

Alcarràs and As Bestas: Spain's Renewable Energy Divides Play Out in Cinemas

Article by Adriana Mayor

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In Spain, the installation of large renewable energy plants generates contrasts. Local populations concerned at the transformation of their homelands on the one hand. A climate that cannot wait on the other. The films *Alcarràs* and *As Bestas* brought these divisions that risk undermining the energy transition to the big screen.

Rural Spain, with its ever dwindling population, offers such limited possibilities to eke out a living locally that its youth are being driven to the cities for work. At the same time, the rise in photovoltaic and wind energy projects means that these growing swaths of abandoned land, as well as the sun and wind themselves, are providing opportunities to cash in on the renewable energy boom.

Alcarràs, a Spanish film, which won the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival and was chosen in September as a possible candidate to represent Spain at the Oscars (although in the end it did not receive the nomination for Best International Feature Film), tells the story of a family that subsists off farming in a Catalan village. The lands where they have cultivated different kinds of fruit for decades were given to them by their neighbours in appreciation for their solidarity during the Spanish Civil War. Now, at a time when agreements are no longer based on favourable relationships but rather contracts and fine print, new ways to exploit the land are arising and the neighbours are demanding it be given back to produce photovoltaic energy.

The specific (fictionalised) case depicted in Catalan director Carla Simón's film is a reflection of a phenomenon that is sweeping the entire country. The energy transition, once purported to be fair, is now attracting criticism as it is implemented in different locations that are fighting back.

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The catchphrase "no one left behind" has been eclipsed by another that is gaining ground: "Yes to renewables, but not like that" (Spanish: *Renovables sí, pero no así*). This slogan has made headway in recent years among populations opposing renewable macro-projects all over Spain, from the offshore wind farm in Málaga to the solar farms spreading throughout the Valencian Community and the wind turbines planned for the Cantabrian Coast and inland Catalonia.

The debate has expanded beyond its niche in environmental and local resistance movements into the realm of public opinion, thanks in particular to two box-office hits: *Alcarràs* and *As Bestas* (English title: *The Beasts*), which also depicts land disputes motivated by the spread of renewable energy – specifically, wind energy – in rural Spain. The director of *The Beasts*, Rodrigo Sorogoyen, coined his

own version of the slogan “but not like that” in his acceptance speech after winning a Goya, Spain’s most prestigious film award.

“Yes to wind energy, but not like that,” declared the film maker after highlighting various wind farms slated to be built in Sabucedo (Pontevedra, in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula). If completed, Sorogoyen warned that the project would threaten the wild horses that still inhabit this unique natural environment of Galicia.

Critics partially attribute the success of *The Beasts* at the Goya Awards – in contrast to *Alcarràs*, which failed to receive any of the 11 nominations – to this debut film’s ability to lure spectators back to the cinemas (a phenomenon that, in an industry increasingly pitted against streaming platforms, thrilled the academy). *The Beasts*, in theatres since last November, has grossed more than 4.6 million euros. This number – still well below pre-streaming platform figures in Spain – exceeds the reasonably good ticket sales of *Alcarràs*, which has grossed nearly 2.3 million euros since its premiere in April.

The Beasts tells the story of a French couple who practise environmentally friendly agriculture in a small village in Galicia. The foreign pair find themselves immersed in a conflict with local residents who have decided to collectively sell their lands to a Norwegian company looking to install wind turbines on the mountainside.

The French couple, who refuse to sign the agreement – a decision that blocks the deal for the Galician locals – end up exacerbating already tense relations and being harassed by their neighbours, fuelled by other issues such as xenophobia, ideas around entitlement to collective decisions where one lives but was not born, and the tension between the idealisation of rural life and the grievances of a community that feels ignored (if not shunned) by the urban elite.

Both films raise the question of land inequality, a phenomenon firmly rooted in Spain via its centralised model whereby so-called “sacrificed” lands are found outside of the cities but cater particularly to the needs of those urban centres.

Both films – *Alcarràs* and *The Beasts* – illustrate this sense of declining quality of life in the countryside, increasingly difficult economic conditions due to agricultural production costs that have grown to even exceed the value of sales, and the results of a food system that punishes producers and rewards large commercial operations.

We see in *Alcarràs* a farmer and father who refuses to encourage his eldest son to follow in his footsteps despite the son’s desire to dedicate himself to farming. Instead, he insists that his son study at university in order to have a chance at finding better job opportunities in the city.

In *The Beasts*, the French couple’s idea of creating a life for themselves in nature and breathing new life into the community stands in contrast to the fantasies of the local population who, at that point, want nothing more than to flee their tedious existence in their aged and depopulated Galician village and buy a taxi to make a living in the city of Ourense.

In the background, both films raise the question of land inequality, a phenomenon firmly rooted in Spain

via its centralised model whereby so-called “sacrificed” lands – used for agricultural, livestock or energy production – are found outside of the cities but cater particularly (though not exclusively) to the needs of those urban centres.

The debate has heated up so much that environmental organisations in Spain are reconsidering their stance after decades seeking a transition to renewable sources of energy in order to decarbonise the electricity sector. Some of the largest Spanish environmentalist NGOs are now trying to strike a balance between advancing the energy transition fast enough to combat climate change and recognising the motives behind local movements fighting renewable energy macro-projects, as well as preventing them from having an impact on biodiversity.

Many political decisions in this field have widened an already present rift in the environmental movement. The most recent example is a relaxation of the rules around environmental impact assessments, which are required before setting up wind or photovoltaic farms, in order to speed up the switch to cleaner forms of energy. The Spanish government set this out in a Royal Decree which received no small amount of criticism, even from its own partners in the government.

“We are conscious of the fact that there is a backlog in these processes and that it should be resolved, but eliminating the environmental impact assessment is of no benefit to renewable energy, and may in fact be very harmful, giving the green light to projects that generate more opposition, thereby affecting the entire sector,” stressed Juanxo López de Uralde, member of Unidas Podemos in the Spanish Congress of Deputies.

A statement made by the Alianza Energía y Territorio (Energy and Land Alliance, Spanish acronym: Aliente), a state-wide collective that supports movements against renewable macro-projects, and criticises “the massive, oversized and under-planned development of large-scale renewable energy facilities within a centralised framework, lacking effective policies for conserving energy and ensuring its efficient use” which, according to their statement, “is causing many environmental impacts, including seriously risking the biodiversity of our region, one of the richest and most unique in all of western Europe.”

Within the environmental movement, some of the voices with increasing public reach and popularity among Extinction Rebellion activists, such as physicist Antonio Turiel, enthusiastically champion a rhetoric that rejects the construction of such large facilities for renewable energy. Turiel, in particular, takes it one step further and argues that, besides the socio-environmental problems created by large-scale wind or photovoltaic farms, “there is no market for more electricity”. “This explains the great standstill in the implementation of renewable energy over the past decade, not only in Spain, but throughout Europe. It wasn’t until the renewable energy fever started, thanks to Next Generation EU funds, that there was a need for even one more kWh of electricity,” Turiel wrote in an [editorial](#) published by *CTXT*.

On the other hand – although the movement is reluctant to admit that it is divided, or to encourage such a divide – leading figures like Pedro Fresco (dismissed from his position as Director General of Environmental Transition of the Valencian Community in part due to disagreements around this issue), Héctor Tejero and Xan López warn about “[climate delay](#)”, which may fuel this confrontational stance on renewable energy.

In an [article](#) on [eldiario.es](#), Xan López makes the distinction between climate “denial” and “delay”, and clarifies that delay “is more complex, more intuitive and can be charged with good reasoning and even

better intentions in which we can see ourselves reflected”.

“Two opposing forces are at work in the debate surrounding climate delay,” writes López. “On the one hand, we see the urgency and severity of climate change, the need to very quickly transform and adapt our societies in order to avoid dramatic, and potentially catastrophic, effects. On the other hand, there is the uncomfortable reality of a rapid transition being largely carried out in a society very similar to the one we know. A society riddled with injustices, inequalities, grievances and mistrust. An imperfect society with a complex history. The force of delay, summed up by the slogan “Yes to renewables, but not like that”, is that it can unite those two opposing forces, simplifying an almost impossible debate into a seemingly simple request: “Yes, the first problem is serious; No, I don’t want to overlook all the issues that define me, even if that means delaying any kind of energy transition.””

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Xan Lopez

Those who defend the mass implementation of renewable energy to lower greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to global warming and compromise our future, insist on clarifying that, “keeping in mind that photovoltaic energy in 2030 will only require 0.3-0.5% of arable land (by comparison, 10% of arable land is completely disused), that wasteland can be used, that there are combined approaches such as agro-voltaic energy, it can be said that, beyond a few specific scandals, there is no real threat or global competition between renewable energy and agriculture,” points out Héctor Tejero, co-author of *¿Qué hacer en caso de incendio? Manifiesto por el Green New Deal* (What to do in the event of a fire. A Manifesto for the New Green Deal), in an [editorial](#) in El País.

Nevertheless, these defenders of renewable energy recognise the important environmental transition task of “correcting territorial inequalities” which arise not only in the energy sector but also in areas such as food production. They also maintain that we must “reform the electricity market, make it structurally more democratic and promote greater public and civic participation in the production and distribution of electricity,” as Tejero explains.

“However,” he continues, “as we are already behind the clock, we cannot waste time delaying the installation of renewable energy facilities until these problems are solved. We have to do everything all at once. Refusing to accept this uncomfortable reality is like burying your head in the sand to avoid the climate crisis emergency,” he states.

This debate, which seems to be male-dominated, at least in editorials and social media, also features positions taken by women such as Paz Serra from the environmental party Equo, who highlights the need to approach this conversation honestly and without identity-based disputes.

Despite agreeing that renewable energy facilities should undergo environmental impact assessments, Serra warns of the “danger” that comes with the slogan “Yes to renewables, but not like that”, considering that “it originates from the fallacy that only solar and wind farms have an environmental impact,” as Serra states from her Twitter account.

“In order to satisfy our society’s demand for electricity, we need to be able to install solar panels on every rooftop where it is viable and efficient to do so. But that’s not enough,” she adds in a thread that concludes with a plea: “I hope we can have a sincere, thoughtful and informed debate about how willing we are as a society to reduce our demand for electricity. The rest is just energy populism.”

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