

Numax, our university: Conversation with Joaquim Jordà

In 1979, Joaquim Jordà filmed a documentary about the experiment in self-management that the workers at the Numax electrical appliance factory carried out in response to the attempt by its owners to close it down in an irregular manner. The documentary was made with the express wish of the Workers' Committee at Numax which, when the filming was almost completed, decided to invest the last 600,000 pesetas from the strike fund in recording the process that they had all been involved in.

Now, Joaquim Jordà has filmed *Veinte años no es nada* (Twenty years is nothing), a documentary that aims to reconstruct the history of the last twenty-five years of Spain by taking the lives of the people involved in this experiment in self-management at the Numax factory as a starting point.

In 1979, Joaquim Jordà's camera captured the experience of the group of workers that collectivised and ran the Numax factory in Barcelona themselves. Twenty-five years later, the same camera attended their reunion meeting. What bridges the gap between their years of collective struggle and the disperse nature of their current lives are the desires "of people who fought to stop being working class without renouncing what they had experienced in the factory". Jordà captured them on film at a time when, sick of competing amongst and exploiting themselves, the workers at this self-managed factory decided to transfer it: to never again work for someone else, to do meaningful work, to head off to the country, carry on the struggle... What became of those desires? What happened to those lives that had become politicised inside the factory? Jordà sums up: "Perhaps they didn't do all that they wanted, but they didn't do anything that they didn't want to do". *Twenty years is nothing*, the film that Jordà brought out in November 2005, is a tribute to the anonymous dignity of the working class that was defeated. They lost, but they didn't fail. "I wasn't interested in telling the story of a failure. I was interested in explaining that



Joaquim Jordà *Viente años no es nada* (Twenty years is nothing) 2005

despite experiencing the mediocrity and horror of the last twenty-five years, they had been able to keep one thing alive: the idea that they couldn't possibly stoop to doing certain awful things; they couldn't be fooled, and that they were responsible for keeping alive a story that they had experienced — an exemplary story”.

As they never tire of repeating in *Twenty years is nothing*, for this group of workers Numax was their university. When we talked with Joaquim Jordà in his flat in Barcelona on a December evening, and took a closer look at the collective experience of these two films with him, we discovered that Numax is also a university for us. On the one hand, because it shows us a radically autonomous politicisation process that cannot be explained through the importance of ideology but

through the capacity for invention and creation that shared lives have. And, on the other, because it transports us into a story that is our own: the concealed history of the Spanish transition to democracy, which is like a tale of disillusionment and betrayal.

“I experienced the workers’ world in its capacity for organisation and revolt”, Jordà claims when he recalls the experience of working on *Numax presenta*. “For the traditional workers’ movement, *Numax presenta* was a film about failure. What I thought was a victory, was a defeat in their eyes”. This victory, as the second film confirms, is the victory of an apprenticeship in life that you cannot give up. “At Numax, the basic idea was the group. What they learnt was to maintain their unity through the factory committee. On the



basis of this group experience, each of them was personally enriched. Paradoxically, they learnt how to be individuals. Unlike what they say about the workers' struggle becoming standardised and depersonalised, at Numax the experience is quite different. Some of them already had a past; others didn't. But they all experience a personal process through collective struggle. Each one of them comes out of Numax with their own degree". Their political process is a communal process of acquiring self-respect in a common struggle. Unlike the traditional concepts of commitment to the workers' movement, with its slogans and guidelines, at Numax they discover the violence of salaried jobs through their own lives, when this is recognised as being a common problem. This is why the critique that workers at Numax formulate must go beyond a mere external critique of capitalism. It must be formulated as a critique of work and its system of domination over their lives. "The concept of secondary exploitation was a revelation for me. If someone else flogs me, I don't care; but I do care if I flog someone. This is what makes them get out of there. They also find out that they are doing a job that they are not interested in and don't care about. What does a fan or an egg-boiler have to do with

them? How can they sell them to other workers if there are cheaper and better ones? By selling pointless electrical appliances they feel that they are deceiving their own fellow workers. This is what they gradually learn over these two years running the factory themselves. They discover that work doesn't give them dignity and that they are also doing absurd things". Their lives, collectively rescued from the submissiveness and servitude of struggling to survive, want something more; something that provides an extra piece of political, personal, individual and collective meaning. This is what is expressed in the desires that bring *Numax presenta* to a close. Promises made for lives that have decided, on their own, to put an end to the meagre conquests they have achieved on their journey from self-management to self-exploitation... so that they can go beyond this.

This collective spirit, in which the unique qualities of each individual were blended with the special features of the others, had found its bearings in the factory. "The factory is having four walls and giving yourself time and space". Twenty-five years later the factory has disappeared and the irreversibly marked lives of the Numax workers drift along through the net-like space formed by new capitalism. Their varied biographies provide a metaphor for the isolation in which each of them risks their lives in the net-society. The disappearance of the factory as a space for political struggle, and the subsequent personalisation of our careers and lives as a result of the lack of job security have wiped out spaces where it is possible to form communal experiences from our political map. "We now have a sum of personal adventures that come together at a certain time in order to shape something. This is a fundamental change". In *Veinte años no es nada*, the workers from Numax have become taxi drivers, teachers, craftsmen, nuns, lawyers, cooks, hippies in the mountains, salesmen... Each of them has their own story; each of them has their own personal battle. However they all keep a secret that they share and which means that they can live with their heads held high: "one day we fought".

Among all of these stories, one of them captivates and monopolises Jordà's gaze: the story of Juan and Pepi, the couple who together with some other workmates became bank robbers during the early years of the transition to democracy. "This is the story that is most consistent. It's the story that puts into practice what all the others have thought. They had organised a collective confrontation with the capital that the transition had caused them to lose. Some of them continued this individually through what they used to call expropriations and now call robberies". These social robbers are the ones who take the critique of work that they had formulated together at Numax quite literally to extremes. To the extent that Juan, when he is seriously ill, "has a childlike dream: to be a working class hero; the one who kills the government minister who has betrayed them". As *Veinte años no es nada* shows, Juan demands that Barrionuevo turn up at his final robbery. Finishing him off and eliminating what he represents is the desperate climax to these shattered lives that "have seen things that they can't forget".

Is there any way back? This is one of the questions that silently haunts us when we watch *Veinte años no es nada*. Can you return to normality when the rules of the game have changed completely? Can you bear the full weight of mediocrity, of competitiveness, of the single-handed struggle for survival when you have experienced the power of creativity and collective intelligence? Juan Manzanera points out a path followed by those who know that they can only continue moving forward until they drop. Pepi along with the other workmates show, through their shattered lives, that there can be dignity in anonymity. "You can't fool them", Jordà says.

They cannot be fooled because they were involved in the struggles during the transition in which their dreams were betrayed. *Twenty years is nothing* is, among many other things, an interpretation of the Transition, and a vision of recent Spanish history that doesn't require external analysis or voices off-screen. Jordà's eloquence focuses on a handful of lives that speak for themselves. They are not analysed by him; they themselves state that they know that "the only people who listen are the ones who want to hear you". Their testimony shatters the fairy tale of the transition: this wasn't the result of a reconciliation process or of a gesture of realism. The pacts that sealed the change of regime were another door that slammed shut and another layer of quicklime poured over the workers' movement's final attempt at social innovation. This was perhaps the final attempt; the final wave, which from 1968 to 1977 shook developed societies in search of new ways to organise society. As against the Communist interventionism that was a feature of other struggles, the 1968-77 wave had a markedly autonomous character, and Numax is a clear example of this.

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Jordà vindicates this experience and returns to it twenty-five years later by chronicling their lives and staging a reunion. Vindicating it means stripping this of any temptation to indulge in nostalgia. “I don’t know what kind of nostalgia there could be. You look at the past as the starting point from the place we are at now”. Vindicating it also means you avert the trap of lapsing into a syrupy kind of naivety: “They weren’t naive. They were really bright and intelligent. What I found when I shot these two films is the collective intelligence of the workers”. Devoid of any nostalgia or naivety, the exemplary story of Numax and its major figures becomes irrelevant. It disrupts the general outlines of the story of this bygone past, to repeatedly ask us: when and where could these politicisation processes occur nowadays so that they might transform social issues and transform our own lives? When and where can we collectively tackle the squalor of our working lives? If they could... Nevertheless, many things have changed. “Today work is an asset that people long for. The restructuring process that has occurred during this period has been so radical that the figure of the worker has acquired a dream status. A time will definitely come when this figure will no longer be what people aim for and there will then be a radically new situation, in which people once again reject work, but this time do so totally. I think that it has to happen. I wish I could imagine it”.

Twenty years is nothing. It is nothing when we once again question the communal aspects in a neighbourhood, in the publication of a software program, in the re-appropriation of land or in a squat. It is nothing when an exemplary story questions the normality of our situation and shows us that hidden behind the anonymous lives led by the people who drive us around in taxis, teach us to read and write or serve us a coffee, there is a past in which a collective struggle forms the basis of their current lives. It is nothing when past experience tells us what our present consists of: what human materials —dreams, experiences, desires, struggles, friendships— we are trampling on in our everyday dealings with the horror and stupidity of our contemporary world.



Jordà said that the workers from Numax cannot be fooled. They cannot be fooled because Numax, their university, was a school that has given them dignity. At the end of *Twenty years is nothing*, the son of one of the workers involved in collectivising Numax bursts into tears. He is deaf and dumb. “He’s the one who can’t speak. All he can do is express himself, and everything is expressed in his tears: the thrill of what they have experienced; the sadness of defeat; “the pride of having a father who has a past”. These tears reflect the anxiety of those who thought they were fighting on their own against the world and discover that it’s not like that. Getting up close to Joaquim Jordà means you need to be prepared to make this discovery and accept its future consequences. «

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