion of the Galician language in education (Rivas Barrós 2001, p. 175).

In any case, the levels of literacy in Galicia were very low (see de Gabriel, 2013, p. 305). Curiously, migration had a positive impact: the need to migrate provoked an increase in the interest in learning how to read and write, considering it an indispensable asset to travel around the world (de Gabriel, 2013, p. 309). The migrants also financed the establishment of an important net of schools through the *Sociedades de Instrucción* [Education Societies] they created in America. Manuel Lemos (a migrant in Argentina) financed the schools in Val Miñor, which featured in several of Gil’s *correspondencia* films (González, 2022, p. 140): *Nuestras fiestas de allá* proudly shows a school “raised by the love of the absent ones”.

Despite the commitment of the intellectual elite to Galician nationalism, they were by no means a unified front. José Gil collaborated in the magazine *Vida Gallega*, created in 1931 to build communication between both sides of the Atlantic around a project for the economic and cultural reform of Galicia (Barreiro González, 2018, p. 70). The head of the magazine was Jaime Solá, who usually did the intertitles of José Gil's films (Barreiro González, 2018, p. 61). Although the magazine did include articles in Galician, their reformist project prioritized economic development over the defence of Galician language (Barreiro González, 2018, p. 70). Showing the infrastructure built with the money sent by the migrants became a recurrent topic in the *correspondencia* documentaries (Barreiro González, 2018, p. 71), like the Val Miñor school in *Nuestras fiestas de allá*. On the other hand, despite their efforts to use Galician in arts and sciences, the nationalists were initially dismissive about cinema (Fernández, 1999, p. 83), which they did not regard as a serious art. In 1916, José Gil produced the first-ever Galician fiction film, *Miss Ledyia*. The cosmopolitan plot, set in the fashionable A Toxa spa, was highly influenced by the French *feuilleton* film serials and centred around an anarchist conspiracy to kill the King and Queen of Suavia (the mythical name of Galicia). One of the actors was the artist and nationalist politician, Alfonso Daniel Rodríguez Castelao (a founding member of *Nós*). Unfortunately, this first meeting between film and the nationalist movement did not lead to a collaboration. *Miss Ledyia* (the only fiction film in Gil's production) was received as a curiosity, a frivolous entertainment for the members of the Pontevedra bourgeoisie who participated as actors (Romero, 2014). It was only in the mid-twenties that the nationalist movement started to realize the potential of the medium for spreading the Galician language and their political ideas.

The *correspondencia* documentaries as communicative travel

The *correspondencia* documentaries establish a connection between film and transport, which suggests the need to use an interdisciplinary methodology of study. First, travelling does not automatically imply physical mobility; it can be an "imagined presence" through the travelling of images (Urry, 2007, p. 47). Film gives you the opportunity to travel virtually, to see distant parts of the world without moving from your town. Consequently, it impacts people's perception of the world dramatically. This way of travelling is part of the paradigm of the five interdependent mobilities described by Urry (2007) and also Larssen et al. (2005). One of them is imaginative travel, which refers to "images and memories" seen on television screens and film. The *correspondencia* documentaries allowed the Galician community to see the places where their relatives had migrated to without having ever been there ("a dreamed journey"): the beginning of *Porriño en Buenos Aires* shows views of Los Andes and Iguazú. Reciprocally, it allowed the migrants to see the motherland they had left behind, how it had progressed, and even to glimpse their relatives (Mouriño, 2017). The *correspondencia* documentaries also show traits of communicative travel, which Larssen et al. identify as happening "through person-to-person messages via letters, postcards [...], telephones, [...] email, videoconferences" (2005, p. 60; see also Urry, 2007, p. 47). The epistolary condition

of the *correspondencia* documentaries, with a specific sender and recipient (Galicia and the migrant community), suggests a “conception of cinema as a means of communication and expression” (Gómez Viñas, 2018, p. 18).

In 1928, Gil produced an industry documentary, *Talleres Alonarti. La Artística*, about the manufacturing process in a Vigo fishing cannery. The documentary had features which later became characteristic of *correspondencia* documentaries: first, the breaking of the fourth wall. The final scene is reminiscent of *Employees Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895), and many of the workers look at the camera when they pass. Second, the landscape as nostalgia: the last intertitle shows a view of the Atlantic, symbolically separating the migrants from the motherland (Barreiro González, 2018, p. 72). Another important characteristic is the depiction of the migrants as heroes – “brave pilgrims” (*Nuestras fiestas de allá*).

I am going to analyse the characteristics of *correspondencia* documentaries in relation to two specific films: *Galicia y Buenos Aires* (1930), directed by José Gil to send to America, and *Porriño en Buenos Aires* (1929), produced by Cinematográfica Valle to send back to Galicia from the diaspora. The reference to the same city in the title is not accidental. Buenos Aires had a huge Galician migrant community, to the extent that it was referred to as “the fifth Galician province”. The Centro Galego [Galician Centre] in Buenos Aires, acquired in the 1910s with the money of thousands of migrants in the city, had around 120,000 members and provided medical assistance and education, theatre shows and celebrations, and had a huge library and music collection (Redondo Neira & Pérez Pereiro, 2018, p. 107).

Galicia y Buenos Aires was commissioned to Gil’s Galicia Cinegráfica by a migrant association in Buenos Aires, the *Sociedad Progresista Hijos de Fornelos y Anexos* [Liberal Society of the Sons of Fornelos and Surroundings]. These migrants were originally from Fornelos da Riveira (Salvaterra do Miño, Pontevedra), where the documentary premiered in June 1931. It was restored in 1999 by the CGAI. The film shows the inauguration of the Agricultural and Livestock Union *El Progreso* [“Progress”], financed with money sent by the migrants’ association, proving that it had been put to good use. As we said, this was a recurrent topic in the *correspondencia* documentaries. *Galicia y Buenos Aires* was made soon after the Second Republic started and includes speeches from politicians during the inauguration of the union premises, praising the government. This circumstance would have prevented the film from being shown during the dictatorship.

Porriño en Buenos Aires (1929) was a commission from the Society *Hijos de Porriño* [Sons of Porriño] to Cinematográfica Valle, a production company owned by the Italian migrant Federico Valle, who had settled in Buenos Aires. The association comprised migrants from that town in Pontevedra and the film showed their activities (Redondo Neira & Pérez Pereiro, 2018, p. 112): meetings, dances, and a large celebration in a park with food and music. The documentary, divided in four parts, was restored in 1993, although the reel corresponding to the second part was lost.

Barreiro González (2018, p. 60) establishes the exceptionality of the *correspondencia* documentary, as the genre is exclusive to Galician cinema: it does not exist in any other industry

(even from communities with a large diaspora). One exception would be the Italian films directed by Elvira Notari (1875–1946), a contemporary of José Gil and owner of Dora Films production house in Naples. Like the *correspondencia* documentaries, Notari's films provided a connection between Naples and the Italian migrant community in New York (Bruno, 1997, p. 51) which travelled both ways. In the 1920s, groups of Italian-American migrants commissioned Notari to produce short documentary films about Italy for them (Bruno, 1997, p. 53). One notable difference which distinguishes *correspondencia* documentaries from Notari's films is the constant breaking of the fourth wall. The *correspondencia* documentaries were very conscious of their communicative purpose. The participants constantly interacted with the camera, looking directly at their imagined relatives, whom they assumed to be the audience (prefiguring home videos): in the outdoor lunch in *Galicia y Buenos Aires*, everybody greets and salutes the camera. The breaking of the fourth wall is even more pronounced in *Porriño en Buenos Aires*: during the open-air festivities, the families at each table are given individualised shots, where they offer their (abundant) food to the camera and cheerfully raise glasses and bottles, as if sharing their goods with the motherland. In many shots, parents insistently make young children and babies face the camera for the benefit of the relatives in Galicia, whom probably they had never met in person. The camera identifies these children as the next generation, already born in Argentina, who “will perpetuate tomorrow our name and our virtues in American land”. This intertitle illustrates Larssen et al.'s (2005) insightful description of migration as a “two-way journey” between the place of settlement and the one left behind. The motherland “exerts some claim upon one's identity and loyalty”, which includes “desires and expectations to return there and to sustain networks” (Larssen et al., 2005, p. 55). The *correspondencia* documentaries originate in a community whose members are forced to migrate due to economic constraints, but are expected to maintain their commitment to the motherland. First, by sending money to develop it and, second, by keeping their culture in their place of settlement.

The *correspondencia* documentaries were also exceptional because of the totally positive image of migration they presented. This is not surprising, as they were produced by the migrant community and their place of origin, not the place of reception. Like Notari's, Gil's films provided self-representation of a minority culture (see Bruno, 1997, p. 53). The hardships experienced by the migrants were not the focus in the *correspondencia* documentaries, which instead depicted their triumphs. The migrants in *Porriño en Buenos Aires* dress elegantly and modern, and appear surrounded by material goods (a car) and an abundance of food, in contrast to the hunger, scarcity, and underdevelopment left behind in the motherland. The films emphasize the sacrifice of the migrants, leaving “the beloved homeland” but “always remembering” it (*Porriño en Buenos Aires*). They also praise their “magnanimity” and commitment which, in *Galicia y Buenos Aires*, acquires mythical undertones: the intertitles make a reference to the legends of the *mouros* (Galician underworld creatures), custodians of hidden golden treasures. Some children are shown coming out of a cave with their *tesouro* (“treasure”), which happens to be a sheep (“the treasure of livestock wealth”), given by the

livestock union created by the migrants. The main point of these films is to tighten the link between the motherland and the community in the diaspora, so there is a big focus on the bond between Galicia and America. The speeches during the inauguration in *Galicia y Buenos Aires* show “heartfelt Hispanic-American emotion”, according to the intertitles. In *Porriño en Buenos Aires*, the Argentinean capital is referred to as the “Favourite daughter of Spain [...] adopted and loving patria for thousands of migrated Spaniards”. The controversial colonial past between Spain and Latin America is casually and benevolently mentioned: *Porriño en Buenos Aires* shows the Monument of the Spaniards, a gift from the Spanish community to the city for the Centenary of Argentina’s Independence.

Landscape was already an iconic element of cultural representation in nineteenth-century Galician literature: the book of poems *Cantares Gallegos* by Rosalía de Castro (1863) is the first in which the word *paisaxe* (the Galician word for “landscape”) is written (Barreiro González, 2018, p. 43). Landscape has always been a crucial element for building Galician identity. It was recurrently personified as a mother: the mother earth, “matria”, tragically losing her children to migration. This symbolism passed to cinema (see Barreiro González, 2018, p. 64). The last intertitle in *Galicia y Buenos Aires* describes the land as “an adoring mother” waiting for the return of her children “to her loving lap”. In *Porriño en Buenos Aires*, the intertitles appeal to the remembrance of the birthplace “in the heart of her migrant children”. Barreiro González identifies two filmic representations of the Galician landscape: the landscape as scenery, fixed (“immobile landscape”), and the landscape of the experience and the work, which changes (“mobile landscape”) (2018, pp. 44-45). We can find both types in Gil’s *correspondencia* documentaries. *Galicia y Buenos Aires* (1931) shows the landscape fixed in the memory of the migrants who left it behind (immobile). It starts with an “Evocation”, an emotional moment, remembering the motherland from the point of view of the migrants (a similar “evocation” appears in *Nuestras fiestas de allá*). *Galicia y Buenos Aires* also shows the changes which have taken place in their absence and the innovations made with the money they sent (mobile landscape). The *correspondencia* documentaries characteristically emphasize the landscape to evoke homesickness. The Galician language has a word, *morriña*, which specifically means ‘longing for the motherland’. *Morriña* is an intrinsic concept to the Galician migrant experience, implying the unwillingness to lose connection with their culture, roots, and heritage. These documentaries allowed the Galician migrants to keep an affective communion with the motherland in the distance, defined by “close personal ties, belongingness and emotional warmth” (Urry, 2007, p. 163). Through these documentaries, the Galician migrants’ imaginative travel appealed to their nostalgia and memories of the motherland or, for second-generation migrants, their discovery of it.

Galician language in the *correspondencia* documentaries

If the *correspondencia* documentary contributed to the sense of cohesion of the Galician community, it surely had an impact on the Galician language. The study of *correspondencia* films in relation to language brings up a very complex picture. First, as cinema in the early

twentieth century was silent, any use of language (Galician or other) was restricted to the intertitles. Other linguistic elements were the songs used as accompaniment to the films and the “*explicador*”, a person who stood in front of the screen explaining the images (Galán, 1997, p. 6). This figure, common in early twentieth-century travelling cinemas, was especially useful as many people in the audience could not read. These last two elements were not systematic and probably varied from screening to screening, so any analysis of them involves a high degree of speculation. We have no data about how many *explicadores* used Galician. On the other hand, singing and dancing were an integral part of the celebrations so commonly depicted in the *correspondencia* documentaries: *Porriño en Buenos Aires* shows people dancing a typical *muiñeira* and playing traditional instruments (tambourine, bagpipes, and *cunchas* [“shells”]). However, it would be the decision of each projectionist on which music to play during those scenes. Some fiction films of the period did include references to popular poems and song in the intertitles: *La casa de la Troya* (1924) includes *Unha noite na eira do trigo* (1869), by Manuel Curros Enríquez. At a time when Galician was relegated to the oral sphere, these songs were widely known and recognized by the intended audience as an expression of their culture. This practice continued with the arrival of sound, as many films incorporated popular Galician songs in their soundtrack: for example, Manuel Arís included *A Rianxeira* and *Queixumes dos Pinos* (Galicia’s national anthem) in his 1958 film *Un viaje por Galicia* (see Barreiro González, 2018, p. 47).

In order to provide an accurate linguistic analysis of the intertitles in the *correspondencia* documentaries, one must be careful that the copy includes the original texts. Some of the copies restored in the 1990s have versions with the intertitles totally in Galician, which is not how those films were released. The original intertitles just contained some Galician words, but they were mainly in Spanish, which reflected the subjugated language situation Galician suffered in the society of the time. Intersecting Galician words with Spanish intertitles is not unusual in a bilingual community, when people mix both languages when speaking, even nowadays. Irrespective of the language they habitually speak, the vast majority of people have the capacity to understand both. However, the *correspondencia* documentaries replicated the power relation between the two languages, a diglossia in which Spanish was the dominant language and Galician the minorized language, identified with the rural classes and mainly used to evoke emotions, especially nostalgia (Redondo Neira & Pérez Pereiro, 2018, p. 139). *Galicia y Buenos Aires* uses Galician words when describing the peasants’ work (*enmeducar* [to bind straw]), but sticks to Spanish during the political speeches. However, unlike the comedic Galician peasant stereotypes so common in later cinema of the dictatorship, agricultural tasks are portrayed objectively and respectfully. Saturnino Piñeiro, who designed the intertitles, was a supporter of agrarian reform.

The prohibition of the language in education meant that there were barely any written references in Galician at the time. Despite the literary revival, few novels had been written in the language, which was more commonly used for poetry (Rosalía de Castro wrote her poems in Galician and her novels in Spanish). In fact, the language had no unified grammar

rules: “riveira” [“riverbank”] (*Galicia y Buenos Aires*) is nowadays spelt “ribeira”. Without any standards of use for guidance, Galician intertitles could only replicate the way people spoke.⁶

The peripheral presence of Galician language is nevertheless brought to the audience’s attention. The few words in Galician are highlighted by inverted commas and underlined. In the two *correspondencia* documentaries we are analysing, Galician words appear when they want to appeal to the feelings of the spectators, especially their homesickness. This emotive use of the language is mainly used in three instances. First, names of places (“*o Piñeiral*”, *Galicia y Buenos Aires*) and people. *Galicia y Buenos Aires* identifies people by their family nicknames (“*Celsa da Marela*”; “*Enriqueño da Parda*”), which in those villages were more recognisable than their given names and surnames. In *Porriño en Buenos Aires*, the migrants are identified by their official name, as a symbol of acquired status and having left the village behind. However, some nicknames appear during the cheerful celebration (“*o Raposeira*”) when emotions take over. Some pretty young ladies, shown smiling coyly to the camera, are referred to as “our *carabeles*” [carnations], blooming in Buenos Aires like those “on the banks of the Louro” (the river passing through Porriño). The word not only associates the women to the much-missed landscape, but suggests the possibility of planting their roots in the land of destination.

A second instance specifies untranslatable Galician words such as *aturuxo* (a cry of happiness). *Galicia y Buenos Aires* shows local food (*rosquillas do Riveiro* [ring-shaped pastries], *viño do Condado* [Condado wine]), probably missed by the intended migrant audience. In *Porriño en Buenos Aires*, the intertitles show Galician words when the migrant families reminisce about the motherland (*salgueiro* [willow], *panasco* [grass for the cattle]), which become mixed with local Argentinean expressions (*jarola* [go partying], *tragos* [drinks], *bocados* [snacks]). This mixing of linguistic expressions reflects the mixing of cultures between the migrant community and the local, and the construction of a hybrid identity in the place of destination.

The third instance is the evocative and emotional use of the Galician language, which increases at moments of happiness, celebration, and playfulness. In *Porriño en Buenos Aires*, after everybody falls to the floor at the tug-of-war game, the intertitle says: “*¡COMO TURRARON OS COITADOS!*” [“how hard the poor souls pulled!”]. At a time of hunger and poverty in many villages, Galician words playfully highlight the abundance of food available in Buenos Aires: “*rilando un hueso de polo*” [“chewing a chicken bone”], “*Están de bo ano*” [“they are well-fed”]. Being fat was a sign of status, meaning you had plenty of food to eat. In *Galicia y Buenos Aires*, after tasting the wine, a villager says “*íste é o que me ten a min en pé*” [“this is what keeps me standing”].

The reduced use of Galician in the *correspondencia* documentaries reflects the relegation of the language to the private, domestic sphere. Nevertheless, the examples analysed define Galician as the language through which to express feelings: the personal identity.

The 1920s-1930s: hopes and backlash for Galician cinema

The 1920s started promisingly for Galician cinema, as the nationalist movement finally realized the possibilities brought by the medium to advance their political agenda. The fiction film

Maruxa (1923), made “to be seen by our countrymen in America”, was released in a version with intertitles “in correct Galician” created by writer and nationalist Manuel Lugo Freire, which made it “especially attractive”, as press reviewers of the time said (Fernández, 2004, p. 33). In addition, the Second Republic (1931–1936) promoted “the use of the camera as an avant-garde art to the service of the working classes” (Gómez Viñas, 2014, p. 18). The Galician nationalist movement started to use film as a weapon of propaganda in support of the demands for home rule, which aimed for the region to be an autonomous state within the Federal Republic of Spain. In 1933, the brothers Ramón and Enrique Barreiro, owners of the Casa Folk production company whose cinematic newsreels rivalled José Gil’s, created the propaganda film *Por unha Galicia nova* (*For a new Galicia*) (Fernández & Cabo Villaverde, 2008, p. 65). The arrival of sound cinema to Spain in the mid-thirties brought a radical change in the way films were exhibited, and created excellent opportunities to use different national languages in cinema. In 1936, Carlos Velo and Fernando Gutiérrez Mantilla directed the political documentary *Galicia-Finisterre*, in which they used *aturuxos* and peasant songs to depict “the sounds of the motherland” (Barreiro González, 2018, p. 55), while Castelao’s satirical drawings in *Album Nós* (1920) and *Cousas da vida* (1925) served as credits.

The early twentieth century should have set the foundation of the Galician film industry but, unfortunately, the efforts of these cinema pioneers were about to suffer a huge backlash. First, like many Galician filmmakers after him, José Gil suffered the indifference of the government towards his regional cinematography project. In 1929, the provincial administrations sponsored the first feature documentary film made in Galicia (*Un viaje por Galicia*) to promote the region, but gave the commission to a Madrid production company, not to Galicia Cinegráfica. In an irate letter to the newspaper *Faro de Vigo*, Gil complained that “these are the reasons why people migrate” (Fernández & Cabo Villaverde, 2008, p. 308). When sound cinema arrived, José Gil, already suffering from ill health, struggled to adapt to the new format (Romero, 2014). He also never recovered from the death of his three daughters from tuberculosis in the 1920s, which temporarily halted his career. He died, penniless, in 1937, several months after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) had started. During the war, Galicia immediately fell under the control of Franco’s nationalist side, who forbade the use of Galician as early as July 1936. The hopes for home rule vanished after the imposition of a dictatorship in Spain in 1939, which lasted until 1975. At a time when film industries were being established around the world, the Galician language (and in fact, all regional languages) was forbidden in film and other media.

José Gil’s complaints about *Un viaje por Galicia* were well-justified. In contrast to the self-representation his regional cinematography proposed, the 1929 documentary was a “tourist” vision of Galicia from the outside. It showed an exclusively immobile landscape (a “passive view”, according to Barreiro González (2018, p. 54)). The intertitles were merely informative (like a travelogue), lacking all the emotional use of language present in the *correspondencia* documentaries. Use of the Galician language was practically non-existent, with constant spelling mistakes: *pallazas* instead of *pallozas* (a typical Celtic household). In

contrast to Gil's lively celebrations and people engaging with the camera, this Galicia was shown empty of people, seen from far away, their faces barely distinguishable. In fact, *Un viaje por Galicia* (1929) prefigured the tendency in the dictatorship cinema of speaking *for* the Galicians, not giving them a voice. *Galicia y sus gentes* was a 1951 NO-DO (official cinematic newsreel during the dictatorship) which surprisingly contained a high percentage of dialogue in Galician. However, it was an exercise in ventriloquism: the voiceover spoke for the people in the images, inventing their words, reducing them to picturesque conversations about haggling (see Busto Miramontes, 2016, pp. 444–450).

The legacy of *correspondencia* documentaries: Novo Cinema Galego

Despite the political restrictions, the legacy of José Gil's *correspondencia* documentaries lived on as visual communication with the diaspora persisted. First, up until the 1960s, Galician photographers received many commissions for pictures of people with the presents their migrant relatives had sent from America, as proof they had received them. Second, the availability of portable cameras allowed the migrants to film images which travelled back and forth across the Atlantic. This type of documentaries became habitual in the mid-twentieth century (Redondo Neira & Pérez Pereiro, 2018, p. 112). In 1958, Manuel Arís, a migrant in Buenos Aires, successfully released *Un viaje por Galicia* there, which he shot with a 16mm colour camera during three trips to the motherland (Barreiro González, 2018, p. 46). Another important documentalist in the diaspora was Elixio González, the official photographer and filmmaker of the Galician community in Buenos Aires, who documented the activities of the nationalist movement in Argentina (including recordings of the exiled Castelao) (Redondo Neira & Pérez Pereiro, 2018, pp. 112–113).

The Spanish cinema of the dictatorship reduced Galician culture to the *gallegada* subgenre, created in the 1940s by production company Suevia (owned by the Galician Cesáreo González). These comedies were massively criticized because of their submissive, bucolic depiction of the region and their emphasis on folkloric stereotypes (Fernández, 2004, p. 613). However, they fulfilled a similar purpose to the *correspondencia* documentaries. They were exported to South America, appealing to the migrants' nostalgia through their extensive use of the Galician landscape.

Galician language in mid-twentieth century cinema remained incidental, but there were significant differences in its use in the diaspora and in Spain. *Un viaje por Galicia* shows a mobile landscape, defined by Arís's experiences and memories, with emotional use of the language. The dominant Spanish voiceover changes to Galician in the scenes which show Arís' birthplace, his family's land, and his mother (Barreiro González, 2018, p. 44). In contrast, the occasional Galician words in the *gallegada*, delivered in an exaggerated regional accent, were supposed to provide comedic relief (see Fernández, 2004, p. 13).

The arrival of democracy in 1975 radically changed the situation for Galician language and culture (although economic constraints remained), finally making it possible to produce

audiovisual material totally in Galician. The region was granted home rule, unified grammar rules were established in 1982 and, more importantly, Galician started to be taught in schools and used in government and administration. Galician television started broadcasting in 1985, spreading the normative Galician language. The first film totally spoken in Galician, *Sempre Xonxa* (dir. Chano Piñeiro), was released in 1989.

The documentary is the most prolific genre in recent Galician audiovisual production, with a higher use of Galician in documentaries than in fiction productions, suggesting a bigger commitment by documentary authors as to the use of Galician language (see Roca Baamonde et al., 2016, pp. 169–170). The avant-garde movement known as Novo Cinema Galego, which arose in the 2010s, relies heavily on the documentary genre. This new generation of filmmakers (who can be from Galicia, living in the diaspora, or born there) are characterized by preferring non-fiction digital formats and for self-financing their productions (Villarmea Álvarez, 2019, p. 202) which they present in national and international film festivals. Digital technologies, which have given an impulse to cinema in minority languages, are of crucial importance in the shooting and distribution of Novo Cinema Galego films (Romero Suárez, 2015, p. 17). This movement has resurrected the *correspondencia* subgenre for the twenty-first century. *Bs.As.*, directed by Alberte Pagán in 2006 and spoken in Galician and Spanish, is considered to be a foundational film of the movement. It is structured as a correspondence between the filmmaker and his family in Argentina, descendants of a migrant uncle, whose steps he retraces. In the second half, his cousin reflects about her “inherited identity as second-generation Galician” (Villarmea Álvarez, 2015, pp. 236–237).

The Novo Cinema Galego coincided with the 2008 financial crisis, which provoked a new wave of Galician migration (Villarmea Álvarez, 2019, p. 203). However, the experience of these twenty-first century migrants is very different from their early twentieth century ancestors. Education is nowadays compulsory, accessible to all, and bilingual, so migrants often have a university degree and have been educated in Galician. In contrast to the diglossia in early twentieth-century *correspondencia*, the Novo Cinema Galego films use the language without power relations, which reflects the co-official status of Galician in twenty-first century society (although some social prejudices remain). These documentaries are mainly spoken in Galician, although they may include languages from other communities which they may interact with. *Vikíngland* (dir. Xurxo Chirro, 2011) is a videoblog of the daily routine of a worker in a ferry travelling between Denmark and Germany.⁷ Galician (the dominant language in the documentary) is combined in “suggestive harmony” with other languages spoken by other crew members, like English or German (Redondo Neira & Perez Pereiro, 2018, p. 134). Some of the Novo Cinema Galego directors live in the diaspora and document their own migrant experience. In *Pettring* (2013), director Eloy Domínguez Serén films a diary of his life as a migrant in Sweden (see Romero Suárez, 2015, p. 15). *Pettring* is part of a filmic correspondence between Domínguez Serén and fellow filmmaker Marcos Nine: *Cartas* (2012–2013).⁸ This contemporary *correspondencia* may also be a return journey, in which the motherland and roots are the land where their migrant parents were born. In *Cienfuegos 1913*, director Margarita

Ledo Andión reminisces (in Galician and Spanish) about her mother's birthplace (Cienfuegos, Cuba) by corresponding with Cuban documentalist Belkis Vega. These films by Domínguez Serén and Ledo Andión not only continue the Galician *correspondencia* with the diaspora, but are also framed within other projects of filmic correspondence between global filmmakers.⁹

Conclusion

José Gil's project for a regional cinematography attests to the efforts of Galician culture to attain agency and self-representation in the audiovisual field, and to challenge the subjugation that the language had suffered for centuries. The documentary is established as the genre through which Galician audiovisual production will achieve these objectives. José Gil's *correspondencia* documentary is a subgenre unique to the Galician audiovisual field, which arose from the wish of a minority culture to communicate with a huge diaspora. His "regional cinematography" was always a battle against the odds, as it arose at a time when the Galician language was subjugated by the authorities and dismissed by society. The *correspondencia* documentaries reflected the precarious situation of the language, restricted to the oral sphere and therefore lacking written references to elaborate the intertitles. The use of Galician was scarce, but Galician words appeared for the expression of feelings and emotions. On the other hand, despite their initial dismissal of cinema, the rising nationalist movement ended up realizing the potential of the new medium to spread the language.

I established a parallel between José Gil's *correspondencia* documentaries and the modern expressions of this subgenre, produced within the Novo Cinema Galego movement, which prove the relevance of the genre. If Gil used the new media of the early twentieth century to communicate with the diaspora, then so do the Novo Cinema Galego *correspondencia* films by means of twenty-first-century digital technologies. These modern documentaries are mainly produced in normative Galician, which reflects the official status of this minority language nowadays and also its power of resistance.

The *correspondencia* documentaries should not only be valued as a cinematic expression, but also as early form of communicative travel. The early twentieth century was a period of economic underdevelopment resulting in huge migration. This subgenre allowed communication between Galicia and the diaspora, as a way for the migrants to keep their sense of identity and alleviate their nostalgia (*morriña*) for the motherland and people. They also documented the migrant experience for future generations, demonstrating the need to preserve the legacy of film pioneers like José Gil.

Endnotes

- 1 Until very recently, it was believed that the first Spanish film was *La salida de la misa de doce del Pilar de Zaragoza/ Exit from 12 o'clock mass at the Church of the Pilar of Zaragoza* (dir. Eduardo Jimeno Correás), but new information suggests that it was actually shot in October 1896, some months after Sellier's.
- 2 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
- 3 The term was first used in 1925 by John Grierson.
- 4 See Manolo González, *Nos dias encantados de Agosto. Unha biografía de José Gil* (Vigo: Editorial Galaxia, 2022) for an extensive analysis of the life and works of José Gil
- 5 González (2022, pp. 397–460) includes an appendix with a comprehensive list of José Gil's films (although it does not specifically identify which ones are *correspondencia documentaries*).
- 6 In 2020, the Galician town Santa Uxía de Ribeira finally adopted this spelling in their official name (instead of "Riveira") after around four decades of controversy.
- 7 The tapes were recorded by the worker himself, Luis Lomba "Haia" in the 1990s, and were later compiled and edited as a documentary by Xurxo Chirro. See Villarmea Álvarez (2019) for a detailed analysis of this film.
- 8 Between 2019–2022, Domínguez Serén established a new film correspondence with Colombian filmmaker Samuel Moreno Álvarez (see Liste, 2022).
- 9 For example, *Filmed Correspondence*, a project commissioned by the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCCB) from 2006 to 2011, with film letters between directors like José Luis Guerin and Jonas Mekas, or Isaki Lacuesta and Naomi Kawase.

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Filmography [in chronological order]

- Employees Leaving the Lumière Factory* (Louis Lumière, 1895)
- El entierro del General Sánchez Bregua* (José Sellier, 1897)
- Maruxa* (Henry Vorins, 1923)
- Tranvías de La Coruña* (dated 1926)
- Nuestras fiestas de allá* (José Gil, 1928)
- Talleres Alonarti. La Artística* (José Gil, 1928)
- Porriño en Buenos Aires* (Cinematográfica Valle, 1929)
- Un viaje por Galicia* (Luis R. Alonso, 1929)
- Galicia y Buenos Aires* (José Gil, 1930)
- Canto de emigración* (Antonio Román, 1935)
- Un viaje por Galicia* (Manuel Arís, 1958)
- Camarote de lujo* (Rafael Gil, 1959)
- Sempre Xonxa* (Chano Piñeiro, 1989)
- Bs.As* (Alberte Pagán, 2006)
- Cienfuegos 1913* (Margarita Ledo Andión, 2008)
- Vikíngland* (Xurxo Chirro, 2011)