

**GAGO, G. (DIRECTOR). (2017). *MATRIA* [FILM].  
SPAIN: SOMBRIZA FILMS, RINGO MEDIA.**

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The short film *Matria* (2017) depicts a day in the life of Ramona [Francisca Iglesias Bouzón], a 50-something-year-old woman who works at a cannery on the Galicia coast. A Sombriza Films (Galicia) and Ringo Media (Catalonia) production, by the young Galician director Álvaro Gago<sup>1</sup> [Vigo, 1986], supported by AGADIC – Axencia Galega das Industrias Culturais [Galician Agency for Cultural Industries], this is a fiction film, but one with an aesthetically raw narrative, which draws it very close to reality, granting a critical look upon the matriarchy myth in traditional Galician culture.

This 21-minute short film brings to the big screen the daily routine of an anonymous woman who, as so many others, is not used to being the star and, therefore, is often silenced, or relegated to second plan by film narratives (Lauzen, 2018). Ramona is an example of the women that stay in silence, that abide, that have an intense lifestyle and that sacrifice themselves for other people. One look at the beginning of the film and it is noticeable the hurry in which the main character leaves for work, sparing no time to take care of herself, with a close up shot that portrays a life of extreme severity expressed on her face. This lack of care that foresees the absence of the subject sets the stage for the whole film. Her care is always transferred to other people, which is evident when, breaking the rules, she answers the phone in the middle of work, when she gives up her lunch break in order to go home and serve her husband lunch or when she quickly applies deodorant because she has to leave in a hurry to solve family problems (daughter and granddaughter). The expressions of Ramona's exhaustion and continuous struggle stand out throughout the entire narrative with the use of some close up shots, a technique emphasised by the director.

To watch this film is to be aware of a certain knowledge located and anchored in the geographical (coastal area of Galicia and canning industry) and time contexts (the present characterised by precarious work situations), in history (family, gender, intergenerational and professional relationships), in the structures (social, political and economic) and in the social agents involved in the film production. In a time characterised by the "illusion of equality" (Banyard, 2010) and the rhetoric of post-feminism (Tasker & Negra, 2007) invading media productions, including film narratives, this story gives visibility to unequal gender relationships, evidence of a patriarchal system that is still deeply rooted

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.alvarogago.com>

in society. Similar to the work of other researchers<sup>2</sup>, and from this point of view, the director deconstructs the idea of Galician matriarchy created by José Cela and Vicente Risco in a book about the daily life of Galicians in the last 200 years. Ramona is presented as a strong Galician woman, sacrificed and almost asphyxiated by her daily life. However, her power is only apparent, she is just trying to survive. Her daily routine is defined by emptiness and alienation, two features presented very well in an environmental realism that highlights the film aesthetics of this short film. This framework is portrayed by several shots in which we can see the face of the main character, her expressions of anguish and despair. In other shots we see the pedalling of her bicycle as a metaphor for her fast life and its inherent risks. Additionally, there is not much dialogue throughout the narrative, but each word leads to a density that will not leave viewers indifferent. Gender relationships set the entire film, intersecting with each other in the private (family) and public (work and leisure space) domains.

Alongside these, intergenerational relationships are also present, particularly through the interaction between grandmother, daughter and granddaughter. In a society characterised by labour precarity and the need for support between generations, the grandmother, Ramona, spares no effort to make her descendants happy. There is also a strong reference to the consumer society and the fact that people increasingly value material goods (in the film this is translated in the importance of the birthday present for the granddaughter).

In addition, this film approaches interpersonal relationships and communication (or the lack of it), in the family and professional spheres. This can be observed in the relationship that Ramona maintains with her husband. She gives up her lunch break in order to go home and put food on the table for him. In this scene, it is noticeable that this is an extremely mechanical process, in which there is minimum communication or dialogue between the two. Likewise, this scene highlights the glaring asymmetric gender relationships. At work, communication is equally absent, sometimes giving rise to conflict situations, defined by power/hierarchy relationships. A noticeable example can be found in the insults from the cannery forewoman, who exercises her power in a tyrannical manner, without even looking at the employees, all of whom are women. It is depicted as a professional activity carried out mainly by women, however, at a certain point in the film, there is the fleeting image of the factory manager, a man who emerges, once again, to clearly show who has the power and is at the top of the hierarchy.

Additionally, the film emphasises precariousness and the dehumanisation of the labour market, as well as the economic crisis. It may be said that there is a patent critique to the production mode in effect in the capitalist society, which does not allow people to stop, think and question about their labour relations. This critique permeates the main character's daily labour routine and also her family life, mostly when she sacrifices herself to help her daughter and granddaughter.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.elprogreso.es/articulo/noticias/el-mito-del-matriarcado-gallego/20071222165000150353.html>  
<https://praza.gal/cultura/lo-mito-do-matriarcado-galego-e-totalmente-falsor>

Despite being a short film, it addresses several and complex topics, without overlooking the depth they deserve. At times, fiction and reality intersect and are extremely close to us. As explained by the director in many interviews, the main character, Ramona, is not a professional actress. The film stems from the relationship the director had with Francisca Iglesias Bouzón, who had been employed by his grandfather and had cared for him during the last years of his life. He wanted to give her a voice, visibility, to show the example of an anonymous female hero who he had known since childhood and someone who was an inspiration to him, simultaneously, portraying the daily life of many other women. Besides that, the other actresses and actors did not have previous experience either; Francisca's sister and niece also participate in the film, the women from the cannery work there and the men at the café are also not actors. All of these points, once again, to the fine line between reality and fiction.

*Matria* has won over 40 international awards, notably the Short Film Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Festival (2018) and best fiction short film at the IndieLisboa (2018). It is a humanist film about hope, despite its considerable emotional charge, which sometimes makes it extremely heavy and realistic. The last scene of the film depicts Ramona with an expression that refers to the future and to the possibility of change, on a personal, but also on a social level. This is a change aimed at a fairer, more equitable and less individualistic society.

The director Álvaro Gago has mentioned in interviews and on his personal web page<sup>3</sup> that the short film *Matria* does not have a clear political goal, but intends to tell the story of an unknown woman who takes care of so many things, and mainly so many people, allowing her visibility and public recognition. However, while watching this film, we face reflections on several social issues. It is worth remembering that since its appearance, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the film industry has performed a double and important role regarding, on the one hand, the strengthening of unequal power relationships in society and, on the other hand, the questioning of values and dominant identity configurations in the individual and collective imaginary. This short film is an example that clearly proves the power of film narratives as spaces for questioning the dominant social order, social struggle and resistance.

Translation: Inovtrad

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.alvarogago.com/matria>

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#### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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\* Submitted: 14-09-2018

\* Accepted: 05-02-2019