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Review of Isabel M. Elstrada, *El documental cinematográfico y televisivo contemporáneo: memoria, sujeto y formación de la identidad democrática española*. Woodbridge: Tamesis. 2013.

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Review of Isabel M. Elstrada *El documental cinematográfico y televisivo contemporáneo: memoria, sujeto y formación de la identidad democrática española*. Woodbridge: Tamesis. 2013. 196 pp.

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This study examines the debate around the topic of memory in contemporary Spain through an analysis of the production of television and film documentaries from the 1990s to the present. Divided in two sections, the book begins with a detailed critical account of the interest in the past in Spanish society. The author then focuses on documentaries such as *Les fosses del silenci* (2003), *Las fosas del olvido* (2004), *Muerte en El Valle* (1996) and *Aguaviva* (1996) which deal with the remnants of the Spanish Civil War. These films document public exhumations of mass graves, the story of private citizens who embark on personal journeys to shed light on the disappearance of relatives, and the testimony of those who have personally experienced the aftermath of the war and the repression of the Franco dictatorship. The author examines the politics involved in the making and screening of these works and the way they have to do with silencing and forgetting the past, trying to balance historiographical interest and the personal testimony that accounts for the memories discussed in these films. For the author, the documentary as a visual and narrative genre is a useful medium to bring forth these discussions, even when its presumed objectivity and didactic nature can be at times challenging. Through her engaging analyses, it becomes clear to the reader that most of the documentaries analysed in the first part of the book end up offering a rather limited reading of the past. They tend to ignore the complexity of how memory works and to heavily rely on the authority of specialists silencing the voice of those who keep continuing to be affected by the legacies of the Spanish Civil War. It is not surprising then that the author favours the creative documentaries studied in the second part of the book such as *El cielo gira* (2005) by Mercedes Álvarez or *En construcción* (2001) by José Luis Guerín, as both of these works offer a different approach to the individual voices and experiences that capture a narrative about the present and its ties to the past. She pays special attention to the graduate programme in Creative Documentary offered by the Pompeu Fabra University and the work of its graduates. The author's close look into the narratives used by these young filmmakers is enough to convince her and her readers that cinematographic documentary now deserves critical attention.

The analyses of the documentaries mentioned above and which are only a selection of those discussed in the book, are part of the author's helpful discussion on how the notion of recovering memories opens a complex discussion between public and private space that ultimately deals with an ethical stance taken in the present towards injustices committed in the past. This position, however, is not one without difficulties or ambiguities, as an obsession with the past can lead to prolonged victimizations or to political manipulation. In the reading of this author, this possibility is outweighed by the need to recognize the victims of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship. Especially because examining this memory can shed light to the way we

both understand the past and the present. Neither rejecting the democratic changes that has taken place in Spain from the late 1970s or being too lenient to the many oversights that took place during this political transformation regarding with the legacy of both the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, the author provides a balanced reading between two disparate critical perspectives by examining what contemporary documentary production can tell us about the country's past. Following Maurice Halbwach's idea that each society modifies its memory with the hope to maintain a desired equilibrium in the present, the author finds in these works a way to better comprehend Spain's relationship with its troubled past, both in terms of its efforts to break from it and with its continued obsession with it. As the concluding section of the book states, what the author weaves through her discussion of the documentaries is a narration of the past that is currently taking place ('nos hablan del pasado que está pasando' [170]). What she puts into practice in this study, in her own words, is an empathetic approach to the memories of the past as a way to pursue a fertile and more democratic critical work that does not delegate previous experiences as part of a normative process towards the future, but rather as how it is complicit in the present. Indeed, the analyses offered in this study, especially those in the second part of the book, bring to our attention how these documentaries movingly work between the personal and the objective to reveal the complexities of our present.