



**LATIN AMERICAN  
DOCUMENTARY  
FILM IN THE NEW  
MILLENNIUM**

**EDITED BY  
MARÍA GUADALUPE ARENILLAS  
AND MICHAEL J. LAZZARA**



Latin American Documentary Film in the  
New Millennium



María Guadalupe Arenillas • Michael J. Lazzara

Editors

# Latin American Documentary Film in the New Millennium

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*Editors*

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An edited book, in so many ways, is more than the sum of its parts. Behind it are a series of experiences (played out over many years) that give birth to an idea, a group of dedicated authors, a publisher willing to take a risk, and a support network of family and friends who help keep us grounded and send us good vibes to weather the process.

Among the lessons this book has taught us is that many documentary films are a search for origins: exploratory journeys into the past. In that vein, the impetus that marks the beginning of any project is, in a sense, a fiction, an arbitrary point (or points) in time to which we assign a name and attribute significance. Here are our fictions:

One of the first theoretical concepts that Lupe learned in college was the Russian formalist idea of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization): to look at common things differently so as to unleash the richness and complexity of what once seemed simple or familiar. Learning this idea helped her appreciate certain things about art—and about life. More deeply attuned to the strangeness within the real, she grew fascinated by documentary film’s intriguing textures, by the conventions it deploys to feign objectivity or destroy it. Certain directors played significant roles in cultivating this love for the defamiliarizing gaze: Jim Jarmusch, Martín Rejtman, and Godard, among others. But it wasn’t until graduate school at the University of Notre Dame that Lupe fully savored documentary’s ability to open other worlds and alter the ways in which we’re trained to see. In 2008, Dr. Isabel Ferreira Gould invited Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa to screen his work. Costa’s visit was tense and riddled with accusations: he claimed that U.S. students from private institutions were incapable of understanding

certain realities. These accusations, however, paled in comparison to the pleasant surprise of discovering his cinema. His protagonists, marginalized youth and immigrants from Africa's former Portuguese colonies, live their "lot," to recall Jacques Ranciere's phrase, as their destiny. Embodying *ostranenie*, Costa's camera paused on everyday faces and objects to produce "the occasion for a beautiful still life."

Michael's fiction of origin is somewhat different. Although his research on the politics of memory always made him aware of documentary's testimonial aspects and its defiance of master narratives, it wasn't until he attended a public screening of Patricio Guzmán's *La batalla de Chile* at Princeton in 2002 that he fully appreciated documentary as a way to chronicle history. He had seen that film many times before, but that day there was something unique about watching it in public, uninterrupted; he was able to palpate differently the political passions and tensions of the euphoric and embattled Allende years. Watching the documentary was the closest he could come to "being there"; to this day, Guzmán film remains the best "document" we have of that crucial period in history. The film was screened as part of the Princeton Documentary Festival (2002–2009), founded by Ricardo Piglia, with artistic direction by Andrés Di Tella. Attending the festival and meeting directors from Latin America heightened Michael's appreciation for the diversity of Latin American documentary film, particularly for how the "social documentary" was giving way to other aesthetics and styles: the autobiographical, the reflexive, films about memory, indigenous films, hybrid or experimental forms, or *cine piquetero*. At Princeton, not only did Michael discover classic works by masters like Solanas and Getino or Eduardo Coutinho, but also films by younger directors who were pushing the conversation in new directions: Di Tella, João Moreira Salles, Albertina Carri, and others. Since then, documentary has remained central to his research and pedagogy.

Lupe would like to thank several people without whose support this book would not have been possible: Mariela Eva Rodríguez, Mara Pastor, Alex Ruuska, Alisa Kirzharr, and Rebecca J. Ulland. She is also grateful to her parents and siblings for the Polaroids, Super-8 movies, and the three-thousand kilometer car trips through the Patagonian wilderness. Her family, years ago, taught her the value of creating a personal archive to inspire acts of storytelling and memory. Finally, Lupe thanks her two beautiful children, Marco and Clara, for the inspiration they give her every day.

Michael, too, would like to acknowledge a number of people who have inspired him both personally and professionally. First and foremost, he is grateful to Andrés Di Tella for years of dialogue. Andrés's workshops at Princeton and UC Davis were defining moments, as was the lengthy interview that Andrés accepted to do with Michael's students in 2006. The interview explored themes that Michael first discovered by reading the inspirational work of Princetonian friends and colleagues Paul Firbas and Pedro Meira Monteiro. Another formative moment came at Stanford in 2009 when Jorge Ruffinelli organized a memorable symposium called "El Documental Personal" (The Personal Documentary). Several days at Stanford brought conversations and new relationships with Latin American filmmakers and academics like João Moreira Salles, Albertina Carri, María Inés Roqué, Marilú Mallet, Sandra Kogut, and Leonor Arfuch (whose inaugural lecture opened Michael's eyes to "the biographical space" in contemporary culture).

Particular thanks go to Michael's undergraduate and graduate students who have passionately participated in several courses on documentary at UC Davis: Yana DeLange, Ikuska Sanz, Tania Lizarazo, and Sergio Díaz-Luna are among those who taught him to see new layers in filmic expression. He also thanks his UC Davis colleagues; Darcie Doll, who graciously hosted the 2010 seminar on documentary he taught at the University of Chile; and his parents, Jim and Ginny Lazzara, who have believed in him every step of the way. But most of all, Michael is immensely grateful to his wife Julia and his darling Ana and James, without whom nothing he does could be.

Together, the editors are grateful to Emily Davidson and Mari Spira, *compañeras de ruta*, and to each other for years of friendship, conversation, patience, and inspiration. We are thankful as well to our contributing authors for all they have taught us about Latin American documentary and for their good humor throughout the sometimes painstakingly tedious editing process. Producing this book has truly been an experience of collaborative thinking and learning. Lastly, we express our gratitude to Farideh Koohi-Kamali and Sara Doskow, our editors at Palgrave, for believing in our project and guiding us through the publication process, and to Andrés Di Tella, María Inés Roqué, Albertina Carri, and João Moreira Salles for generously sharing images to illustrate our book. After three years of hard work, we are delighted finally to share this project with the world.





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# Introduction: Latin American Documentary Film in the New Millennium

*María Guadalupe Arenillas and Michael J. Lazzara*

The upsurge in Latin American documentary film at the turn of the twenty-first century is undeniable. In a region that has made documentary films, in some form or another, since the end of the nineteenth century, fiction film has long eclipsed the documentary in terms of prestige and circulation. Yet signs indicate that this situation is changing. While documentary production in the USA enjoyed something of a boom in the 2000s—it now comprises about 10% of the market—in Argentina, as Jens Andermann has noted, documentary now accounts for about 40% of total film production.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this boom are likely many and may include factors such as: an increase in documentary festivals; the creation of alternative distribution channels; the relatively inexpensive nature of documentary filmmaking; the democratization of the “field” for aspiring filmmakers; the use of portable media and new technologies; and the advantages of documentary for dealing with urgent social, political, or economic issues.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this boom in documentary has been accompanied not only by increased academic inquiry about the documentary form, but also by

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sustained innovation in documentary filmmaking practices—practices that are increasingly reflexive, metacinematic, and that blur the line traditionally separating documentary from fiction film.

Given this state of affairs, this book brings together a group of established and emerging film scholars to ask some simple but important questions: What are the most salient characteristics of Latin American documentary film in the new millennium? What has changed in the last twenty-five-or-so years compared to previous historical and aesthetic moments? And what signs do we have regarding where documentary may be headed? To answer these questions, our authors examine trends, problems, and specific films from the 1990s to the present. The book therefore constructs a temporal bridge that maps the contributions of Latin American documentary filmmaking in the twentieth century onto that of the twenty-first.

To think about the state of Latin American documentary film today, it is necessary to have an awareness of its trajectory until now. Jorge Ruffinelli points out that on the international stage, documentary emerged in fledgling form in 1895 with the Lumière brothers' short films, but really gained traction with Robert J. Flaherty's ethnographic films, like *Nanook of the North* (1922), or Soviet Dziga Vertov's technically daring, experimental film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, in Latin America, it is difficult to talk about a consolidated documentary cinema until around the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Up until that time, the appearance of documentaries was rather sporadic. While travelogues, scientific films, newsreels, landscapes, and historical documentaries exist from as early as the first quarter of the twentieth century, very few Latin American countries in the first half of the twentieth century—with Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil being marked exceptions—produced significant amounts of documentary film or film in general. In Mexico, early twentieth-century filmmaking focused largely on wars and conflicts, particularly on the Mexican Revolution (1910). But even before that, President Porfirio Díaz, who was in power from 1876 to 1911, hired filmmakers to produce propagandistic documentaries that glorified his regime; other filmmakers, in an opposite move, adopted critical positions and used documentary film to denounce grave injustices and social ills. From very early on, then, we see the emergence in certain countries of what Julianne Burton, in a much cited and influential book, called the Latin American “social documentary.”<sup>5</sup> To all of this, Michael Chanan

adds that as early as the 1930s, we can find examples—though few—of Latin American documentaries that break with the traditional strictures of genre and show important degrees of experimentalism.<sup>6</sup> These films foreshadow the rich documentary cinema that would flourish in subsequent decades.

As the “New Latin American Cinema” burst onto the scene into the 1950s and 1960s, so did a new generation of filmmakers who benefitted from the modernization processes that were taking place in capital cities around the region. Handheld cameras and the influence of Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité had a significant impact on filmmakers like Argentine Fernando Birri, whose training in Europe brought new techniques that would later be expanded and adapted to different Latin American contexts. Although imported Hollywood cinema accounted for about 80% of the Latin American film market in those years, a generation of young filmmakers eager to break with cultural imperialism and the commercialization of Latin America’s film industry cultivated a politically committed cinema that would challenge the “first cinema” of the USA (i.e. Hollywood cinema) as well as the bourgeois “second cinema” (“auteurial” art films) of Europe. Many of these young, militant artists belonged to leftist social movements that adhered to Marxism or other revolutionary ideological currents. In that vein, Julianne Burton mentions that “the rise of Marxist-inflected ideologies in Latin America prescribed a dual quest: for a less stratified socioeconomic system, and for authentic, autonomous, culturally specific forms of expression.”<sup>7</sup> It is from this dual quest that “Third Cinema” was born.

The conflicted, impassioned, and ideologically driven revolutionary movement of the 1960s and early 1970s saw the birth of a filmmaking movement that really put Latin American documentary on the map. Fernando E. Solanas and Octavio Getino’s landmark diatribe against neocolonialism, *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968), quickly gained recognition around the globe and continues to stand as a monument within the canon of Latin American documentary. It is perhaps the best-known example of Third Cinema. A didactic film that offers a revision of Argentine history meant to inspire revolutionary commitment to armed struggle, *La hora*, demanded an active spectator who would engage with the film’s images and messages both affectively and intellectually. An heir to the Soviet cinema of Vertov and to the cinema of the Cuban Revolution (1959), Third Cinema’s radical goal was to

decolonize film, the filmmaker, and the viewing public—to turn filmmaking into a weapon that could play a role in the multifront battle to liberate the oppressed.<sup>8</sup> An array of influences “ranging from early Russian constructivist film, Italian neorealism, and European new-wave cinema to Brechtian theater, visual arts, advertising, and revolutionary propaganda” gave this cinema a richness (beyond its historical relevance) that elevated it to a level of global importance.<sup>9</sup> In the Third Cinema years, the observational and expository modes that traditionally governed documentary film in the region gave way to layered, reflexive works that, more than mere testimonies, should be seen as interactive compositions densely layered with meaning.<sup>10</sup> The twenty-first-century militant cinema movements, like Argentina’s *cine piquetero* (picketeer cinema), or perhaps even indigenous filmmaking or films by activist collectives of different kinds, are in many ways connected to, although also distinct from, the Third Cinema movement.

The 1970s and 1980s ushered in a period of civil conflicts—“dirty wars” and “civil wars”—that from Mexico and Central America to the Andes and the Southern Cone would pit military and paramilitary forces against leftist insurgency. The different and complex histories of the Cold War period and the civil conflicts it generated brought unfathomable bloodshed and misery to the region: torture, forced disappearance, exile, and myriad other types of human rights violations. From the pain of exile, state terror, and the defeat of the revolutions, a cinema of memory and political protest emerged that, though born in these years, continues to flourish in the present. Very much connected to the search for truth and justice, the cinema of memory has taken up themes like the forensic disinterment of the disappeared; the ongoing search by mothers, grandmothers, and family members for their missing loved ones; the international dimensions of the Latin American dictatorships; and the persistent effects of violence on indigenous communities, students, and other groups. Of course, censorship by military dictatorships had detrimental effects on the amount of cinema produced in countries like Chile or Argentina, not to mention Peru or Guatemala. Yet despite censorship, the dark years of military counterinsurgency also gave us monumental films like Patricio Guzmán’s three-part epic on Salvador Allende’s Popular Unity government, *La batalla de Chile* (*The Battle of Chile*, 1975–1979), or Brazilian director Eduardo Coutinho’s *Cabra marcado para morrer* (*Twenty Years Later*, 1984), which looks back at the 1962 murder by landowners of a peasant leader from the state of Paraíba.

In the 1990s and into the new millennium, we have witnessed (and continue to witness) a number of phenomena: transitions to democracy; truth commissions; persistent socioeconomic inequality; continued battles over memory and justice; struggles for gender equality, sexual rights, and equal access to education; as well as the return to power of leftist governments and political actors who just two decades earlier were brutally persecuted. These phenomena coexist with the entrenchment of neoliberalism in the region, which, next to bodily and psychological violence, is perhaps the greatest legacy of the recent wave of Latin American dictatorships. The neoliberal moment has also sparked battles over a lost sense of solidarity and community that many suggest was more prevalent and palpable in previous historical moments. In the academic realm—particularly in the social sciences and humanities—the consolidation of neoliberalism caused critics like Beatriz Sarlo to speak of a “subjective turn”—a restored confidence in the subject’s right to speak—that both interfaces with and channels struggles for equality and rights by subaltern actors.<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Leonor Arfuch signals a “more widespread [obsession with the first person] that not only involves film, but also visual arts, literature, the media, politics, and even academic research.”<sup>12</sup> This insistence on the subjective, as we have said, certainly has to do with rights-based claims by individuals and groups, but it may also be telling us something important about the nature of the globalized, neoliberal era in which we live: a time in which individualism is rampant, and social media or reality TV, among other media, bombard us daily with first-person constructs.

New work on documentary film—and here we are referring not just to Latin American documentary film—insists that one of its most salient characteristics at the turn of the millennium is the “boom” of first-person, reflexive filmmaking. Various authors, most notably Michael Renov, Bill Nichols, Stella Bruzzi, Alisa Lebow, Jay Ruby, and Pablo Piedras, among others, have called attention to the subjective (Renov), autobiographical (Nichols), performative (Bruzzi), or reflexive (Ruby) aspects of current documentary films.<sup>13</sup> Nichols, for example, points out that although documentary filmmakers since Vertov have experimented with reflexive forms that draw the audience’s attention toward the *process* of filmmaking—in metacinematic fashion—rather than toward the object of representation, it really is not until the 1970s and 1980s that reflexivity begins to play a more prominent role within the documentary filmmaker’s repertoire on the global stage.<sup>14</sup> For decades, it seemed that documentary filmmaking—plagued by pretensions of objectivity and a privileged relationship to the

real—“had few tools at its disposal to address the issue of the reflexive or ironic, and, even less, to see it as a potentially more powerful political tool than the straightforward, persuasive presentation of an argument.”<sup>15</sup>

The global turn toward the reflexive that began in the 1970s really took off in Latin America as of the 1990s. Perhaps as a reaction to myriad nationalistic, ideological, or authoritarian narratives that had been imposed upon Latin American nations by political elites throughout history (and particularly during the Cold War period of authoritarian rule), the subjective turn (which coincided with the transitions to democratic rule as well as the neoliberal moment) brought a poststructuralist critique of language (and the image) and a feeling that political transformation would come through the rescuing of alternative histories, memories, and experiences that could lead to deeper democratization. Filmmakers used reflexivity to question conventional truths and to challenge objectivity both formally and politically.

Nevertheless, documentary filmmaking, even in the new millennium, is always reticent to abandon objectivity completely. There is still something about the genre that makes filmmakers and viewers feel that by watching a documentary, we are somehow getting closer to reality. This longstanding pretension may be the impetus behind Stella Bruzzi’s insightful observation that “documentary practice and theory have always had a problem with aesthetics.”<sup>16</sup> Documentary filmmaking in the new millennium, however, clearly acknowledges that aesthetics are a key part of the documentary enterprise. Reflexive techniques allow filmmakers to more easily introduce a critical point of view and to deconstruct the narratives that shape individuals and modern societies. This seismic shift in documentary practice has caused Pablo Piedras, in his study of recent Argentine filmmaking, to signal a “profound transformation,” that is, occurring “in the epistemic status of documentary film.”<sup>17</sup>

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that first-person documentaries—which are indeed diverse and incorporate the filmmaker’s subjective presence in different ways and to greater or lesser extents—are simply an exercise in narcissism or a modern-day iteration of bourgeois, auteurial cinema. Andrés Di Tella, one of the most recognized cultivators of the first-person documentary in Latin America, has admitted that such films, his own included, are probably not completely devoid of these defects. Yet, we would argue that in most first-person films, there is something much more profound at play. The director, as a first-person subject, goes in search of the other to learn something, but also to learn something about



the self, or perhaps even more importantly about the relationship between the self and the other. In this sense, the subjective turn derives from the anthropological and ethnographic impulses that have always been present in documentary filmmaking. Attuned to these dynamics, Alisa Lebow notes that although a film “may appear to be in the first-person singular ‘I,’ [...] ontologically speaking, it is always in effect, [in] the first-person plural ‘we.’”<sup>18</sup> Because the “I” exists in a social relationship to the other, it becomes clear that first-person documentaries have everything to do with the notion of community, with creating regimes of affect, identification, and connection in times when inequality reigns; exclusion is rampant; and people are starved for meaningful social relations. By saying “I,” then, the first-person documentary subject becomes vulnerable, open to transformation by the other, poised to both affect history and be affected by it. Regarding this ethical aspect of first-person filmmaking, Andrés Di Tella adds: “To put into a film autobiographical substance, to sacrifice one’s own family, to expose intimacies of experience, all that is a kind of public offering. An autobiographical documentary is a curious act of *responsibility*.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps, then, one of the greatest contributions of the subjective (and reflexive) turn has been the introduction of *ethics* as one of the main nodal points in new documentaries. If the documentary act always involves someone behind the camera, someone being filmed, and an audience asked to relate to both filmmaker and the object of representation, the “ethical question about how we are treating each other” is not only always present but also unavoidable.<sup>20</sup>

This book recognizes that first-person, reflexive filmmaking and a concern with ethics are not entirely new to documentary studies but nevertheless stand as hallmarks of turn-of-the-millennium Latin American documentary filmmaking. At the same time, we are convinced that Latin American documentary today is a terrain whose complexity goes beyond questions of subjectivity, ethics, or the social documentary.

Latin American documentary filmmaking today is diverse and in dialogue with global trends. While the social documentary undeniably remains a strong force in the region, nation-centered filmmaking, for example, is no longer as central to the Latin American documentary tradition as it once was. Cross-border concerns, identity politics, transnational flows, and a questioning of the relationship between local memories and global histories now all play a role. Numerous documentaries about immigration, for example, “record and help give shape to new patterns of locality and mobility, serving as a reminder that, rather than simply

represent social reality, documentary filmmaking contributes to the processes through which spatial relations are upheld or reinvented, national borders are reinforced or undermined, and cultural affiliations are reproduced or interrogated.”<sup>21</sup> Pablo Piedras’s reflections (see Chap. 5) on the “mobility turn” echo this point. Furthermore, Latin American documentary film today deploys formally innovative techniques to create new communities for artistic, social, and political participation, as in the cases of Colombia’s Escuela Audiovisual Al Borde (see Chap. 11) or Peru’s Caravana Documentary Project (see Chap. 10). These projects put cameras into the hands of those whom the films seek to represent, empowering them to become subjects rather than objects of representation. Such rights-based collectives, which also include indigenous filmmaking groups in the region, not only give voice to traditionally marginalized subjects but also encourage self-representation as a vehicle for knowledge production, community building, and political change.<sup>22</sup>

The bibliography on Latin American documentary film in English is growing but still limited. In addition to Julianne Burton’s *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (1990), we can now reference other key works like Gonzalo Aguilar’s *Other Worlds: New Argentine Film* (2008), Miriam Haddu and Joanna Page’s *Visual Synergies in Fiction and Documentary Film from Latin America* (2009), Jens Andermann’s *New Argentine Cinema* (2012), Jessica Stites Mor’s *Transition Cinema: Political Filmmaking and the Argentine Left since 1968* (2012), David William Foster’s *Latin American Documentary Filmmaking: Major Works* (2013), Antonio Traverso and Kristi M. Wilson’s *Political Documentary Cinema in Latin America* (2014), and Vinicius Navarro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez’s *New Documentaries in Latin America* (2014). These books deal either in whole or in part with documentary film and, in general, draw out Latin American documentary’s political aspects, its hybridity and crossover with fiction film, and its subjective or reflexive aspects. Only some of these titles treat the most recent production from the region; in this sense, our book perhaps comes closest in ambition to Navarro and Rodríguez’s study, which also seeks to identify new trends in the region’s production. The thematic topics we have chosen, we feel, complement theirs and invite questions for further reflection: What lies beyond the subjective turn? How do new documentaries deal with the ethics of representing the other and the real? And how do films about memory interrogate historical master narratives and foster more democratic formations of community? Moreover, as is evident from these

titles, bibliography on documentary—even bibliography in Spanish—has focused largely on the Southern Cone. Consequently, one of our goals in this volume is to open discussion of other contexts including Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Panama, Colombia, and Guatemala, in order to bring into relief the reach that documentary filmmaking now has throughout Latin America.<sup>23</sup>

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As we have said, much work on documentary filmmaking in the twenty-first century focuses on the consolidation of the subjective or reflexive turn. Part One of this book—“Beyond the Subjective Turn”—recognizes and fleshes out the salience of this tendency but also seeks to look beyond it, to ask if documentary filmmakers have reached a point at which it is no longer enough to obviate that the representation of the real is, in a sense, always a fiction.

Part One begins with a chapter by Michael J. Lazzara (Chap. 2) titled, “What Remains of Third Cinema?” Starting with the idea that the Third Cinema movement of the 1960s and early 1970s was a watershed for Latin American documentary filmmaking, Lazzara asks if the politically committed, ideological filmmaking of those years remains latently or patently present in the films of the late 1990s and 2000s. He explores the question by tracing the somewhat divergent filmic trajectories of two important founding fathers of modern Latin American documentary: Argentine director Fernando E. Solanas and Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán. As Lazzara argues, while Guzmán’s cinema of memory—particularly films like *Chile: la memoria obstinada* (*Chile: Obstinate Memory*, 1997), *Salvador Allende* (2004), and *Nostalgia de la luz* (*Nostalgia for the Light*, 2010)—closely echoes the intensified reflexivity we see in much recent documentary work, films like Solanas’s *Memoria del saqueo* (*Social Genocide*, 2004), although not devoid of reflexivity, seem to echo more closely the combative and ideological nature of classic films like *La hora de los hornos*. Lazzara wonders how new strategies blend with old ones to create a kind of temporal hybridity in today’s documentary films. He ends with a discussion of new movements like Argentina’s *cine piquetero*, and asks how such movements both return us to the aesthetics of forty years ago while also diverging from them. He acknowledges that the cinema of memory that was so prominent in the 1990s and early 2000s seems to be giving way, in some cases, to a

repolitization of documentary filmmaking that closely dialogues with the dynamic political developments occurring in the region.

Jorge Ruffinelli (Chap. 3), in “Andrés Di Tella and Argentine Documentary Film,” also tracks broad developments in recent Latin American documentary filmmaking by focusing on the case of Argentine director Andrés Di Tella, whose films like *La televisión y yo* (*Television and Me*, 2002) and *Fotografías* (*Photographs*, 2007) figure among the most prominent examples of the subjective turn. In addition to making films that concretize metacinematic practices, Di Tella has also given numerous interviews and written essays in which he reflects on the importance of the “personal archive” in today’s documentary filmmaking; the exploratory, “essayistic” nature of his films; and the interfacing that occurs between the public and the private.<sup>24</sup> Far from narcissism or a bourgeois obsession with the authorial voice, Di Tella’s cinema shows how first-person cinema can be a powerful vehicle for engaging with and exploring the very public and collective dimensions of history and politics. In Di Tella’s work, the search for the self is always a search for the other, an attempt to say something larger, to form community, even at the risk of failure. Ruffinelli explains how, over the years, Di Tella has experimented with different filmic forms and styles: how he has moved, in broad brushstrokes, from the political to the personal to the communal and the social. In this sense, Ruffinelli implies that Di Tella’s work, akin to Guzmán’s in Lazzara’s analysis, may very well function as a barometer for major developments in recent Latin American documentary filmmaking over the past twenty years. In contrast to Lazzara’s highlighting of *cine piquetero* as a return to militant political cinema, Ruffinelli notes that Di Tella’s cinema shows us other, perhaps more subtle ways of intervening politically.

In an attempt to move beyond the subjective turn, Antonio Gómez (Chap. 4), in “Displacing the ‘I’: Uses of the First Person in Recent Argentine Biographical Documentaries,” looks at efforts by filmmakers to “transcend the hegemony of the ‘I,’” that is, to downplay the first person without abandoning it completely or denying its relevance to the documentary act. Reacting against the pervasive presence of subjectivity and the testimonial utterance in new documentary films, Gómez focuses on films—Rodrigo Espina’s *Luca* (2008) and Goyo Anchoy and Peter Pank’s *La peli de Batato* (*Batato’s Movie*, 2011)—in which the “I” reflexively recognizes its importance for structuring a gaze, but at the same time consciously fades into the background to avoid saturating the scene. In other words, the “I” constructs but does not speak. Gómez finds value in this

self-deprecating gesture insofar as it challenges the hegemony of a certain narcissistic, bourgeois gaze that he feels has all-too-frequently pervaded documentary film. He also values how these films seek to create a countercultural archive—that of the Argentine underground music scene of the 1980s—that challenges the hegemony of memory films about the “Dirty War” (1976–1983). In short, his analysis signals a desire by certain Argentine directors to move beyond points of view that have dominated the country’s filmmaking over the past twenty years.

In “The ‘Mobility Turn’ in Contemporary Latin American First-Person Documentary,” Pablo Piedras (Chap. 5) explores how movement and territorial displacement serve as both formal and conceptual devices that complicate identity constructs in the age of globalization. Films like Cecilia Priego’s *Familia tipo* (*Typical Family*, 2009) and José Luis García’s *La chica del sur* (*The Girl From the South*, 2012) feature protagonists whose movement from place to place generates intercultural encounters that open reflections on memory, identity, and the ethics of representation. In this sense, the “mobility turn” that Piedras identifies functions almost like a subturn within the realm of first-person documentary filmmaking.

Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado’s (Chap. 6), “The Politics-Commodity: The Rise of Mexican Commercial Documentary in the Neoliberal Era” is interested in the mobility and reception of documentary films as cultural products, in how they “participate in the neoliberal structures of circulation and production.” While the social documentary has long been the dominant form in the region, it is often the case that social documentaries only manage to be seen by relatively small viewing publics. They rarely enjoy commercial distribution and are usually consumed by viewers whose politics align with the film’s messaging. In contrast, Sánchez Prado draws attention to the fact that “what the contemporary Mexican documentary sells is a politics-commodity that is consumed by spectators in the market of signifiers and discourses that comprise the neoliberal realm.” He argues that films like Juan Carlos Rulfo’s *En el hoyo* (*In the Pit*, 2006) are successful in the neoliberal marketplace and enjoy good distribution precisely because their politically ambiguous messages manage to appeal to a diverse viewership. We no longer have an “I” bearing witness to a specific reality, but a group of floating signifiers available to be imbued with meaning by viewers of different political stripes.

Part One concludes with Gustavo Procopio Furtado’s (Chap. 7), “Where Are the ‘People’?: The Politics of the Virtual and the Ordinary in Contemporary Brazilian Documentaries,” a chapter that goes beyond

the individual to seek alternative forms of community in our contemporary, globalized societies. Acknowledging a world in which we humans are hyperconnected yet paradoxically estranged from one another, Furtado highlights how certain new Brazilian documentaries hint at an unrealized potential for constructing collective horizons, even though we are never quite sure if these horizons will materialize in a world in which it has become ever more difficult to envision collective projects. If Deleuze was right in affirming that the “people have gone missing” in contemporary documentary films, material objects and the magic of the movie camera can be mediators that facilitate human interaction. Reminiscent of Piedras’s “mobility turn,” movement, for Furtado, brings individuals into contact with one another in ways that challenge the hyperindividualized neoliberal moment. Although we are still far removed from the 1970s sense of the “people” as a political construct, we find that new documentaries have not given up completely on the desire to bring human beings together to forge meaningful relationships and communities and to break with self-centered modes of living.

Perhaps one of the byproducts of globalization’s effects on documentary filmmaking has been documentary’s rethinking of the encounter with the “other.” Part Two, “The Ethics of Encounter,” analyzes a series of works that explore the relationships among filmmakers and the others (objects/subjects) they seek to represent. It is now commonplace for filmmakers to understand the act of documenting another’s experience as an act of responsibility, as an ethical relationship. Consequently, documentarians approach the relationship to the other fluidly, open to unanticipated occurrences as well as to the possibility of being transformed through interpersonal or intercultural contact. The encounter, in this sense, ceases to produce a unidirectional, hierarchical, or positivist gaze and instead becomes an organic process of mutual give-and-take.

The section opens with Joanna Page’s (Chap. 8), “Ethnobiographic Encounters and Interculturalism: New Modes of Reflexivity in Contemporary Documentaries from Argentina.” Page analyzes films that move away from positivist views of documentary filmmaking that see it as a way to gain knowledge about the other, as well as from postmodern views that posit the other as reflection of the self, or vice versa. Instead, she is interested in interculturalism as a framework for thinking about the encounters that bring people together, respect difference, and foster understanding without appropriating another’s experience. Page argues that “an emphasis on the subjective, the autobiographical, and the reflexive need

not chart a shift from political engagement to narcissistic introspection”; instead, the encounter with the other can still be meaningful and political. Films like Fermín Rivera’s *Huellas y memoria de Jorge Prelorán* (*Traces and Memory of Jorge Prelorán*, 2009) and Ulises Rosell’s *El etnógrafo* (*The Ethnographer*, 2012) “find ways to encourage the viewer’s reflection on the filmmaking process and on the problems of anthropological knowledge without resorting to the more facile, self-privileging techniques of metareflexive accounts.” Page holds that such films emerge in post-2001 Argentina because of new sensibilities that permit a more nuanced reflection on the relationships among nation, citizenship, and multiculturalism.

In “Performance, Reflexivity, and the Languages of History in Contemporary Brazilian Documentary Film,” Jens Andermann (Chap. 9) identifies various modes of documentary performativity that highlight different types of encounters between the filmmaker and the object/subject of his or her gaze. He argues that, over time, what began as a “purely self-referential critique of cinematic truth production” has grown increasingly complex; in this sense, like Page, he is interested in how documentary filmmaking has moved “beyond reflexivity.” To tease out this complexity, Andermann analyzes three types of intersubjective performances. He begins by studying Eduardo Coutinho’s approach to the documentary interview as a moment of truth production in which complex negotiations of meaning and positionality occur. From there, works by Sandra Kogut and João Moreira Salles open a reflection on a second mode of filmmaking that casts the director as a character in his or her own film. In these films, the director is open to subjective transformation, and his or her understanding of the self is entirely contingent on his or her relationship to the other. The self, in other words, is not a foregone conclusion, but a construct that is created in the journey of filming and discovering. The third and final mode of performativity, which is exemplified by the work of Paulo Sacramento, Marcelo Pedroso, and Gabriel Mascaro, places the camera into the hands of those whom the filmmaker seeks to represent. The other therefore ceases to be an object of the filmmaker’s gaze and now takes an active part in constructing a vision of the self.

Among the more interesting approaches to rethinking the “encounter” in recent Latin American documentary filmmaking is the emergence of collectives that strive to erode the power relations inherent in filmmaking and to turn documentary into a tool for generating self-knowledge and building community. In “A Common Gaze: Reflections on New Documentary Practices in Peru,” Talía Dajes and Sofía Velázquez

(Chap. 10), following a brief explanation of the trajectory of documentary cinema in Peru, focus on new documentary practices that challenge traditional forms of representation like the “social documentary” and “poverty porn,” a term coined by Colombian filmmakers Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo to describe the exploitative, objectifying gaze of middle- or upper-class filmmakers toward the impoverished. The authors study two projects—the Caravana Documentary Project and the film *Retrato peruano del Perú* (*Portrait*, 2013), by Carlos Sánchez Giraldo and Sofía Velázquez—that try to construct a “less restricted—and more inclusive—gaze, both in political and ethical terms.” Caravana Documentary Project, on the one hand, organizes audiovisual workshops in marginalized areas of Peru with the goal of empowering subjects to represent their own experience. *Retrato*, on the other hand, deconstructs the ways in which Peruvian national identity has been constructed by subverting the early Republican tradition of “illuminated photography”—a photographic technique once used by elites to consolidate their power and preserve the status quo and that has now become an art form that younger artists use to challenge a social order that has long reproduced discrimination and inequality.

In a similar vein to Dajes and Velázquez’s analysis of the Caravana Documentary Project, Marta Cabrera (Chap. 11), in “Audiovisual Affect: Sexuality and the Public Sphere in the Work of Colombia’s Escuela Audiovisual Al Borde,” studies the work of a Colombian, community-based collective that uses documentary filmmaking to empower social actors who suffer discrimination based on sexual identity or orientation. Unlike in the films Andermann studies, we do not see an inversion of roles here to disrupt the typical hierarchical flows of the encounter. Instead, subject/object hierarchies break down completely. The directors belong to the collective and seek to foster a horizontal dynamic for production. Those who are represented take the camera into their own hands and share in the process of imagining the final product. Documentary filmmaking thus becomes a way to generate affective communities that empower subjects and strengthen identity-based rights claims in both national and transnational terms.

A common concern running through all of the chapters in Part Two has to do with how to represent the experience of another in a way that is not objectifying or exploitative. Different filmmakers have different strategies for doing this, that is, for making films they feel are ethical. Central to this debate is how to represent extreme poverty, marginality,



or precarity. In “Capturing the ‘Real’ in Panama’s Canal Ghettos,” Emily F. Davidson (Chap. 12) approaches this question by analyzing the “ghetto documentary” genre, which, she argues, has had a tendency to lapse into “poverty porn.” Some recent documentaries from Panama, however, namely Héctor Herrera and Joan Cutrina’s *One dollar: el precio de la vida* (*One Dollar, The Price of Life*, 2001) and Ana Endara Misolv’s *Curundú* (2007), challenge this voyeuristic and exploitative tendency by placing the camera into the hands of those who are represented, subverting the filmmaker’s original intentions, and defying happy endings or the illusion of closure. One of the most important points that Davidson makes is that even documentaries that seek to represent the other responsibly are not devoid of problems. Representing the “reality” of poverty and marginalization is therefore an ethical challenge with no easy answers and will likely continue to fuel the documentary enterprise.

Part Three, “Performing Truth: Memory Politics and Documentary Filmmaking,” focuses on the battles over memories of revolution, political violence, civil war, dictatorship, and state terrorism in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala. Since the 1990s, documentary film has played an important role in engaging and debating recent history. Documentaries that deal with leftist militancy in the 1970s, state terror, and genocide have attracted the attention of scholars and have generated a robust bibliography. The four chapters grouped in Part Three seek to revisit canonical films to give them fresh readings, to expand the ways in which we think about the ethical and aesthetic approaches to memory that we find in the ever-expanding universe of memory films.

María Laura Lattanzi’s (Chap. 13) “Beyond Autobiography: Rethinking Documentary Production by the Children of the Disappeared” assesses documentaries by the biological children of the disappeared in Argentina and Chile. Parting ways with more traditional analyses of postmemory films that tend to view them as autobiographical, Lattanzi suggests that we read them through the lens of “domestic cinema” because their directors engage with past histories of violence by focusing on the intimate, the quotidian, and the familiar. Uninterested in trying to capture the past as it was or in generating grandiloquent historical narratives, directors like Albertina Carri, María Inés Roqué, Nicolás Prividera, and Macarena Aguiló use their films to reflect on how subjects whose lives were affected in myriad ways by state terror persist in a postdictatorial world characterized by the end of utopia and a weakening of community. They are interested

in the pitfalls of memory and the complex human dramas that revolution and dictatorship produced. Faced with this cataclysmic historical situation, the everyday gives rise to their films because it seems to be the only realm that persists in spite of all.

Bernardita Llanos's chapter (Chap. 14), "Caught Off Guard at the Crossroads of Ideology and Affect: Documentary Films by the Daughters of Revolutionaries," explores other facets of the ideas that Lattanzi presents by reading postmemory films within a framework of gender and vulnerability studies. She is particularly concerned with how daughters of revolutionaries grapple with the masculine imaginaries of heroism and sacrifice that structured the revolutionary movement, in how daughters deal with the "utopian remains" of an era whose historical weight inevitably shapes their own subjectivities. For Llanos, documentarians like María Inés Roqué and Macarena Aguiló find themselves trapped between ideology and affect; unwilling to detach themselves from the affective connections that bind them to inherited narratives of heroism, they paradoxically seek to revise and challenge those inherited histories in ways that generate interesting cinematic tensions. Their films emerge from a profound desire to disarm imposed patriarchal structures as well as the bourgeois family narratives that regulate their identities. While women's participation in revolutionary movements throughout Latin America was noteworthy, Llanos consciously focuses on the masculine imaginaries that continue to dominate the historical legacy of that time.

One of the most important contributions of memory documentaries has been their ability to create an alternative archive to the official narratives of the state or of militant organizations. In a context like Guatemala in which impunity has reigned in the aftermath of the 1960–1996 Civil War, how to represent a traumatic past in a way that truly accounts for the victims' voices has been a particularly salient question. Valeria Grinberg Pla's (Chap. 15), "Filming Responsibly: Ethnicity, Community, and the Nation in Ana Lucía Cuevas's *El eco del dolor de mucha gente*" emphasizes an urgent need to address the particularities of the Guatemalan genocide, specifically its racial and ethnic aspects, without resorting to paternalistic narratives that appropriate the victims' voices. At first glance, Ana Lucía Cuevas's film appears to be about the search for her disappeared brother—and it is. But even more importantly, the film is an exercise in empathy and listening. In the process of searching for her own "truth," Cuevas finds her experience embodied in

the testimonies of many indigenous subjects who bear witness. The film therefore becomes a kind of echo chamber in which a collective memory resonates and in turn offers a basis for constructing community. The personal becomes, for Cuevas, a pretext for revealing a nation's trauma, and like the films studied in Part Two, she has much to say about the ethics of the encounter between the "I" and the "other."

Our book concludes with María Guadalupe Arenillas's (Chap. 16) "Toward a Nondiscursive Turn in Argentine Documentary Film," in which she analyzes a series of documentaries, including Jonathan Perel's *Tabula rasa* (2013) and *Toponimia* (*Toponymy*, 2015) and Martín Oesterheld's *La multitud* (*The Multitude*, 2012). All of these films bring into relief emblematic spaces linked to the history of Argentina's most recent dictatorship (1976–1983), though none of them use conventional documentary techniques like the voice in off, talking head testimonies, or expository explanations of the past. Instead, these films take a "nondiscursive" approach to understanding the past that challenges the primacy of the testimonial genre and the subjective turn that have given shape to the vast majority of postdictatorial narratives. Taken together, these films construct an archeology of the present in which it becomes possible to recognize the tensions at play in certain kinds of cultural production on memory as well as the profound effects that past political violence continues to have on citizens' daily lives.

By focusing on problems like subjectivity, reflexivity, ethics, and memory, this book does not intend to offer an exhaustive treatment of recent Latin American documentary filmmaking. Instead, it seeks to map how long-established documentary topics evolve in the new millennium thanks to the creativity of Latin American directors who not only respond to but also shape global cinematic trends. While certain themes and concerns run through several directors studied in the following pages, we are convinced that it is difficult to pin labels on Latin American documentary. We hope to show that the region's production is eclectic and heterogeneous, diverse in topics, styles, and techniques. To enhance the book's value as a reference work, we have included birth dates of filmmakers whenever verifiable, as well as English translations of film titles. We will consider our efforts worthwhile if the reader discovers the vibrancy of a genre that, in our opinion, constitutes one of the richest cultural archives in Latin America today.

## NOTES

1. See Jens Andermann, *New Argentine Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 93. Andermann derives his statistics from Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: BFI, 2007), 3, 15, and “Datos del circuito de producción y consumo,” *Cine-ar* (2011), <http://www.cine.ar/contenidos/72-Industria/>.
2. Ibid.
3. Jorge Ruffinelli, *América Latina en 130 documentales* (Santiago de Chile: Uqbar Editores, 2013), 11.
4. For a comprehensive history of documentary film in Latin America, see Paulo Antonio Paranaguá ed., *Cine documental en América Latina* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2003). Paranaguá’s volume stands as one of the most important Spanish-language works to date on the subject. See also, Michael Chanan, “Documentary Film: Latin America,” in Ian Aitken ed., *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 524–31. Much of the historical information that we reference here comes from these sources.
5. See Julianne Burton, ed., *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990).
6. See Michael Chanan, “The Space between Fiction and Documentary in Latin American Cinema: Notes Toward a Genealogy,” in Miriam Haddu and Joanna Page, eds., *Visual Synergies in Fiction and Documentary Film from Latin America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 15–23.
7. Julianne Burton, ed., *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, 78.
8. For an explanation of Third Cinema’s tenets, see Octavio Getino, “Some Notes on the Concept of ‘Third Cinema,’” in Michael T. Martin ed., *New Latin American Cinema, Volume One: Theories, Practices, and Transcontinental Articulations* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 99–107.
9. Antonio Traverso and Tomás Crowder-Taraborelli, “Political Documentary Cinema in the Southern Cone,” *Latin American Perspectives* 188, vol. 40, no. 1 (January 2013): 6.
10. Pablo Piedras, “From Recording to Intervention: History and Documentary Filmmaking in Argentina,” *Latin American Perspectives* 188, vol. 40, no. 1 (January 2013): 33.
11. See Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado: cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo, una discusión* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2005).
12. Leonor Arfuch, “Espacio biográfico y memoria en la cultura contemporánea: intervenciones sobre el ‘documental subjetivo,’” lecture delivered at Stanford University, May 1, 2009. See also, Leonor Arfuch, *El espacio biográfico: dilemas de la subjetividad contemporánea* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002).

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PART I

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The Subjective Turn and Beyond

## What Remains of Third Cinema?

*Michael J. Lazzara*

The question that gives rise to this chapter implies a double shift that is at once sociopolitical and aesthetic. Let me start with the sociopolitical. When we look at Latin America today, it is clear that times have changed, and that a region battered by dictatorships, civil conflicts, and neoliberal reforms is not the same one in which “Third Cinema” urgently intervened in the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout Latin America, the moment of revolutionary insurgency that came in the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution paved the way for other revolutions—both armed and peaceful. Yet, as we know, conservative backlash and brutal authoritarian regimes violently quelled the utopian dreams of a generation. This resulted in rampant torture, large-scale displacement of people, countless human rights violations, and the extermination of somewhere between five and seven hundred thousand individuals between 1959 and 1990.<sup>1</sup>

In places like Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, neoliberalization and the particular textures that the various transitions to democracy have acquired have made it such that socialism today looks quite different from the way it did in the 1960s and early 1970s. Memory and justice seeking, too, remain salient struggles in contexts like Guatemala or Peru where

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impunity has reigned; in other contexts, like Chile, justice has, on balance, worked silently, been insufficient (according to many), and been very slow in coming. Meanwhile, under today's progressive, democratic regimes, Latin American countries still face rampant poverty, inequality, individualism, and myriad forms of violence (gender-based, ethnic, and otherwise). All of this brings to mind a famous quote by Gabriel García Márquez from his classic novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967): "Time passes ... but not so much."<sup>2</sup> In many ways, then, the problems of the 1960s and 1970s (imperialism, colonialism, inequality, etc.) have not gone away and continue to inspire protest and combative politics all over the region by citizens as well as artists.

In the terrain of documentary cinema—which for the purposes of this chapter constitutes the “artistic” realm—I think it is also possible to cite a shift, concurrent with the sociopolitical, epochal shift I have just described. The Third Cinema wave of the 1960s and 1970s gave way, as we know, to a cinema of exile, memory, and denunciation of human rights violations in the 1980s. It was a cinema marked by a different urgency and a different kind of denunciative discourse than in previous decades, a cinema very much reflective of the sociohistorical moment that Latin America was living at the time. Yet as the dictatorships waned in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and earlier on, Brazil, an “expository” cinema of memory—which has now taken hold in other contexts like Guatemala and Peru where memory debates blossomed later—came to coexist alongside a number of productions that were more reflexive in nature; many of which, particularly films by the children of the disappeared, used the first-person authorial voice to question figurations of memory and identity. Albertina Carri's (1973–) *Los rubios* (*The Blondes*, 2003) or films like Andrés Di Tella's (1958–) *La televisión y yo* (*Television and Me*, 2002) or *Fotografías* (*Photographs*, 2007) have become paradigmatic examples of this style that has variously been called “performative” (Bruzzi), “reflexive” (Nichols), or “autobiographical” (Piedras),<sup>3</sup> and that derives from previous global movements that experimented with reflexivity and the inclusion of the first person, like Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité, in the 1950s, or US autobiographical cinema, in the 1970s and 1980s.

At the same time, the shift from a collectively articulated and overtly political Third Cinema toward an identity-based (and less overtly, though still political) first-person cinema likely interfaces in complex ways with the general epochal shift that I mentioned above. It is somehow not surprising



that the neoliberal moment, which according to Leonor Arfuch has plunged contemporary culture into an “I” centered “biographical space” that is visible from just about everywhere, has also birthed a still-ongoing glut of first-person documentaries in which the private, the intimate, and the affective have become ways of talking about or directing inquiries toward the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, as some authors in this book suggest (see, in particular, the chapters by Gustavo Furtado, Antonio Gómez, Jens Andermann, and Joanna Page), first-person documentary practices are now acquiring new layers of complexity; sometimes the first person disappears completely to privilege the collective, while other times, the subject/object of representation, as in indigenous cinema, takes up the camera to film his or her own reality or to interrogate the gaze of the auteur. It seems possible, then, to hypothesize an intensification of the political (if not, in some sense, a return to the political) that faded with the onset of the dictatorships.<sup>5</sup> As the Chilean student movement rails against Pinochet’s neoliberalization of education or governments like that of Evo Morales in Bolivia challenge global neoliberalism, it seems possible to ask: Is Latin American documentary cinema moving in reverse to recapture the flavor of the lost time of Third Cinema?

The question is, I admit, rhetorical. It would be naïve to think that this is the case because time does not move backward. Time marches on, but remnants, residues of previous epochs (e.g. that of the 1960s and 1970s revolutions) remain present and are reactivated by other voices, both old and new. The idea of *remains* (as a verb and a noun) is therefore pivotal to my argument and has not been chosen innocently. If we look at Latin America today, it is abundantly clear that much remains from the 1960s and 1970s—a spirit, a combativeness, a *malestar* (an unrest) that is inspiring new political movements, new generations, and a return to the political (a *certain* “political” more reminiscent of what some have called a bygone era). A cinema of tears and melancholy—that is, of memory in an expository mode—is no longer the order of the day. Aware of the fact that no progression (in film or in history) is linear, my desire in this chapter is therefore to think about *what remains*, to map sociopolitical shifts onto aesthetic ones. This task, I know, is quite ambitious and far exceeds what can be done in the space of a short reflection. All I can really hope to do is erect some signposts that might spark a debate.

I want to approach my initial question of *what remains* by charting three moves that will allow me to address it in different ways. The first two moves diverge somewhat radically from one another and litmus test

the question against the work of two of the most emblematic filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s: Patricio Guzmán (Chile, 1941–) and Fernando E. “Pino” Solanas (Argentina, 1936–), the latter of which, along with Octavio Getino (1935–), Fernando Birri (1925–), Santiago Álvarez (1919–1998), and others, was, we might say, a founding father of Third Cinema. While Guzmán’s cinema seems to turn inward, melancholically, exacerbating the presence of an emotive first person as it evolves, Solanas’s cinema, particularly after the 2001 Argentine crisis, has begun to recover the spirit of Third Cinema without abandoning a first-person site of enunciation. A film like Solanas’s *Memoria del saqueo (Social Genocide, 2004)*, for example, riffs on the remains of his epic 1968 diatribe against neocolonialism *La hora de los hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* and has become a touch-point for younger filmmakers seeking to deploy documentary to incite collective political action. In other words, while Guzmán’s cinema evidences a move largely reminiscent of the transition we have seen from a combative, politicized cinema (in Third Cinema key) to the subjective documentary cinema of the turn-of-the-millennium, Solanas’s post-2001 films activate the remains of Third Cinema in a markedly different way that moves us backward in time and then forward again to ask how the combative political stances and aesthetics of the past can inform present political and cinematic intervention.

A third and final move emerges in the filmmaking of a younger, grassroots, post-2001 generation. *Cine piquetero* (picketer cinema), documentary projects by Argentine collectives protesting neoliberal economics, poverty, and inequality, challenge a first-person, auteurial cinema and return us, in a sense, to the collective, political spirit of Third Cinema in today’s context. By charting these three moves in turn, I hope to show that Third Cinema has neither returned, nor disappeared forever. Rather, it is part of a tradition that lingers and is reactivated, like a cinematic memory in an ever-evolving, diverse field of vision.

#### CITATIONS

If we really stop to think about it, Patricio Guzmán’s epic film *La batalla de Chile: la lucha de un pueblo sin armas (The Battle of Chile: The Struggle of an Unarmed People, three parts, 1975–1979)* does not fit into the Third Cinema genre in the same way that Solanas and Getino’s *La hora de los hornos* (1968) does. This is so because Guzmán’s film reads like a chronicle of a death foretold (in reality a double death: that of Chilean

president Salvador Allende and that of the “peaceful road to socialism” that his Popular Unity government represented). Instead of presenting a totalizing, rounded view of history with the specific intention of fomenting participation in the revolution (like in *La hora*), Guzmán’s approach to history is much more reflexive and shot through with questions.

Because Guzmán edited the film at Cuba’s film institute (ICAIC, Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos), after the September 11, 1973 coup, its very structure and narrative emplotment are marked by the melancholy tone of a political project and a utopian dream violently defeated. The opening credits of Part One (“The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie”) roll against the sounds of Hawker Hunter fighter planes bombing the presidential palace; these sounds meld into concrete images of the bombing that appear again at the conclusion of Part Two (“The Coup d’état”). The coup is therefore a definitive and irreversible moment that frames the dynamism, passions, and political tensions of the Popular Unity years; this cataclysmic moment hovers over the film and colors our interpretation of everything we see. In that sense, *La batalla*, despite its temporal proximity to the events it portrays, can already be read as a citation of another time—a prior era of hope and political possibility that had been forestalled by the time the documentary took its final form. Many sequences give us the impression that we are living the twists and turns of history in real time—an impression exacerbated by the use of the handheld camera and its ability to penetrate every last corner of public and private space—but the film’s broader framework makes us realize that the images we see belong to one historical temporality (revolutionary time) that has abruptly given way to another (the imposition of neoliberalism by force). How one historical moment gives way to the other constitutes the central motor of the film’s inquiry.

Harkening back to earlier analyses of *La batalla*, like the one published by Ana M. López in Julianne Burton’s influential collection *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (1990),<sup>6</sup> Patrick Blaine notes that Guzmán’s film “seamlessly integrate[s] a number of key narrative devices [...] that ma[ke] it a truly innovative project, surpassing the paradigm of the [documentary] genre in the New Latin American cinema movement and indicating the direction he would take with his later films.”<sup>7</sup> Blaine notes that, surprisingly, for its time, *La batalla* “comes close to what Burton calls the reflexive mode”—although the degree of reflexivity is far less pronounced than in Guzmán’s subsequent films or in those by younger documentarians from the region.<sup>8</sup> In *La batalla*, the use of

voice-over and observation, coupled with non-chronological narrative and flashbacks, are just some of the film's reflexive aspects.<sup>9</sup>

Though on first glance it may seem like Guzmán's subjectivity is absent from *La batalla*—he does not appear on screen, although he may in fact be the interviewer whose voice we hear polling people about the March 21, 1973 congressional elections—his subjectivity is, in fact, central to the film's composition. A voice-of-god narrator, Abilio Fernández, acts as an ordering consciousness whose scripted words mirror Guzmán's own feelings about the events portrayed. Once we become aware that the filmmaker is determining how history is presented, it becomes clear that *La batalla* is a “complex interpretive essay” that, although ideologically grounded in an unambiguous, militant, leftist, pro-Allende perspective, leaves room to question historical decisions and ideological positions.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the film not only shows us the conflicts that existed between left and right, but also within the left, which, as we know, was gravely torn between reformism and revolution.<sup>11</sup> Testimonial challenges by workers or union leaders coupled with street chants like “*Crear, crear, poder popular*” (Create, create, the people's power) only exacerbate feelings of impatience and discontent. Interestingly, Part Three ends with a landscape shot of the Chilean desert, overdubbed by a worker's voice whose words imply that the struggle, despite the odds, must somehow continue: “It's now or never. Let's keep moving forward, comrade; we'll be seeing each other, comrade.” The coup is now a reality, yet Guzmán leaves the door open to other historical possibilities that may potentially play out in some future moment, either near or distant.<sup>12</sup> Melancholy tinged by a measured dose of hope may therefore best characterize Guzmán's affective state as he edited his film, banished to exile in Cuba. This same tone undeniably lingers into his later projects.

If in *La batalla*, the combative, ideologically dogmatic subject of Third Cinema is already fading into melancholy, by the time we reach Guzmán's later work, the individual, melancholic subject is immensely salient: particularly in *Chile: la memoria obstinada* (*Chile: Obstinate Memory*, 1997), and even more so in *Salvador Allende* (2004) and *Nostalgia de la luz* (*Nostalgia for the Light*, 2010). Over the course of these three films, Guzmán's performative and reflexive authorial presence progressively intensifies, in consonance with the subjective turn that quite clearly characterized turn-of-the-millennium documentary filmmaking in Latin America. We might even go so far as to say that the progression of Guzmán's documentaries functions as a map or a barometer of the subjective turn in general. I have

already said that *La batalla* was, in a sense, a citation of an earlier historical time, even though its first part appeared just two years after the coup. But twenty years later, it is abundantly clear that this earlier time (Popular Unity), which defined Guzmán's youth, militancy, and life, becomes an archive of personal trauma (and joy) that is activated through his own memories as well as those of his former comrades and others. The images of *La batalla*, in short, constitute the filmic archive with which the rest of Guzmán's *oeuvre* will dialogue.

In an illuminating essay, José Miguel Palacios analyzes how Guzmán juxtaposes historical temporalities:

*Obstinate Memory* signals a pivotal point in the history of recent Chilean documentary cinema, taking the concerns with mourning, loss, and disappearance that were prominent in the films produced by filmmakers in exile to another level, one in which the loss is not exhausted in the pain of its mourning and not limited to its pastness; rather it is drastically confronted with its present remains, whether material, bodily, psychological, or political.<sup>13</sup>

When Guzmán returns, twenty years later, to the scene of the crime (Chile), he finds a neoliberal city whose landscape and official memory narratives exude a painful forgetting of the socialist experiment that marked his youth. In the 1990s, politicians, even those on the left, tended not to talk about Popular Unity publicly; Allende remained taboo, a subject best suited to the private conversations of former militants forced to nurse their traumas or lost utopian dreams. Evoking this reality, Palacios analyzes the well-known sequence in which Carmen Vivanco, a woman who lost five members of her family to dictatorial violence, contemplates a photograph of her younger self and claims to have “doubts” that she is actually the woman in the image. He reads this confrontation of temporalities to show that a trace of the past that remains inscribed, though uncertainly, within the variegated textures of a present that denies it.<sup>14</sup> While the transition governments of the 1990s tended to deny the “political time” of revolution, Guzmán—through the use of the filmic metaimage or of black-and-white photographic stills or moving images (many from *La batalla de Chile*) flashed into the present—brings one political time, the years of revolution, to bear on another political time, that of the amnesiac transition.<sup>15</sup> Therein lies the impact of *Chile: la memoria obstinada*: in its ability to seize the present by force (like the Benjaminian flash) and to use images

(citations) to interrogate a series of actors and citizens who, for so many different reasons, are wont to forget.

Many sequences in *Chile: la memoria obstinada* confront temporalities in provocative ways. Professor Ernesto Malbrán, who appeared in *La batalla*, reflects throughout the film on the nature of memory and argues that the dictatorship was not a definitive defeat for the left, but rather a temporary one. In another sequence, a youth band marches through the Paseo Ahumada, a commercial, pedestrian thoroughfare that symbolized Pinochet's economic reforms of the 1980s, and plays "Venceremos" (We Shall Overcome), the anthem of Popular Unity. Bystanders look on stunned. Some applaud the gesture, while others clearly watch with disdain. As a final example—the list could go on and on—Guzmán returns to the National Stadium where he was detained in 1973; a handheld camera walks us through a doorway into the stadium such that we re-encounter that space from Guzmán's vantage point. By the end of the sequence, the camera shifts perspective: through the visors and combat gear of the police assigned to work a soccer game, Guzmán films a group of raucous youths who light fireworks and cheer on Colo-Colo. Many faces in the crowd are dark skinned. Eerily, we get the impression (which has been proven time and again) that today's police and military are but one provocation away from brutalizing the people. We are left questioning how the violence and attitudes of the past linger into the present and still determine behavioral patterns.

Guzmán's melancholic, personal cinema perhaps reaches its culmination in *Salvador Allende*.<sup>16</sup> Ruins—material objects from another time—give rise to the film. The opening sequence confronts the viewer with several of these: a presidential sash, Allende's official Socialist Party identification card, and an eyeglass case bearing the initials S.A.G. (Salvador Allende Gossens). All of these objects serve as material touch-points, in almost Proustian fashion, for Guzmán's homage to his political father: Allende. As the film progresses, however, we come to understand that what we assume will be a reflection on Allende's life and legacy, turns out to be, first and foremost, a film about Guzmán: "Salvador Allende," he says toward the beginning of the film, "marked my life. I would not be who I am if he had not embodied the utopia of a freer, more just world that seized my country in those times [1970–1973]. I was there, an actor and a filmmaker... Detained in the National Stadium, subjected to the machinery of forgetfulness that was being put into motion, only one desire motivated me: to save the reels of *La batalla de Chile* that contained the proof of the waking dream we lived with Allende" (Fig. 2.1).



Fig. 2.1 *Salvador Allende* (2004), directed by Patricio Guzmán

These first-person comments set the tone for everything that comes next. Other informants' testimonies channel emotions and deep-seated questions that Guzmán probably harbors too. A nostalgia that seeks to restore the past intact, what Svetlana Boym calls "restorative nostalgia," mixes poignantly with a more reflective brand of nostalgia that allows Guzmán, and those he interviews, to engage in a certain amount of historical revisionism that makes the film more than a predictable, romanticized evocation of utopia: Could we have done something different? Did Allende lead the country the way he should have?<sup>17</sup> This tug of war between a desire to integrally restore the past and to openly debate what it was that *really happened*, in historical and existential terms, is perhaps the film's richest contribution.

A final sequence in which poet Gonzalo Millán reads from his famous work *La ciudad* (*The City*, 1979)—a book of poetry in which the lyric voice imagines history "in reverse," as if the coup had never happened—speaks to a restoratively nostalgic impulse that risks dominating the film.

Yet final word we hear Millán speak is “Venceremos”: an ambiguous signifier within the semiotic web the film weaves. It both cites another (unrecoverable) time, but also acts as a call to arms, despite the odds. Cautiously optimistic, though melancholically so, it brings to mind John Beverley’s observation that revolution in Latin America “did not fail because of its internal contradictions—although there were many—nor was it condemned to defeat from the start; it was *defeated* by what turned out to be in the end a stronger, more ruthless enemy.”<sup>18</sup>

By the time we reach *Nostalgia de la luz*, Guzmán, now seventy-four years old, continues his memory saga, but with new questions, new perspectives, and a slightly tempered, though still prevalent use of the first person. The reflection of a now-old man who has dedicated his life to struggle, his film is a beautiful personal essay on the intricate relationships between the cosmos and the events of recent Chilean history. Scientists search for other galaxies and seek the origins of human life, while mothers of the disappeared, in an equally taxing and ill-fated search, comb the Atacama Desert for shards of their deceased loved ones’ bones. At the same time, Guzmán seeks answers to the questions of his own life by looking in previously unexplored directions and by seeking alternative archives.

Tamara Lea Spira wonders whether *Nostalgia de la luz* “diagnose[s] a ceding of the Political to the realm of Metaphysics.”<sup>19</sup> Unconvinced by this hypothesis, she seems to conclude that instead of abandoning politics, the film redefines the political by constructing an archive that is much different from the one we find in the films I have mentioned until now. “The story of the dictatorship,” she writes, “is no longer so tightly moored to a familiar affective economy of loss and longing.”<sup>20</sup> Instead, familiar images of Chile’s trauma, like the bombing of La Moneda or Allende’s face, give way to the vast textures of the Atacama Desert, whose history encompasses the *longue durée*: colonialism, the extermination of indigenous peoples, the plight of miners who worked in that region and were often brutally repressed, and the interrelatedness and evolution of life via the scientific inquiry that occurs there. The film, in this sense, manages to put Allende’s peaceful revolution and Pinochet’s authoritarian backlash into a much broader perspective: a desire that manifests through images of telescopes or swirling stars in far-off galaxies.

The idea of connectedness, of history repeating itself, of scenes that play out over and over again, lies at the heart of *Nostalgia de la luz*. Although the film is personal in style, the viewer feels that Guzmán reaches outward (beyond the self) to make visible connections between history and



human experience, to create awareness that, ideally, might form the basis for reconstituting broken communities. Of course, we don't see anything in this film akin to the *pueblo* of Third Cinema, but what we do see are groups of people (the wives and mothers of the disappeared, young scientists, new generations, etc.) seeking ways to mitigate human isolation and affirm a connectedness that, as all of Guzmán's cinema shows, is abundantly lacking in our current sociopolitical moment.

### THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVE

All of Patricio Guzmán's films post-*La batalla de Chile* reveal an interest in the collective, and this interest, as I have said, is perhaps most acutely felt in how *Nostalgia de la luz* probes the connectedness of people and temporalities—to the point at which temporalities, which were always markedly distinct in films like *Chile: la memoria obstinada* and *Salvador Allende*, almost collapse into one another as we view the cosmos in macro. Yet, overall, Guzmán's treatment of the collective is subtle and, in general, manifests fragmentarily; the collective does not appear on-screen as a multitude demanding social change, but rather as a phantasm that has not managed to fully coalesce and revive in postdictatorial times. Gone, for example, are the militant throngs of *La batalla* that undulate in the streets as if they were one body. Instead, in Guzmán's postdictatorship cinema, the collective is something to be mourned, desired, celebrated, or intuited. By contrast, "Pino" Solanas's post-2001 films return us to the political of Third Cinema—mass street action and overt, incendiary ideological discourse—in ways that Guzmán's films do not. This move toward citing a Third Cinema aesthetic to revive its potential in the present is the second move I want to examine. Whether Solanas is successful in his attempt is what concerns me here.

In one of the later chapters of this book, Gustavo Procopio Furtado provocatively suggests, following Deleuze, that one of the central characteristics of contemporary cinema may be that the "people" (*el pueblo*), as a collective construct, have gone missing. Furtado writes:

Although current cinematography presents a few points of continuity with the political project of NLAC [New Latin American Cinema], investment in history's collective subject, 'the people,' is not one of them. Contemporary documentary production tends toward the microhistoric rather than the historic, and it favors subjective, intimate, and personal narratives and perspectives rather than collective ones.<sup>21</sup>

To a certain extent, what Furtado claims may well be true; we can think of myriad examples, many of which are discussed throughout this book, of films in which the people have been relegated to the margins, or in which they struggle, as in the Brazilian films Furtado analyzes, to generate affective ties in a neoliberal era rife with individualism. Yet films like Solanas's *Memoria del saqueo* (2004) defy this idea in important ways.

Having abandoned a Third Cinema aesthetic for several decades, the massive Argentine protests of 2001 inspired Solanas to return to the streets to create an epic explanation of the greed and corruption—particularly of figures like Carlos Menem and Fernando de la Rúa, or entities like the International Monetary Fund—that led to economic collapse and the now-infamous *corralito* (government mandated controls on bank withdrawals). Solanas's railings against politicians, economists, and global capital remind us of his diatribe against the Argentine oligarchy and neo-colonialism in *La hora*. The idea that the “people” will not relent (“*El pueblo no se va*”), which acts as the film's ultimate message, revives the construct of *pueblo* (at least in name) and reinstalls the combative tenor that was present in 1960s cinema.

If we reflect back on Solanas and Getino's landmark 1968 documentary, which became paradigmatic and inaugural of Third Cinema, several features stand out: the use of voice-of-god narration to construct reality in a way that does not pretend to be objective; the use of archival images and fictional devices to denaturalize images and interrogate the media gloss of capitalism; the use of intertitles and chapter divisions to reinforce ideological messaging; and the use of cinema as a revolutionary “weapon” whose goal was to draw people to the revolutionary cause through emotion, reason, and quasi-religious commitment. Who can forget that the film's first part, “Neocolonialismo y violencia” (Neocolonialism and Violence), which lays out the framework for the discussions of Peronist militancy that come in the other two parts, ends with a four-minute, almost mystical contemplation of the visage of Che Guevara's cadaver? Upon seeing this image, the viewer was expected to make the crucial decision, as Che did, to sacrifice his life for the cause (Fig. 2.2).

In *La hora*, then, the film's mandate is not simply for the *pueblo* to resist, but for the people to fight to the death if necessary. The film constructs an active spectator who is expected to join the fight and pursue the revolution to its ultimate consequences. We should remember that *La hora* was often screened clandestinely at union meetings or for groups of militants. Its parts did not have to be shown in order and could be tailored



Fig. 2.2 *La hora de los hornos* (1968), directed by Fernando E. Solanas and Octavio Getino

to address the particular needs and debates of the day. Moreover, the film included ample space (chapter and part divisions) that allowed viewers to take breaks to discuss the ideas presented. Its pedagogical goals were clear.

While these pedagogical goals are also present in *Memoria del saqueo*, Solanas's rhetoric, though extreme, does not reach the extremes of his 1968 film. In contrast to *La hora*, *Memoria*, notwithstanding its antineoliberal content, is itself a product of the neoliberal moment; it was screened commercially in Argentina and abroad and was designed to appeal to the sensibilities of diverse audiences that might be inspired, *diversely*, to active political militancy, to the perhaps more passive pursuit of a "progressive" political agenda, or to a simple awareness of social ills. In this sense, the film can (and perhaps should) be viewed as a "politics-commodity" whose "material structures of circulation and production" may very well generate paradoxes that clash with its contents.<sup>22</sup>

Still, *Memoria del saqueo* puts us back in touch with some of the key characteristics of *La hora*: its incessant referencing of the *pueblo*, its

dogmatism, its epic reading of large swaths of political and historical experience, its formal division into chapters sequentially ordered to lead us to certain conclusions, its penetration of public and private space, and its pedagogical function. But Solanas's 2004 film also departs from Third Cinema in important ways, not the least of which is the director's pervasive presence as narrator, interviewer, and character—something that would have been unthinkable in Third Cinema (in a formal sense), one of whose goals was, precisely, to challenge European and American (bourgeois) authorial cinema.

Antonio Gómez reads the presence of Solanas's "I" as "a clear-cut expression of the set of problems that Solanas's generation is trying to resolve: in the context of the dissolution of the political project that defined his generation, the withdrawal from the 'we' stands as an index of vindication, and gives place to the inauguration of a discourse of 'ethics,' centered on the opposition between the individual subject and history, and expressed in first person singular."<sup>23</sup> It seems significant that by the time *Memoria* reached its final stages of preparation, Néstor Kirchner had already come to power on a platform that vindicated both the left and the previously vilified experience of revolutionary militancy; it seems equally significant that around that same time, Solanas was likely contemplating his own entry into politics as a congressman and, later, a mayoral candidate for the progressive political party he founded, Proyecto Sur (Project South). By 2001, then, the former revolutionary speaks out, just as he did before, but in a different register and differently motivated. He speaks out because he *can* speak; he is no longer denied a voice, as during the dictatorship. But because of his desire for historical vindication or political advancement (as well as because of new trends in documentary modes of expression)—this is just a hypothesis—he may also be reticent to abandon the first person. And this pervasive use of the first person has, in fact, led to harsh critiques, like Jens Andermann's assertion that Solanas's film is cheapened by its blatantly propagandistic quality: "[It] ends up becoming the very mirror-image of the shallow and superficial news coverage he claims to be denouncing."<sup>24</sup> Although I am not sure I fully agree with Andermann on this point, it does seem fair to say that the pueblo returns in Solanas's film, but takes a backseat to the authorial "I" who, on- and off-screen, always remains in control of the camera and the story.

At bottom, then, *Memoria del saqueo* reflects an epochal struggle in which the definition of the "people" (exactly *who* will fight, *for what*, and *against what*) remains somewhat nebulous. Neoliberalism is the many-tentacled

enemy, but it does not affect everyone in the same way, nor does it inspire equally vigorous forms of resistance or engagement among those affected. María Belén Ciancio reminds us of this when she writes: “Solanas does not distinguish among the jobless; investors; grandmothers, mothers, and children of the disappeared; retired people; and rural women. There is no people as a unified whole; rather there is a collection of multiple ‘becomings’ whose political futures are growing apart.”<sup>25</sup> The film thus leaves us teetering on a precipice. While it denounces—in Third Cinema style—the oppression of the poor by the rich, it falls short of the ambitions of *La hora* insofar as it never manages to articulate a programmatic alternative around which to unite these diverse groups.

### MOURNING VERSUS COMBAT

It follows from the previous analyses that directors from the Third Cinema generation appear trapped between a melancholic mode of filmmaking in which combative politics and the people linger as ghostly citations brought to bare on the present (as in Guzmán) and a more combative mode of filmmaking in which the people, and “the political,” in a 1960s or early 1970s sense, return, yet without usurping the place of the first-person “I” that has come to dominate turn-of-the-millennium documentary filmmaking (as in Solanas). This generational tension compels me to consider, as a counterpoint, a third mode of documentary filmmaking that has been growing in Argentina since the 1990s and that exploded in the wake of the 2001 crisis: militant cinema or *cine piquetero* (picketeer cinema).

The very idea of *cine piquetero* is controversial. For some, the term refers to militant cinema made by those who participate directly in the *piquetero* movement—those who “recuperate” dormant factories, cut off traffic in the streets, or march in political demonstrations; for others, the term refers, more broadly and capaciously, to films made by individuals or groups who sympathize with the piqueteros and their contestations of neoliberalism, the media’s false images, poverty, and corruption.<sup>26</sup> Some creators of this kind of cinema support the idea that *cine piquetero* constitutes a genre that both converges with and diverges from Third Cinema; others reject outright the idea that *cine piquetero* is a genre. Developed in parallel with the reflexive, performative, and subjective turns of the 1990s and 2000s, *cine piquetero* marks, as authors like Maximiliano Ignacio de la Puente and Jessica Stites Mor have pointed out, a return to militant filmmaking that was dormant throughout the dictatorship years and the

initial years of transition.<sup>27</sup> Its existence speaks to the diversity of documentary filmmaking styles that exist today in Latin America. Furthermore, it is worth noting that groups like Cine Insurgente, Alavío, Boedo Films, and Ojo Obrero find inspiration in 1960s collectives like Solanas's Cine Liberación (Liberation Cinema) or Raymundo Gleyzer's (1941–1976) Cine de la Base (Cinema of the Militant Base), yet diverge from them insofar as the street is the main site for filming.<sup>28</sup> Piquetero films are not finished in studios, but instead are edited on home computers. Their primary modes of circulation are informal—on the Internet or through screenings in neighborhoods, at intimate political meetings, or at universities (like in Third Cinema)—though occasionally they are shown in domestic or international festivals or in settings that seek to promote transnational solidarity networks among workers.

A main aspect of *cine piquetero* that puts it in closer touch with the collective projects of several decades ago than with the “authorial” militant cinema of today (like *Memoria*) is its suppression of the filmmaker as character or voice-of-god narrator. Although some filmmakers do sign their films as individuals, many are signed by groups so as to consciously suppress the individual in the interest of the collective. *¡Piqueteros carajo!* (*Fucking Piqueteros*, 2002), by Ojo Obrero, a collective with links to the Trotskyist Partido Obrero (Workers' Party), is one representative example of current piquetero cinema that suppresses individual authorship, is guided by concrete political objectives, and, like Third Cinema, is meant to be viewed and debated mainly by militants committed to struggle and political action. The film centers on the deaths of two piqueteros who were killed during a July 2002 protest at the Pueyrredón Bridge in Buenos Aires as a result of police brutality. It lacks a voice-of-god narrator and instead privileges the voice of “Coco,” one of the protestors, who channels his comrades' feelings in testimonial key. Its gritty feel and its use of wide-angle camera shots give the impression that we are on the ground, mired in the chaos of police action, brutalized citizens, reporters chasing a scoop, and gunfire. More than merely denouncing a certain reality—as in *Memoria*—Coco incites the viewer to organize politically and calls for the installation of a “workers' government.”

Several important parallels exist between films like *¡Piqueteros carajo!* and Third Cinema. First, it provides counterinformation to the media's contrived representations and versions of reality.<sup>29</sup> Reminiscent of the critiques of advertising, marketing, and bourgeois culture that we find in *La hora*, *¡Piqueteros carajo!* incorporates lots of media clips, purposefully

manipulating and intervening them to tease out the ludicrous narratives of politicians and journalists. Here, the truth lies in the voices of the *pueblo* that, without pretending to be objective, offer alternative readings, ideologies, and solutions to pressing social maladies.

A second parallel is that the film situates itself at the vanguard of history. *¡Piqueteros carajo!* makes use of history, but deploys historical citations always as a function of present-based action. For example, interspersed with images of police brutality and street action, we find a reference to Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación masacre* (*Operation Massacre*, 1957)—probably as an example of the kind of honest, militant journalism that is so desperately needed today. The reference is entirely visual, subtle, and not expounded upon, such that the citation's power lies in what it implies rather than in explicit rhetoric. At another point in the film, Coco points out that “the piqueteros are the *descamisados* [shirtless people] of the twenty-first century,” a reference that clearly harkens back to the Peronist project of the 1940s and 1950s. However, he quickly adds that the piqueteros, unlike Montoneros or other groups from the past, do not pledge allegiance to Perón. Instead, they say “¡Piqueteros carajo!”—an expression of ire that reflects a desire to oust the political class and leave the bourgeoisie trembling in fear.

A final—and perhaps the most important—parallel with Third Cinema is the way in which *¡Piqueteros carajo!* serves as a call to arms that actualizes the visage of Che Guevara's cadaver. In the wake of a tribute to the two martyred protestors killed by the police, the music track leaves us pondering that sometimes people have to die for rebirth to occur. The lyric adds: “And if you have any questions about that, just ask Che.” Whereas Solanas's *Memoria* stopped short of such blatant harangues and calls to self-sacrifice, *¡Piqueteros carajo!* appears willing to pursue the struggle to its ultimate consequences. In that sense, it may better actualize the combative spirit of *La hora de los hornos* than Solanas's own post-2001 films.

The arguments I have advanced in this chapter are merely ideas, a basic outline for thinking about the remains of Third Cinema in broad terms. Taken together, the readings seems to suggest that something does, in fact, remain in today's cinema of the vibrant and combative revolutionary cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. While sometimes the revolutionary moment appears as another time to be cited, mourned, or evoked, it is also a time that can be celebrated and actualized—plumbed for its combative potential in new times and new contexts. All of this is to say that Latin American documentary filmmaking at the turn-of-the-millennium



is much more than the subjective turn. The upsurge of piquetero cinema is just one more reminder that the “social documentary” has always been prevalent in Latin America and that something of Third Cinema will linger—though perhaps transformed and adapted to new circumstances—as long as endemic inequality and rampant injustice remain.

## NOTES

1. For these statistics, I follow John Beverley’s lead. See John Beverley, *Latinamericanism After 9/11* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 108.
2. Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 341.
3. For the sake of clarity, I should add that Andrés Di Tella, unlike Albertina Carri, does not speak from the position of a child of the disappeared. His films are linked to those of Carri and others, however, by their subjective nature and by a generationally motivated inquiry into the past. On the “performative,” “reflexive,” and “biographical,” respectively, see, Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and Pablo Piedras, *El cine documental en primera persona* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2014).
4. See Leonor Arfuch, *El espacio biográfico: dilemas de la subjetividad contemporánea* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002).
5. I mean for this statement to be understood in its most general sense. I am not saying that the political died with the onset of authoritarian rule in Latin America. Very much to the contrary, protest and political action at home and abroad played a key role in bringing an end to dictatorship. However, it is undeniable that dictatorial regimes made it such that, for many years, protest had to happen creatively, clandestinely, or differently. The return to the political to which I refer has to do with the return to power of leftist governments, on the one hand, and with a return to the street as an arena for performing dissent, on the other. At the same time, however, it seems important to add that in a country like Chile, for example, the street became a key arena for protest during the dictatorship’s denouement. Therefore, these are not strict chronologies.
6. Julianne Burton, ed., *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990).
7. Patrick Blaine, “Representing Absences in the Postdictatorial Documentary Cinema of Patricio Guzmán,” *Latin American Perspectives* 188, vol. 40, no. 1 (2013), 117.
8. *Ibid.*



9. Acknowledging the reflexive, experimental nature of *La batalla*, Guzmán states that the film is “open,” a “search” for meaning that constructs its argumentation through point and counterpoint, while always leaving room for the “invisible” or overlooked aspects of the real that can change the course of history. See Cecilia Ricciarelli, *El cine documental según Patricio Guzmán* (Santiago de Chile: FIDOCs, 2010), 115.
10. See Nelly Richard, *Fracturas de la memoria: arte y pensamiento crítico* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2007), 201.
11. See David William Foster’s careful analysis in his book *Latin American Documentary Filmmaking: Major Works* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2013), 143–58.
12. See David William Foster, *Latin American Documentary*, 157.
13. José Miguel Palacios, “Residual Images and Political Time: Memory and History in *Chile, Obstinate Memory* and *City of Photographers*,” in Vinicius Navarro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez, eds., *New Documentaries in Latin America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 109.
14. *Ibid.*, 111.
15. *Ibid.*, 113.
16. For an in-depth analysis of *Salvador Allende* and the dynamics I allude to here, see my “Guzmán’s Allende,” *Chasqui: revista de literatura latino-americana* 38, no. 2 (November 2009): 47–62.
17. See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii.
18. John Beverley, *Latinamericanism After 9/11*, 108.
19. See Tamara Lea Spira, “Toward a New Temporality and Archive of ‘Revolution’: Patricio Guzmán’s *Nostalgia for/of the Light*,” *E-misférica* 9, nos 1 and 2 (Summer 2012), <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-91/spira>, n.p.
20. *Ibid.*, n.p.
21. See Gustavo Procopio Furtado’s chapter in this volume.
22. For a full explanation of the logic to which I refer, see Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado’s chapter in this book.
23. See Antonio Gómez, “First-Person Documentary and the New Political Subject: Enunciation, Recent History, and the Present in New Argentine Cinema,” in Vinicius Navarro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez eds., *New Documentaries in Latin America*, 50.
24. Jens Andermann, *New Argentine Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd.), 100.
25. María Belén Ciancio, “Labyrinths and Lines of Memory in Documentary Film: *Memoria del saqueo* and *Los rubios* from a Philosophical Perspective,” *Latin American Perspectives* 188, vol. 40, no. 1 (2013), 106.

26. For an excellent overview of *piquetero* cinema, see Maximiliano Ignacio de la Puente, “Cine Militante argentino contemporáneo: una introducción,” *PolHis* 8 (2011): 173–182.
27. See Maximiliano Ignacio de la Puente, “Cine Militante,” and Jessica Stites Mor, *Transition Cinema: Political Filmmaking and the Argentine Left since 1968* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 149–52.
28. Solanas and Gleyzer are merely referenced as representative figures of these well-known groups.
29. De la Puente highlights the counterinformational aspect of *piquetero* cinema. See his “Cine Militante,” 180.

## Andrés Di Tella and Argentine Documentary Film

*Jorge Ruffinelli*

Nineteen fifty eight was an important year in Andrés Di Tella's (1958–) life and in Latin American film. That year, by chance, Argentine sociologist Torcuato Di Tella and his wife, Kamala Apparao, originally from India, found themselves in Chile. It was there that she would give birth to their first son. They named him Andrés. In that same year, Arturo Frondizi was elected president of Argentina, only to be brought down by a military coup four years later.

Twelve hundred kilometers from Santiago, Chile, in Santa Fe de la Vera Cruz, Argentina, a group of young motion picture producers had just finished filming the documentary *Tire dié* (*Toss Me a Dime*, 1958). In 1956, Santa Fe native Fernando Birri (1925–) had come home from studying filmmaking at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Italian National Film School) in Rome. When he returned, he founded the Instituto de Cinematografía de la Universidad del Litoral (National University of the Littoral Film School). His name soon came to be associated with a pictorial documentary format that aimed to capture urgent social realities: the *fotodocumental*, or photo-reportage, which was embryonic of the types of documentaries that Birri and his crew would soon begin to film.

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The 1970s in Argentina ushered in a short-lived phenomenon: the legalization of Peronism to pave the way for Juan Domingo Perón's return from exile in Spain. In the interim, Héctor Cámpora became president and set the stage for Perón's comeback. When the exiled general returned, Cámpora resigned and relinquished the presidency to him. Perón, however, only stayed in power for a year. He died in 1974. His wife, María Estela (Isabel), inherited the chief executive office but lacked the skills to take control of a rapidly deteriorating political and institutional climate. This chaotic situation would lead to another, even bloodier military coup in 1976. That coup set in motion a horrific period known as the "Dirty War" (1976–1983): a time marked by terror, danger, uncertainty, murder, and the disappearance of thirty thousand victims.

### A TIME FOR QUESTIONING: *MONTONEROS, UNA HISTORIA*

In 1995, Andrés Di Tella completed his first full-length documentary, *Montoneros, una historia* (*Montoneros: A Story*, 1995). The time had come for him to ask some questions about the recent past—questions he had only touched upon in a short film he produced several years earlier for Amnesty International called *Desaparición forzada de personas* (*Forced Disappearance of People*, 1989). A decade later, Di Tella would reflect on these same questions:

In that moment, when I filmed *Desaparición forzada*, I was able to find it in myself to talk about the experiences of the disappeared. I spoke with concentration camp survivors, and I ventured to ask them details about torture. I don't know how I mustered the courage. But I could never bring myself to ask any of them if they had been guerrillas. That was kind of a big taboo subject that wasn't personal, but societal in nature. So it was for that same reason that I wanted to make *Montoneros, una historia*. As a member of a certain generation, I was constantly asking myself: What were my "older siblings" doing? But maybe a better question would have been: What were their parents up to? Even if I'm technically not a child of the 1970s, Montoneros generation, I am, for all intents and purposes, a descendant of the revolutionary generation.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear, then, that *Montoneros, una historia* is born out of a feeling of not belonging, of Di Tella's sense that he was generationally and biographically out of place. Even though more than a decade had passed

since making *Desaparición forzada*, he was still asking what his place was in all of it—what his place *was* and *is* in relation to his country's recent history.

Between 1995 and 1996, two documentaries brought Montoneros squarely into the public eye.<sup>2</sup> One was the aforementioned film by Di Tella, the other was David Blaustein's (1953–) *Cazadores de utopías* (*Hunters of Utopia*, 1996). There are interesting differences between the two films. *Cazadores* exudes a magnetism that seems justified based on what the film is: a revision of Argentina's recent past that traces the 1955 military coup and the “Revolution for Freedom,” Peronism's return, and the dawn of the Dirty War. The film is dedicated to “the thirty thousand disappeared and to those who still believe that it's possible to live history with a little more dignity.”

In contrast to Blaustein's film, Di Tella's documentary takes a more objective and distanced approach. Di Tella's style, as he admits, “never ceases to transmit a kind of formal addiction to authority, as if to say *this is how it was*.” At the same time, though, he clarifies that the film is “*one story (una historia)* out of many possible stories.”<sup>3</sup>

No filmmaker had touched the topic of Montoneros until these two documentaries erupted onto the scene. The first part of Di Tella's film, which lasts forty-five minutes, was shown on television in 1994, prior to its theatrical release, but the second part never aired on TV due to the “sensitive” nature of its content: specifically, its mention of ESMA (Naval Mechanics School), one of the military's most notorious sites for the detention and murder of political prisoners. Given that Di Tella did not live through the revolutionary era himself, his approach to that time had to be patently “documentary” in nature, that is, done from the outside, guided by a search for objectivity rooted in the fact that he never belonged to any political or armed group.

If something was missing in Blaustein's documentary (and also from the debate about Montoneros that was taking place around that time), it was a political discussion that transcended a mere analysis of military objectives. Montoneros were Peronist militants who staked their identity on Perón's approval, granted from afar while he was exiled in Spain. Nevertheless, when the political conditions made it such that the exiled leader could return, Montoneros became, paradoxically, not only collaborators in his reconquering of power, but also an obstacle that he would soon condemn and persecute. After Perón's death, when Isabel became

president (and José López Rega, leader of the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, tacitly took power), the persecution and extermination of leftist revolutionary groups grew crueler than ever. Looking back, one interviewee in *Cazadores* poignantly concludes that Montoneros and Perón effectively betrayed one another.

If Di Tella's film, too, fails to engage in "political theory"—perhaps it was neither the time nor the place for such reflections, or maybe he wasn't the right person for the job—*Montoneros* penetrates deeply into the theme of violence. One of Montoneros's very first actions was the 1970 kidnapping, condemnation, and execution "in the name of the *pueblo*" of Army General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu. From that point on, violence was their trademark. Yet, in the film, no survivor, militant, or sympathizer defends the use of violence as a viable answer or tactic. In this sense, an air of self-critique hovers over *Montoneros*, even if the film never really stages a true political debate.

*Montoneros* is noteworthy because it showcases various former leaders and sympathizers, interweaving their testimonies and respective opinions about their involvement in the armed struggle. The cast includes Roberto Perdía, ex-Montonero commander; Jorge Rulli, cofounder of the Peronist Youth; Graciela Daleo, Chiqui Falcone, and Topo Devoto, all former militants; and Domingo Godoy, from the Peronist Shantytown Dwellers Movement. Among other things, then, one of the great contributions of *Montoneros* is how it works with archival material, notably a brief television interview with the guerrilla group's most reviled leader, Mario Firmenich, whom the film notes "charged fifteen thousand dollars to appear on TV." Firmenich and Rodolfo Galimberti are, according to Rulli, the story's "sinister" characters, and at a certain point, he mentions a theory—widespread among former militants—that the former was a double agent for the Argentine military.

From the time of his very first documentary, Andrés Di Tella was concerned with the use of narrative in film. Over the years, he would hone a style that would become progressively more personal and complex. In *Montoneros*, for example, he avoids a journalistic bent and instead gives the film a "human" feel and narrative focus. Far from weakening the political side of the story, this personal approach ends up bringing the political into even sharper relief. To that end, the director chooses Ana Testa as his protagonist, a militant of Montoneros and ESMA survivor whose husband the military disappeared. Her story reveals the personal and very human drama that many militants experienced. By focusing on

one story among many, Di Tella works beyond a stereotyped view of the militant. Ana leads Di Tella to different filming locations, all the while offering explanations, anecdotes, and even doubts. She narrates a series of discrete episodes: from the impact that Gillo Pontecorvo's (1919–2006) *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) had on both militants and their captors, to her ambiguous relationship with one of the Navy's most sinister villains. She also tells about the clandestine life she lived with her husband, Juan Silva, whom she saw for the last time in 1979.

Among the documentary's many fascinating elements, the experiences recounted by ESMA survivors like Mario Villani and Víctor Bastera are the most disturbing. Villani explains his conscious decision to collaborate with his torturers: his acquiescence to their request to build an electric prodding device (*la picana*). He claims to have done it to palliate the effects of much more diabolical torture devices.<sup>4</sup> Ana and other interviewees talk about Lucy, one of the movement's most battle-hardened veterans who became romantically involved with Antonio Pernías, the military operative responsible for killing Ana's husband. These stories about Stockholm Syndrome and exchanging sexual favors for survival highlight the human dimensions of the prisoners' tragic misery.

Ana's own story is but one example of this misery. She recounts how her husband, living clandestinely, refused to see her after she was freed from ESMA. The fact that she survived made others automatically assume she had collaborated. Today many former Montoneros continue to struggle with the suspicions, accusations, and pain of having betrayed their fellow comrades—or of having been betrayed by them. This subject matter makes Di Tella's documentary quite current and secures its place in the history of Argentine postdictatorial film.

#### FURTHER QUESTIONS: *PROHIBIDO*

One might say that during Argentina's Dirty War, workers, farmers, and students were *repressed*, while intellectuals were *forbidden* (*prohibidos*). Consequently, Di Tella's narrative strategy in *Prohibido* (1997) is to tell the history of that period as a tale of repression and censorship whose aim was to annihilate the citizenry's dignity.

When deciding how to narrate the film, Di Tella could have very well attempted to create an objective and detailed account of the military regime's persecution of intellectuals. This, in and of itself, would have been enough to make the film noteworthy. However, he pushed further

to make a more complex and layered film. Indeed, the documentary addresses censorship and repression, but, more importantly, it evokes an atmosphere in which it becomes difficult to mete out responsibilities for the violence that took place. Toward the beginning of the film, Raúl Portal, a journalist, observes: “We were a violent generation by omission or commission.” According to Portal, the violence that intensified with the 1976 coup was already present within the armed left. This view of violence, however, does not absolve the military of its crimes, nor does it validate the “Theory of the Two Demons,” which shamefully assigns equal blame to the revolutionaries and the military. The comment simply begs an explanation of violence that would plumb its complexities and place it in a broader historical scope.

Di Tella weaves a cloth of many colored threads, but, in the end, he allows that cloth to speak for itself. The myriad testimonies collected in the film attest to a tremendous intellectual force whose voices were curtailed, though not totally silenced. Well-known cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo refers to the difficulty or impossibility of directly confronting the regime, while Jacobo Timerman, a journalist who was jailed and tortured, bears witness to the military’s brutality and to how people internalized fear, a dynamic that made it progressively difficult for him to speak about torture. Osvaldo Bayer relates how being “marked” by the military turned him into a social leper. He recalls that he could not even leave his dog with his neighbors for fear that the dog might draw attention to a “dangerous” friendship. A climate of risk and betrayal therefore enveloped an entire society. Privy to these testimonies, *Prohibido* affirms what, a couple of years later, Marco Bechis’s (1955–) fiction film *Garage Olimpo* (1999) would also show with painful force: Argentine society’s collective denial of the extreme horror that was happening in the country’s clandestine detention centers.

*Prohibido* also focuses on the role that theater played during the dictatorship, paying special attention to the work of director Alberto Ure and playwright Eduardo “Tato” Pavlovsky. It includes their anecdotal testimonies about staging *Telarañas* (*Webs*, 1977), a play that was censored even though its themes were “abstract” and lacking in direct reference to social reality. This example, among others, allows Di Tella to evoke a general atmosphere of suspicion, personal risk, and disappearance. Meanwhile, archival films show General Videla visiting the Buenos Aires Book Fair, where he is greeted by none other than Jorge Luis Borges. Videla also appears on-screen visiting a school where the children receive him as a new national hero.



*Prohibido* explores the dictatorship's filmic archive in other provocative ways as well. As part of the multicolored patchwork he creates, Di Tella incorporates clips from films that both supported and critiqued the so-called "Process for National Reorganization." Among the films he includes are Emilio Vieyra's (1920–2010) *Comandos azules* (*Blue Commanders*, 1980), which glorifies the Argentine police; Adolfo Aristarain's (1943–) *Tiempo de revancha* (*Time for Revenge*, 1981), an allegory of political violence; Fernando E. Solanas's (1936–) *Sur* (*The South*, 1988), which portrays mock executions; Hugo Santiago's (1939–) *Las veredas de Saturno* (*The Sidewalks of Saturn*, 1986), a film about exile; Héctor Olivera's (1931–) *La noche de los lápices* (*Night of the Pencils*, 1986), which treats the theme of torture; and Luis Puenzo's (1946–) *La historia oficial* (*The Official Story*, 1985), about children whom the military kidnapped. These archival clips constitute a veritable anthology of how film, whenever possible, made reference to that time of intense violence.

Toward the end of *Prohibido*, a numerical tally summarizes the horror of those years: among the thirty-thousand disappeared, there were ninety-three journalists, four filmmakers, twenty-three psychologists, six musicians, three plastic artists, six hundred teachers, and two thousand students. A series of photos draws us closer to the victims, who are now only a faint trace in the haze of memory. As the documentary concludes, the viewer recalls that it began by referring to a "violent generation" that included both the left and the right, but now it is abundantly clear that those who "disappeared" were not military personnel but civilians: that it was the dictatorial regime that perpetrated the violence and offered no apologies for its actions. In that vein, Admiral Emilio Massera's conclusion is jarring: "My conscience is clear."

Di Tella has acknowledged that *Prohibido* marks a shift in his documentary style.<sup>5</sup> In his first two feature-length films, his strategy was to include a multitude of accounts from witnesses to recent history. These witnesses also served as protagonists. As Clara Krieger notes, Di Tella "has always been fascinated by those telling the story,"<sup>6</sup> yet he is always careful to maintain a certain level of objectivity: "he neither judges nor praises his characters."<sup>7</sup> Referring specifically to the narrative strategy he devised for *Prohibido*, Di Tella explains:

When I made *Prohibido*, I was at a point in my career when I was really fascinated by the idea of documentary storytelling as oral storytelling. I could spend hours listening to people tell stories about their lives,

especially old people. I got the feeling that that's what documentary was: people sitting around a campfire spinning tales. *Prohibido* takes that idea as its starting point.<sup>8</sup>

Di Tella's next documentaries, however, would break with that strategy and redefine the authorial figure's place within the narrative, moving that figure from the margin to the center. The filmmaker, that is, would carve out a place for himself as a privileged voice within his narrative.

### A TURN TOWARD THE PERSONAL: *LA TELEVISIÓN Y YO*

In Di Tella's third feature-length film, *La televisión y yo* (*Television and Me*, 2002), television is the missing link that might comfortably connect the filmmaker to his generation. From the age of six until the age of fourteen, Andrés lived with his parents in exile, first in the USA and later in England. This break in the continuity of his childhood story caused him to miss out on seven years of TV that would have connected him to his peers. His film, therefore, becomes a search for the past *from the present*, in which a conversation with his father, well-known sociologist Torcuato Di Tella, becomes the pretext for filming. The important point here is that Andrés's father is no ordinary interviewee. Both Torcuato and his son hail from a prominent industrialist family that founded the now-defunct Siam Di Tella empire: a company that manufactured appliances, automobiles, and other products starting in the early twentieth century. As a young man, Torcuato rejected the role his social class and family expected of him, and when his father, the patriarch (also named Torcuato) died, he felt free to pursue an academic career that would eventually lead to his exile. Today a cultural center and a university bear the name "Torcuato Di Tella": remnants of another time, of another Argentina, and of grandiose industrial dreams.

The fact that Andrés missed out on seven years of TV inspires him to do some historical research on the origins of television in Argentina. In the process, chance connects him to Sebastián Rosenfeld, the great grandson of business magnate Jaime Yankelevich, a radio industry pioneer who built a media empire that was also responsible for bringing television to the country in the 1950s. Alternating between Sebastián (who also introduces Andrés to Yankelevich's daughter) and his own father, Torcuato, the filmmaker intermingles the stories of two industrial empires that no longer exist.

Yankelevich's story is intriguing because of his relationship to Argentine politics. As the film hypothesizes, Yankelevich might have been the person

responsible for introducing Eva Duarte to Juan Domingo Perón. Once he consolidated control of the radio airwaves by creating Radio Belgrano and many other local stations, he put television in the service of Perón's political "empire." Because of his usefulness to Perón, Yankelevich survived the ascent of Peronism, a time in which the military had no tolerance for Jews, especially if they were media moguls. At any rate, each man scratched the other's back, even though, according to Yankelevich's great grandson, it's difficult to say who really "won" in the end. Perón wound up nationalizing the media, and Yankelevich got rich. One might say that Perón traded the airwaves for power, which, as we know, is always entangled with money.

Eva Perón could never take advantage of television's wonders. A radio and TV actress, she was already gravely ill when the first television broadcasts aired in 1952. Evita's second-to-the-last public appearance was captured on TV; apparently, Yankelevich watched the very first television broadcast from a hospital bed. He died just a few months before Evita.

Since its inception, television was, and still is, a powerful political tool. That's why Di Tella overlays his nostalgia for a lost past (TV programs like *La niña* [*The Girl*] or *Biondi* [hosted by José "Pepe" Biondi]) with television's penchant for inculcating ideology or generating passive spectatorship to protect conservative interests.

Yet Di Tella's documentary doesn't offer its analysis primarily to lodge a protest, but rather to explore the phantasm-like losses that configure his identity. In that sense, his film powerfully suggests television's pivotal role in shaping the popular imagination of his generation. In contrast, his father, Torcuato, quips that he never felt the same kind of attraction to the televised image. Echoing this idea, in a brief "family" scene, Torcuato falls asleep in front of the TV while he watches with his son Andrés and his grandson Rocco. Indeed, television's allure is universal, but with marked exceptions.

Notably, then, despite the film's expository richness, its intelligent use of archival material, and the boldness it displays in incorporating family members (Andrés's father and, in a short sequence, his uncle), with *La televisión y yo*, Andrés Di Tella would not yet reach the pinnacle of the personal documentary form. Beyond expressing angst about the seven years of television he missed (angst that doesn't totally gel into anguish, drama, or tragedy), beyond sharing with the viewer some childhood dreams (like wanting to be an astronaut), or excepting a brief sequence from his wedding (aimed at showing that it was there where he first met Rosenfeld), there is actually very little of "Andrés Di Tella" in this film.

Even though the documentary's style is subjective and personal, it cannot be described as intimate (perhaps with the exception of Andrés's childhood dream). Certainly, the filmmaker is present in the images we see. So are some of his feelings. Nevertheless, he continuously eludes us. We know more about the feelings his father harbors toward his parents than we do about Andrés's own feelings toward Torcuato. Andrés's cinematic "regard" for his father is rooted in great respect and admiration—just as it is for so many other topics like politics, history, the culture of motherhood, his own paternity, and above all, the documentarian's enormous responsibility to show restraint vis-à-vis his characters (Fig. 3.1).

*La televisión y yo* thus marks an exceptional moment in Di Tella's trajectory as a director. His adept straddling of the public and the private realms reveals the filmmaker's undeniable and mature control of media. In *Montoneros* and *Prohibido*, he experimented with and learned to control both the archive and the interview. With *La televisión y yo*, the "family novel" (*la novela familiar*) finds its (perhaps) necessary place in the history of postdictatorial Argentina cinema. More than mere revisionism,



Fig. 3.1 *La televisión y yo* (2002), directed by Andrés Di Tella

Di Tella brings into play a new way of manipulating media to create a more subjective and personal cinema than the social and political documentaries to which audiences had grown accustomed.

If we think about this film in Freudian terms, it offers a return to the past whose intention is to reimagine and rearticulate the “family novel.” What is particularly noteworthy in Di Tella’s case, however, is that this gesture coincides with his maturation as a director. In *La televisión y yo*, the subject and the world, the individual and society, achieve an astonishing degree of intercommunication. This leads us to believe that in the future, Di Tella will not be able to avoid turning his gaze toward the collective (a shared “outside”), nor will he be able to avoid gazing inwardly at himself.

### SUBJECTIVITY EMERGES: *FOTOGRAFÍAS*

As the new millennium began, the big novelty was the emergence of subjectivity in documentaries. The distance separating the subject of a film from its object dissolved, and the documentarian began to appear on-screen, even when he or she was not the film’s main character.

In contrast, there are many films in which the filmmaker *is* the main character. María Inés Roqué’s (1968–) *Papá Iván* (*My Father, Iván*, 2004); Albertina Carri’s (1973–) *Los rubios* (*The Blondes*, 2003); and Nicolás Prividera’s (1970–) *M* (2007) are three notable examples of subjective films by children of the disappeared who stake their identities on traumatic family loss. Andrés Di Tella’s *Fotografías* (*Photographs*, 2007) belongs to this same group of personal documentaries, but with a noteworthy difference: his mother’s death was unrelated to the dictatorship or politics. What connects his documentary to those by Roqué, Carri, and Prividera is the raw emotion with which he tries to recapture a figure who, without a doubt, was the most important person in his childhood and who continued to be a driving force in his adulthood.

It is likely that the title for this new documentary, *Fotografías*, occurred to Andrés when his father gave him a box of family photos, which he saw as a good starting point for making a film about his mother’s ethnic and cultural origins. He found some home movies as well. Already in *La televisión y yo*, one could feel a dialectical—if not adversarial—relationship between father and son. The son proposes to make a documentary about the family (which isn’t the film he really winds up making), while the father advises him to wait twenty years to gain a clearer perspective. But the son doesn’t want to wait. Andrés pushes forward, while Torcuato applies the brakes. From this dialectical synthesis, *Fotografías* emerges.

Even though, as Roland Barthes once suggested, the photographic image alludes to what is static, permanent, or dead, Di Tella's documentary is pure motion: a journey, a road movie, and a travel diary.<sup>9</sup> The enigma that surrounds his mother, Kamala Apparao, is that she never taught her children anything about her native country or culture. It was not until much later, when a schoolmate bandied epithets at him, that Andrés discovered that his mother—like the color of her skin—was “different.” Even though Kamala had taken Andrés and his brother Víctor to India when Andrés was only eleven years old, he never internalized his roots, nor did he develop an acute awareness of India's specific cultural values.

When *La televisión y yo* was complete, the time had come to delve deeper into his “family novel,” both for his own benefit and especially for his son Rocco. So Andrés decided to travel to India with Rocco; his wife, the writer Cecilia Szperling; a cameraman; and a soundman. His goal was to acquaint himself with the maternal side of his family. In a kind of symbolic reckoning, he would now offer his son Rocco the immersion into Indian culture that his mother had denied him (Fig. 3.2).



Fig. 3.2 *Fotografías* (2007), directed by Andrés Di Tella

*Fotografías* also explores Hindu culture from another angle: by looking into the life of famed Argentine writer Ricardo Güiraldes, author of the classic “gaucho” novel *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926). Güiraldes’s fascination with India was not well known, nor was the fact that his late wife, Adelina del Carril, had adopted a Hindu child named Ramachandra Gowda. Before leaving for India, Di Tella went to see “Rama” in Patagonia. Rama, who once met Andrés’s mother, confessed that years before, he innocently believed that given the uniqueness of their origins, he and Kamala were “the only two Hindus in Argentina.” Rama serves in the documentary as an anchor that links one exceptional individual (him) to another (Kamala). Upon completing the film, Andrés learns that in the interim, Rama has died. Poignantly, Rama lives on through the cinematic image.

The snippets of a “domestic cinema” scattered throughout *Fotografías* are brief and fleeting; most of them are images of a much younger Andrés. There is no filmed footage of Kamala, only photographs—although Di Tella does include a video of a child in which we hear Kamala’s professional voice as a psychologist attempting to communicate with her patient. Andrés knew it was possible to use audiotapes of his mother, but he never had listened to all of them.<sup>10</sup> Yet ever since he filmed *La televisión y yo*, he had been reflecting on the nature of first-person filmic discourse and on how to incorporate home movies into his documentaries. In both cases, his analysis is *defensive* because of the common perception that personal documentaries are born of narcissism:

[Home movies] symbolize that which is not public, that which is only of interest to the family. Home movies epitomize a personal archive that is of no use to anyone else. I think private movies are starting to pique people’s interest because they speak in a way that’s different from public documents. But you have to know how to manipulate them, because home movies are [in and of themselves] extremely boring.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, Di Tella’s challenge in *Fotografías* is to deploy a “personal archive” effectively in a film meant for strangers, not just friends and family; he manages to do it by making the film completely autobiographical. Of course, *La televisión y yo* was partly autobiographical, but the film also left room for historical investigation. In the documentaries that come after *Fotografías*, Di Tella’s subjective and personal impulses will ebb, but not totally disappear.

*Fotografías* allowed Di Tella to transform his Freudian “family novel” into a real family story when he traveled to India to meet his relatives.



Because he had taken his wife and son along on the journey, one might say that he managed to integrate his immediate family with the once-distant-and-mythical family of his disappeared mother. This, in fact, was the real pretext for Andrés's journey to Madras; it wasn't so much to investigate Kamala's life before she became the "Argentine sociologist's wife." Nevertheless, Andrés must have certainly been intrigued when, among the photos his father gave him, he found a typical hunting photo, with his mother pictured next to a dead Bengal tiger, an ethnographic gesture far removed from Argentine culture.

It was important to Andrés to make Rocco's immersion into his grandmother's culture as natural as possible. "One always films for another," Di Tella once observed. And when one watches *Fotografías*, it is quite obvious that that "other" is his son, Rocco. That's why the sequences that feature his son are abundant; it is also why the documentary culminates with an extraordinary take in which an elephant strokes Rocco's face at the Tiruvannamalai Temple. All the while, the credits roll while we listen to a well-known nursery rhyme from Andrés's childhood (passed down to him by his father): "El gusanito" (The Little Worm), by Jorge de la Vega.

#### IN SEARCH OF OTHER COLLECTIVE PASTS: *EL PAÍS DEL DIABLO*

After the 2001 economic crisis, Argentine political documentary, which had been dormant for a while, burst back onto the scene. The anonymous, or almost anonymous, *cine piquetero* (picketer cinema) captured the workers' plight, roadblocks, factory takeovers, and other forms of resistance to neoliberalism. Fernando E. Solanas returned to a politicized cinema, evocative of his early years, in *Memoria del saqueo* (*Social Genocide*, 2004), *Argentina latente* (*Hidden Argentina*, 2008), and other films. Documentaries like Santiago García's (1970–) *Lesbianas de Buenos Aires* (*Lesbians of Buenos Aires*, 2004) or Martín Rejtman's (1961–) *Copacabana* (2006) explored the country's sexual and ethnic diversity. During these initial years of the new millennium, then, while other documentarians headed out into the streets to find their themes and characters, Di Tella stayed focused on the personal and the subjective. All that would change, though, in 2008, when Andrés would go in search of another story: that of the last remaining indigenous peoples, historical descendants



of the nineteenth-century cultural and physical genocide known as “The Conquest of the Desert.”

*El país del diablo* (*The Devil's Country*, 2008) had its beginnings in a project on “frontiers” cosponsored by the National Secretary of Culture, the Canal Encuentro television network, and the National Institute of Cinema and the Audiovisual Arts (INCAA, Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes). In all, twelve filmmakers participated, and for his contribution, Di Tella chose an interesting but sensitive topic: General Roca’s campaign, a historical episode that detonated the extermination of Argentina’s indigenous people in the nineteenth century. Originally a fifty-minute film titled *Zanja de Alsina* (*Alsina's Trench*), Andrés later lengthened the film to seventy-five minutes and retitled it *El país del diablo*.

Just as he did in *Fotografías*, the director again produced a road movie, a search for identity—only this time it wasn’t a search for personal identity, but rather a collective, national one. In that vein, he followed the footsteps of Indian Chief Namuncurá and the last indigenous people to be killed by General Julio Argentino Roca. Initiated in the 1870s by then-Defense Minister Adolfo Alsina, the Conquest of the Desert enacted a plan to sever the “civilized” community from the “barbaric” inhabitants of the desert-like pampas. To do this, Alsina planned to dig a six-hundred-kilometer trench that would separate one group from the other. Excavation ended, however, after only a few meters were dug. Years later, Roca would act much more expeditiously: his mission was to do away with the Indians by blood and fire. And he succeeded.

Today Argentina considers itself to be “white,” a product of European immigration, free of the diabolical Indian. But this is not really this case. In his travels, Di Tella encounters many learned people from the Ranquel culture, including people who speak the language and fight to have it taught in schools so that the community’s cultural traditions can be passed on, or so that, at the very least, they won’t die out completely.

Accompanied by a small film crew, Di Tella drives his truck through an “unknown” territory—a land of obliterated memory, cultural destruction, and genocide. Of those traveling with him, he is the only one who appears on-screen explaining, narrating, and commenting. From the very start, he places a small figurine of Estanislao Zeballos on the dashboard of his truck. Zeballos—the main ideologue of the Conquest of the Desert who, following the extermination, developed a conscience and eventually defended those whose murder he once supported—drew the first map of

the region and wrote a book called *Viaje al país de los araucanos* (*Journey to the Araucan Country*, 1881). On discovering this, Di Tella murmurs: “Zeballos was a documentarian.” After a pause, he adds: “Like me.” From that moment forward, the little statue of Zeballos appears repeatedly in different frames: Zeballos is the guide, the driver of this identity-journey who will help Argentines understand that after so many decades of racist ideology, they, too, are a product of that genocidal past. This is something they cannot and should not deny.

Additionally, the documentary surveys sites that turn out to be historically revealing: in a La Plata museum, for example, Di Tella finds dozens of indigenous skulls, similar in number to the “photographs” that Zeballos took of the Indians in life. He chats with Daniel Cabral, one of the last remaining speakers of the Ranquel language, who tells Andrés how those who sheltered him as an orphan insisted that he forget his native language and learn Spanish instead. Cabral clung to his mother tongue and, years later, made it his mission to teach others. From there, we see scenes in a school and hear the Ranquel children’s wonderful responses to Di Tella’s questions, answers that capture the intelligence with which they preserve cultural memory and tradition.

Di Tella’s documentary is ultimately effective because it takes distance from historical “fact” without denying his personal fascination with holding letters in his hand that Cacique Namuncurá wrote and Zeballos later found. At the same time, he avoids passing moral judgment on the prejudice, cruelty, and inhumanity of the Conquest of the Desert and its perpetrators. This objective strategy makes for a more impactful portrait of a genocide with which the audience is, in some way, already familiar. What we are not so much aware of, and what the documentary slowly reveals, is the astonishing cultural resistance of the Ranquel descendants. More than a century after being declared extinct, rich indigenous cultures remain, though they constantly teeter on the edge of disappearance.

### KINDRED SPIRITS, CONNECTED STORIES: *HACHAZOS*

An original and refreshing documentary style emerged in Argentina around 2005: films that deal with other art forms, or that create a fluid relationship between other art forms and the filmic process. Key examples in this style are Lorena Muñoz’s (1972–) *Los próximos pasados: vida y muerte de un mural de Siqueiros* (*Present Pasts: The Life and Death of a Mural by Siqueiros*, 2006) and Alejandro Fernández Mouján’s (1952–)

*Espejo para cuando me pruebe el smoking* (*A Mirror for When I Try on My Tux*, 2005). The latter of these films proves an interesting point: documentaries about art do not have to abandon politics. Mouján's film, which was produced by Marcelo Céspedes (1955–) for the Cine Ojo production company, looks at the case of sculptor Ricardo Longhini, who, after witnessing the 2001 popular mobilization known as the *Argentinazo*, filled his pockets with bullets that the police fired on protesters. Out of those bullets, Longhini made and exhibited sculptures that express political resistance to a repressive state. Di Tella's film, *Hachazos* (*Hacks*, 2011), dialogues with this emerging style.

On October 20, 2010, Andrés Di Tella and experimental filmmaker Claudio Caldini (1952–), a legendary figure from the 1970s, created an art installation called “Hachazos” in the Lugones Room of the San Martín Theater. This was meant to be the provisional culmination of a project they had both been developing—which also included a film-in-progress called *El peligro del ojo* (*The Danger of the Eye*)—about Caldini's work. Caldini's short films, some of which Di Tella incorporates into *Hachazos* and that were also part of the installation, are legendary today because they are so hard to find. Because his films were not preserved on durable media like video or DVD (with the exception of his four-minute short *Ofrenda* [*Offering*, 1978], which does exist on DVD), they generally have not been objects of study or contemplation, but rather memories that belong only to those who lived the experience of making them.

Di Tella and Caldini's installation used four projectors to show the films in their original Super-8 format. Although this format was discontinued commercially long ago, it has recently undergone a revival; many people nowadays shop for Super-8 cameras and projectors at antique fairs. It is curious that in our digital age, people crave this kind of return to the past. But what is even more curious is that Di Tella says the following about Caldini's experimentalism: “Looking at [his style] from the outside, I think it's an act of resistance, a deliberately poetic and eloquent anachronism”—a resistance, in any case, that isn't political, but broadly cultural. Caldini staunchly opposes the massive, anonymous invasion of the media barrage that besieges us daily.

Still fascinated by storytelling, Di Tella structures his film, above all, as a narrative. He weaves in a couple of Caldini's old films (especially *El devenir de las piedras* [*The Future of Stones*, 1988], which he finds compelling for its magnetism and mystery), but more than anything he wants to get Caldini to act in his film. On camera, he proposes that Caldini go to

the train station and take a seat on a train; he wants him to hold a valise that apparently contains Caldini's life's work. Caldini refuses. He fears that doing this would upset him immensely; in fact, he had only done something like this once in his life and was generally not accustomed to carrying around his life's work in a leather bag. But Di Tella's will prevails. A sequence in the film contains a double narrative (visual and auditory), in which Di Tella's voice-in-off remarks: "It would go something like this: A man carries all of his work, which is his whole life, in a valise, in a train bound from Moreno to General Rodríguez."

Like Di Tella, Caldini also traveled to India. He first went in 1975. Consequently, another of Di Tella's motives was to find out what Caldini encountered there: utopia or insanity. It is interesting to consider that perhaps he found both. It is also interesting to consider that India is what brought Caldini and Di Tella together (like Rama and Di Tella in *Fotografías*); India is the link that gave birth to both the installation and the film. Caldini takes advantage of this link and uses his relationship with Di Tella to very personal and pragmatic ends. Di Tella asks him to pinpoint exactly when he began to undergo a transformation in India. Claudio replies that his transformation did not start in India:

It actually started here in Argentina when I decided to escape, because what was happening—the dictatorship—was intolerable. You can't separate one thing from the other. To feel like a stranger in your own neighborhood, in your own city, in your own country . . . To feel like you don't know anyone, that's terrible. I didn't solve my problems by going to another country or another city. Paradoxically, I agreed to make this film with you so that I could tell my story. I trusted that you could tell my story better than I could. My story isn't something that's always present to me, nor is it easy to talk about what happened. I always find myself in a bind when I have to talk about it.

Di Tella adds:

To talk about Caldini is to talk about my own relationship to cinema. The first time I took part in making a film, or something like it, was when I was still in school. My mother's friend, the artist Marta Minujín, was doing a performance in which she buried herself alive. At that time in Argentina, anonymous bodies were being buried every day. I threw the dirt on her, and Caldini filmed in Super-8. I didn't see him again for many years. I found out he had been in India, that he had gone crazy, that he lived like a bum,

rumors. Finding him again after so many years was like finding a lost part of my life. The man on the train sleeps, or perhaps dreams. Thanks to cinema, his dreams, or his insanity, he lost everything. He was part of the creative explosion of the 1970s. He lived through the military dictatorship holed up in a garden. He escaped to India in search of utopia and lost everything, even his mind. He was kicked out of an ashram and locked up in an asylum in Paris. On returning to Buenos Aires, he lived on the streets. During a decade as a vagabond, he inhabited thirty-six makeshift dwellings. He abandoned film. In recent years, he has taken up residence on a ranch outside Buenos Aires. There he lives, humbly. Surrounded by plants and silence, he started thinking about film again. Now armed with a borrowed camera and three virgin rolls of film, he starts to shoot.

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Times change. We cannot deny, for example, Caldini's pioneering experimentalism, but still the differences between yesterday and today are evident. So are the differences between resisting dictatorship and resisting ways of life and sensory perception that are imposed on us from the outside. Over time, certain forms of rhetoric and language grow decrepit. We might recall Marta Minujín's famous 1983 installation in which she constructed a Parthenon of Books made from thirty-thousand volumes that the dictatorship censored. She distributed them to the public after keeping them on display for three weeks. Today, in democratic times, resistance does not always have to be overtly political. It might be a gesture against attempts to homogenize the citizenry, or against the inanity of the media. Or, it might simply be a search for a new aesthetic or a new kind of sensorial experience.

*Translated by Michael J. Lazzara and Emily Frankel*

## NOTES

1. Paul Firbas and Pedro Meira Monteiro, eds., *Andrés Di Tella: cine documental y archivo personal (conversación en Princeton)* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2006), 44. Throughout this chapter, the rendering of quotes from Spanish to English is the work of the translators.
2. *Montoneros* was a leftist guerrilla movement in Argentina during the 1960s and 1970s.
3. Firbas and Meira Monteiro, eds., *Andrés Di Tella*, 49.
4. This same anecdote was fictionalized years later in Marco Bechis's film *Garage Olimpo* (1999).

5. Firbas and Meira Monteiro, eds., *Andrés Di Tella*, 57.
6. Clara Kriger, "Andrés Di Tella," in *Cine documental en América Latina*, ed. Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (Madrid: Cátedra, 2003), 263.
7. *Ibid.*, 264.
8. Firbas and Meira Monteiro, eds., *Andrés Di Tella*, 37.
9. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
10. Firbas and Meira Monteiro, eds., *Andrés Di Tella*, 100.
11. *Ibid.*, 90.

## Displacing the “I”: Uses of the First Person in Recent Argentine Biographical Documentaries

*Antonio Gómez*

In her book *Tiempo pasado: cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo, una discusión* (*Time Past: Culture of Memory and the Subjective Turn, a Discussion*, 2005), Argentine critic Beatriz Sarlo describes and censures the subjective turn in Argentine culture that followed the 1976–1983 dictatorship.<sup>1</sup> By “subjective turn,” she refers to the prominence that first-person accounts acquired in reconstructing both the private and public events of Argentina’s dramatic recent history.<sup>2</sup> Her main argument is that a first-person perspective became the dominant, almost exclusive tool for transmitting and understanding traumatic events. The voice of the “I,” in other words, came to be perceived as the only respectable authority for narrating history. Sarlo’s critique pits non-autobiographical literature and good academic history, on the one hand, against memory narratives, and on the other, establishes a hierarchy that differentiates legitimate iterations of first-person discourse from an abusive dependence on personal experience as the primary modality for narrating the past. Her controversial

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proposal has been widely discussed and critiqued as both an expression of the emergence of a neoconservative agenda in Latin American cultural studies<sup>3</sup> and a symptom of the exhaustion of an interpretative framework that for so many years privileged testimonial narratives as the postdictatorial genre par excellence.<sup>4</sup>

Toward the end of *Tiempo pasado*, Sarlo turns her attention to documentary film to exemplify the pitfalls of a pervasive first-person perspective. She presents Albertina Carri's (1973–) *Los rubios* (*The Blonds*, 2003), arguably the most debated Argentine film of the last couple of decades, as “a film about identity”<sup>5</sup> that “brings together all the topics that arise from a child’s postmemory of her murdered parents.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, she sees *Los rubios* as a conventional cultural product that merely responds to the particular *Zeitgeist* of the postdictatorship years—years clearly dominated by an imperative to remember. Although Sarlo fails to detect how Carri’s documentary parodies conventional postdictatorial memory films—which by 2003 had already become something of a dated genre—it is nevertheless significant that the discussion of culture in the 2000s places documentary production squarely at the center, especially considering that documentary film had been widely ignored for years, trumped in status by literature, narrative feature films, and testimonio.

Documentary film is, in fact, one of the genres in Latin American cultural production that has most decisively impacted and shaped the recent shift toward the first person. In the last three decades, the number of documentaries uttered from a personal, intimate, or private perspective has increased to such a degree that the “personal documentary” now constitutes a prominent subgenre unto itself. Pablo Piedras’s monograph *El cine documental en primera persona* (*First-Person Documentary Cinema*, 2014), as well as a veritable profusion of studies about specific films and directors, provide evidence of this seismic shift toward the first person.<sup>7</sup> Of course, this shift is not patently Latin American in nature and most certainly participates in a more general tendency that prevails in global documentary production.<sup>8</sup> However, I want to argue that the Latin American “subjective turn” in documentary film responds to a different set of historical motivations and has resulted in new ways of representing the “I” as it relates to film and history.

Alejandro Agresti’s (1961–) *El amor es una mujer gorda* (*Love Is a Fat Woman*, 1987) tells the story of a cultural reporter for a Buenos Aires newspaper who loses his job because he refuses to praise the shooting of an American-made documentary about the socioeconomic crisis in postdictatorship Argentina. When arguing with his editor, the reporter



claims: "Look what jackasses we must be if all that's left for us to do is make silly little movies (*peliculitas*) about the topic." Interestingly, this phrase, uttered in a 1987 film, is an intuitive harbinger of what would happen in the field of Argentine documentary in the following decades. The "topic" to which the reporter refers is that of the effects of state terrorism on public life in Argentina, a theme that has dominated much of the country's cultural production since the 1980s; "*peliculitas*," by extension, connotes a second-tier category of naïve, well-intentioned films that fall short of providing a satisfactory treatment of the "topic." The notion of making "silly little movies" about the current situation as the only thing "left for us to do" is an indication of both the dissolution of politics as a viable alternative and of representation's hegemony as the most frequent vehicle for public intervention. The reporter's further characterization of the citizenry or collectivity as "jackasses" is also a clear sign of a national (or generational) identity crisis.<sup>9</sup>

The "topic's" recurrence in the Argentine cinema of recent decades reveals a link between newer documentary films and documentary production prior to the 1980s, which was eminently preoccupied, too, with representing social issues and political history. In this sense, it is easier to trace and describe a national tradition in documentary film—a tradition that spans from the global discourse of Third Cinema in the 1960s to more recent films that treat political, social, and economic realities—than it is to identify a similar trajectory in fictional feature film. *El amor es una mujer gorda* recognizes this tradition, but at the same time serves as a pivot point that demarcates a key rhetorical shift: it is, we might say, the last occurrence of a first-person plural "we." From then on, the first-person singular "I" will dominate the rhetorical articulation of Argentine documentary.

More importantly, however, the sentence I have cited from Agresti's film also calls into question the authority filmmakers have (or do not have) to speak about the "topic": by proposing that there are two classes of films that deal with state terrorism and its effects ("*peliculitas*" versus their opposite), it also suggests that some filmmakers have the authority to address the topic while some do not. To make a film that is neither naïve nor biased implies a historical consciousness that finds its legitimacy in "experience." Yet suggesting that only a discourse rooted in "experience" can adequately address the complex problems of the day comes dangerously close to the logic of testimonial narrative.

In this chapter, I will not address the construction of first-person enunciation from the standpoint of the bourgeois "I" that lies at the heart of

autobiography. I will focus instead on a first-person subject that emerges out of the specific history of Latin American culture and politics. On the one hand, I am interested in the shift from the first-person plural that organized political documentaries in the 1960s and 1970s to the first-person singular that has now become the norm in new documentary production<sup>10</sup>; on the other hand, I am interested in the rise, since the 1980s, of the prominent rhetoric and politics of testimonio and its foregrounding of a new, subaltern “I.” While these iterations of the first person have clearly dominated the region’s cultural agenda and production, I want to chart the emergence of another kind of first-person perspective that does not participate in John Beverley’s definition of testimonio as “an affirmation of the individual subject [...] in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the films I prefer to study displace the “I,” decentering it so as to focus attention not on the subject of representation, which is customary in autobiographical narratives, but on the object of representation. The “I” is therefore deflated to emphasize an “I” who *does not* tell his own story and tells, instead, the story of a historical subject who *cannot* tell his own story.

To describe this shift, I will bracket the most emblematic examples of Argentine subjective documentaries of the last few years—*Los rubios*, by Albertina Carri; *Yo no sé qué me han hecho tus ojos* (*I Don’t Know What Your Eyes Have Done to Me*, 2003), by Lorena Muñoz (1972–) and Sergio Wolf (1963–); *M* (2007), by Nicolás Prividera (1970–); or *Fotografías* (*Photographs*, 2007), by Andrés di Tella (1958–), to name just a few examples of films that have been widely analyzed and critiqued—because all of these privilege the protagonist-“I” as the primary structuring mechanism. Instead, I will turn to films that construct a slightly different “I,” one that is technically and rhetorically linked to the experience and position of the *witness* as opposed to the *protagonist*. The purpose of my inquiry will be to discern whether this “I”-witness—displaced from the center of diegesis yet integral to the narrative’s construction—competes against the more commonplace, centralized “I” that organizes films like *Los rubios*, or if, instead, it is an indication of the normalization of the first-person perspective as the only valid point of view for structuring documentary film.

I will focus on two Argentine documentary films articulated from the perspective of this lateral “I.” These films find their material basis in home video footage that bears witness to an otherwise undocumented, unarchived history of Argentine popular culture in the 1980s: first, the rise and fall of Luca Prodan, an iconic figure in the renovation of rock music,

as portrayed in Rodrigo Espina's (1957–) film *Luca* (2008); second, clown, actor, and drag performer Batato Barea's renewal of underground theater and performance in Buenos Aires, as portrayed in Goyo Anchou (1973–) and Peter Pank's *La peli de Batato* (*Batato's Movie*, 2011). These two films are part of a significant corpus of biographical documentaries produced during the last couple of decades. They represent an emerging interest in the history of the 1980s and are noteworthy because they commingle a biographical perspective with attention to a historical period different from the overanalyzed years of dictatorship and resistance. This shift in focus may be the ideal circumstance in which to observe the rise of a decentered "I" that can serve as an alternative to the self-absorbed first-person narrators who have typically relayed to us the traumatic events of the 1970s.

### COMPETING FIRST PERSONS

*La peli de Batato* (2011), co-directed by Goyo Anchou and Peter Pank, centers around the now quasi-mythical figure of underground actor Batato Barea (Salvador Walter Barea, 1961–1991), one of the first AIDS victims in Argentine show business who became a 1980s countercultural icon, especially after his untimely death at the age of thirty.<sup>12</sup> The film tells the not uncommon story of a small-town gay boy who moves to the big city, where he lives the promiscuous life of a hustler and starts a career performing in alternative underground shows after attending a workshop on clown acting techniques. He quickly gains notoriety in the Buenos Aires of the post-1983 transition to democracy, a historical juncture characterized by the avid consumption of unconventional cultural products that were generally censored during the repressive dictatorship years.

Barea established a couple of troupes (El Clú del Cláun and Los Peinados Yoli) that performed regularly in the Parakultural Theater, epicenter of the 1980s underground scene in Buenos Aires. He later achieved a level of popularity that allowed him to present a show on Avenida Corrientes (the primary location for mainstream performing arts in the city), tour nearby locations (such as Uruguay), and appear as a guest on prime time television. His death came at the moment when he was just achieving fame; consequently, there is very little audiovisual record of his work. This is one of the reasons why the film's reconstruction of Barea's trajectory relies decisively on a first-person perspective: It is only possible to narrate Barea's story twenty years after his death thanks to a long interview he

gave to Peter Pank in 1990 as part of one of Pank's film school projects. The interview constitutes the core of the film's archival material, along with some informal video recordings of Barea's shows and some clips from his television appearances. There are no official recordings or publications of Barea's work.

The directors combine these artisanal archival materials with a number of present-day interviews with Barea's friends, family, co-workers, and people who were close to him, as well as with footage that chronicles the process of researching the film. The visual focus of this second set of materials is not Barea himself, but Pank, the interviewer-turned-co-director who sat down with Barea in 1990. By juxtaposing a plurality of voices and discursive registers to illustrate Barea's life, the film takes on a polyphonic form that is consciously and literally echoed on screen using techniques such as fragmenting the frame, multiplying speakers on screen, and overlapping two or more distinct soundtracks. However, two voices dominate the narrative: Barea's (in the 1990 interview and in his performances) and Pank's. Each of those voices emanates from a specific moment in history, the 1980s up to the 1990s in Barea's case, and 2009 in the case of Pank. The two voices are also associated with different relative times: Barea's is situated in his historical present while Pank's is articulated always in relation to the past. In that regard, Pank's voice takes on a nostalgic tone.

These temporal dynamics come to the fore in a sequence that begins with a segment of the 1990 footage in which Barea gets dressed, exits his house, stops a bus on the street, and jumps onto it. That segment immediately cuts to a shot taken inside the bus that shows not Barea, as we might expect, but Pank climbing up the steps to pay the fare. Significantly, the viewer bears witness to Pank's performance of his nostalgia for Barea. Even though Pank's and Barea's voices theoretically collaborate with one another throughout the film, in effect they end up competing to be the film's main protagonist.

In *La peli de Batato*, therefore, a battle ensues to construct a subject of enunciation.<sup>13</sup> We might call it a battle between restoring a lost object (in Pank's case) and self-expression as a subject (in Barea's case). Barea's presence in the film alternates between his position as the voice of a subject who can tell his own story and that of an object of inquiry and investigation, an object that can only take shape through others' voices. Barea's personal trajectory as an underground artist partially informs his status as object, since underground art is, de facto, defined by its "undiscovered," secret nature.<sup>14</sup> His absence from the public eye makes him something of

a myth, a mystery, and this, in turn, triggers the dynamics of witnessing: Because there is no official record of underground performing arts, their existence can only be corroborated through the accounts of witnesses who were present when the original events took place. The witness' act of seeing and their capacity to tell what they saw construct the artist just like the secret nature of the artistic act constructs the viewer. The film presents Pank's interview with Barea, rescued from the archive, as a vehicle for the dead actor's salvation, an inventive act that is perhaps the only way to subvert Barea's absence.

In *La peli de Batato*, therefore, the witnessing "I" becomes integral and functional to the writing of history. Barea's story could not be told without the intervention of the first-person subject (Pank) who recorded his existence twenty years earlier and later cobbled together the many pieces of what constitutes today's version of Batato Barea—clearly more of a mythical figure than a historical reality by 2011, the year of the film's release. Visually, Pank's first-person account assumes the form of a gaze: we see his camera observing and recording Barea. The indexical nature of the photographic image—even if only vicariously present, since the interview was originally registered in video home system (VHS), whereas the film is in digital format—thus becomes crucial to the process of registering history. Clearly, Pank's first-person perspective and narrative voice make him a witness. But Pank does not want to relinquish his ability to be defined as a reflexive subject as well. As he narrates Barea's life and art, he simultaneously narrates his own function in preserving that life and that art.

In this sense, the film's perspective is not so much "testimonial" as it is "egotistical." Even though admiration and affection drive Pank's efforts to recover Batato Barea's life and accomplishments, Barea's prominence and identity are blurred by Pank's imposed presence as a subject of enunciation. Ideally, the film seems to want to articulate multiple versions of Barea as pieces that will congeal in a totalizing, truthful, and genuine image of the performance artist. Yet Pank's strong-willed "I" casts its shadow over the film's expressed aim and imposes itself not only over the many voices congregated, but also over Barea's "I." Pank's gaze, then, clearly dominates the film: he appears on screen as a "character," conducts interviews on camera, acts as the film's narrator, and has a historical connection to the object of inquiry (Barea). And although it is necessary and possible to talk about another gaze—I am referring to co-director Goyo Anchou's overarching gaze that orchestrates the interplay between Barea and Pank—it is also undeniable that Pank's egocentrism overtakes

the project as a whole, overshadowing the voices of both its object and its co-director.

One of the film's final sequences, which attempts to link Barea's legacy to LGBT activism in Argentina in 2011, illustrates this egocentrism. The sequence incorporates a clip from Pank's 1990 interview in which Barea reluctantly reflects on the existence of an LGBT collective in 1980s Argentina. Barea is pessimistic. He does not feel that a consolidated LGBT movement exists. Nevertheless, his opinion is purposefully misrepresented in the film to very particular ends: Pank wants to confirm the existence of a past LGBT movement so as to signal a forerunner to present-day LGBT struggles. Pank's interviewing strategy is consequently coercive as he tries to articulate a "we" perspective that Barea resists by repeatedly stressing his individual involvement: "Nobody moved like I did," Barea says. But the film twists these unapologetic first-person statements around to propose, via different formal strategies, a hagiographic image of Barea as a prophet and hero who anticipated the recent equal rights milestones that Argentina's LGBT community had achieved by 2011.<sup>15</sup> The subject and context of enunciation, therefore, abuse the object and its time, imposing a clear "I" (that of the directors) onto what at first glance looks like an attempt to rearticulate a "we." Ironically, at the end of the film, a quotation by Barea from a television show sheds light on the dynamics of enunciation at work in *La peli de Batato*: "La vaca no da la leche, se la quitan" ("Cows don't give milk, it's taken from them"). This sentence, which Barea utters to reflect on the violence of extractive economies and of life itself, perfectly describes the process to which he is subjected throughout the film.

### THE FIRST PERSON FADES OUT

Like in *La peli de Batato*, the focus of Rodrigo Espina's *Luca* (2007) is also biographical. The film narrates the life of Italo-Argentine punk rock star Luca Prodan (1953–1987), who is portrayed as a musical innovator and rebel. The story not only focuses on Prodan's life as an artist in 1980s Argentina, but also tries to be comprehensive and tackle the urban legend of Prodan's life as an *enfant terrible*: a heroin addict who took refuge in a country without a market for heroin in the early 1980s, formed the legendary band Sumo, changed the history of Argentine rock music, became an alcoholic, and died of cirrhosis at the age of thirty-four. Espina's documentary retells this story and sheds light on Prodan's origins, his life in Europe, his displacement to Argentina, and his work as a musician.

Similar to *La peli de Batato*, *Luca* is a film spun from a paucity of archival material. Because Prodan died at a very early stage in his career and never made it out of the underground scene, there is very little existing footage of his concerts, tours, or interviews. Most recordings of Sumo's music available today have a nonprofessional quality typical of any fledgling band's formative years. Moreover, Prodan died before Sumo ever reached its pinnacle of success. Consequently, the "retro" quality of the materials the film uses gives it a rare auratic quality as a document of the real. Luca's voice speaking a mix of English, Italian, and Spanish onto cassette recordings sent as audio letters to his family in Europe, footage of rehearsals, backstage footage from a concert, and a few intimate moments in unidentified locations reveal previously unknown facets of this quasi-mythical character. Indeed, to those who never saw Prodan perform, he was only known by his music and a handful of iconic photographs endlessly reproduced on posters, on T-shirts, and in street graffiti.

The film teaches us that Luca Prodan, of Italian and Scottish origin, was raised in Italy as part of an affluent family and received an elite education in exclusive English boarding schools. He lived in London during his punk rock years, and it was there that he became an addict. After several overdoses and conflicts with European authorities, he moved to the farm of an old Anglo-Argentine friend and classmate, in the province of Córdoba, where he recovered from his heroin addiction and started working on his music. He would later relocate to the suburbs of Buenos Aires, where he would found and lead Sumo, the band that introduced reggae and punk to the Argentine scene. The film recreates the atmosphere of underground culture in the 1980s and ends with a narration of Luca's death in 1987 and its aftermath.

The film contains multiple present-day interviews with an array of characters related to Prodan, some of them familiar to connoisseurs of his life and work, but many others totally unknown to the Argentine public: his mother, sister, and brother; friends from childhood and adolescence in Great Britain and Italy; members of Sumo (including English drummer Natalie Nuttall, from Sumo's first incarnation); girlfriends, and so on. These interviews are combined with the previously unreleased footage and sound recordings. The inclusion of these materials is what makes *Luca* unique and gives the film the authority of a document: it offers evidence of Prodan's existence before he became an iconic figure and of Sumo's activity before it turned into a cult band.

The historical documents that the film collects clearly establish Espina, the director, as a compiler and subject of enunciation. He is the one who once documented private or semi-public moments that could later be used to articulate a history, the story of a life. The view of the documentarian is therefore *a priori* to the documentary project: Espina is the witness who was there when history was taking place and his role was quite similar to the “fly on the wall” positionality that, decades earlier, constituted the style and function of Direct Cinema.

But Espina’s real-life, first-person perspective does not automatically yield a first-person narrative. The director, in other words, is a first-person observer, a witness, but he is not a first-person narrator. This may be because the film’s purpose is mainly historical, which in turn causes the director to gravitate naturally toward a more detached enunciative position. At its core, the film wants, above all, to situate Luca in a context, to affirm his role in a particularly crucial period of Argentine rock and pop music, and to understand the main character’s historical dimensions beyond the simplified versions offered by biopics such as “El caso Luca Prodan” (The Case of Luca Prodan), an episode of the 1990s TV show *Sin condena* (*No Sentence*), and the 2002 feature film *Luca vive* (*Luca Lives*), directed by Jorge Coscia (1952–).

In *Luca*, the technological starting point is similar to that used in *La peli de Batato*: in both cases, old VHS footage shot while the subjects were alive creates the conditions of possibility for a present-day documentary. Both films, too, emphasize the role of the witness and the notion of underground culture. What sets *Luca* apart, however, is that it articulates its first-person perspective nonverbally. Although we cannot deny that the film includes a very personal narrative of events and characters that draws on the director’s autobiographical connection to the materials, it is striking that there is no material “I.” As in the case of Goyo Anchou and Peter Pank’s construction of Batato Barea, Espina’s enunciation is pivotal throughout *Luca*, but it only materializes as a gaze. Rodrigo Espina adopts the position of the witness when he tells Prodan’s story, but he relies exclusively on visual and technological means to do it. He rejects any verbal articulation of his experience. As a result, even though his narrative partially echoes the testimonial paradigm, it also reconceptualizes it by avoiding linguistic representation. The now-canonical definition of testimonio that John Beverley offered in 1989 to describe *written* testimonial narratives—“by testimonio I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (i.e. printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the



first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience”—breaks down here.<sup>16</sup> Although Beverley’s definition of *testimonio* describes, in large measure, what *Luca* does, the first person does not transmit linguistically but through a different medium. The witness’s gaze becomes the expression of a subject who is not preoccupied primarily with self-articulation, but rather of another subject whose existence, he knows, is nevertheless always already dependent on his particular narrative.

The displacement of the director’s “I” consequently gives way to the inclusion of a host of other voices that allow him to construct the version of his protagonist that he desires. At first, in keeping with urban legends surrounding the rock star, Espina opts to narrate Prodan’s relocation to Argentina in a salvific key. Argentina’s “marginal” position within the global market (as a place not yet reached in the 1980s by heroin trafficking) makes it the perfect staging ground for rescuing the musician from his addictions.

Yet the voices that later speak about Prodan break with urban legends and generate a vision of him that is far more layered and nuanced. For example, in an effort to cast Prodan as a diasporic subject, Espina makes a concerted effort to trace the complex history of his and his family’s multiple displacements. We learn from his mother that before Luca’s birth, the family, of mixed European origin, had been in China during the Japanese invasion and was confined in a concentration camp until the end of World War II, when they were authorized to relocate to Europe. From other interviewees, we learn about several locations where the family lived in Italy; about Luca’s internment in a Scottish boarding school at his father’s behest; about his escape from school and his wanderings through London, Europe, and back to Italy; and about a frenzy of addiction and other illegal activities that pushed him to the brink of death. Accepting a former classmate’s invitation to relocate to South America becomes his only way out. Once in Argentina, Prodan’s penetration of the artistic scene in the post-colonial metropolis (mainly as a consumer of emerging trends in popular music) becomes the cultural capital that distinguishes him and eventually incorporates him into a long line of European expatriates who became prominent public figures in Argentine culture: those who introduced novelties from the world’s metropolises and became arbiters in local culture, in the tradition of Paul Groussac and Witold Gombrowicz. As the film narrates Prodan’s contributions to renewing Argentine rock music (i.e.

how he imported reggae and punk from London), the story brings into relief the marginal rock star's progressive move toward the center, as if he were gradually conquering the Argentine capital. We follow him from his first few months on an estate in Córdoba to his relocation to the *porteño* suburb of Hurlingham, and finally to his triumphant entry into the key spaces of underground art and counterculture in Buenos Aires: the Parakultural Theater, emblematic nightclubs like Cemento, and finally, the iconic Obras Sanitarias stadium. In short, through multiple juxtaposed voices, the film explains how Luca's emergence as a public historical figure resulted from a series of confluences among multiple cultural spaces and multiple histories. As the one who orchestrates the polyphony of voices we hear, Espina functions as the subject-witness behind the narrative. He constructs a specific version of Prodan and produces the materials that serve as proof of the story he wants to tell.

Given that there is no narrator in the film, Prodan's death is told without words through the visual metaphor of a dimming light bulb that finally fades out. This image is followed by words on a black screen: "Luca died smiling in the wee hours of Tuesday, December 22, 1987," a statement that parallels another made at the beginning of the film ("Luca George Prodan was born in Rome in the wee hours of May 17, 1953"). These statements, plus the opening comment that "Luca's voice is taken from audio letters on cassette to his family and from various interviews," are the only linguistic traces of enunciation behind the whole film. They are traces, but they do not coalesce into the figure of a narrator.

In *Luca*, as in many other documentaries, enunciation is thoroughly visual. But what makes Espina's act of witnessing unique is that it spans several decades. The light bulb sequence is a good example of the filmmaker's will to make visible the perspective that underlies the cinematic gaze. It opens with a shot of an old house in a popular Buenos Aires neighborhood, Montserrat, the place where Prodan was found dead in 1987. The camera displays the inscriptions and graffiti on a wooden double door that opens to a *zaguán*, a typical hallway found in old, urban houses in Argentina: "Luca lives," "Luca is not dead," "Luca is a hero." This was obviously shot in the present of 2007, when the house where Luca died is already a *lieu de mémoire*, a site for remembrance. The image of the door is then followed by a long segment in which we see Prodan singing playfully, telling jokes, and hanging out with other members of the band in that same house. Then, after one of the few close-ups of his face, the sequence brings us back to the present: the camera shows the empty house, in very

poor condition, almost in ruins, and finishes by focusing on the light bulb in a room that we are invited to assume is the one in which Prodan died. The film thus presents us with the historical continuity of the "I"-witness, the subject who was present through time to view and record history, to constitute the historical existence of the object through the act of seeing. This functions in the text as a manifestation of the first person, even if it is never articulated as an "I."

### A FINAL REFLECTION

The films I have discussed here are a good example of an effort to transcend the hegemony of the "I" in recent Argentine documentary, but to do it without abandoning a first-person perspective. The biographical foundations that undergird *La peli de Batato* and *Luca* push these films' directors toward a first-person perspective, even if they try to resist it and would seemingly feel more at ease with the conventional objectivity of impersonal narrative. Yet when it comes to registering the life and work of Batato Barea and Luca Prodan, a paltry archive turns the directors into privileged witnesses to history; their intimate connections to their characters, too, give rise to a personal tone. On some level, then, the "I" is unavoidable. As a consciousness that pieces together a fragmented past, the first person remains present, though modified.

Although each film approaches its task differently, both wind up offering a renewed construction of the first person, one that responds to the *esprit du temps* in acknowledging the role that the personal always plays in narrating history, while simultaneously critiquing the normalization of the first-person format by destabilizing the certainties that act as its substrate. The fact that these films are about 1980s popular culture instead of the 1976–1983 dictatorship and its aftermath makes it possible to think of a transition in Argentine documentary toward a peripheral "I" who is invested in recentering the other and in rescuing certain countercultural figures whom the archive has displaced (or misplaced).

Though both films achieve comparable results, *La peli de Batato* better illustrates the impulse of defacing the "I" through the silent confrontation it stages between the two voices that collaborate as co-directors. While Anchou does not resort to the first-person, Pank assumes the role of on-screen narrator. As a key character in the film, he casts a shadow over its object. In this sense, *La peli de Batato* still preserves some of the prominence of the individualistic, historic "I." In contrast, *Luca* accomplishes

a more radical erasure of the “I” by avoiding any linguistic utterance by a first-person. The “I” is still present and essential to the narrative, to the act of seeing and witnessing history, but significantly, he does not speak.

## NOTES

1. Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado: cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo, una discusión* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2005). I would like to thank Dale Shuger for her invaluable help in reviewing a previous version of this text and for her assistance in translating quotes from the original Spanish.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Spanish are mine.
3. John Beverley, “The Neoconservative Turn in Latin American Literary and Cultural Criticism,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2008): 65–83. Beverley sees Sarlo’s book as part of an emerging neoconservative tendency in Latin American cultural criticism. Particularly representative of this tendency is her defense of the republican-civic function of traditional intellectuals and of academic disciplines, the canon, and literature itself, which are, in reality, manifestations of what he calls a “criollo subjectivity,” that is, a resistance to the advent of new social actors and agendas in the cultural and political debate.
4. Verónica Garibotto, “Temporalidad e historia: hacia una reformulación del marco interpretativo del testimonio posdictatorial,” *Chasqui: revista de literatura latinoamericana* 39, no. 2 (November 2010): 99–114. This article offers a detailed analysis of the reception of and debates around Sarlo’s book.
5. Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado*, 149.
6. *Ibid.*, 146.
7. Pablo Piedras, *El cine documental en primera persona* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2014).
8. See Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (London: Routledge, 2006) and Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
9. *El amor es una mujer gorda* (and subsequent films by Agresti) is one of the best cinematic representations of the 1990s generation’s mistrust of politics. The 1990s generation came of age after the early 1970s period of utopian militancy and after the dictatorship of 1976–1983. Skeptical of politics, this same generation witnessed the re-emergence of politics in the wake of the 2001 economic crisis.
10. For this discussion, see my “First-Person Documentary and the New Political Subject: Enunciation, Recent History, and the Present in New Argentine Cinema,” in *New Documentaries in Latin America*, eds., Vinicius Navarro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 45–58.

11. John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 41.
12. About Argentine theatre in the 1980s, see the special issue of *Latin American Theatre Review* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1991), edited by Osvaldo Pelletieri. About Barea’s life, see Fernando Noy, *Te lo juro por Batato: biografía oral de Batato Barea* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2001).
13. Semiotic paradigms for studying and describing film were widely discussed in the 1970s and 1980s and then fell into disuse. Because the notion of a “subject of enunciation” is key to my argumentation, I use it fully aware of its risks and connotations. About the debate around semiotics and film theory, see Bart Tesla, “Film Theory and Enunciation,” *The Semiotic Review of Books* 12, no. 3 (2002): 7–18.
14. Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 117. Thornton speaks of the “underground” as a self-imposed denomination for subcultures, defined “against the mass media” by some degree of public invisibility.
15. Among these milestones are the Equal Marriage Act (2010), which allows same-sex marriages, and the Gender Identity Act (2012), which permits people to officially register with the name and gender with which they self-identify, regardless of biological determinants.
16. Beverley, *Testimonio*, 30–31.

## The “Mobility Turn” in Contemporary Latin American First-Person Documentary

*Pablo Piedras*

Mobility and displacement are core aspects of documentary filmmaking.<sup>1</sup> These concepts invite reflection on a host of issues ranging from the mechanics of how images are captured on film, to the ways in which filmmakers engage other realities, to the representation of people in transit, whether they are migrants, exiles, or travelers in search of family or cultural origins. John Grierson (1898-1972) once suggested that travelogues—eminently Western narratives that explore other cultures and shape our vision of them—might be considered the first chapter in the history of documentary cinema.<sup>2</sup> In our current audiovisual era, a century after the first travelogues appeared, there has been a veritable explosion of nonfiction films featuring journeys, displacements, and mobility of different sorts. Consequently, mobility has become not only a preferred topic, but also a device part in parcel with documentary filmmaking’s regimes of visuality.

This chapter focuses on films that feature directors who move from place to place. In their films, displacement has myriad ramifications: it determines how directors represent the historical world, how they ask certain cultural or political questions, and how they relate to different social actors. Broadly speaking, mobility, as theme and device, manifests richly in an extensive body of Latin American documentaries produced

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over the last few years. In fact, its presence is so pervasive that it seems possible to talk about a “mobility turn.” In the following pages, I will attempt to define, historicize, and problematize this turn.

Certain questions give rise to my reflection: How might we understand mobility’s historical trajectory in the Latin American documentary tradition? How might that trajectory interface with known modes of documentary representation? Furthermore, what motivations and objectives compel contemporary filmmakers to increasingly capture their own physical and spatial movements? And what kinds of questions about identity or culture can filmmakers ask by abandoning their places of origin to film in other lands?

### TOWARD A PERIODIZATION OF MOBILITY IN LATIN AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY FILM

To begin, I would like to propose—provisionally—four stages in the history of Latin American documentary filmmaking that allow us to chart development with respect to directors, how they move, and the types of documentary representations they create.

As I mentioned before, during the silent period and the initial years of sound film, we find a number of travelogues by foreigners or recently arrived immigrants who describe their encounters with Latin America. Andrea Cuarterolo points out that these films, which are generally articulated in an expository or argumentative mode, seek to immerse spectators in the clash between civilization (embodied by the white explorer) and barbarism (represented by indomitable, uncharted lands or the “primitive” peoples who inhabit them).<sup>3</sup> In this first stage, an exoticizing or romanticized gaze prevails, as does a cult-like fetish for machines and new modes of transportation that symbolize modernity. Filmmakers’ relationships to their objects of study lack permeability; instead, very much in keeping with traditional, colonialist anthropology, audiovisual discourse about the “real” tends simply to confirm preconceived, positivist notions. In other words, early on, displacement serves documentary filmmakers as a vantage point from which to dissect the cultural “other” (the foreigner, the primitive, and the acultural) with the goal of legitimating and constructing the “self” as civilized, Western, and modern.

The second stage comprises the work of those whom María Luisa Ortega calls “traveler-documentarians.”<sup>4</sup> Mindful that the Latin American documentary tradition took shape in dialogue with the work of foreign filmmakers, Ortega scrutinizes a corpus of films shot between the 1930s

and 1960s that became touchstones (or even generated informal "schools" of thought) and influenced Latin American political and social documentary practices.<sup>5</sup> She mentions three types of Latin American travel films from that period: ethnographic films that portray nature and the region's peoples; films whose content is primarily political or social; and documentaries about the "mediatic" aspects of Latin American culture, like images or music. These three variants share in common the filmmaker's growing propensity to find greater complexity in the "objects" he or she represents. In contrast to travelogue films, these generally alternative, noncommercial productions attempt to treat reality poetically and generate dialogue with it. We might say, then, that displacement, in this second stage, leads to deeper and more open dialogue between filmmakers and their objects/subjects of representation.

The third stage corresponds to the years of exile: the period in the 1970s and 1980s in which many filmmakers chose or were forced to flee their countries for social, economic, or political reasons. Uprooted filmmakers made movies that explored the relationships among territory, culture, and identity. Sometimes these films originated outside the home country; other times they were born back at home upon the filmmaker's return from exile. Hamid Naficy notes that exiled filmmakers speak in an "accent" generated by cultural rifts or feelings of estrangement that make it difficult for them to express a social world in which they never feel totally at home. At the same time, however, Naficy adds that "access to multiple channels ... and types of local and transnational media and the displacement of an unprecedented number of people [challenge] our received notions of national culture and identity, national cinema and genre, authorial vision and style, and film reception and ethnography."<sup>6</sup> Another significant feature of these films is the central role that the authorial "I" plays in them. This "I" manifests in several ways: through the voice in off, through the exposure of the director's body (or that of an intermediary), or through words written on screen. In short, the years of exile give birth to an explosion in first-person documentary triggered by estrangement or territorial displacement.

As I have argued elsewhere, exile films can be understood as immediate precursors to the more recent, first-person documentaries that have fueled the aesthetic, cultural, and political renewal of Latin American documentary filmmaking in the new millennium.<sup>7</sup> Thinking about this renewal in global terms, Michael Renov confirms that the first European and US autobiographical documentaries were also by filmmakers attempting to



examine their identities as exiles or immigrants. Renov further argues that the idea of displacement offers a starting point for exploring the distances that mediate between the self and the other—an other to whom the self, at least at first glance, has no direct linkage.<sup>8</sup>

The fourth and final stage erupts in the mid-1990s. Around that time, a series of political, cultural, aesthetic, and technological transformations impact the field of Latin American documentary film. Documentarians grow tired of interview-style films (like many of the films made about the Southern Cone dictatorships) based mainly on testimonial sources. The state weakens and neoliberal economic policy intensifies. In this context, totalizing discourses about the past, without disappearing completely, give way to subjective narratives. These narratives engage in a brand of historical revisionism that privileges affect and personal experience as lenses through which to settle unresolved debts with history. Also during the 1990s, digital technologies become more widespread. Cameras become lighter and smaller, making it possible to mount them to moving objects, transport them easily, and film in environments that would have once been considered inhospitable.

If we think about “performative”<sup>9</sup> or “subjective”<sup>10</sup> documentaries, it becomes clear that mobility and displacement serve as narrative structuring mechanisms in many films of this type—among them the late-1970s and 1980s films on exile and migration that I just mentioned.<sup>11</sup> Yet mobility—cultural, social, and political—can be found in a range of documentaries that date from a decade earlier, particularly films on identity and memory. Following a period of “visual sedentariness” in the 1980s and 1990s—decades in which many films were discursively configured based mainly on interviews and archival material—documentaries of the new millennium incorporate mobility in various ways: through handheld camera tours of memory sites; lengthy travelling shots that use cameras mounted to buses, trains, or even airplanes; and long camera shots of photo albums, and so on.

Many recent films emphasize mobility: *El círculo* (*The Circle*, Aldo Garay [1969–] and José Pedro Charlo [1953–], 2008); *Pulqui: un instante en la patria de la felicidad* (*Pulqui: A Moment in the Native Land of Happiness*, Alejandro Fernández Mouján [1952–], 2007); *Los que se quedan* (*Those Who Remain*, Carlos Hagerman [1966–] and Juan Carlos Rulfo [1964–], 2008); *Querida Mara: cartas de un viaje por la Patagonia* (*Dear Mara: Letters from a Patagonia Trip*, Carlos Echeverría [1958–], 2009); and *Pachamama* (Eryk Rocha [1978–], 2008), to cite just a few. Nevertheless,

the mobility turn’s epicenter can be located in first-person productions by filmmakers who structure their cinematic inquiry as a search: for example, *Papa Iván* (*My Father, Iván*, María Inés Roqué [1968–], 2000); *Um passaporte húngaro* (*A Hungarian Passport*, Sandra Kogut [1965–], 2001); *33* (Kiko Goifman [1968–], 2002); *Por la vuelta* (*To the Return*, Christian Pauls [1957–], 2002); *Fotografías* (*Photographs*, Andrés Di Tella [1958–], 2007); *Secretos de lucha* (*Secrets of the Struggle*, Maiana Bidegain [1977–], 2007); *Familia tipo* (*Typical Family*, Cecilia Priego [1971–], 2009); and *La chica del sur* (*The Girl from the South*, José Luis García [1965–], 2012).<sup>12</sup>

Critics like Bill Nichols and others have analyzed documentary as a “discourse of sobriety”<sup>13</sup> among those of the social and humanistic sciences.<sup>14</sup> Paralleling epistemic developments within these fields, audiovisual nonfiction experienced a “linguistic turn” in the 1960s and 1970s whose main characteristic was the resurgence of reflexivity. After that, the 1980s and 1990s brought a “subjective turn,” which was marked by a proliferation of first-person, autobiographical pieces.<sup>15</sup> The current mobility turn builds on and follows from this logic.<sup>16</sup> As Mimi Sheller and John Urry have argued, the concept of mobility encapsulates myriad systems of sociability and exchange that exist in our globalized, interconnected world.<sup>17</sup> Linkages among subjects and specific territories or nations have weakened—or, at the very least, technology and culture mediate and complicate them. In this vein, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim write about new forms of socialization and remind us that in certain instances, the configuration of families is no longer local, but global in scope.<sup>18</sup> The concept of the “global screen,” coined by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, also gets us thinking about the proliferation of images and about the constant connectedness that mobility generates in today’s world.<sup>19</sup>

Documentaries like *Familia tipo* and *La chica del sur* clearly illustrate the mobility turn. These films’ directors work beyond national and territorial borders and use movement or displacement to make first-person inquiries into the foundations of identity (personal, political, and cultural).<sup>20</sup> They deploy cinematic devices that play with mobility both formally and conceptually: for example, intercultural dialogues among distant people, intercontinental travel, multiple takes from automobiles or other modes of transport, the comings and goings of characters, or the need to map one’s own identity by traveling to faraway lands that are both personally and culturally significant.

## MOBILE WOMEN

All the films within the mobility turn explore displacement in narrative, visual, and thematic terms, but several films stand out because they give agency to female protagonists who narrate personal stories or sometimes even public history. Examples include: María Inés Roqué's *Papá Iván*; Susana Barriga's (1981–) *The Illusion* (2008); Flavia Castro's (1965–) *Diário de uma busca* (*Diary of a Search*, 2010); María Paz González's (1981–) *Hija* (*Daughter*, 2011); María Clara Escobar's (1988–) *Os dias com ele* (*The Days with Him*, 2012); and Cecilia Priego's *Familia tipo* (2009). These autobiographical films all explore how parents influenced their children's fate by showing them little affection or by leaving gaps in the family story.<sup>21</sup> In an attempt to mitigate these debts, the films function as socio-aesthetic acts of reparation in which daughters tell their stories reflexively, in ways that empower them to question the facts. It is no accident, then, that the films contain father–daughter dialogues that upset asymmetrical power relations and intervene in public history (normally the domain of men) using sensibilities traditionally ascribed to the “feminine,” domestic sphere.

In the prologue to *Familia tipo*, Cecilia Priego explains the circumstances in which she produced her film. On a recent trip to Spain, she went to see family members and people her father knew. They gave her home movies, photographs, and letters from his youth. Upon seeing these materials, Priego comes to understand some of the decisions her father made during his lifetime. Ironically, the film's title leads us to believe that we are going to learn about a “typical” family, entirely ordinary and unexceptional. However, Priego soon discovers that there is an exception to every rule. Behind the veil of normalcy that the title announces, there lurks a hidden story of her father's other family—another wife and another daughter named Belén. In the film's opening minutes, the director's mother pithily summarizes how a whole generation relates to the secrets it harbors from its past: “There are things in life that can't or shouldn't be pieced together; [and] you [children] never understood that certain things existed, but they shouldn't bother you.” We might say that the whole film is constructed as a way of questioning of these two intimately related ideas.

The journey that *Familia tipo* records has two aspects: on the one hand, the director juxtaposes testimonies and family archival materials that appear out of sequence; on the other, her journey triggers memories based

on physical and sensorial contact with people, places, and objects from the past. The film's initial sequence establishes a ground zero for what is to come: the very first sound we hear is of an old-fashioned projector starting up; immediately thereafter, we see images taken from a domestic archive whose contents will fuel the narrative from that point forward. The prologue's intertitles, written in the first person, explain that these images actually come from sixteen-millimeter reels that her father's family recorded in 1948. By the end of the prologue, someone (probably Priego) hangs a string of photos from a balcony, as if they were clothes hung out to dry: a woman with a child; a recently married couple; a young woman's face; the same child again, but this time with a man; and another man carrying a child in his arms. All the photos are in black and white, except for the last one, the only one not shown in close-up: its color has faded; it shows a smiling little girl. The epilogue sequence returns to the same balcony. We are now able to confirm that the woman hanging the photographs was Cecilia Priego and the little girl her daughter. The film's trajectory allows us to learn some things about the people and events pictured. The prologue and epilogue therefore function as mirror sequences that permit us to read the film holistically as an actualization of the family photo album. However, it is only in these bookended sequences that the photographs appear orderly and clear. In the interim, the director subjects her archival materials to a battery of operations whose goal is to denaturalize them, problematize their referents, or make them say something altogether different.

*Familia tipo* presents an ambivalent and complex view of the ways in which images act as bridges to the past. At every turn, the film questions the consensual meanings and dominant narratives that family lore legitimates. Yet instead of claiming it is impossible for photographs and home movies to grant access to the past, Priego chooses to intervene the images she presents to show that "in spite of all," they do play a role in recreating the traumatic scenes of family history.<sup>22</sup>

Priego's documentary is a palimpsest of images and sounds that are layered, superimposed, overprinted, or folded onto one another.<sup>23</sup> Archival materials are not there to "prove" or illustrate oral narratives, but instead to generate tension. The film's textual density interrupts the flow of testimonies and attunes viewers to memory as a constructed process. Put another way, the film seems to tell us that a family's archive is not a simple reserve of memories, but rather a complex medium that must be intervened and questioned if it is to have any meaning at all. The palimpsest

motif is most apparent in Priego's use of montage. Rarely do we see isolated photos; most of the time, images are laid over others. Time's workings and manipulated meanings are bound up in the cracks, in the dried glue left behind after the tape is pulled away, in the frayed edges. The palimpsest-like nature of this film is so strong, in fact, that it seems possible to argue that photographs aren't there to show or reveal, but rather to hide other images. It is as if Priego wants to show that archives cannot speak without mediation; even though photographs have an undeniable indexical or iconic quality, someone has to process images if they are to say something. Echoing this idea, François Niney holds that images "already exist in an archive somewhere, but it is clearly the filmmaker-historian's questions that determine [how they are] selected, sampled, or given meaning, that is, how they are assigned a documentary role [...]. [I]f archives aren't innocent, neither are the questions we ask of them: [archives] are 'crafted' and 'given shape.'"<sup>24</sup>

Collage is another technique that participates in the film's construction of palimpsests. Defined as a collection of heterogeneous materials, collage has long played a role in the Latin American documentary tradition.<sup>25</sup> In *Familia tipo*, however, the device is put to specific use. It permits Priego to reorder fragments and establish new relationships among them, thereby deconstructing an inherited family archive. Priego's use of collage is not straightforward, but rather reflexive in nature. She exposes photographs' imminent materiality and shatters their communicative transparency. In effect, she exposes the seams between images, the irregularities that result from cinematic cutting and pasting. She wants to show that family photo albums—like films—take shape through montage, through operations of ordering and suppression.

The director deploys collage poignantly when she juxtaposes photographs of the two sisters: Belén and Cecilia. The obvious affinity between the girls becomes apparent in a sequence of three sets of photos titled, respectively: "Belén-Me," "Me-Belén," and "Belén-Me." Priego's recognition of the "other's" face in her own is a powerful moment because that face, until just shortly before, was utterly unknown to her.<sup>26</sup> That the sisters are "doubles" of one another echoes other doublings throughout the film: the comings and goings to Europe or the repeated abandonment of children within the father's family line. All of these repetitions can be traced back to the original trauma that gave birth to the conflict: Priego's discovery that her father had a second family in Europe.

Priego and her brother's car trip through Europe may well symbolize life as a journey. In that vein, one of the first people interviewed waxes poetically that "sometimes life is about jumping on a train." Aunt Estrella remarks that Priego's father's behavior and abandonment of his first wife can be chalked up to "destiny"; she clearly feels that certain conditions predestine people to act in certain ways. In the case of the director's father, predestination plays out through a specific chain of causality: Fernando Priego's mother was taken from him during the Spanish Civil War; his father was exiled; and later he was raised by his aunt and uncle. Because of this, the rest of the father's life—specifically his abandonment of his first daughter, Belén—can be explained by his traumatic past. Yet, at the same time, the film defies a fatalistic reading insofar as Fernando Priego's children break the cycle of estrangement: Cecilia Priego reaches out to Belén and is willing to form a relationship with her even though Fernando continues to ignore his oldest daughter. In defiance of abandonment and denial, we find that individuals can freely choose to assume responsibility and deviate from inherited patterns of behavior.

In this film, the automobile is more than just a mode of transportation: it is an instrument of "auto-mobility," of agency. Priego's riff on the displacement motif is different from other common manifestations (trains, public transportation, and airplanes) because of the privileged role the subject plays as the driver of the car. John Urry writes: "Auto-mobility thus involves the powerful combination of autonomous humans together with machines possessing the capacity for autonomous movement along the paths, lanes, streets, and routeways of each society."<sup>27</sup> Using the cinematographic procedures I have described, Cecilia Priego sets "in motion" different ways of remembering and constructing family history. By doing this, she hopes to create a different legacy for her own children. Although her starting point is personal experience, she problematizes a longstanding Hispanic cultural tradition in which hiding aspects of the past or omitting elements from the story was a way to "safeguard" history. Those who propagated such selective narratives, however, never stopped to think about the toxic effects they would have on their descendants.

### MOBILITY AND THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE OTHER

The mobility turn brings into relief the intersubjective encounters that take place between filmmakers and others. As a result, contemporary documentary film proposes new ways of approaching social, cultural, or religious

difference and actualizes longstanding ethnographic debates about how to observe and analyze the cultural practices of diverse individuals and groups.<sup>28</sup> One of the contributions that recent first-person documentaries have made is to stake identity politics on establishing productive dialogues with minority groups. Films of this nature are often quite aware of the ethics of intersubjective contact and, therefore, shy away from the certainties implicit in explanatory or totalizing discursive gestures.

In recent years, some anthropologists have shifted focus. Having partially abandoned the impulse to study exotic or “primitive” others, anthropologists now pay greater attention to their own societies. Michael Renov’s concept of “domestic ethnography” perhaps best describes the approach to ethnography that we find in many recent Latin American documentaries. In these films, autobiography intersects ethnography in a very specific way: the other no longer appears as distant from the filmmaker, but rather as part of the filmmaker’s own family or community (political, social, or affective). Rather than as an object of scientific scrutiny, the other functions as a mirror for the self.<sup>29</sup> Mobility plays a role in facilitating these encounters, which often profoundly transform the filmmaker’s experience or worldview.<sup>30</sup> Examples of films in which directors construct identity transnationally include Andrés Di Tella’s (1958–) *Fotografías* (*Photographs*, 2007) and *La televisión y yo* (*Television and Me*, 2002), or Lucia Murat’s (1949–) *Uma longa viagem* (*A Long Journey*, 2010).

*La chica del sur* (2012) is a paradigmatic case of a documentary that ameliorates territorial and cultural difference through mobility. A distant event deeply impacts the director and serves as the film’s pretext: in 1989, José Luis García took part in the thirteenth annual World Youth Festival in Pyongyang, North Korea, a political event that the Soviet Union sponsored just three weeks before the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing and four weeks before the fall of the Berlin Wall. While García filmed this extraordinary event with a handheld VHS camera, he unexpectedly encountered a captivating, young, South Korean political activist named Lim Su-kyung who had clandestinely infiltrated the event to advocate for the peaceful reunification of the two Koreas. An instant celebrity, the South Korean girl’s subjectivity overshadowed García’s authorial intentions. Twenty years later, after reviewing the 1989 footage, García decides to contact her.

In the late 1980s, García was just one face in a massive crowd of leftist youth. The fact that he was even there in the first place was, in itself, exceptional: at the last minute, García took his brother’s place because

he could not make the trip. In those days, the mere idea of chatting with Su-kyung one-on-one would have been unthinkable. Yet by 2011, thanks to the massive explosion of social media, which have played an important role in the mobility turn, the director locates Su-kyung easily, and she agrees to receive him in South Korea. Suddenly, then, a faraway, foreign land doesn't seem so far away after all, and the “Flower of Reunification” (Su-kyung's nickname) goes from being an untouchable to a tangible (though somewhat standoffish) flesh-and-blood individual. The documentary thus takes on a paradoxical quality: on the one hand, it expresses the possibility of concretizing an intercultural encounter; while on the other, it marks the limits that such encounters always have.<sup>31</sup>

Mobility opens lines of communication among the semantic, narrative, and dramatic polarities that structure García's film. Two historical moments organize the film's spatial and temporal flows: the first part of the film takes place in North Korea in 1989 and the second in South Korea in 2011. A sequence mediating these two moments narrates the points of contact between them: the sequence not only features the Internet as a mediator that helps facilitate mobility, but also introduces us to Alejandro Kim, a historian living in Buenos Aires who accompanies the director on his journey through Seoul. Kim's role as translator symbolically expresses both the possibility and impossibility of communication between Argentina and Korea, as well as between García and Su-kyung. A final journey (which constitutes a kind of reparatory mobility) comes at the end of the film: the “girl from the south” leaves her country of origin and travels to Argentina. This geographical displacement brings symbolic closure for Su-kyung: visiting Ushuaia becomes a way of healing the wound she has harbored since her son died; in fact, her son had a book about the South Pole with him when he left on the journey that took his life (Fig. 5.1).

Everything happens twice in *La chica del sur*. It is as if the director wants to show us how history repeats. José Luis García travels twice to Korea (first to the north and then to the south); we hear the Communist “Internationale” played twice on the soundtrack (first extradigetically as fanfare in 1989 and then digetically as an experimental, electronic composition in 2011); Lim Su-kyung twice sings a melancholy Korean folk song (first in a Karaoke bar in Seoul and later accompanied by a guitar in Ushuaia); José Luis García twice mentions (using the same words) the number of airplanes a person has to take to get from Argentina to Korea and back again; and Lim Su-kyung travels southward twice (to South





Fig. 5.1 *La chica del sur* (2012), directed by José Luis García

Korea in 1989 and to Southern Argentina in 2011). Repetition, as narrative form, dramatically expresses deep historical fissures, as well as radical changes in political and ideological paradigms; at the same time, it serves to tie historical events to personal conflicts. In this sense, *La chica del sur* is a symptom of the historical time prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, a time in which totalizing narratives (Marxism, communism, and anti-imperialism) allowed individuals to explain the world around them. The abundant archival images that fill the first half of the film simply confirm this. We witness massive political rallies, throngs of youth in the streets, colorful choreography, and vibrant chants about the possibility of changing the world. José Luis García's skill (or luck) is to have witnessed (and recorded audiovisually) such a key moment, just before history took an irrevocable turn. By 2011, South Korea would lose all the color present in these archival images from two decades earlier: the multitudes would be replaced by intimate groups of friends, the political meetings by people

having drinks in bars; instead of accessing images of Lim Su-kyung on a television screen, García would meet her personally in her home and have dinner with her family.

The tension between two historical eras and two political regimes (communism and capitalism) echoes tensions between the director and Lim Su-kyung. These tensions, latent throughout the film, blow up in the second-to-the-last sequence when the South Korean woman travels to Argentina and for the first time grants García an extensive, face-to-face interview. In a scene so uncomfortable it’s funny, Su-kyung grows annoyed by García’s superficial questions. The lack of communication between the two is disturbing. It even manifests on a linguistic level: neither translation nor direct communication in English can smooth out terse speech. The gap—both personal and cultural—is far too great. García cannot move beyond his fascination with the young, South Korean student who bewitched him in 1989. Even though time has passed, he is unable to relax or interact with her naturally. For her part, Lim Su-kyung is still saddled by the weight of her historical protagonism. García’s attitude toward her does little more than exacerbate that feeling. Moreover, the encounter between Su-kyung and García speaks to indelibly demarcated cultural borders. No matter how much the director studies Korean history, he remains overwhelmed by myriad references and structures of feeling that he will never share with his character. In short, García’s frustrated interview with Su-kyung symbolizes the clash between two historical times, two ways of life, as well as the wounds and traumas that remain. One quickly understands that cultural, territorial, and political differences are alive and well—even in our globalized world. Mobility, therefore, does not always lead to understanding. While it does create opportunities for subjects from distant cultures to understand one another, it also helps directors to tease out the limits of intercultural encounters.

### MOBILITY AND SUBJECTIVITY: CONVERGENT FORCES

In this chapter, I have studied two tendencies within the vast terrain of recent Latin American documentaries that work with mobility and subjectivity. If, as Malene Freudendal-Pedersen asserts, “mobility and movement play an increasing role in the lives of late modern individuals,” documentary film seems to have adopted these tropes as thematic and structuring mechanisms for reflecting on memory and identity.<sup>32</sup>

Films like *Familia tipo* and *La chica del sur* show that even works on history and memory whose primary sources are testimonial or archival in nature use mobility to set up present-bound problems and to posit how those problems resonate in the contemporary social fabric. In contrast to fixity and solidity, movement and fluidity are firmly entrenched in the current universe of nonfictional film. Movement, moreover, opens opportunities for researching and questioning identities, memories, and social linkages.

Given the current prevalence of documentary's cross-pollination with fictional genres, it hardly seems accidental that the "road movie" has become one of the most popular generic forms. We see examples of this in films like *Hija* and *Diário de uma busca*, and to a lesser extent in *La chica del sur* and *Familia tipo*. The road movie universalizes and transnationalizes some of the recent paths that documentary has taken. It expands the mobility turn and pegs it to a series of recognizable images, techniques, and tropes: the road, the car, the journey, traveling shots, or territorial displacement. These, in turn, become the pretext for a series of encounters—somewhat predictable, yet still transcendental—with other subjectivities and cultures.

*Translated by Michael J. Lazzara, with Emily Frankel*

## NOTES

1. The idea for this chapter came about while doing research at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, under the supervision of Dr. Nadia Lie. I would like to thank Dr. Lie for introducing me to the question of mobility in the social and human sciences. Her guidance has opened new reflections for my studies of Latin American film.
2. Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary: The Story of the Film Movement Founded by John Grierson* (California: The University of California Press, 1975).
3. Andrea Cuarterolo, "El viaje en la era de la reproductibilidad técnica: discursos etno-geográficos en los primeros *travelogues* argentinos," *Revista cine documental* 3 (2011), [http://revista.cinedocumental.com.ar/3/articulos\\_05.html](http://revista.cinedocumental.com.ar/3/articulos_05.html). Cuarterolo refers to documentaries such as: *The Cataracts of Iguassu* (Burton Holmes, 1920); *Terre Magellaniche (Magellan's Lands)*, Alberto Maria De Agostini, 1915–1930); and *Un viaje al río Bermejo (A Trip on the Bermejo River)*, Max Glücksmann, 1915).
4. María Luisa Ortega, "El descubrimiento de América Latina por los documentalistas viajeros," in *Cine documental en América Latina*, ed. Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (Madrid: Cátedra, 2003), 93–118.

5. Ortega points out the impact of Latin American film on movies such as: *¡Qué viva México!* (*Long Live Mexico!*, Grigori Aleksandrov and Sergei Eisenstein, 1931); *Redes* (*The Wave*, Fred Zinnemann and Emilio Gómez Muriel, 1936); *¡Cuba sí!* (*Cuba, Yes!*, Chris Marker, 1961); and *A Valparaíso* (*Valparaiso*, Joris Ivens, 1964), among other films.
6. Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8.
7. Pablo Piedras, “La regla y la excepción: figuraciones de la subjetividad autorral en documentales argentinos de los ochenta y noventa,” *Toma Uno* 1 (2012): 37–53.
8. Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 176–79.
9. Although their theoretical perspectives differ, Bill Nichols and Stella Bruzzi both note that performativity, as a manifestation of subjectivity, has played a major role in recent documentary filmmaking. See Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 130–37, and Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 185–218.
10. See Clara Kriger, “La experiencia del documental subjetivo en Argentina,” in *Cines al margen: nuevos modos de representación en el cine argentino contemporáneo*, eds. Paula Wolkowicz and María José Moore (Buenos Aires: Librería, 2007), 33–49; Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, “El documental subjetivo en América Latina,” paper presented at XI Festival Internacional de Documentales “Santiago Álvarez in Memoriam,” Santiago de Cuba, November 2010; and Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009).
11. For a more complete discussion of the “subjective turn” in Latin American documentary, see Antonio Gómez’s chapter in this book.
12. Jean-Claude Bernardet names some of the characteristics of documentaries that are structured as searches for someone or something: the filmmaker as protagonist, the film as a “work in progress,” the primacy of uncertainty and a lack of closure. See Jean-Claude Bernardet, “Documentales de búsqueda: 33 y *Un pasaporte húngaro*,” in *El cine de lo real*, eds. Amir Labaki and María Dora Mourão (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2011), 117–28.
13. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 201.
14. See also, Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); William Guynn, *A Cinema of Nonfiction* (London: Associated University Presses Inc., 1990); and Michael Renov, “New Subjectivities: Documentary and Self-Representation in the Post-verité Age,” in *Feminism and Documentary*, eds. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 84–94.

15. Bill Nichols expounds a taxonomy of documentary “modes of representation” in a series of texts. For a comprehensive review of these modalities, see Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).
16. See also, John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), and Peter Adey, *Mobility* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
17. See Mimi Sheller and John Urry, “The New Mobilities Paradigm,” *Environment and Planning* 38, no. 2 (2006): 207–26
18. See Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Amor a distancia: nuevas formas de vida en la era global* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2012).
19. See Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *La pantalla global* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2009), 268–71.
20. The two films begin and are structured as journeys that the directors take to faraway lands (Europe or Asia). In the course of those journeys, people whom the directors meet along the way (Belén and Lim Su-kyung) decide to travel to Argentina for personal reasons.
21. In memory studies, the concept of “postmemory” has been used to characterize these types of narratives. See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Laia Quilez prefers the concept “second generation” in her study of Argentine documentaries produced by children whose parents disappeared during the dictatorship. See Laia Quilez, “La representación de la dictadura militar en el cine documental argentino de segunda generación” (PhD dissertation, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, 2010). María Laura Lattanzi’s chapter in this book also treats this topic.
22. Imagination plays a key role when filmmakers intervene family photos and home movies. This point brings to mind Georges Didi-Huberman’s thoughts on the power that images have to convey the imaginative operations that are required to read visual sources. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
23. Gérard Genette’s classic work explores the role that palimpsests play in semiotics. In this article, what interests me is the potential that the palimpsest holds for discussing how memory works. See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestos: la literatura en segundo grado* (Madrid: Taurus, 1989).
24. François Niney, *La prueba de lo real en la pantalla: ensayo sobre el principio de realidad documental* (México: Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos, UNAM, 2009), 388, 391.
25. See María Luisa Ortega’s article: “De la certeza a la incertidumbre: collage, documental y discurso político en América Latina,” in *Piedra, papel y tijera: el collage en el cine documental*, eds. Sonia García López and Laura Gómez Vaquero (Madrid: Ocho y Medio/Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2009), 101–37.

26. Deepening the themes of sameness and doubling, the narrator tells about how she found a photograph among her father’s things. Later on, she comes to find that the photo was not hers, as she originally thought, but rather Belén’s.
27. Urry, *Mobilities*, 118.
28. Nancy Lutkehaus and Jenny Cool cite two tendencies within contemporary documentary film in which directors seek to subvert traditional ethnographic ways of approaching and representing the other. In one of these tendencies, the “other” takes the camera in an act of self-representation that upsets traditional power relations. This tendency often comes to the fore in indigenous filmmaking where communities make films as a call to political action. In the other tendency, identity is explored transnationally. Directors cross borders to understand the transnational flows of people and goods. See Nancy Lutkehaus and Jenny Cool, “Paradigms Lost and Found: The ‘Crisis of Representation’ and Visual Anthropology,” in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 116–39.
29. Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 216.
30. Regarding the relationship between contemporary documentary and new anthropology, I refer again to Nancy Lutkehaus and Jenny Cool, “Paradigms Lost and Found.”
31. See Joanna Page’s chapter in this book on the political and epistemic implications of “interculturalism,” “multiculturalism,” and “transculturalism” and how these connect to ethnographic documentary film.
32. Marlene Freudendal-Pedersen, *Mobility in Daily Life: Between Freedom and Unfreedom* (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 19.

## The Politics-Commodity: The Rise of Mexican Commercial Documentary in the Neoliberal Era

*Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado*

On September 10, 2014, filmmaker Roberto Hernández (1974–) and activist-producer Layda Negrete emerged victorious from one of the many lawsuits and criminal proceedings they have faced in recent years. The lawsuits resulted from the release and success of their documentary *Presunto culpable* (*Presumed Guilty*, 2011), an impassioned film about the legal proceedings that led to the erroneous murder conviction of José Antonio Zúñiga in 2006.<sup>1</sup> Partly due to footage included in the documentary, a film that Hernández and Negrete produced with the aid of American documentarian Geoffrey Smith, Zúñiga was acquitted in 2008. Upon the film's release, both on PBS through the *Point of View* series and in Mexico with the support of Televisa and Cinépolis, the film caused veritable political turmoil because of its thorough exposé of Mexico's corrupt and inefficient legal system. Jo Tuckman pithily explains the effect that this documentary had in Mexico: "The film resonated so deeply with the Mexican public not just because it tapped into latent public consciousness

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about the broken judicial system, but also because it spoke to a more general distrust of all authorities.”<sup>2</sup> *Presunto culpable*, then, faced as much success as it did censorship. It remains the highest grossing documentary in Mexican history, with receipts totaling 6.6 million dollars, beating Michael Moore’s (1954–) *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which grossed 2.2 million dollars in the year of its release.

The political success of *Presunto culpable* and the scandal that surrounds it evoke a paradigmatic narrative about the documentary genre. According to this narrative, a documentary film’s merits reside not just in its artistry but also in its ideological function, that is, its purported role in changing the world. Yet all too often critical evaluations of the documentary genre are tied to both the circulation of “global art cinema” in festival markets and to the ideological legacies of what Julianne Burton termed “the social documentary.”<sup>3</sup> Recent assessments of the genre have contributed greatly to a revision of this posture by recognizing the major changes that documentary filmmaking has undergone since Burton’s original formulations. These changes include the rise of digital filmmaking, on the technical side, and the redefinition of left-wing politics due to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Latin America’s military dictatorships, on the political side.<sup>4</sup> *Presunto culpable* fits the new paradigm in many ways. It reflects a new, postsocialist form of political engagement proper to the ideologies of democracy that have ruled Mexico since at least 1989. The film fits squarely within the idea that Mexico underwent a “transition to democracy,” which was prevalent in many intellectual circles, particularly after the election of Vicente Fox in 2000. Its guerrilla style is undoubtedly connected to both the flexibility of digital technology and the change in mediascapes of the last twenty-five years.<sup>5</sup> But it is also representative of another phenomenon: the integration of documentary film into the structures of the neoliberal film commodity.

If one looks at the contemporary landscape of documentary filmmaking in Mexico, one can find an array of producers, directors, and films that remain entrenched in activist practices or in highly aestheticized understandings of the genre. A recent state-of-the-genre book published by Cineteca Nacional, *Reflexiones sobre cine mexicano contemporáneo: documental* (*Reflections on Contemporary Mexican Cinema: Documentary*, 2014), speaks to this reality by manifestly privileging documentarians like Everardo González (1971–), Eugenio Polgovsky (1977–), and Mercedes Moncada (1972–) whose work is activist in nature or whose filmic subjects represent marginalized and silenced voices in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> But what stands



out in the scholarship and criticism about Mexican documentary is the glaring absence of those scarce, though important documentaries, like *Presunto culpable*, that truly achieve box-office success. Missing from the critical discourse is a small, but very significant group of directors and producers whose work appeals to mainstream markets such as film theaters, home video, video on demand, or transnational distribution in “global art cinema” circuits: Olallo Rubio (1978–), Lynn Fainchtein (1963–), Carlos Marcovich (1963–), and Luis Mandoki (1954–) may be among the most relevant. The only mainstream director who seems to garner some critical attention in academic circles is Juan Carlos Rulfo (1964–), probably because he is the son of one of Mexico’s most important writers, Juan Rulfo, and partly because one of his documentaries, *En el hoyo* (*In the Pit*, 2006), which I will discuss at length later, does fit some of the paradigmatic preferences of scholars and critics.

However, if we are really to appreciate the role documentary film plays in Mexico’s larger film industry, we need to look beyond aesthetics and ideology and consider other factors crucial to the success of films like *Presunto culpable*: for example, the involvement of mainstream filmmakers and media figures like Rubio and Fainchtein, both well-known radio personalities, or Luis Mandoki (1954–), a Hollywood director; the participation of hegemonic media companies like Televisa in film production and distribution; and the media exposure achieved by films dealing with Mexico’s political realities or media personalities. Because the ideological inclinations of filmmakers and critics still skew toward the “social documentary” brand, such biases may very well result in the sidelining of certain important films that in fact enjoy access to considerable viewership. I believe that crucial and overlooked questions inhere in the fact that regardless of their theme or their political inclination, some documentaries proactively participate in neoliberal structures of circulation and production, even when, perhaps counterintuitively, their subject matter sets forth a critique of neoliberalism.

### THE DOCUMENTARY IN MEXICO’S NEOLIBERAL FILM INDUSTRY

Mexican cinema has experienced two structural transformations that are crucial for framing documentaries like *Presunto culpable*.<sup>7</sup> First, most commercial distribution caters to middle- and upper-class urban audiences. Most movie theaters today are controlled by a duopoly of multiplexes:

The Ramírez Organization's Cinépolis chain and Cinemex, which recently absorbed a third competitor, Cinemark. As a result, only a scant amount of screen time goes to Mexican films (5–10% in any given year) and leads to the creation of films that directly appeal to the core consumer demographic, a reality that heavily influences the content and ideology of commercial documentaries. While certain politically engaged documentaries like Everardo González's *Los ladrones viejos* (*Old Thieves*, 2007) or Eugenio Polgovsky's *Los herederos* (*The Heirs*, 2008) still enjoy a fair degree of critical acclaim and commercial success, the rise of a newly successful and commercially viable form of documentary in the USA—thanks to Michael Moore's blockbuster success and the relevant work of directors like Errol Morris (1948–)—has provided a blueprint for some Mexican documentarians to appeal to a wider audience, which, in turn, has required them to make concessions to the ideological and cultural mores of movie-going elites.

Carlos Mendoza (1951–), one of the most important producers and critics of the genre in Mexico (he is also the director of Canal 6 de Julio) has lamented that in the wake of Michael Moore's success and economic transformations to the industry, “most documentarians do not attempt to modify the mechanisms of distribution and exhibition of their films.”<sup>8</sup> Mendoza goes on to question the kinds of documentaries produced through hybrid structures of public-private financing such as festivals, which, in his view, do little more than deactivate the political potential of films and subject them to structures of patronage.<sup>9</sup> While Mendoza's concerns are legitimate, I think that prejudgments regarding production structures obstruct a critical understanding of the complex processes that define cinema in the neoliberal age, where privatization is a fundamental element that intersects problematically with aesthetic and ideological concerns.

A second structural transformation in the Mexican film industry is the adaptation of cinema's political ideologies to reflect the biases and values of the core audience. In fiction cinema, the industry has evolved from the types of *engagé* that ruled art cinema in the 1970s and 1980s—Third Cinema politics and predominant Buñuelian tremendism—toward productions that embody the priorities of Mexico's neoliberal elites: democracy, public insecurity, government corruption, and the like.<sup>10</sup> This shift presents an important challenge to documentarians, whose craft has historically been defined by their role in challenging official histories and discourses. However, given the restricted spaces in which Mexican

documentaries circulate, a major problem has been finding access to audiences that do not agree with the documentary's agenda even before watching it. In this sense, it is hard to imagine how anyone who is not in some way committed to leftist politics would watch a Canal 6 de Julio production on the 1968 massacre or on education reform. In fact, if one scrutinizes networks and strategies for the circulation of documentaries in Mexico, notably described by Antonio Ziri6n and Claudine Cyr,<sup>11</sup> it becomes immediately obvious that all platforms (video on demand, the Internet, film festivals, and commercial release) are always already determined by the economic structures of inclusion and exclusion of audiences in the neoliberal context. Consequently, a methodological error all too often committed by scholars and critics of the documentary genre (and in many cases of film at large) is the selection and valuation of materials upon the nature of their political content, without considering the paradoxes embedded in the material structures of circulation and production that inherently limit all filmic production from the outset.

Studies on "new documentary" in the English language point out that one of the effects of documentary's entrance into commercial markets has been the emergence of performative and self-aware forms of the genre. According to Stella Bruzzi: "[d]ocumentary now widely acknowledges and formally engages with its own constructedness, its own performative agenda; it is not that reality has changed, but rather the ways in which documentary—mainstream as well as independent—has chosen to represent it."<sup>12</sup> Bruzzi recognizes that self-awareness and openness to acknowledge political agendas and narrative biases "are moves that exemplify the commercialization of nonfictional output and its concomitant shift away from the observational mode."<sup>13</sup> This aligns with the development of what Miriam Haddu and Joanna Page call "visual synergies" between fiction and documentary.<sup>14</sup> I would contend that "visual synergies," a term unwittingly loaded with neoliberal tint due to the term's use in contemporary business vocabularies, are not merely formal issues related to documentary's objectivity (as Haddu and Page's volume and Bruzzi's argument mostly suggest); they are also adaptations of the documentary form to a set of ideologies connected to neoliberalism.

One of the predominant documentary forms in Mexico today is the use of a collage of testimonies with little editorial intervention on the documentarian's part. The collage technique traverses the genre's ideological and thematic spectrum. One can see it in left-oriented documentaries such as Gerardo Tort's (1958–) *La guerrilla y la esperanza*

(*The Guerrilla and Hope*, 2005), a film on 1970s insurgent movements; in productions that seek to revise official history, like Francesco Taboada Tabone's (1973–) *Los últimos zapatistas* (*The Last Zapatistas*, 2002); and even in films about the music scene, like Carlos Marcovich's *Cuatro labios* (*Four Lips*, 2006). This form of polyphonic narration, with an apparent lack of editorial intervention, finds an important forerunner in Elena Poniatowska's book *La noche de Tlatelolco* (*Massacre in Mexico*, 1971), a chronicle of the 1968 student massacre told through the compilation and ordering of diverse voices.<sup>15</sup> This precedent is relevant because Poniatowska's narration, which many documentaries today resemble, is constructed upon the idea of a civil society that opposed the homogeneity of official history and power discourses. Both the self-awareness described by Bruzzi and the “visual synergies” discussed by Haddu and Page reveal a formal evolution of the genre to more properly engage with the ideological values of its target audience, which, in turn, affords access to commercial structures of culture that cater to the tastes of that audience. My point is that regardless of political position, most documentaries participate in the mythologies of the public sphere and of civil society that make possible the circulation of even the most politically radical ideologies as commodities. Like in Luis Estrada's (1962–) films, what the contemporary Mexican documentary sells is a politics-commodity that is consumed by spectators in the market of signifiers and discourses that comprise the neoliberal realm.

In the early years of neoliberalism, Néstor García Canclini theorized two changes in what he called the “new sociocultural scene”: the “participation in transnational or deterritorialized communities of consumers,” made possible by the proliferation of media, and “the shift from the citizen as a representative of public opinion to the consumer interested in enjoying quality of life.”<sup>16</sup> Tellingly, García Canclini exemplifies this by underscoring that “argumentative and critical forms of participation cede their place to the pleasure taken in electronic media spectacles where narration or simple accumulation of anecdotes prevails over reasoned solutions to problems.”<sup>17</sup> This explains the rise of nonargumentative documentaries by directors like Juan Carlos Rulfo. Documentaries in general, and commercial documentaries in particular, participate in the shifts described by García Canclini, where mediascapes and cultural consumption become new forms of public engagement and participation as neoliberalism erodes liberal and socialist ideas of democracy, citizenship, and political commitment.

Within this framework, censorship emerges as a discourse of both commercialism and politicization. When discussing attempts at censoring films in the late 1990s and early 2000s, MacLaird analyzes a phenomenon she calls “authoritarian neosensationalism, in which films are not only still unofficially censored but also profit from their anticensorship media campaigns.”<sup>18</sup> In these terms, censorship was the paradoxical way in which both trends—privatization and redefinition of politics—converged in *Presunto culpable*, thus rendering it a highly successful cultural commodity. It is important here that *Presunto culpable* functions *vis-à-vis* the industry in a similar way to the most successful products of Mexican commercial cinema: Luis Estrada’s *La ley de Herodes* (*Herod’s Law*, 1999); Alfonso Cuarón’s (1961–) *Y tu mamá también* (*And Your Mother Too*, 2001); and Carlos Carrera’s (1962–) *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (*The Crime of Father Amaro*, 2003)—all major blockbusters because of censorship. What censorship achieves in the neoliberal era is the creation of a commodity of political participation embedded in the purchase of a film ticket, while also selling, for less committed viewers, a flexible product that can be purchased as a mere curiosity, or as a reflection of widely held views about the state.

### BEYOND RESISTANCE: THE DOCUMENTARY AS COMMODITY

To take the pulse of documentary in the commercial realm, one must look away from those filmmakers who are fully established as social documentarians, like Eugenio Polgovsky, or from films directly tied to political controversies, like *Presunto culpable*.<sup>19</sup> Instead, some of the most interesting renditions of the genre in the last few years come from filmmakers who do not always replicate a political discourse of “resisting the state.” While it is understandable that critics like Mendoza, MacLaird, and others choose to emphasize productions that fight power or that, at the very least, provide avenues for political engagement against the grain of official discourse and material networks of censorship, there are also many documentaries in Mexico today operating within forms of political and cultural engagement that, in my view, cannot be reduced to a narrative that pits the documentarian in a resistance struggle against the state.

Juan Carlos Rulfo provides an interesting example of the more paradoxical nature of political engagement in documentary. Rulfo’s *En el hoyo* (2006) deservedly became one of the paradigmatic examples of the genre in Mexico. It documents the story of the construction workers

involved in building the upper tier of Mexico City's Periférico Avenue, a landmark public works project of then left-wing presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration as city mayor. MacLaird reads the film as a cultural product that "sustains reverence for the lower socioeconomic classes that López Obrador's campaign had initiated, [but] with a more subdued tone than the political rallies and without the condescension and misery painted by the stylized realism that was central to the fiction film boom."<sup>20</sup> This reading squarely locates Rulfo within a set of cinematic productions that directly connect documentary to forms of political engagement that resist PRI-PAN (Partido Revolucionario Institucional or Institutional Revolutionary Party and Partido de Acción Nacional or National Action Party) political hegemony. However, it does not account for the fact, as MacLaird admits, that other documentaries directly identified with López Obrador's political campaign (like Luis Mandoki's *¿Quién es el señor López?* [Who is Mr. López, 2006] and *Fraude: México 2006* [The 2006 Electoral Fraud, 2007]) struggled to achieve commercial distribution due to censorship and to the reluctance of screening houses like Cinépolis to support López Obrador's claims against the purported election winner Felipe Calderón.

A closer look at *En el hoyo* shows that the film's politics are not as clear-cut as they seem. MacLaird correctly portrays the film as a paean to a working class that invisibly participates in public works, risking their lives; she also praises the film's avoidance of the tremendism predominant in fiction film of the period. However, its ideological commitments are hardly visible because of the close focus on the workers. I think that a critical reading of this documentary requires spectators to dislodge the film's representation of working-class subjects from any connection to formal left-wing politics. When viewed from this perspective, the film is hardly an endorsement of the infrastructure project it depicts. One should remember that the "*segundo piso*" (upper tier) was not a particularly popular public works project, and in fact, when Rulfo's film was released, anti-López Obrador commercials airing on television railed against it to criticize his administration's high levels of public debt.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the focus on the workers articulates a criticism of the venture at many levels. It is notable that the workers who intervene in the project are precisely the type of social subjects who will not benefit from the construction. In addition, as Madalina Stefan and Lorena Ortiz point out, the documentary presents a stance that subverts what they call "the narration of national progress" embedded in López Obrador's developmentalist project by presenting

that “progress” from the perspective of those who construct it but who are not included in it.<sup>22</sup> The very title, *En el hoyo*, is a popular expression that conveys the same meaning as the English expression “to be screwed,” and can be easily construed as a critique of López Obrador’s developmentalist policies. The title illustrates the fact that the very regime that conceives of such an infrastructural project has been unable to address the social marginalization of the construction workers who made it possible. It is quite plausible to read this film, then, not as a celebration of López Obrador’s public works, but as a deeply critical rendering of them.

The film’s two final scenes support this reading. First, we see a long, continuous shot of the avenue where the upper tier is being built, spanning from San Antonio, in the middle-class neighborhood of San Pedro de los Pinos, to San Jerónimo, which borders the upper-class neighborhood of Pedregal. This social geography, obvious to many viewers, is sonically framed by the ghostly presence of the workers we saw in the film (some of whom died), via short sentences in-off. After this, the film fades to black-and-white photographs of the workers who were interviewed; the photographic montage does not look much different from an in-memorial reel. The visual narrative of the two sequences, which compellingly suggests a gradual fading and disappearance of the workers from the construction project, symbolically separates the workers from the development project that their work produces. In so doing, it also provides grounds for a challenge to the López Obrador administration’s policies.

*En el hoyo* represents, in this reading, a form of cultural politics more properly articulated to the contradictory perspectives of movie-going audiences both on the festival circuit and in the multiplex market. Its presentation of the Mexican working class through an emphasis on vernacular speech and social criticism plays well in transnational markets like Sundance, in which ideologically driven independent cinema privileges testimonial narratives and the representation of subaltern subjects from the Global South. At the same time, the film does not offend the sensibilities of corporate media companies like Cinépolis. In fact, one could even say that MacLaird’s reading and mine do not contradict each other because the film is so semiotically open ended that it allows for both of them: it can be read either as a politically correct rendering of modernization projects from the humanizing perspective of labor or as a critique of those same projects through the denunciation of the exploitation of the workers who participate in them. The lack of an editorial voice in Rulfo’s documentary—proper to many films of the neoliberal era—delivers an ideological

ambiguity that allows spectators to appreciate the film regardless of party affiliation. Thus, people favorable to López Obrador—including the city government itself, which appears listed as a co-producer—can see it as celebratory, while audiences critical of him can read it as a denunciation.

In *En el hoyo*, politics are therefore not a clearly articulated ideology, but rather an artful nonarticulation of concrete political ideologies; the film ultimately commodifies politics so as to make it more attractive to diverse consumer publics. The difference, then, between a Canal 6 de Julio or a Luis Mandoki documentary and *En el hoyo* is that the latter, rather than presuming audience participation in its ideological codes, ably constructs a narrative that permits audience participation via a negotiation with diverse political positions. One could say the same thing about *Presunto culpable*, since corruption is the kind of broad subject that cannot be reduced to specific political identification and thus enables citizen participation from across the whole swath of the political spectrum. Like Alejandro González Iñárritu's (1963–) *Amores perros* (*Love's a Bitch*, 2000), *En el hoyo* managed to profit from a structure of circulation of symbolic capital by successfully presenting itself as a progressive film in the eyes of the North American and European festival markets, while simultaneously embodying ideas about the Mexican poor and national politics that correspond to longstanding narratives held by Mexico's middle and upper classes.<sup>23</sup>

It is thus not surprising that Rulfo's most recent documentary *¡De panzazo* (*Barely Passing the Grade*, 2012) was co-directed by Televisa newscaster Carlos Loret de Mola (1976–), one of López Obrador's most notorious public enemies in the media, or that the film's attack on the deficiencies of Mexico's educational system in general, and on the teachers' unions in particular, aligns with the educational reform that then-candidate Enrique Peña Nieto was beginning to float and that became law a year later. Unlike Luis Mandoki or Carlos Mendoza, Rulfo cannot be pigeonholed within any particular political ideology or party line, and his documentaries achieve a considerable degree of media exposure and audience access precisely because their ideological ambiguity renders them an effective film commodity in the neoliberal marketplace.

Tellingly, *De panzazo* was produced by a non-governmental organization (an NGO) called Mexicanos Primero, led by Claudio X. González, son of the former president of Mexico's Chamber of Commerce and current chairman of the Board of Directors of Kimberly-Clark, Mexico; he was also president of the Televisa Foundation and has been involved in major initiatives of both that media conglomerate and the PRI. Furthermore,



the director of Mexicanos Primero is David Calderón Martín del Campo, a leading educational reformer who strongly advocates for the ENLACE standardized test, a teacher evaluation tool staunchly opposed by the unions. The documentary strongly pushes the evaluation and negatively presents the unions' opposition to it. Loret de Mola is known for his contentious interview with former union leader and politician Elba Esther Gordillo, whose arrest in 2013 for embezzlement and other crimes allowed for the Peña Nieto government's education reform to pass in that same year. *De panzazo* does have an editorial voice and is not as ambiguous in its politics as *En el hoyo*. Nevertheless, it capitalizes on the generalized opposition that many people in Mexico, both of the left and the right, felt for the notoriously corrupt. The film also enjoyed considerable media exposure due to Loret de Mola's standing as the host of Televisa's morning news show and of a popular radio show on Radio Fórmula. This exposure led to box-office receipts of 3.6 million dollars.

Three crucial points emerge from *De panzazo*. First, it shows that we must question any naturalized linkage between Mexican documentary cinema and the social and political paradigms typically identified with the genre. *De panzazo* is a film that uses documentary cinema's traditional strategies for social engagement, but does so to push a hegemonic reform project that the vast majority of the political establishment supports. Consequently, it retrospectively validates my reading of *En el hoyo* as a veiled critique of the modernization projects pushed forward by López Obrador, whose political coalition includes dissident members of the teachers' union who have expressed opposition to the type of teaching evaluations portrayed in *De panzazo*.

Second, along with *Presunto culpable*, Rulfo's film pushes us to reconsider the notions of politics and of the political in Mexican cinema. It is clear that the displacement of film audiences, including those who favor documentary, to the middle and upper classes who benefit from neoliberal economic reforms, has resulted in the rise of documentaries that advance the cultural and political values of the social elite. In *De panzazo*, Loret de Mola, whose newscast typically presents a favorable view of PRI educational policies, embodies the viewpoint of an elite class that includes both neoliberal social reformers and members of the business elite who participate in institutions like Mexicanos Primero. This type of conservative NGO politics channels the interests of the middle and upper classes who resent the effects of statist and socialist policies in Mexico's modernization. These same NGOs have aggressively mobilized against López

Obrador and other left-wing politicians on issues such as crime and impunity, which characterized, for example, the platform of the conservative candidate for Mexico City's major office, Isabel Miranda de Wallace. Even though the educational system and the judiciary undoubtedly victimize Mexico's poor, it is also true that the policies advocated by *De panzazo* and *Presunto culpable* (neoliberal educational reform and the fight against judicial abuses and impunity) are two causes that mobilize middle- and upper-class conservative activists.

Finally, one must also consider the synergies between the film industry and other media structures, like radio or television, to fully account for the development of commercial documentaries like *De panzazo*. Unlike the precarious circulation of more politically engaged work, which relies on Internet sites, bare-bones commercial structures, and in many cases, underground circulation in political organizations or in the piracy market, the commercial documentary fully embodies its nature as a neoliberal media commodity and takes advantage of media languages and infrastructures previously unavailable to the genre.

An example, in this regard, is the work of Lynn Fainchtein, who has been very influential as a producer of major documentary productions. Fainchtein began her career as a radio personality in the 1980s on the alternative music station Rock 101. She has been an extremely prominent music supervisor during Mexican cinema's neoliberal transition, almost single-handedly revolutionizing the role of the music soundtrack as an aesthetic and marketing instrument. Of the dozens of films she has scored, one can recall *Amores perros* and Fernando Sariñana's (1958–) *Todo el poder* (*Gimme the Power*, 1999), two highly successful works that redefined the role of film music in Mexico. Beyond this, Fainchtein, who remains a music supervisor in the industry and who hosts a daily segment about music on the radio news show *Atando cabos* (*Tying Loose Ends*), has produced three documentaries crucial to understanding the gradual insertion of the genre into commercial circuits: Olallo Rubio's *¿Y tú, cuánto cuestas?* (*So, What's Your Price?*, 2007); Lorenzo Hagerman's (1969–) *0.56%* *¿Qué le pasó a México?* (*0.56%, What Happened to Mexico?*, 2010, which Fainchtein also co-wrote); and Duncan Bridgeman's (1959–) *Hecho en México* (*Made in Mexico*, 2012). *0.56%* more properly belongs to the mainstream forms of Mexican documentary cinema. Like Luis Mandoki's *Fraude: México 2006*, *0.56%* documents the controversial 2006 election (the title refers to the differential in votes received between Calderón and López Obrador in official results), but in a less controversial way. The film

does not accept the narrative of fraud, but rather presents a more neutral rendering of the controversy between López Obrador's and Calderón's followers. *0.56%* achieved far more commercial exposure than Mandoki's film, in part because it did not have to face censorship (it was partly financed by the Mexican Film Institute), but also because Fainchtein's media presence allowed for better distribution. The notable aspect of this film is its noneditorial, testimonial approach, which in Fainchtein's film allows her to defuse the controversial nature of the subject, demonstrating how "civil society," expressed as a plurality of perspectives, can depolarize a hot-button issue and make it more palatable to viewers. Like in the cases of the other films I have discussed thus far, such a diffuse, depolarizing approach makes the film an effective politics-commodity, because it allows both Calderón's and López Obrador's followers to feel vindicated, as it does not take a stand regarding the veracity of the election fraud claims.

Fainchtein's most innovative documentary, however, is *Hecho en México*. The film is an aggregate of musical video clips and interviews that vertiginously form a tapestry of discourses about contemporary cultural manifestations of Mexican national identity. The film takes full advantage of Fainchtein's prowess as a music producer by including some of Mexico's most interesting musical acts (Amanditita, Lila Downs, and Alejandro Fernández, among others); it also capitalizes on her media connections by including major public figures like Juan Villoro, Elena Poniatowska, Daniel Giménez Cacho, and Diego Luna. All of this is skillfully executed by the director, Duncan Bridgeman, a former member of the experimental music project 1 Giant Leap, which, in the mid-2000s, produced a well-regarded and original CD/DVD project that combined music, spoken word, and visual documentary. The result is an extremely well-crafted documentary that discusses and updates Mexican national identity (a topic from which successful films of the neoliberal period distanced themselves) to the contemporary Mexican mediascape and its expansion into the Mexican-American culture industry.

One of the film's most innovative aspects is its binational nature. *Hecho en México* is the first documentary by Pantelion, a joint venture between Televisa and Lions Gate Entertainment meant to cater to middle-class Mexican American audiences. As a result, while *Hecho en México* fell short of the box-office receipts of other commercial documentaries, it managed to raise nine hundred thousand dollars in the Mexican market (a respectable showing), while it added another one hundred and fifty thousand in a limited release in the USA. The film has also enjoyed further distribution

through platforms such as Netflix and media coverage in Latino media outlets like the Fusion news network. This binational strategy finds a precedent in Rubio's *¿Y tú cuánto cuestas?*, a scathing critique of consumerism and commodification. Tellingly, this film only raised a measly two hundred thousand dollars at the box office because its message was not geared toward a particularly clear target audience, regardless of the fact that director Olallo Rubio, like Fainchtein, belongs to a well-known cadre of radio hosts-turned-filmmakers. At any rate, Rubio's film explores its subject matter by juxtaposing subjects from both Mexico and the USA and unapologetically using English and Spanish, thus opening the door to documentary work that breaks the bounds of nation-specific political and social subject matter.

The deft use of music in *Hecho en México* bolsters its appeal. Music documentaries find interesting precedents in Mexico that harken back to Paul Leduc's (1942–) *¿Cómo ves? (What do you think?)* (1986), a film that used underground rock culture to explore the contradictions and conflicts of Mexico City's working class. A similar, contemporary film is Olallo Rubio's *Gimme the Power* (2012),<sup>24</sup> a critical revision of Mexico's transition to democracy narrated in parallel to the history of the Mexican rock movement and the rise of the alternative music act Molotov.<sup>25</sup> The novelty that Hagerman and Fainchtein introduce is that they manage to reshape the parallels between history and music explored by Leduc and Rubio by removing “voice of God” narration or a focus on a single musical act, favoring instead the production of a multivoice, multitopic documentary that jibes with the plurality myths of neoliberal Mexico. The film is structured around a series of topics (borders, gender, resistance, faith, etc.) that unfold through songs from an array of musical genres, interviews with public intellectuals, and images of Mexican and Mexican American people of different social origins. The movie succeeds because it does not grant representational privilege to any particular music genre (even though, personally, Leduc and Rubio, who are more politically engaged, favor rock's countercultural undertones), and because it chooses to present a considerable variety of genres ranging from popular underground practices like indigenous-language rap and neotraditional folk to high-culture forms like philharmonic music.

Fainchtein and Bridgeman's work therefore seems to announce a new strain of documentary filmmaking that circulates a thoroughly neoliberal politics-commodity: a notion of national identity that can be appropriated by pretty much any Mexican. The film invites political participation via the allegory of a civil society represented pluralistically and based on a

proliferation of definitions of the term “Mexican.” More significantly, it is properly packaged for consumption by the core audiences of Mexican cinema today: the middle and upper classes who have ruled Mexican spectatorship since the privatization process of the 1990s and the emerging middle-class Latino audience sought by Pantelion. It is designed for consumers who want products distinct from the *telenovelas* (soap operas) produced by working-class-oriented outlets like Televisión Azteca or Univisión.

Taken together, *Hecho en México*, *De panzazo*, *Presunto culpable*, and other documentaries that have managed to break into the realm of Mexican commercial cinema illustrate a series of trends that may become predominant in the next several years. I do not believe that these trends will replace more politically active or socially engaged forms of the documentary genre, which, as I said at the beginning, remain central to Mexico’s production. Canal Seis de Julio, which backed Rubio’s *Todo el poder*, is still very active, and documentarians like Luciana Kaplan (1975–) (in *La revolución de los alcatraces* [*Eufrosina’s Revolution*, 2013] and Everardo González (in *Cuates de Australia* [*Drought*, 2013]) are successfully exploring new forms of giving image and voice to Mexico’s most marginalized and of bringing to the fore stories of political repression and social injustice. Nevertheless, the repertoire of techniques and marketing strategies adopted by commercial documentaries has set an interesting precedent by inventing ways of constructing political expediency and engagement with spectators who do not identify with left-wing causes, thus widening the spaces for the genre to develop. The increasing involvement of exhibitors like Cinemex and Cinépolis, corporate producers like Televisa and Pantelion, and center-right NGOs like Mexicanos Primero in the financing, production, and distribution of documentaries is not a trivial development, and in the cases at hand, there are obvious aesthetic and ideological consequences to this. To ignore these productions, which are seen by far more people than activist and social documentaries, produces a partial and falsified picture of the documentary genre’s presence and impact in Mexico today and obstructs our ability to understand it in the context of neoliberalized film culture.

## NOTES

1. Zúñiga was arrested and convicted on trumped-up charges. He was sentenced to twenty years in prison.

2. Jo Tuckman, *Mexico: Democracy Interrupted* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 116.
3. Julianne Burton, ed., *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990). For the concept of “global art cinema,” I follow Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover’s definition, which asserts both the global circulation of cinema in markets and festivals and the claims to art present in film not directly identified with commercial ventures. See Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, eds., *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–25.
4. See Vinicius Navarro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez, eds., *New Documentaries in Latin America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5–6.
5. For the particular development of post-1988 ideologies in Mexico, see Tuckman, *Mexico*, and Alexander Dawson, *First World Dreams: Mexico since 1989* (London: Zed, 2006).
6. Claudia Curiel de Icaza and Abel Muñoz Hénonin, eds., *Reflexiones sobre cine mexicano contemporáneo: documental* (Mexico: Cineteca Nacional, 2014).
7. I have extensively discussed both transformations in my book *Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema, 1988–2012* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014). Other studies of the period may be found in Misha MacLaird, *Aesthetics and Politics in the Mexican Film Industry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and Frederick Aldama, *Mex-Ciné: Mexican Filmmaking, Production, and Consumption in the Twenty-First Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
8. Carlos Mendoza, *La invención de la verdad: nueve ensayos sobre cine documental* (Mexico: Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos UNAM, 2008), 199.
9. Mendoza, *La invención de la verdad*, 210–14.
10. The paradigmatic example is Luis Estrada’s trilogy (soon to be a tetralogy) of films, the most successful of which, *La ley de Herodes* (*Herod’s Law*, 1999) and *El infierno* (*Hell*, 2010) directly represent issues that elites privilege: widespread corruption and drug-related violence, respectively. For a discussion of the redefinition of “political cinema” in Mexico, see Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism*, 105–54.
11. Antonio Ziri6n and Claudine Cyr, “Circuitos alternos: nuevas redes y estrategias creativas para la difusi6n del cine documental en M6xico,” in *Reflexiones*, eds. Curiel de Icaza and Muñoz Henoin, 23–35.
12. Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (London: Routledge, 2006), 252.
13. *Ibid.*, 252.
14. Miriam Haddu and Joanna Page, eds., *Visual Synergies in Fiction and Documentary Film from Latin America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

- 2009). The volume uses the term “synergies” to discuss the flows between fiction and documentary.
15. Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco* (Mexico: Era, 1971).
  16. Néstor García Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 24.
  17. *Ibid.*, 25. It is interesting to note that a critic raises this point as a critique when he suggests that Everardo González’s work “while enjoyable, is not an innovative documentary form and, above all, it lacks the argumentative character that his own questions demand.” See Germán Martínez Martínez, “El cine de Everardo González y las posibilidades del documental en México,” in *Reflexiones*, eds. Curiel de Icaza and Muñoz Henoin, 51.
  18. MacLaird, *Aesthetics and Politics*, 74.
  19. A telling case is that of Luis Mandoki. Mandoki pursued a career as the director of middlebrow Hollywood films since the 1980s and later returned to Mexico to make political documentaries and fiction films about Central American migrants. I will not discuss his key documentary *Fraude: México 2006* (*The 2006 Electoral Fraud*, 2007) because its identification with a political party and the fallout from its political intervention constitute a separate case altogether and are not directly related to my topic of the commercial documentary. It does, however, play a central role in MacLaird’s study of the genre. See MacLaird, “Documentaries and Celebrities, Democracy and Impunity: Thawing the Revolution in Twenty-first-century Mexico,” *Social Identities* 19, no. 3–4 (2013): 477–78. An interesting piece of information that MacLaird provides is that Cinépolis did not support the film in the same way it supported *Presunto culpable*, due to the Ramírez Organization’s ties to elected President Felipe Calderón’s political structure. (Ramírez is based in Michoacán, Calderón’s home state). This indeed shows the limits of the paradigm of private exhibition discussed here.
  20. MacLaird, “Documentaries and Celebrities,” 476–77.
  21. Other arguments were leveled against it from across the political spectrum. For a discussion of the project’s politics, see Carlos Javier Vilalta Perdomo, “El voto de oposición al segundo piso del Periférico,” *Gestión y política pública* 36, no. 2 (2007): 381–420.
  22. Madalina Stegan and Lorena Ortiz, “Voces subversivas y mito en la narración de la nación: *En el hoyo* (2006) de Juan Carlos Rulfo,” in *Screening the Americas/Proyectando las Américas: Narration of the Nation in Documentary Film/Narración de la nación en el cine documental*, eds. Josef Raab, Sebastian Thies, and Daniela Noll-Opitz (Trier, Germany and Tempe, AZ: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag/Bilingual Press, 2011), 197.

23. For development of this point regarding Alejandro González Iñárritu's film, see Sánchez Prado, "Amores perros: Exotic Violence and Neoliberal Fear," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 39–57.
24. The reader should note that this is a different film from *Todo el poder* (1999), the fiction film by Fernando Sariñana that I mentioned earlier. Both film titles, in English, are *Gimme the Power*. Rubio's documentary uses the English title in lieu of the Spanish.
25. Another example is Carlos Marcovich's *Cuatro labios*, referenced above, which documents the farewell tour of pop ensemble OV7. Marcovich is a major figure in the history of Mexican documentary due to his landmark film *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* (*Who the Hell Is Juliette?*, 1997). He is responsible for major advances in the Mexican documentary form, but is not particularly related to the paradigms discussed here. For a good study of Marcovich's work, see Geoffrey Kantaris, "Dereferencing the Real: Documentary Mediascapes in the Films of Carlos Marcovich (*¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* and *Cuatro labios*)," in *Visual Synergies*, eds. Haddu and Page, 219–36.



## Where Are the “People”?: The Politics of the Virtual and the Ordinary in Contemporary Brazilian Documentaries

*Gustavo Procopio Furtado*

In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989), Gilles Deleuze makes his well-known claim that “if there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet . . . *the people are missing*.”<sup>1</sup> This notion of political cinema, rendered in an aphorism that verges on paradox, diverges sharply from a common sense understanding of politics. Assumptions about what constitutes the political often take it to mean the distribution and exercise of power by governments as well as by already existing collectivities, such as the citizenry of the *polis*, “the people,” who are imagined *a priori* to possess will and rights. From this perspective, political subjects are cinematically representable, as well as available to be described and analyzed by multiple discourses, including those of the social sciences. In contrast, Deleuze predicates the politics of cinema precisely on the absence of the people—or, more specifically, on what could emerge in the interval between the “no longer” and the “not yet” of “the people.” For Deleuze, the political exists as a possibility (hence the cautious qualifier articulated by the subjunctive phrase “if there were”) and is associated both with the ruins of what no longer fully exists

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and with what is emergent and unforeseen. Ultimately, his contention is that films are political to the extent that they reach beyond the configurations of what is given and help produce rather than merely represent or address political subjects. From this perspective, politics has more to do with the stirrings of the virtual than with disputes over the consolidated contours of the actual.

I begin with Deleuze's claim not because I subscribe wholeheartedly to its restriction of what deserves the name "political" (the definition of which is grounds for a political dispute that I intend to leave open), but because it is illuminating for thinking historically and aesthetically about key aspects of the Brazilian documentary today. It provides an inadvertent template for outlining differences between the "new" cinemas of yesterday and the "new" cinemas of today—in other words, between two effervescent moments for the documentary not only in Brazil but also in Latin America as a whole. The "new" cinemas of the 1960s—a moment amply discussed in the Anglophone critical literature as the "New Latin American Cinema," or NLAC—were rooted, as David William Foster notes, in the ideology of the Marxist left and its emancipatory politics.<sup>2</sup> Antonio Traverso and Kristi Wilson, in their introduction to a recent special issue of *Social Identities*, add that the NLAC was an "explosive film movement . . . born out of the historical urgency of equally explosive social and political circumstances, such as social unrest, revolutions, military dictatorships, foreign invasions, and internal and external wars."<sup>3</sup> This historical urgency, Mike Wayne suggests, demands a political cinema that does not take the individual to be the primary agent of history, which is the tendency in the narrative forms that flourish in Western capitalism, but that thinks, instead, in terms of the collective.<sup>4</sup> The politics of this "explosive movement," then, came to rely heavily on existing collectivities such as the exploited peasantry and the urban poor—in other words, subgroupings of what Frantz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth."<sup>5</sup> This intense preoccupation with the fate of the dispossessed is one of the qualities that allowed film critics to infer from the geographically dispersed practices that erupted in the 1960s the outlines of a "continental project" and even of a global movement in political cinema.<sup>6</sup>

No such generalizations about sociopolitical commitment can be made about the "new" cinemas that have emerged in the last two decades. Contemporary production is eclectic and nonprogrammatic, a cinema of tactics for a period lacking in overarching strategies, as Ismail Xavier suggests.<sup>7</sup> Although current cinematography presents a few points of con-

tinuity with the political project of NLAC, investment in history’s collective subject, “the people,” is not one of them. Contemporary documentary production tends toward the microhistoric rather than the historic, and it favors subjective, intimate, and personal perspectives and narratives rather than collective ones.<sup>8</sup> As Claudia Mesquita notes, the multiplication of intimate biographical films is indicative of this trend and evinces widespread resistance to synecdoche, the trope by which the singular is presented not in its singularity but as representative of some greater social totality.<sup>9</sup>

Depending on the trajectory one takes through contemporary documentary, one might form the impression that “the people” have gone missing.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that in the intimate spaces contemporary films portray, the social disappears completely. As Catherine Russell notes, the retreat from the social is itself a social practice,<sup>11</sup> an observation that Patricia Aufderheide complements by affirming that even the most intimate film reveals something about the shifting boundaries between the private and the public, which is undeniably a politically significant frontier.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, the films that most interest me elaborate novel ways of thinking about the collective, historical present, even as they plunge deeper into the scaled down domains of localized, private, and embodied experience.

It is in relation to such films that Deleuze’s formulation about the political most attracts me, tensed as it is between the spatio-temporal poles of the “no longer” and the “not yet” and cast under the shadow of doubt implied by its subjunctive qualifying clause. The films I have in mind date from the 2000s and include works by emerging and established directors such as Sérgio Borges (1975–), Clarissa Campolina (1979–), Gabriel Mascaro (1983–), Marcelo Pedroso (1979–), the multimedia artist Cao Guimarães (1965–), and even the late Eduardo Coutinho (1933–2014). Diverging in many respects, the films I will examine are fundamentally similar in that they delve into singular and embodied realms of experience while simultaneously gesturing toward forms of commonality and sociality. It is possible to read in these films explorations of a *becoming collective of the particular* as well as of a *becoming particular of the collective*. This state of transition finds resonance in the multiple forms of dislocation, incompleteness, and open-endedness that operate at the levels of production methods, themes, visual style, and above all, in what I will call their “affective texture.”

Elusive as it may seem, the notion of affective texture points to an important dimension of these films. As Raymond Williams argues, to access the historical present as an unfinished process (a task that typically

eludes historical thought), one has to turn to “structures of feeling”: his term for the affective forces that exert palpable pressure on the present but are not yet consolidated in institutions, social formations, or even coherent thinking and ideology.<sup>13</sup> What I am calling affective texture is similar to Williams’s “structures of feeling” and to what Kathleen Stewart calls “ordinary affects”: the “public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation” but that are “also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of.”<sup>14</sup> These different but overlapping terms can be compared to what Deleuze calls the virtual. “Every actual,” he writes, “surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images,” images that are connected to the actual through ever renewed circuits of exchange and that exert an influence on the present that is as indeterminable as it is inevitable.<sup>15</sup> The virtual, therefore, can be thought of as the immaterial, elusive potentiality that hovers over the real.<sup>16</sup> Here I propose to use the term affective texture to refer precisely to the interactions and exchanges that take place between the virtual and the real. These interactions manifest in the films in a number of ways: through inconclusive passages and dislocations, through multiple suggestions of the “no longer” and the “not yet,” and also through an interrogation of the sensorial textures of our collective, ordinary, everyday world.

In what follows, I will elaborate on these initial thoughts by examining three films: *O céu sobre os ombros* (*The Sky Above*, Sérgio Borges, 2011), *KFZ-1348* (Gabriel Mascaro and Marcelo Pedroso, 2008), and *Rua de mão dupla* (*Two Way Street*, Cao Guimarães, 2004). I will show that in these films, the “ordinary” takes on special significance as the hinge point between the particular and the general, the locus where the private and the collective commune. Toward the end of the chapter, I will offer some concluding remarks about the politics of the virtual and the ordinary that lies at the heart of these films.

### PARALLEL LIVES

Sérgio Borges’s *O céu sobre os ombros* (2011) follows three unlikely characters: the first is a Hare Krishna devotee, telemarketer, restaurant cook, and member of an organized fan club for one of Belo Horizonte’s top soccer teams; the second is a black writer with an African name who is simultaneously working on nine novels but has never published a single piece; and the third is a male-to-female transgendered subject who is a street prostitute as well as a student and teacher at the Federal University,

where she is pursuing a master's degree in gender studies. Although ostensibly a fiction film, *Céu* operates in a contact zone between fiction and documentary and consists primarily of intense observations of these urban dwellers' everyday existence. The film's fiction-documentary hybridity is appropriate because the characters' lives are highly performative and marked by unlikely combinations of social roles.<sup>17</sup> For example, the cook-telemarketer-Hare Krishna character shifts his devotion from the god Krishna to a soccer team and then helps to organize the team's fans at a soccer match. Likewise, the transgender character alternates with ease among the roles of sex worker, student, and intellectual, morphing according to the demands of the social context. In the writer's case, it is not so much the diversity of social roles that comes into view but the question of what it means to be a writer. Is a writer without readers indeed a writer? His performance of the writer's role is therefore fundamentally incomplete. It is also crucial to note that these characters are not played by professional actors, but by amateurs performing a version of their real lives. Although we cannot determine where the biographical ends and the fictional begins, a Google search of Evelyn Barbin, the transgendered subject, reveals that her filmic self is only a slight riff on her biographical self. Even the way the actors' names appear in the credits—two names appear for each, coordinated by an ambiguous "or" (rather than the usual "as")—helps blur the line between the biographical and the fictional, between being and performing, leaving the viewer mired in ambiguous, transitional terrain.

This ambiguity between the real and fictional is comparable to what Deleuze calls the "powers of the false."<sup>18</sup> This concept designates the productive potency of the "false," understood not as a derivative or secondary falsification of the true, but as something real and productive in its own right. Crucial to understanding Deleuze's elusive politics of cinema, the powers of the false describe the transformative power of the virtual—that is, the productive interaction of the imagined, the cinematic, and the fictional with the actual. To put it differently, the "false" can be seen as a version of the "not yet," a virtual possibility that emerges within the horizon of the real. Consequently, the cinema that interests Deleuze evinces this transformative potency such that "[t]he real and the imaginary . . . chase after each other, exchange their roles."<sup>19</sup> In a similar way, Borges's film is not interested in representing identities, but in exploring the interactions between the real and the virtual, which appear in an unstable, transitional state. Thus, life is caught in transit, a transit made manifest as a visual motif in the film's opening shots in which the characters appear in a moving bus

(as I will discuss in more detail below). The idea of transit is later developed further through the characters' performances of social roles and in the synergies between their real and fictional personas; consequently, we reach a point of indiscernibility and contamination that puts on display, precisely, the "powers" of the false.

This productive confusion between the virtual and the actual—which remits in part to the unstable temporalities of the "no longer" and the "not yet"—also plays out in the relationship the film establishes among the three characters who, taken together, constitute, somewhat paradoxically, a virtual community of strangers. This aspect comes to the fore in the film's opening shots, in which the characters are seen traveling in a moving bus. This five-shot sequence begins with one character, the writer, seen in medium close-up, looking downward. Sitting next to him, a woman looks distractedly out the window. The next shot shows his hands handling a book, and farther back, her hands clasped together. We cut to another character, the Hare Krishna devotee, but this time, we start with a view of his hands, which appear to be handling prayer beads in a cloth bag. Then a medium shot shows his absent-minded expression, daydreaming as the outside cityscape drifts by. Lastly, we see Everlyn, her profile juxtaposed against the passing city. She is also holding an object, a flower that comes into view when she raises it to her nose.

These initial five shots, which precede the appearance of the film's title, foreshadow relationships that lie at the core of Borges's film. Here every suggestion of spatio-temporal togetherness is accompanied by a simultaneous suggestion of distancing, spacing, and, ultimately, the solitude of each individual. The introduction of these three characters in parallel situations suggests that they share something, that they constitute a group: they are in buses, and their bodies are similarly oriented in vehicles moving from left to right. Moreover, in conjunction with the continuity that their shared physical orientation establishes, the brief sequence carefully dovetails the images of each: face (cut) hands, hands (cut) face, and then face and hands in a single shot. There is an intercalating symmetry here, a pattern that nestles the images of each character within those of the others. At first, the viewer might even suppose that the three are traveling together in the same bus—at least until it becomes clear that the third character travels by night, temporally separated from the other two. The night shot introduces a disjunction in what might have seemed a contiguous, shared present. Other disjunctions, too, are inscribed in each shot. We hear the noise of other passengers in the bus and thus sense their physical proximity in

a shared space. Yet, these others are off-screen; their presence is only felt, but always kept out of view, such that they are at once present and absent.

The parallel structure of the introductory shots may raise expectations that these characters share a story, cohabit a single narrative. Yet this parallel structure really remits to parallelism in a more fundamental sense: their stories, which are sparse and only minimally narrative, never cross. Like passengers in a bus, they are strangers cohabiting the ordinary space of a city. Similarly, their images are intercut so that they share separately the space-time of the film. Not only are the characters strangers to each other, but they also appear to live lives characterized by sparse interpersonal exchange. Even when in the company of others, they almost always seem to be alone (as in the bus in the opening shots, or when Evelyn shares a table with strangers lunching quietly in a restaurant, or when the writer is talking to a woman in his apartment who is kept off-screen, obstructed from view by a wall so that he is visually alone). A memorable sequence capturing Murari Krishna's telemarketing job also encodes forms of collective solitude; in a long shot of the office space, we see him as one among countless workers laboring in adjacent stations, at once grouped and separated in the workplace, talking incessantly on the telephone in conversations that forestall meaningful communication.

The characters' shared aloneness finds resonance in the film's occasional panning shots of the city. These shots are taken from such a distance that the city appears to be uninhabited, or inhabited by buildings rather than humans. The second of these panning shots happens at night; here the city is rendered as an agglomeration of buildings and flickering lights, as if the people had gone missing.<sup>20</sup> The feeling of urban solitude that these shots suggest intensifies in scenes in which the characters appear alone in the city—as when Evelyn walks deserted streets, or in a long lyrical sequence in which Murari is seen skateboarding and doing graffiti, his body the only discernible human figure moving among urban structures, passing cars, and city lights. By interspersing solitary images of each of these characters, the film creates a feeling of collective solitude, of closely knit relationships among parallel lives that converge only in an imaginary vanishing point that the film never reaches. The film's three characters form "a people" whose time is "not yet"; their togetherness is suggested but deferred.

Unstable and perennially transitioning, alone as foreigners in a strange world, the characters' experience borders on the exilic. Exile is to some extent implied by the writer's African, non-Brazilian name, Edjucu Moio, which remits to a migratory past. The little we learn about Evelyn's tra-

jectory from a small town to the city, a break with provincial origins that enables her urban self-renewal, also suggests a kind of exile. As Laura Marks observes, Deleuze's notion of political cinema speaks acutely to postcolonial spaces where different languages, histories, and regimes of knowledge tensely meet and contend. At these borders, many postcolonial subjects inhabit the "no longer" and the "not yet" of different peoples.<sup>21</sup> These exilic subjects, then, need to construct meaning in "the movement between two or more cultures," on the borders between a collective past that is no longer and a present to which they do not fully belong.<sup>22</sup> Borges's film suggests that this exilic experience is not restricted to the context of transnational and postcolonial citizenship but is lived out, to some degree, within national and metropolitan borders, especially by subjects who do not belong to fully configured and sanctioned forms of social identity but instead move in between them.

Having said all of this, before drawing any conclusions based on *Céu*'s multilayered evocations of the virtual and its oscillations between the "no longer" and the "not yet," I would like to turn to the other two films and to the notion of the ordinary, which, along with the virtual, is central to contemporary documentaries.

### EXCAVATING THE ORDINARY

Although the characters in *Céu* are unique, and in a sense extraordinary, we can also think of Sérgio Borges's film as an immersion into the ordinary world of everyday life, a world in which the flow of time barely has any narrative momentum. The film adjusts its rhythm to the rhythms of ordinary time. This illustrates what Ivone Margulies once called the "hyperrealism of the everyday," which, in counterpoint to the realism of classical narrative cinema, is characterized by minimalism of content and keen attention to seemingly uneventful time, such that it appears that in this hyperrealism "nothing happens."<sup>23</sup> Riding in a bus, bathing, eating, watching TV, and lying in bed: these are the types of nonevents that occupy most of Borges's film. Moreover, the spaces in which these nonevents unfold are quintessentially ordinary, such as the shared spaces of the city, or the familiar, "private" landscape of urban apartments. In this regard, *Céu* exemplifies a trend in recent Brazilian audiovisual production that film critic César Guimarães calls the "return of the ordinary," a return that makes of cinema a compendium of everyday "figures, gestures, voices, styles, and ways of speaking."<sup>24</sup>



But how does this cinema understand the "ordinary" and what potential does the ordinary harbor? Evocative of what is "common," "average," or "normal," the ordinary is not as simple a concept as it first appears. Its ample meaning refers to both the familiar and the habitual as well as to whatever is deemed unworthy of attention or without value. Paradoxically, the word names that which demands no particular name. Seen in this light, the ordinary does not point to specific people and phenomena, but rather to a field of contradictions, an accommodating space wherein things can be at once ubiquitous and invisible, present and absent. These contradictory pairs of adjectives aptly describe the anonymity of strangers that we see in Borges's film as well as the absent-presence of the ever-multiplying ordinary things that furnish the spaces of our distraction. As a shared *mise en scène* of everyday life, some have imagined the ordinary to be the common ground of the present, a repository for an unfulfilled solidarity that is the substrate of our otherwise divided, solitary experience of the everyday.<sup>25</sup> In this vein, the ordinary designates a commonality without fixed contours, a relatedness that weights on the present but is only vaguely felt.

*KFZ-1348* (2008), the first feature film by Marcelo Pedroso and Gabriel Mascaro, and *Rua de mão dupla* (2004), by Cao Guimarães, explore ordinary time and space in a manner similar to Borges's film. However, they are also intensely invested in the material stuff that fills the everyday. In these films, the objects of ordinary life take on meaning as repositories of personal and social histories; they become the meeting ground of the private and the collective that the films attempt to unearth. *KFZ* and *Rua* therefore excavate the materiality of the everyday to show not what exists in a consolidated form, but the lingering of what has passed and the intimations of what might be yet to come.

Pedroso and Mascaro's film takes its title from the license plate of a 1965 Volkswagen Beetle that the directors find in the junkyard of an unidentified Brazilian city. The lack of a specified location as well as the choice of a car that was for decades one of the most common vehicles in Brazil situate the film squarely within the confines of the ordinary. It is worth noting that the junkyard is a peculiar place, a "heterotopia," which, as Foucault suggests, is a place "outside of all places," a sort of counter-place that, like the cemetery, constitutes a space apart for things that no longer belong in the "normal" world.<sup>26</sup> Despite the extraordinary nature of this "other space" (*heterotopia*), in the junkyard, some of the characteristics of the ordinary are not just present but are also intensified. If the ordinary implies depreciation and invisibility, here depreciation takes the

form of material abandonment and decay; invisibility becomes an injunction imposed on objects that are willfully moved out of sight. Indeed, one of the definitions of the ordinary, as Guimarães suggests, drawing from Michel de Certeau, is that which lacks a proper place, existing without fully belonging.

To elaborate on this notion of the ordinary as a sort of out-of-placeness, it is useful to differentiate between “object” and “thing.” The rusty remains of cars are not exactly *objects*—a word that implies a *subject*, a user that gives them meaning. Rather, these are objects-in-ruin, objects abandoned or forgotten by subjects and therefore reduced to mere *things*, material assemblies that are gradually falling apart.<sup>27</sup> In the junkyard, objects pause for a moment on their way to ruin so that some of their parts may be recycled or saved. The junkyard is a space poised between the “no longer” and the “not yet” of the decaying car commodity, a space where the car object becomes a mere thing and lingers in this state of transition before becoming scrap metal and debris.

But what is gained by making this distinction? Moreover, why would cinema explore this passage of objects into ruin? The owner of the yard, a car mechanic who habitually sits in front of his shop and counts the cars that drive by, suggests one reason by noting the staggering proliferation of cars outside: “When the world began there were twelve people. Today there are trillions ... Here, during the day, some fifteen hundred cars should go by. Instead, there are more than 3 million ... You can count fifteen hundred in an hour!” There is some lucidity in this man’s seemingly unhinged, awkward speech. Sitting in front of his ruinous junkyard, the mechanic accounts for the mind-numbing multiplication of objects—a phenomenon with particular relevance for Brazil, one of the so-called “emerging economies” where democratic inclusion has become synonymous with capacity to consume. In contrast to the forward-moving, fast-paced momentum of progress (which, as Walter Benjamin famously notes, piles debris at the feet of the angel of history), the junkyard operates by a different spatio-temporal logic. It is a refuge for devalued things, things guarded by a quixotic mechanic. The junkyard, particularly as it appears in the film, stalls the forward-moving thrust of consumer capitalism and allows for ruinous things to linger in the temporality of the “no longer” and the “not yet.”

The notion that things withhold something valuable that should be retrieved guides the construction of *KFZ*. In a series of early shots that repeat, with slight variations, several times, the camera surveys debris

scattered around the yard, performing a cinematic excavation of its holdings. Starting with long, establishing shots of the yard, the sequence moves to medium shots of cars and car parts, and finally focuses on the Volkswagen Beetle referenced in the title, probing its inner and outer surfaces with close-ups. This repeated process of approximation seems to interrogate the decaying material as if asking the thing to gaze back at the camera and speak. Interspersed with these plunges into the car's materiality, the film presents a visual history of the object from its making in 1965 to its present, ruinous state. We see footage from a Volkswagen factory in the 1960s as well as a government newsreel trumpeting development and industrial growth. We also encounter the vehicle's eight previous owners, who, due to the car's progressive devaluation, represent a vertical, socio-economic cross section of Brazilian society ranging from the original, well-off owner to the recovering drug addict and day laborer who owned the car last. Monologues in which previous owners reminisce about the car overlay scenes from their daily lives. These segments also include photographs of the owners and the car drawn from family archives that help reconstruct the vehicle's long and complex history. The combination of this assorted footage with the images of the decaying car suggests the film's central conceit: it is as if *KFZ* were not as much eliciting memories from people, but retrieving them from the decaying object itself. Moving back and forth between the real and the virtual, which here is to say, "between the circuits of perception and recollection," the film attempts to tease out elements from the virtual cloud that surrounds the Beetle.<sup>28</sup> A swan song to the dying car, the film performs a redemptive incantation of the nonauratic, abandoned, and inanimate thing.

Recall Deleuze's affirmation that every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images. *KFZ* seems to search this cloud, opening circuits and bringing into relief glimpses of the Beetle's past. To put it differently, in *KFZ*, the mere thing is asked to reveal its social and affective history even as it falls into ruin. This is the dramaturgical thread that holds this delicate, almost tentative film together—which ends with the Beetle being torn apart, irreversibly reduced to scrap metal. But this focus on the thing is not a rejection of the human and the social. What is recovered from the thing is, at least in part, the social. The car's unearthed history includes substantial human investment, starting with its initial manufacture, when mere things (metal, glass, etc.) are transformed via human labor into an object of use or market value; this human investment continues throughout the following decades when the Volkswagen's successive owners invest

the object with affective meaning. *KFZ* restages Proust's idea of "involuntary memory," the car playing the role of a collective madeleine from which memories re-emerge. Despite having been the object of prized, private ownership, the disowned car is approached here as the ruin of a virtual community, a link among complete strangers who are otherwise separated by time, space, and social class. Although *KFZ* at first seems drastically distinct from *Céu*, the films are related in how they explore the temporalities of the "no longer" and the "not yet" of the community. Together, they suggest a sense of the collective that is paradoxically both present and absent.

Cao Guimarães's *Rua de mão dupla* (2004) relates to and radicalizes key elements of *Céu* and *KFZ*. In this film, which mixes documentary filmmaking with art installation and social experimentation, six complete strangers in possession of camcorders exchange apartments for twenty-four hours and are invited to film whatever they wish in the stranger's home. At the end of the twenty-four hours, each participant sits in front of the camcorder and attempts to describe the apartments' permanent inhabitants, reconstructing them only from the traces they have left behind. The film presents the images in split-screen format so that we simultaneously see the footage of each pair of participants occupying the space of the absent other. Through this original combination of social experimentation, participatory video installation, and documentary cinema, Guimarães's film effectively inverts typical discursive patterns of documentary filmmaking. While the documentary camera often turns its lens toward ordinary people and asks them to speak about themselves, here ordinary people are themselves behind the camera and explore the absence rather than the presence of human subjects.<sup>29</sup>

In Guimarães's film, the ordinary also emerges with force in all of its ambiguity. The assertiveness of the ordinary here is partly due to the choice of participants: average Belo Horizontinos whom one might encounter in the street or in a bus without as much as a glance. The footage, shot with affordable cameras and with no aesthetic intervention by the filmmaker, is also staunchly ordinary. While in *Céu* and *KFZ* ordinary worlds are treated with carefully, even tenderly composed shots, here the approach is unpolished; it produces decidedly ordinary images of ordinary things. In its unabashed ordinariness, even ugliness, the footage is akin to a ruinous thing, debris, the by-product of a social experiment. The choice of middle-class apartments as the film's location is also significant: the apartment building, with its homogenous, compact, often barely separated

private spaces, evokes architecturally the collective nature of our seemingly separate lives; however, it also renders, by extension, the ordinary's inherent ambiguity. The film's dislocation of the six participants explores and accentuates this ambiguity by provoking simultaneous impressions of estrangement and intimacy and suggesting the ordinary as the locus where the individual and the collective secretly convene.

As I mentioned above (and as Georg Simmel noted in his seminal examination of metropolitan life), urban living entails physical proximity and impinging contact with strangers that one learns to ignore—in effect reducing these strangers to a kind of absent-presence.<sup>30</sup> By literally displacing bodies from their ordinary dwellings, Guimarães's film remits to the condition of absent-presence that characterizes ordinary urban experience, but also turns that experience on its head. While urban living demands that one ignores the bodies of strangers who are physically near (like the strangers in a bus in *Céu*), in *Rua*, the participants are asked to sense the presence of bodies that are physically absent. In this process, the stuff of everyday life plays a role comparable to that of the Beetle in *KFZ*. To borrow a concept from Nicolas Bourriaud, *Rua* and *KFZ* produce "relational objects," mere things that become the mediators of a community of strangers.<sup>31</sup>

Each participant, seeking intimations of an absent stranger in the empty home, plays the role of a detective at a crime scene or an archeologist at a deserted site. With the camcorder as a tool, participants excavate the apartments for traces of the other lodged in the most banal, everyday items. They peek into bathroom drawers, closets, and fridges, and gaze at myriad trinkets ranging from decorative statues and books on shelves to a worn-out Brillo pad abandoned on a kitchen sink. To one of these "detectives," a comb reveals the color of someone's hair. Another suspicious participant, taking the experiment to be a reality TV kind of game, pauses to wonder if the dweller has left false clues such as misplaced objects or misleading photos. Another is puzzled by the incoherence of the objects in the apartment—as if the permanent dweller lacked a sense of *mise en scène*. Yet another participant, comfortable with speculation, infers from the items strewn on a desk that the absent dweller teaches but does not practice architecture. From the six pillows on the bed, he supposes that the home belongs to a lonely man. Still another impressionable participant infers from the home's delicate decoration that the dweller must be a delicate, slim woman. In their search for clues, the participants' gaze often rests on the most ordinary of items, such as empty light sockets or

the contents of a garbage can. Some participants compulsively use the zoom, as if repeated approximations and retreats could tease out a message. Confronted with the stuff of someone else's life, it is as if each participant wished the objects could reciprocate his or her gaze and reveal a secret—again, much like the approach to the Beetle that we find in *KEZ*.

Also like in *KEZ*, the film's community is socioeconomically diverse—though here the diversity is less dramatic. The participants in *Rua* belong, we might say, to a broadly defined middle class. Yet the group is not homogenous, and this becomes especially notable in the third pair of participants, which includes an upper-class white woman and a black writer who, like Edjucu in *Céu*, lives in relative poverty. This writer has difficulty making himself at home in the apartment of the well-off stranger. He feels like an intruding outsider, to the point that he refuses to use the bedroom and sleeps on the living-room couch. In contrast to the other participants, his camera looks repeatedly toward the window, as if not wanting to invade the absent dweller's privacy. In turn, the upper-class white woman also feels uneasy in the black writer's home. She complains that the place seems unkempt and exudes an unidentifiable but disagreeable smell. The apartment's location in a poor neighborhood also puts her on the defensive and makes her evince and, to some extent, recognize her prejudices. She spends much of the night attuned to the sounds of a party in a neighboring building, which, despite her class-based expectations, never derails into anything other than a normal birthday party.

As I mentioned before in relation to *Céu*, contemporary urban life has an exilic dimension, particularly for those who, like the characters of Borges's film, have complex, hybrid identities. This exilic dimension finds filmic expression through a combination of generic registers. Filmic discourse moves between established forms and genres, reflecting the insufficiency of any single genre as a representational vehicle for identities and communities that are in transit among various forms of the "no longer" and the "not yet." Guimarães's documentary, which incorporates installation art and social experiment, also enacts its own complex mixture of registers to the point that it is difficult to think of it as only a "film."<sup>32</sup> More importantly, the production strategy we find in *Rua*, that is, the dislocation of the apartment dwellers, ultimately explores the possibilities of an orchestrated displacement—a displacement that produces a momentary exile lived in what would otherwise seem familiar, domestic, ordinary space. Forms of intimacy and estrangement ensue, exacerbating the ordinary's inherent ambiguities. Even the material objects of these apartments are subjected to a kind of dislocation. In the absence of the human

subjects who habitually imbue them with meaning, they become ruinous things, traces of an absent-presence that the visitors attempt to conjure and recover.

These films give the impression that “the people” are “no longer,” or that they are “not yet.” Their exploration of the ruinous and the emergent—evocative of Deleuze’s definition of political cinema—are no guarantee of political edge, nor should these elements necessarily be taken as a positive sign. To some extent, the films can all be understood as symptomatic of contemporary sociohistorical conditions—conditions that had not been fully revealed at the time of Deleuze’s writing.

Do these explorations of virtual communities, then, reflect our contemporaneity—a contemporaneity marked by the paradoxical simultaneity of hyperconnectivity and individualism, such that we are increasingly “alone together”? Are their evocations of incompleteness and displacement symptomatic of the neoliberal present’s structural instability as well as of the difficulties we face, from the field of culture, in envisioning convincing collective projects and horizons?<sup>33</sup> While there is some truth to these notions, I would argue that the films are not just passive reflections of the conundrums of contemporaneity. Exploratory in nature, they quarry ordinary worlds as if to reveal anew and affect, if ever so slightly, the way we perceive our shared present. Delving into what I earlier called affective textures, these recent films operate on ambiguous, tentative terrain. Their potential is yet to be seen.

## NOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 216.
2. David William Foster, *Latin American Documentary Filmmaking: Major Works* (Phoenix: University of Arizona Press, 2013), x.
3. Antonio Traverso and Kristi Wilson, “Political Documentary Cinema in Latin America,” *Social Identities* 19, no. 3–4 (2013): 276.
4. Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 60.
5. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004).
6. For the continental articulation, see Michael T. Martin’s excellent two-volume anthology *New Latin American Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), as well as Zuzana M. Pick’s *New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

- For the global perspective, framed through Solanas and Getino's concept of "Third Cinema," see Mike Wayne's lucidly argued *Political Film*.
7. Ismail Xavier, "Cinema nacional: táticas para um tempo sem estratégias," *Comunicação & educação* 6, no. 18 (2008): 81.
  8. Karla Holanda, "Documentário brasileiro contemporâneo e micro-história," *Revista de história e estudos culturais* 3 (2004): 2.
  9. Cláudia Mesquita, "Retratos em diálogo: notas sobre o documentário brasileiro recente," *Novos estudos-CEBRAP* 86 (2010): 105.
  10. For example, Eduardo Coutinho's *Peões* (2004) is constructed against the backdrop of three earlier documentaries: João Batista de Andrade's *Greve* (1979), Renato Tapajós's *Linha de montagem* (1982), and Leon Hirszman's *ABC da greve* (1979), about the auto-worker strikes of 1979 and 1980. Coutinho's film takes place in the private homes of these same workers. Collective mobilization becomes the detonator for personal memory and is revisited through footage played on their television sets.
  11. Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 16.
  12. Patricia Aufderheide, "Public Intimacy: The Development of First-person Documentary," *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* 25, no. 1 (1997): 16–18.
  13. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 133–34.
  14. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.
  15. Gilles Deleuze, "The Actual and the Virtual," in *Dialogues II*, trans. Elliot Ross Albert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 148.
  16. Although I cannot provide an in-depth analysis of what Deleuze means by the virtual, it is worth noting that his concept is largely derived from Henri Bergson's work (1896) *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1990). As David Rodowick notes, the actual is the dimension of space, perception, and the present, while the virtual is the dimension of time, memory, and the past. The "no longer" and the "not yet" are temporal figures that refer to the virtual. For Rodowick's take on this, see his *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
  17. For the director's take on the centrality of performance for the film, see his comments on the film's website: <http://www.teia.art.br/br/obras/o-ceu-sobre-os-ombros>.
  18. Deleuze, *Cinema* 2, 127.
  19. *Ibid.*
  20. For another exploration of this visual theme, see Clarissa Campolina's stunning short film *Adormecidos* (2011). Campolina is Borges's collaborator in the Teia production company.



21. Laura U. Marks, “A Deleuzian Politics of Hybrid Cinema,” *Screen* 35, no. 3 (1994): 245.
22. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 65.
23. Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).
24. César Guimarães, “O retorno do homem ordinário do cinema,” *Contemporânea: revista de comunicação e cultura* 3, no. 2 (2009): 78.
25. See, for example, Michael Taussig, “Tactility and Distraction,” *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (1991): 147–53.
26. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.
27. For an interesting discussion of the difference between things and objects, see Bill Brown, “Thing theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.
28. Laura U. Marks, “A Deleuzian Politics,” 257.
29. Consuelo Lins, “Rua de Mão Dupla: documentário e arte contemporânea,” in *Transcineamas*, ed. Kátia Maciel (Rio de Janeiro: Contracapa, 2009), 327–40.
30. See Georg Simmel’s seminal essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 409–24.
31. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du Reel, 2002).
32. Note that the project was initially presented as a video installation.
33. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2012). On this paradox, see also Martín Hopenhayn, “Vida insular en la aldea global: paradojas en curso,” *Polis* 2 (2002), <http://polis.revues.org/7857>.

PART II

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The Ethics of Encounter

## Ethnobiographic Encounters and Interculturalism: New Modes of Reflexivity in Contemporary Documentaries from Argentina

*Joanna Page*

Documentary production in Argentina enjoyed a remarkable surge in the wake of the 2001 financial crisis. Filmmakers and video-activists lent important support to political protests, filming *piquetero*<sup>1</sup> roadblocks and the occupation of factories by workers; they also registered the increasing visibility of impoverished and marginalized figures on the streets of Buenos Aires, such as the swelling ranks of *cartoneros* (waste pickers) who flocked to the more affluent city-center to pick through household rubbish for recyclable goods. Many of these documentaries harken back to the political immediacy and raw aesthetics of the radical filmmaking movements of 1960s Latin America. At the other end of the spectrum, highly reflexive documentaries have explored questions of subjectivity, the power of the media, or the enduring legacies of the military regime (1976–1983). For Clara Kriger, these films provide evidence of “a repositioning of the documentary in epistemological terms,” critical as they are of the positivist assumptions

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of a genre traditionally associated with the dissemination of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, the autobiographical has often moved center-stage to derail the more objective claims of historical or political accounts, as it does in Andrés Di Tella's (1958–) *La televisión y yo* (*Television and Me*, 2002) or Albertina Carri's (1973–) *Los rubios* (*The Blonds*, 2003).

Although the initial wave of video-activism catalyzed by the 2001 crisis has since subsided, what has remained is a sustained interest among filmmakers—fiction and documentary—in recording the experience of those on the nation's social and economic margins. If the many voices lamenting the “Latinamericanization” of Argentina since the crisis have invoked the term pejoratively to refer to a new wave of violence and insecurity, several filmmakers have set out with the much more positive aim of promoting a greater understanding of non-European cultures and communities in Argentina: the ethnic other within the nation's borders. Over six hundred thousand people residing in Argentina identify themselves as belonging to indigenous ethnic groups; of these, almost a third live in indigenous communities.<sup>3</sup> Their rights and traditions have recently become much more prominent on the nation's political agenda and increasingly visible on its film festival screens.<sup>4</sup> The first Festival of Indigenous Cinema was held in Buenos Aires in 2012; similar festivals took place for the first time in Chaco province in 2008, Patagonia (Neuquén) in 2011, and Córdoba in 2013. They have provided an important forum for screening a growing number of films by indigenous directors and groups in Argentina, as well as other films on indigeneity from across Latin America.

As Jens Andermann observes, the global refashioning of the documentary form from objective *vérité* styles to self-representation and performance coincides in Argentina with “an exceptional and peculiar ‘explosion of the real’” that came on the heels of the 2001 crisis.<sup>5</sup> The extraordinary extent of social and political mobilization in post-2001 Argentina has, Andermann suggests, “to some extent countered or delayed the ‘subjective turn’ noticed by [Stella] Bruzzi, [Michael] Chanan, and [Michael] Renov in contemporary, global documentary film.”<sup>6</sup> However, a significant number of directors have sought to combine reflexive or performative approaches with a keen intent to explore new forms of marginalization, such that, as Andermann notes, “the foregrounded auteurial subject is both a target of ethical, epistemological, and political self-reflexivity *and* an instrument of social enquiry.”<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter, I will focus on two recent films on indigenous experience in Argentina that experiment with certain forms of reflexivity without,

in the typical fashion of many reflexive documentaries, undermining their own truth-claims or discounting the representation of the other as a mere projection of the self. Fermín Rivera's *Huellas y memoria de Jorge Prelorán* (*Traces and Memory of Jorge Prelorán*, 2009) follows the life and career of the renowned ethnographic filmmaker, interspersing clips from his most famous documentaries with reflections by Prelorán and his family; Ulises Rosell's (1970–) *El etnógrafo* (*The Ethnographer*, 2012) affords us insight into the day-to-day experiences of an English student of anthropology, John Palmer, who married into a Wichí community, the subject of his fieldwork, and continues to work as its advocate. Both films could therefore be understood as practicing ethnography “at a remove,” taking as their central theme the relationship developed between the anthropologist/ethnographer and the individuals and community with which he comes into contact. This oblique approach, I will argue, encourages a new emphasis on *interculturalism* instead of multiculturalism, in the manner explored in recent work by Néstor García Canclini; it also allows for the development of alternative kinds of reflexivity that following Bruno Latour, I will call *infrareflexivity* rather than metareflexivity.<sup>8</sup> These films approach an encounter with the ethnic other without repeating either the positivist dogmatism of many anthropological or televisual documentaries, which proceed as if knowledge of the other may be straightforwardly gained and communicated or, at the other extreme, the postmodern tenet that the other is merely a construction of the self.

### *HUELLAS Y MEMORIA DE JORGE PRELORÁN*

Fermín Rivera's film pays homage to the pioneering work of the ethnographic filmmaker Jorge Prelorán (1933–2009). Exiled during the military regime, Prelorán spent almost two decades teaching and making films at the University of California, Los Angeles, before returning to Argentina in 1994; this time abroad accounts, in part, for the greater recognition he has enjoyed in international circles than in his home country. Three of his major films—*Hermógenes Cayo, imaginero* (*Hermógenes Cayo: The Image Man*, 1970); *Cochengo Miranda* (1975); and *Zulay frente al siglo XXI* (*Zulay: Facing the 21st Century*, 1989)—loom large in Rivera's account of his approach to filmmaking. They are excellent examples of Prelorán's lifelong commitment to overcoming primitivism and exoticism in the representation of indigenous people and of the new genre he develops: the ethnobiography, which becomes in Prelorán's hands an intimate study of

the daily life of an individual from an indigenous community and of the relationship that develops between filmmaker and subject.

Prelorán rejects the argument-driven approaches of what he calls “consciousness-raising or protest cinema [*cine de denuncia*]”; instead, he favors the exploration of individual lives, in all their complexity, at once unremarkable and extraordinary.<sup>9</sup> His protagonists do not represent particular social roles; his aim is not so much to emphasize cultural difference as to reveal a shared humanity that transcends ethnic identities. He insists that his films “are not anthropological or ethnographical but human documents,”<sup>10</sup> and that his aim is to engage his viewers’ emotions rather than their capacity for intellectual argument and debate.<sup>11</sup> These views do not comprise any naïve claim to representational transparency, as is clear from the acknowledgment within Prelorán’s films of the extent to which the narrative is shaped by the relationship between filmmaker and subject. Prelorán does not fully abandon a belief in the possibility of representation, however: crucially, he presents the ethnographic encounter as a relationship that brings about genuine change through sustained contact with otherness. His ethnobiographies emerge from months and years invested in living in a community and earning the trust of its members before a camera is ever switched on. Rivera highlights both this essential period of preparation and the ongoing involvement of Jorge and Mabel, Jorge’s wife, with the protagonists of his films. “There is a relationship of respect,” explains Prelorán in Rivera’s film. “You have to be committed [*entregado*].” Elsewhere, he writes that time becomes “one of the nonnegotiable factors in the process of making ethnobiographies.”<sup>12</sup> Rivera films a phone call Prelorán receives from the son of Hermógenes Cayo, a semireclusive, Quechua-speaking painter and woodcarver from the Andean plateau and the subject of his first ethnobiography. The story of Hermógenes Cayo never ends, says Prelorán when he puts down the phone: his own life is now linked with that of Hermógenes and his family in a way that cannot be torn apart.

In this way, Rivera encourages us to see Prelorán’s films not as the products of an encounter with the other, but as catalysts for relationships that stretch far beyond the time of filmmaking. The knowledge they disseminate about a particular community is of diminished importance in Rivera’s film. These films stand out instead because they bear witness to a relationship of trust and respect between two human beings from very different cultures, and to the cultural exchange that this makes possible. Rather than lament the inevitable distortions wrought by the presence of

the observing anthropologist, Rivera, like Prelorán, celebrates such entanglements as evidence of the real encounters that precede and outlast the making of films.

That this celebration of real encounters does not hide any naïve assumptions about the relationship between a beneficent first-world film director and his indigenous subjects is clear, too, from the space Rivera dedicates to Prelorán's searching self-examination in *Zulay, frente al siglo XXI*. In this film, Prelorán documents the relationship he and Mabel strike up with Zulay, a young girl they meet while shooting a documentary in an indigenous community in Otavalo, Ecuador. Zulay decides to stay with them for a while in Los Angeles. She goes to Los Angeles with the aim of expanding sales of local crafts in the US market, but this is unsuccessful; meanwhile, she learns some English and ends up helping Jorge edit the film. In Rivera's film, Prelorán explains that he finally found the angle he had been searching for in the experiences of emigration shared by Zulay and Mabel. Consequently, their conversations on the topic become the documentary's central focus. Prelorán thereby refracts the anthropologist's gaze: Zulay and Mabel may come from strikingly different cultures, but there is something common to be found in their experience of transculturation, emigration, and reintegration. In his own film, Rivera accentuates these parallels between Zulay and Mabel by exploring in greater detail the Preloráns' experience in the USA and their return to Argentina; he also highlights that they travel to Ecuador to reinterview Zulay about her subsequent life back in her community.

Transculturation thus emerges as the key theme of *Zulay, frente al siglo XXI*. However, Prelorán does not approach this phenomenon as a purist defender of traditional indigenous identities, but presents it instead as an intrinsic part of cultural development. As Mabel reminds Zulay, the Otavaleños have a long history of forays into other communities and countries for the purpose of trade expansion, stretching back to Inca times. Many current-day Otavaleños are devout Catholics, but practice that religion alongside animist and shamanist beliefs. Zulay's father decides to send his children to school in Quito, where they are taught in Spanish and—as Mabel points out—with reference to the values and priorities of a national curriculum; one of Zulay's sisters has also learned some English. The ethnographer, we are led to understand, does not intervene in what, until now, has been an isolated community, but in one that has been continually shaped—like all cultures—by its relationships with others around it. Prelorán thus shifts the emphasis away from the problems inherent in

our knowledge of the ethnic other to the processes of transculturation that simultaneously bind and separate all cultures.

These processes are not, however, presented as unproblematic in Prelorán's films. As the epigraph to *Zulay* suggests, those who emigrate become "eternal wanderers," belonging neither here nor there. Zulay remains a foreigner in the USA but experiences the painful rejection of her community on her return to Otavalo; Prelorán's film ends with the question, left hanging, of what Zulay plans to do with her life. "I don't know," she replies. "I don't know." He also wonders whether Jorge and Mabel acted rightly by encouraging her to spend time abroad. This question, left unanswered in Prelorán's searching film, is effectively resolved in Rivera's, which provides a kind of postdated vindication of Prelorán's intervention in Zulay's life by including an interview in which Zulay talks about her reacceptance into the community and her new role in providing services for English-speaking tourists. This has brought benefits to her and to the wider community and—importantly for her, and for Rivera—has enhanced intercultural understanding.

Paradoxically, perhaps, it is Zulay's experience growing up as a member of an indigenous community in Ecuador that has prepared her for this new position as much as her exposure to life in the USA. As a member of her community and, simultaneously, an Ecuadorian citizen, she has been required to shift repeatedly between two languages and cultures. García Canclini suggests that Latin America's indigenous groups can offer a vital model of interculturalism in a world in which difference is becoming subsumed into uniformity under the influence of global capitalism. While the majority of US citizens feel no need to learn any language other than English or to stimulate their imaginations with anything other than their own films or television programs, "indigenous people have the advantage of knowing at least two languages, using traditional and modern resources, combining paid work with work for the community, reciprocity with commercial competence."<sup>13</sup> Zulay specifically endorses this view: while Mabel is concerned that having to attend a Spanish-speaking school and learn from a national curriculum will erode her cultural roots, Zulay is fully conscious of the advantages of bilingualism, explaining that she did not lose her own culture, but gained another.

In her reading of Prelorán's film, Sharon R. Sherman finds that "*Zulay* reveals the process of construction and collaboration that is usually hidden from view and makes it a central issue. What begins as a project about the Other ends as an extraordinary and evocative film by the self about the



self.”<sup>14</sup> While *Zulay* undoubtedly lays bare the collaborative process of ethnographic filmmaking, Sherman jumps too quickly to the conclusion that these points of reflexivity reveal that the primary knowledge gained is of the self. Rivera’s film gives us a very different reading of Prelorán’s work, emphasizing the very real encounters with cultural difference staged in these films and their power to transform both self and other. It points repeatedly to Prelorán’s choice to focus on the transcultural, that which is shared between cultures, as a point from which an understanding of cultural difference and a challenge to racial and ethnic prejudice may begin. Rivera’s film about filmmaking, his ethnography “at a remove,” shifts the focus from the transcultural and transculturation to interculturalism: from a recognition of shared human experience and an account of cultural exchange to the active promotion of dialogue and interaction between different cultures.

Prelorán’s films were, perhaps, ahead of their time. They were infused with a political conscience, but showed no interest in appropriating the marginalized for ideological ends, as was the wont of much Latin American filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s. These very personal documents find a place—especially through Rivera’s film—in contemporary filmmaking, from which to speak to and challenge the recent interest in subjective filmmaking, reflexive and performative documentary modes, autobiography, and the biodrama. They bear witness to the fact that an emphasis on the subjective, the autobiographical, and the reflexive need not chart a shift from political engagement to narcissistic introspection; nor do they necessarily undermine, displace, or discredit the possibility of a genuine encounter with the cultural and ethnic other.

### *EL ETNÓGRAFO*

Like Rivera’s film, Rosell’s documentary is inspired by the work of an extraordinary individual who leaves his country and culture to live in an indigenous community. Having made first contact with the Wichí community in the mid-1970s, John Palmer returned to carry out fieldwork for his doctoral thesis, and then again, this time to settle for good in the community known as Hoktek T’oi (or Lapacho Mocho in Spanish), located in the Chaco region in northeastern Argentina. He lives there today with his Wichí wife, Tojweya, and their children. Their fifth son was born during the making of the film.

While Rosell’s film has no clear narrative progression, it is constructed around a series of recurring motifs. These include John’s home life, the

battle he wages against illegal appropriations of Wichí land, and the direct conflict between the laws of the community and those of the nation with respect to marriage and the age of sexual consent. It is this conflict that structures the film's initial drama. A man has been imprisoned for having sexual intercourse with a girl who has, according to Wichí custom, chosen him as her husband upon reaching the menstruating age. She later gives birth to their child. At the hospital, it is discovered that her identity papers state that she is nine years old.

What happens when the sexual norms and marriage conventions of an ancient community are deemed illegal by the more recently formed nation that now encompasses their land? The film ends with the man's fate still unknown, as he awaits a trial that has already been delayed for several years. Intercultural conflict is presented as more intractable in Rosell's film than in Rivera's, produced not just by a lack of understanding on the part of individuals, but also by clashes with powerful legal, administrative, and economic forces at national and supranational levels that have no easy resolution. Rosell follows John in his advocacy work in support of the community's land rights, as he firmly confronts and denounces incursions into land that has been legally designated as belonging to Argentina's *pueblos originarios* (indigenous peoples). These laws are poorly enforced, and land entitlements can easily be lost through administrative incompetence or corruption: little prevents the march of multinationals into the region, burning forests as they go to clear land for intensive agricultural development or oil exploration. As John explains, it is not a battle they are winning.

The reformed 1994 constitution includes an article protecting the cultural identity of Argentina's indigenous peoples and recognizing their rights to the land they have traditionally occupied. However, this provision has come into direct conflict with the neoliberal policies actively pursued by the state since the 1990s, including widespread privatization, the sale of land to multinational companies, the creation of a highly favorable regime for mining exports, and the return of control over land to the provinces, which, as Maristella Svampa observes, continue to labor under the illusion that extractive activities provide the quickest (or only) route to local development.<sup>15</sup> Although recent years have seen a significant wave of mobilization among indigenous communities in the country, their political representation at local and national levels remains problematic, and discrimination is rife. The legal issues raised in Rosell's film clearly demonstrate the inadequacy of discourses of multiculturalism in relation

to current-day Argentina and demand, instead, an intercultural approach. They cannot be dealt with from the relativist perspective ordained by multiculturalism, simply by acknowledging the presence of alternative customs and systems of governance. There is a pressing need to shift the focus onto the dynamics of cultural encounters and to tackle the thorny issue of the competing interests of indigenous communities, local governments, the state, and multinational companies.

*El etnógrafo* (2012) does not propose any particular legal reforms or political action, choosing instead to focus on the figure of John, although it is clear that John's work as a mediator would be invaluable for establishing an intercultural dialogue that might eventually provide the conditions and the political will needed for conflict resolution. Like Prelorán, Rosell refuses to reduce his subjects to the status of political symbols: it is the human story of John's life within the community that interests him most. As Horacio Bernades notes, *El etnógrafo* is a successful example of "an anti-televisual, anti-journalistic, anti-manipulative documentary." Rosell does not argue a thesis, or communicate a message, but simply pursues something that attracted his attention.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to the effort made by both Prelorán and Rivera to emphasize the transcultural in human experience, Rosell's film does little to reduce the cultural divide that separates the Wichís from the majority of his viewers. This divide was not, in fact, overcome in the process of filming: as Rosell explains, although the community came to know him, this did not generate any sense of closeness.<sup>17</sup> Cultural difference is not presented through exotic rituals or unusual garments as it is in Prelorán's account of the Otavaleños, who distinguish themselves from neighboring communities by wearing specific colors, patterns, and accessories. In *El etnógrafo*, cultural difference is instead apparent to us in whispered conversations about the influence of spirits or in glimpses of traditional methods of food gathering. It is most resolutely evident in the absence of outward emotional expression. In an interview, Rosell explains that "the ideal state for the Wichís is not to let themselves be swept along by emotions, to try to neutralize sadness and happiness ... The Wichís have a different way of inhabiting the world, and that means that everything that happens to them affects them differently."<sup>18</sup> As viewers, we are confronted with our inability to comprehend the seeming impassiveness of the Wichís toward the imprisonment of one of their members, or the threat of a forest fire raging dangerously close to their encampment. Rosell's filming style only accentuates the divide. Unlike Prelorán, he does not use voice-overs

to ascribe thoughts and emotions to the community members as they engage in everyday activities. We gain little knowledge of their inner lives. The film's intimate spaces, natural dialogue, and simple observations of family life throw into relief the expression of very different worldviews. John's quiet and unremarkable assent only bolsters our estrangement when an elderly woman tells him about a family member who angered kindred spirits and was killed by them.

If Rosell does not diminish the cultural otherness of the Wichís in his film, he also does not depict them with any reference to notions of cultural purity or isolation. While they appear markedly less interested than the Otavaleños (as depicted by Prelorán/Rivera) in the possible trade advantages of moving beyond their borders, some of them do speak Spanish and have access to radio and television. There is no single way of being Wichí: the film makes clear that different communities maintain different degrees and forms of contact with the outside world. Tojweya's parents retain a more traditional lifestyle, eating off the land, while other community members accept welfare benefits that the state provides. The film captures some unexpected and amusing juxtapositions of traditional natural lore and US media influences: deep in the Chaco, a Wichí youth employs ancient fishing techniques while wearing a Michael Jackson tee shirt, and one of John's sons correctly declares that foxes come out at night, as does Batman. We are not permitted to exoticize the community as wholly set apart or "authentic," but to understand it as a product of multiple, previous, and ongoing exchanges. Many of these have been unequal and damaging to the community's rights, but others hold the potential for increased autonomy, peace, and intercultural understanding. Rosell delights in the trilingualism of John's household, in which Wichí, Spanish, and English are often mixed in conversation and even in a single sentence. Tojweya's wish for her sons is that they receive a good education and grow up to speak Spanish and English as well as Wichí, so that they may be best positioned to help their community in the future.

Yet what strikes the viewer most is neither the Wichís' cultural difference nor the evidence of transculturation within the community, but John's own remarkable assimilation into the Wichí language and culture. The film shows us how perfectly John has adopted the quiet, pausing speech and reticent manner of his Wichí companions. Rosell's patient recording of everyday, unremarkable detail immerses us to such an extent in the new life John has chosen that the film succeeds in reversing the ethnographer's gaze. John's relationship with his home country is condensed

into a single phone call with his mother, whose voice is left “suspended somewhere off-screen, just as it is for John.”<sup>19</sup> The scene is wonderfully evocative of cultural distance and acquires a particular poignancy for a British viewer who would immediately capture from the mother’s accent that the difference between their two environments is one of social class and wealth as well as culture and language. Well-meaning and supportive, her questions only reveal her lack of understanding. She is eager to hear reassurances that John simply cannot give about his success in fighting for Wichí rights, and she refers—enthusiastically, but in an almost-undetected infantilizing manner—to “the people” he is helping “out there” and to his “wonderful” wife, pregnant once again. In the end, it is England that appears remote and anachronistic. The gifts that arrive for the grandchildren later in the film, including a computer gaming console, appear to our eyes—newly attuned to images of the Wichí way of life—as intrusively and amusingly out of place. By focusing on John’s life, Rosell, like Rivera, presents us with cultural difference but also creates a powerful testimony to the possibility of genuine intercultural encounters.

### *New Forms of Reflexivity*

The reflexive turn in ethnographic filmmaking and documentary cinema in general, dating from the 1960s, was intended to demystify the representational process and counter the documentary’s claim to objectivity. Jay Ruby asserts that the camera “is not a device that can somehow transcend the photographer’s cultural limitations. We cannot capture reality on film, but we can construct a set of images consistent with our view of it.”<sup>20</sup> Our representations of the other, it is argued, lead us unerringly back to the self. Reflexive films are often considered to be more “honest” in their portrayal of the distorting effects of the filmmaker’s presence and of his or her inability to capture raw reality without overlaying it with preconceptions. For Ruby, anthropologists “behave like scientists” to the degree that they openly and systematically acknowledge the observer effect and the role of the filmmaker in constructing the subject of the film; in sum, “being reflexive is virtually synonymous with being scientific.”<sup>21</sup>

Neither *Huellas y memoria de Jorge Prelorán* nor *El etnógrafo* is reflexive in this sense. While they stage the reflexivity of others—Prelorán and John, respectively—Rivera and Rosell only very rarely allow us to glimpse their own presence in the filming process. While *Huellas y memoria* features plenty of reflection on the process of filmmaking, these discussions

relate almost entirely to Prelorán's work, not to Rivera's own documentary. A short scene at the beginning of the film provides the only example of conventional reflexivity: Prelorán offers Rivera a short lesson in how (not) to film him. He extols the virtues of asynchronous sound—in which images are overlaid with a voice recorded separately—over the more rigid technique of focusing a camera on the subject at the regulatory forty-five degrees while he responds to off-screen questions. For the most part, Rivera obligingly adopts Prelorán's preferred technique. The opening scene of *El etnógrafo*, in which John reflects in a voice-over on ethnography as creative practice, much like the writing of a novel, leads us to expect a metareflexive approach. However, this is soon abandoned: no shots of tripods or camera crews disturb the flow of images that immerse us within the rural environs of the Wichí community. Rosell's voice is fully absent. The emphasis placed on the intercultural by both directors leads them instead to explore alternative forms of reflexivity that we may—borrowing Bruno Latour's terms—call “infrareflexive” rather than “metareflexive.”<sup>22</sup>

For Latour, “metareflexivity” is based on “a naïve and irrepressible belief in the possibility of writing truer texts.”<sup>23</sup> The rhetorical maneuvers of metareflexive writers, who attempt to “construe their own accounts as being somehow more accurate or true than those they criticize,” are, Robert Chia agrees, a “subtle form of self-privileging.”<sup>24</sup> Metareflexive texts turn our attention away from the other and toward the self in a bid to avoid the worst of all fates: that of being naively believed by readers. The visual anthropologist and ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall (1939–) also rejects this form of reflexivity, which may be “completely at odds with the narrative or emotional logic of a work” and may “act to block precisely those forms of understanding that visual anthropology makes possible.”<sup>25</sup> In both *Huellas y memoria* and *El etnógrafo*, as we have seen, the interaction between filmmaker and subject is not the source of a methodological weakness that needs to be overcome with greater scientific rigor; rather, it is the very basis of intercultural exchange.

While viewing a film cannot, of course, substitute for the ethnographer's investment of time in living within a community, it may, by bringing indigenous voices into its text, expose us to other ways of understanding the world. MacDougall holds that “Wherever ‘quotation’ occurs, an indigenous narrative model is possible.”<sup>26</sup> Although, as he concedes, “all texts used in this way are subordinated to the text of the author,” it remains the case that films of this kind are not merely a projection of the self: they reflect an encounter between a filmmaker and his or her subject, and must

therefore be understood as produced at least in part by the subject.<sup>27</sup> “It is a rare book or film that emerges at the end of the process as the author preconceived it,” he claims.<sup>28</sup> The film bears witness to a transformation of the self or of the self’s expectations and beliefs, that is, to the consequence of the very encounter with otherness. By filming ethnography “at a remove,” Rivera and Rosell draw attention to such transformations. They also, more subtly, highlight the gap between expectations and events in the process of making their own films: Prelorán’s death from cancer takes place during the shooting of *Huellas y memoria* and is (delicately) incorporated into the film’s narrative, while the postponed trial robs *El etnógrafo* of a potential resolution but remains as a vestige of a former idea for the film’s organization.

Latour claims that the practice of “infrareflexivity” is one that “pushes the knower off-stage” and returns to the world, which is “still unknown and despised.”<sup>29</sup> Instead of attempting to create a metalanguage with which to talk about language, he proposes hybridizing genres, languages, and disciplines as a way of interrogating frameworks without attempting to construct a single, dominant one. Since “no amount of reflexivity, methodology, deconstruction, seriousness, or statistics will turn our stories into non-stories,”<sup>30</sup> metareflexive accounts hold no greater truth but may well make their subjects less interesting. In a similar manner, MacDougall argues that a reflexive film:

need not proclaim itself in explicit interventions, nor does the absence of these necessarily imply that the author intends the work to be read as unmediated, objective reality. Ethnographic films no longer require the ritualized reminders that they are constructions. An author’s personal reticence may in fact show trust in the audience’s recognition of this fact, or be eloquent of a particular spirit of attentiveness to the subject.<sup>31</sup>

MacDougall predicts “a shift toward an *intertextual* cinema,” in which films would become “repositories of multiple authorship, confrontation, and exchange,” reflecting a new understanding of societies as thoroughly penetrated by “external and historical forces.”<sup>32</sup>

The films by Rivera and Rosell discussed here find ways to encourage the viewer’s reflection on the filmmaking process and on the problems of anthropological knowledge without resorting to the more facile, self-privileging techniques of metareflexive accounts. They are primarily able to do so through their choice to stage the ethnographic encounter of

another “at a remove.” But they also do so through their filmic treatment of the theme of time (the time of the ethnographic encounter and the time of the film); through a staging of the contingency of lived events that disrupt the film’s narrative arc; through the incorporation of other voices, texts, and genres (Rivera); and through a quiet and suggestive reversal of the ethnographic gaze (Rosell). A scene near the beginning of *El etnógrafo* provides another example of how reflexivity may be introduced in more subtle ways that register the presence of the filmmaker or the interlocutor, but without removing the central focus on the subject or rendering the text less believable. When John leaves the hut, Rosell and his cameraman continue filming the two Wichí women who stay behind. They speak freely in Wichí, confident that they cannot be understood. One woman reflects that their words will remain on the recording, like on radio, while the other asks, “How can we let them film us? My teeth will show.” The other responds, “And if they take us by force from behind...?” This provokes laughter, but as Rosell later explains,<sup>33</sup> he was left uncertain as to whether it was a joke or not: according to John, who helped him with the subtitling of the film, in the logic of these women, there could be no other reason for a man to stay inside a hut with a woman during the day. The scene thus provides a telling example of cultural misunderstanding. It draws attention to the filmmaking process but does so in a way that stages the reflexivity of the other, not the self, and does not attempt to frame this within a higher level of explanation or to undermine the credibility of what is being shown.

The title of Rosell’s film is a conscious reference to Jorge Luis Borges’s 1969 story *The Ethnographer*, which also encodes a rejection of the academic recourse to metalanguage to explain the indigenous other.<sup>34</sup> The protagonist of Borges’s story, an anthropology student called Fred Murdock, integrates himself so fully into the language and culture of a Native American reservation that he succeeds in learning the tribe’s jealously guarded, secret doctrine. However, on returning to his academic institution, he decides not to publish his discovery. Instead, he gives up his career and finds a job in a library. Idelber Avelar points to the inequality of power relations laid bare in Borges’s tale: it is this asymmetry that “makes it possible and inevitable that indigenous thinking be appropriated outside by a metalanguage that turns it into raw material, without that metalanguage having to go through the same process.”<sup>35</sup> In this way, Murdock’s diffidence in communicating what he has discovered becomes, Avelar suggests, an ethical choice.<sup>36</sup>



In many ways, however, Rosell's film completely revises the premises of Borges's narrative. Unlike Borges's ethnographer, Rosell does (eventually) write his dissertation; again unlike him, he then returns to the community he has studied in order to live there. While Borges appears to find an ethical stance in a refusal to translate the secrets of one culture into the codes of another (more powerful) one, the ethical commitment explored by Rosell does not shy away from the importance of such translations in genuine cultural exchange. John does not end up—like Murdock—as a Yale librarian, but as an advocate working actively for the rights of the indigenous community in which he now lives, translating their values in a way that demands recognition, however limited, on the part of lawmakers, government executives, and international developers. What Rosell shows us is that these translations may be carried out from a place of immanence, not of transcendence, and that metalanguage and reflexivity are not the preserve of the first-world anthropologist. Growing inequalities in the world and the ever-increasing competition for land and energy do not allow us to praise Murdock's mute delicacy as much as John's dogged and pragmatic mediation. Cultural exchange and conflict are inevitable: what remains is the possibility of shifting the balance of power and of exposing the fictions that underpin discourses of national unity, multiculturalism, and indigenous rights.

*Final Reflections: Interculturalism in Post-2001 Argentina*

Rivera and Rosell succeed in producing documentaries that avoid falling into the trap of naïve empiricism, while simultaneously presenting ethnography as a vital and genuine encounter with otherness, not primarily as an exercise in constructing the self. In this way, they provide an interesting inflection with respect to the recent subjective and reflexive turns in documentary filmmaking. As García Canclini maintains, understanding the fictions that underpin the relationship between self and other may at times be a liberating force for political change: “[I]f differences are recognized to be constructions, it is possible to undo them or modify them. They are not inevitable.”<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, he argues:

[D]econstructing the imaginary nature of the other is not enough to dilute the surprise [the other] causes in us—and that we cause in [the other]—nor to resolve the dilemmas of interculturality. What is needed is to consider otherness as an imaginary construction that—at *the same time*—is rooted

in empirically observable intercultural divergences. There are parts of the other that really are different ... *Difference is not only a question of invention and projection.*<sup>38</sup>

The obsessively reflexive approach of many recent ethnographic films becomes a curious kind of postmodern Puritanism, which posits cultural tradition as something that should not be—but is unavoidably—distorted by the observer’s perspective. Instead, García Canclini champions a new intercultural emphasis in anthropology, which moves away from comparing cultures as if they operated as preexisting and discrete systems to paying attention to the mixtures and misunderstandings that characterize relationships between different cultural groups.<sup>39</sup> *Huellas y memoria de Jorge Prelorán* and *El etnógrafo*, while not ethnographic films themselves, demonstrate an important shift within ethnographic filmmaking in recent years and encourage us to locate that shift within an emerging framework of interculturalism. MacDougall suggests that: “Ethnographic film and video, which were once seen as reinforcing established cultural boundaries, are increasingly seen as part of a wider spectrum of cultural representations, much of which is devoted to the very problematics and contradictions of maintaining discrete, indigenous cultures.”<sup>40</sup>

These documentaries also articulate a distinctly post-2001 sensibility in Argentina and help us to chart new perspectives on citizenship, nationhood, and interculturalism in this period. A renewed focus on indigenous communities, which are often organized around reciprocity rather than monetary forms of exchange and which employ traditional techniques to gather food from the land, fits neatly within post-crisis critiques of capitalism. The conceptions of the land held by the Wichí and other indigenous communities are shown to be incompatible with, and may be mobilized as a challenge to, other conceptions that underpin neoliberal Argentina’s rapid expansion of soy cultivation and multinational mining programs. What might otherwise have simply been idealized, nostalgic, romanticized images that promised a retreat from the savage cut-and-thrust of a globalized economy are imbued with an acute awareness of the realities of increased poverty and marginalization in the wake of the crisis.

The so-called “Latinamericanization” of Argentina has provided an impetus to rethink national identity in ways that acknowledge its non-European heritage. As Isabel Hernández suggests: “the increasing presence of indigenous communities and their organizations on the political stage allows us to think that a change might take place within Argentine civil

society.” This change would involve an acknowledgment that “we are part of Indoamerica and that it has caused us harm to consider ourselves, for so many years, to be the southern branch of Central Europe.”<sup>41</sup> Rivera and Rosell do not set out to provide a political commentary on the problem of indigenous rights. But it is precisely their unwavering focus on an individual’s immersion into another culture, and the need for—and possibility of—cultural mediation, that makes their films such a powerful apology for intercultural approaches to negotiate the conflict between cultures within Argentina, and for rethinking the nation in nonexclusionary terms. While their films cannot claim to offer the insights that years of dedication have afforded the ethnographers to whom they pay homage, they nevertheless demonstrate how incisive a tool the cinematic documentary may become in staging an encounter with other cultures and in exploring the challenges of interculturalism in the twenty-first century.

## NOTES

1. In Argentine Spanish, a *piquetero* is a member of a group mounting a roadblock to call attention to an issue or reinforce a demand. This form of demonstration originated in Argentina in the mid-1990s and became particularly widespread after the crisis. The cinema that documented such protests became known as *cine piquetero*, a category that is sometimes extended to refer to other films of the period that focus on grassroots activism. For an account of political filmmaking in Argentina in the years leading up to and following the crisis, see Jessica Stites Mor, *Transition Cinema: Political Filmmaking and the Argentine Left since 1968* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 131–58.
2. Clara Kriger, “La experiencia del documental subjetivo en Argentina,” in *Cines al margen: nuevos modos de representación en el cine argentino contemporáneo*, eds. María José Moore and Paula Wolkowicz (Buenos Aires: Librería, 2007), 35.
3. The figures are from INDEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, National Institute for Statistics and Censuses) and are based on the 2004–2005 Encuesta Complementaria de Pueblos Indígenas. See <http://www.indec.mecon.ar>.
4. Documentaries on indigenous cultures and communities produced in Argentina during the past few years include *Myba, tierra en rojo* (*Myba, Red Earth or We Are the Indians*, Philip Cox and Valeria Mapelman, 2004); *Soy Huao* (*I Am Huano*, Juan Baldana, 2009); *Las pistas—Lanboyij—Nmitaxanaxac* and *Sipo’hi—El lugar del manduré* (*The Clues—Lanboyij—Nmitaxanaxac* and *Sipo’hi: Mandaré Place*, Sebastián Lingiardi, 2010 and

- 2011); *Runa Kuti: indígenas urbanos*, (*Runa Kuti: Urban Indigenous*, Paola Castaño Londoño y Dailos Batista Suárez, 2011); and *Mal del viento* (*Wind's Evil*, Ximena González, 2012).
5. Jens Andermann, *New Argentine Cinema* (London: New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 95.
  6. *Ibid.*, 97.
  7. *Ibid.*, 98.
  8. See Néstor García Canclini, *Diferentes, desiguales y desconectados: mapas de la interculturalidad* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2004), 56, and Bruno Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative," in *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Steve Wooglar (London: Sage, 1988).
  9. Jorge Prelorán, *El cine etnobiográfico* (Buenos Aires: Universidad del Cine, 2006), 22. These and all other translations from the Spanish are mine.
  10. Humberto Ríos, "El cine no etnológico o el testimonio social de Jorge Prelorán," in *Cine, antropología y colonialismo*, ed. Adolfo Colombres, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Del Sol, 2005), 111.
  11. *Ibid.*, 114.
  12. Prelorán, *El cine etnobiográfico*, 36.
  13. Néstor García Canclini, *Diferentes, desiguales y desconectados*, 56.
  14. Sharon R. Sherman, "From Romanticism to Reflexivity in the Films of Jorge Prelorán," in *Memories of the Origins of Ethnographic Film*, ed. Beate Engelbrecht (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007), 289.
  15. Maristella Svampa, "Argentina: una cartografía de las resistencias (2003–2008). Entre las luchas por la inclusión y las discusiones sobre el modelo de desarrollo," *Revista Osal* 9, no. 24 (October 2008): 42.
  16. Horacio Bernades, "Ese secreto de narrar desde adentro," *Página/12*, September 13, 2012, sec. Cultura & Espectáculos, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/espectaculos/5-26419-2012-09-13.html>.
  17. Luciana Caresani, "Entrevista a Ulises Rosell," *Otros Cines*, 2012, [http://www.otroscines.com/festivales\\_detalle.php?idnota=6361](http://www.otroscines.com/festivales_detalle.php?idnota=6361).
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. *Ibid.*
  20. Jay Ruby, "Ethnography as Trompe l'Oeil: Film and Anthropology," in *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*, ed. Jay Ruby (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 125.
  21. Jay Ruby and Barbara Myerhoff, "Introduction," in *A Crack in the Mirror*, ed. Jay Ruby, 28.
  22. Bruno Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative," 168.
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. Robert C.H. Chia, *Organizational Analysis as Deconstructive Practice* (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 87.

25. MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, 90.
26. *Ibid.*, 155.
27. *Ibid.*, 156.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative," 173.
30. *Ibid.*, 172.
31. MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, 90.
32. *Ibid.*, 148–49.
33. In correspondence with the author, July 8, 2013.
34. Jorge Luis Borges, "El etnógrafo," in *Elogio de la sombra*, 1969, *Prosa completa*, vol. 3 (Buenos Aires: Emcé, 1979), 265–67.
35. Idelber Avelar, *The Letter of Violence: Essays on Narrative, Ethics, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 57.
36. *Ibid.*, 56.
37. García Canclini, *Diferentes, desiguales y desconectados*, 213.
38. *Ibid.* The second emphasis is mine.
39. *Ibid.*, 21.
40. MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, 261.
41. Isabel Hernández, "El cine antropológico y la autogestión indígena," in *Cine, antropología y colonialismo*, ed. Adolfo Colombres, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Del Sol, 2005), 141.

# Performance, Reflexivity, and the Languages of History in Contemporary Brazilian Documentary Film

*Jens Andermann*

My goal in this chapter is to analyze issues of performance and reflexivity in Brazilian documentary production of the last twenty years.<sup>1</sup> I contend that following Brazil's long transition from dictatorship to democracy, which took place roughly between 1979 and 1985, performative and reflexive modes of documentary self-interrogation have been associated with a critical revision of the left's political and cultural project of the early 1960s and 1970s, as it was expressed, for example, in *Cinema Novo*. The 1960s and 1970s documentary cinema by Leon Hirszman (1937–1987), Eduardo Coutinho (1933–2014), and Cacá Diegues (1940–), among others, played a key role in placing cultural work in the service of political revolution. By the mid-1980s, however, reflexive documentaries would contest the avant-garde, pedagogical conceptualization of the political that undergirded certain films made prior to the 1964 military coup, such as Hirszman's *Maioria absoluta* (*Absolute Majority*, 1964) or Paulo César Saraceni's (1933–2012) *Integração racial* (*Racial Integration*, 1964). At the same time, these

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newer films would revive the search for alternative modes of detonating and revealing social experience on-screen that the earlier films had initiated. The late Eduardo Coutinho's *Cabra marcado para morrer* (*Twenty Years Later*, 1984) stands as the paradigmatic example of the particular constellation of performance, cinematic self-reflexivity, and historical experience that spun out of the first documentary wave of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

Coutinho's *Cabra* also anticipates the first of the three specific modes of documentary performativity that I will analyze here, all of which have been particularly influential in the Brazilian context. The first mode focuses on the interview as a core moment of truth-production, reminiscent of the intensity of theatrical acting; this mode gradually turned into a paramount concern in Coutinho's later work. The second mode foregrounds performances of cinematic autobiography, as found in documentaries by Sandra Kogut (1965–) and João Moreira Salles (1962–), both filmmakers of a younger generation. Finally, I will conclude with some comments on a third performative mode in which documented subjects themselves take hold of the camera, thus blurring the conceptual distinction and distribution of representational agency between subjects and authors. In particular, I will consider films by Paulo Sacramento (1971–), Marcelo Pedrosa (1979–), and Gabriel Mascaro (1983–).

My more general aim is to tease out the historical particularity, in the case of Brazil, of the emergence of a documentary cinema that values reflexivity and subjectivity as purveyors of meaning. I want to call attention to the films' formal constructedness and their impact on a "subject matter" that exists only insofar as it is being produced in and through the documentary encounter.<sup>3</sup> Although the rise of documentary performance and, consequently, the blurring of boundaries between the real and the staged, experience and performance, marks a general trend in global film culture and criticism over the last quarter century, we should not lose sight of that fact that performances of selfhood are also radically contingent on the localities and temporal moments in which the documentary encounter takes place. In other words, while the films I analyze here are all highly conversant with contemporary manifestations of documentary self-reflexivity—as in the work of filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke (China, 1970–), Pedro Costa (Portugal, 1958–), Abbas Kiarostami (Iran, 1940–), or Avi Mograbi (Israel, 1956–)—they are also attuned to the specific historicity of the documentary form in Brazil as well as, crucially, their human subjects' own audiovisual literacy. Reflexivity, I will argue, is not simply born out of the filmmakers' epistemic doubts or formal adventurousness,

but also, more importantly, of the ways in which those facing the camera are themselves citizens of an audiovisual culture—though not necessarily a cinematic one—and thus place their own demands on the documentary form, to the point of taking on a quasi-directorial role.

Although documentary reflexivity and the blurring of boundaries between the documentary genre and fiction were arguably present in Brazilian cinema from the outset—from the docudramatic travelogues of filmmaker-adventurer Silvino Santos (1886–1970) in the 1920s to Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s (1928–) urban chronicles of Rio in the 1950s, and the genre-bending work of the 1970s, such as Orlando Senna (1940–) and Jorge Bodanzky’s (1942–) *Iracema, uma transa amazônica* (*Iracema*, 1974), Aloysio Raulino’s (1947–2013) *Tarumã* (1975), or Glauber Rocha’s (1939–1981) own *Di-Glauber* (or *Di Cavalcanti*, 1977)—I would argue that it is only in the 1980s, with Eduardo Coutinho’s *Cabra*, that reflexivity becomes the dominant mode of documentary filmmaking.<sup>4</sup> The historical experience of struggle and traumatic loss provides Coutinho a matrix for seeking formal solutions that are by necessity self-reflexive and critical. Starting with Coutinho’s landmark film, then, in what follows I briefly sketch the progressive radicalization of reflexivity and performance in Coutinho’s own work, and subsequently move on to different formal responses developed, at least in part, in reaction to Coutinho’s work.

### THE ART OF INTERVIEWING: EDUARDO COUTINHO AND THE THEATER OF THE REAL

Shot between 1981 and 1984, *Cabra marcado para morrer* (1984) is, in a sense, the completion of the project from which it inherits its title; it integrates original footage salvaged after the Brazilian military invaded the Galiléia cooperative in Pernambuco at the time of the March 31, 1964 coup. Filming had begun just a month earlier. The original *Cabra*—made with the support of the National Student Union (União Nacional dos Estudantes, UNE) and the leftist Movement for Popular Culture (Movimento de Cultura Popular, MPC), created by Recife’s radical prefect Miguel Arraes de Alencar (1916–2005)—was to be a feature-length fiction about the struggles and assassination of peasant leader João Pedro Teixeira (1918–1962), enacted by real-life peasants, including João Pedro’s wife Elisabeth and several of their eleven children, playing themselves. Following the Amnesty Law of 1979, which opened a tortuous process of “democratization,” Coutinho and his crew returned to the original



locations and found the participants from the project that was aborted seventeen years earlier. Coutinho eventually went on to make a very different film than what the original *Cabra* would have been. The opening sequence, which shows the reunited participants and their families watching the salvaged film reels during an open-air screening at Galiléia, not only revisits but also actively inverts the original's relationship to history and its filmic representation. As Consuelo Lins observes, *Cabra* describes a “double movement of dislocation, at once with regard to history and to the documentary,” and in which the staged, fictional images from the past are transformed into memory frames that trigger a proliferation of stories told on camera.<sup>5</sup>

As viewers of the 1984 *Cabra*, we witness the restaging of an all-too-recent-and-violent historical and biographical experience (the brutal repression of peasant cooperatives) through the eyes of a reunited group of former peasant activists and their relatives who reminisce and laugh together at the ghostly return on screen of their past selves. Yet, at the same time, we witness their emotion when reconnecting with one another and with a more youthful and combative version of themselves. The on-screen protagonists of the salvaged 1964 reels are not yet aware of the extent of the suffering, imprisonment, and torture that the future held in store for them. Reencountering their past selves via images variously prompts the characters to either affirm or abhor their struggles; in the process, they create memory performances that attach and juxtapose their subjectivities to the archival footage. At the same time, *Cabra* remains complicit with the modern cinema of which its 1964 incarnation had been a contemporary; it is important to remember that the first images in *Cabra* are from the same year in which milestones such as Ruy Guerra's (1931–) *Os fuzis* (*The Guns*) and Glauber Rocha's *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (*Black God, White Devil*) were released. The formal gestures of the 1984 version's revisiting of the past are therefore also a form of homage to the cinema of the 1960s; this is evident in a sequence showing the screening of the recovered raw cut for participants, a device pioneered in Jean Rouch (1917–2004) and Edgar Morin's (1921–) *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1961). At the same time, Coutinho's presence among the audience members as just one more veteran reminiscing with the others, complicates the relationship between character-subjects and the film team, all of whom suffered persecution and, in some cases, imprisonment and torture. The second *Cabra* therefore becomes a kind of autobiography of Coutinho himself and of the cinematic movements of the 1960s, told through the eyes of the former and present subjects of inquiry.

The filmmaker's body and subjectivity are visibly present in the 1984 *Cabra*, as if to acknowledge that historical experience is not prior to its filmic representation but is produced, as speech and as physical performance, in the intersubjective encounter. This explains why Coutinho foregrounds and centralizes interviews in the 1984 film, starting with the ones done with the peasant-actor-viewers the day after the Galiléia screening. Thus, *Cabra* also foreshadows what would become a central tenet of Coutinho's subsequent work: the "turning (of the) the interview into one of the fine arts."<sup>6</sup> Like in the 1964 version, the emotional and difficult re-encounter with Elisabeth Teixeira, who had been living clandestinely and out of touch with all but two of her children for sixteen years, takes center stage in the 1984 *Cabra*. As a result, the film becomes a testament to the tragic story of her family and to Elisabeth's own personal strength and integrity.

Anticipating Coutinho's subsequent work, the editing in *Cabra* does not occlude the difficult negotiations that frame Elisabeth's 1984 testimony but, to the contrary, make these a central aspect of the sequence. In the first series of shots, her hesitant, but clearly emotional voice during the first re-encounter with Coutinho (who has brought production stills from the first *Cabra*) alternates with that of her oldest son Abraão, who facilitated the meeting. Now, however, Abraão insists—in sentences that appear rehearsed, prompting Elisabeth to repeat almost textually—that Coutinho's camera registers his family's thanks to General Figueiredo, the head of the military junta, for promoting the amnesty of those wanted for "political crimes." He also urges Coutinho, in a statement clearly directed against the first *Cabra* and its project of politicized re-enactment, to record their "protest" against the way his family has been used and abandoned for political purposes in the past. A second encounter takes place the next day, following a screening of the first *Cabra* for Elisabeth, her children, and some neighbors. Greeting Coutinho and his crew from the open window of the community school where she is volunteering as a teacher, a visibly relaxed, even exuberant Elisabeth speaks of the joy of having finally been able to share her story with her pupils and neighbors, after which she and Coutinho embark on a long, intense conversation about her life, both revisiting the plight of João Pedro and talking about her own forced separation from her family after the escape from the unfinished film shoot at Galiléia that was to be her homage to her dead husband. Coutinho lets long passages of Elisabeth's testimony run on without editing, allowing the narrative of this strong-willed, rural woman activist to emerge in its tragic intensity, yet without ever victimizing or turning her into an object of facile audience empathy. Instead, the film ensures that speech agency

remains with her by reminding us of the testimony's intersubjective, conversational context.

Here, as in many of the interviews following the Galiléia screening, it is the re-encounter with the past self on screen (and with the apparatus of cinema itself embodied in Coutinho and his crew) that prompts the recovery of a language silenced by dictatorship, literally a revoicing of the past, but from the (tragic) distance of loss. At the same time, the intensity infusing these climactic moments stems as much from the revisited episode from the interlocutor's past as it does from its retelling, and working through, in the present of the interview, which aims not to uncover this past in its facticity but as an affective truth lodged in the very intensity of remembrance. It is an intensity that permeates the visible scene, but remains out-of-field except for its verbal evocation, as in Jorge's reminiscences about his former, cross-dressing alter ego Jorgina in *Santa Marta, duas semanas no morro* (*Santa Marta: Two Weeks in the Slums*, 1987) or in Elizabeth's vivid descriptions in *Santo forte* (*The Mighty Spirit*, 1999) of the spirit beings surrounding her Umbanda-worshipping mother, Dona Thereza. In these and other medium or feature-length films of the same period, especially *Boca de lixo* (*Scavengers*, 1992) and *Babilônia 2000* (2001), Coutinho gradually purged his documentary arsenal of narrative interventions such as nondirect sound, voice-over, or archival footage, and focused instead on the interview as an intense, intersubjective moment of transmission of experience and connection to the other. To bring out this "social dimension of speech,"<sup>7</sup> Coutinho's longtime collaborator Consuelo Lins explains, the filmed interviews would be preceded by long periods of on-location research and casting interviews, undertaken by teams reporting back to the director who would only ever meet the final cast of interviewees (selected on the basis of reports and transcripts from previous, less formal interviews) on the prearranged day of shooting.<sup>8</sup> What we see on screen, then, is both a highly spontaneous and extremely ritualized encounter between two subjects acutely aware of one another but who have never met.

In another decisive move away from the "sociological model" of authoritative knowledge production about social others, which according to Jean-Claude Bernardet prevailed in Brazilian documentary between the 1960s and the 1980s,<sup>9</sup> Coutinho decided in *Edifício Master* (*Master: A Building in Copacabana*, 2002) to apply this documentary research practice to the urban middle class rather than to shantytown dwellers or garbage collectors. Here, instead of individual testimonies speaking to, and performing, a shared space of community, as in *Babilônia 2000*, the film's

structure of autonomous, self-contained interview sequences separated by shots of empty corridors and closed-circuit TV footage from the hallway and elevator replicates the atomized, claustrophobic spatial distribution of a lower-middle-class apartment block in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, which serves as both the film's location and subject of inquiry. As Lins points out, the team's main challenge in selecting and preparing interviewees for *Edifício Master* had less to do with the bland, average lives of the building's residents than with tenants' inclination to lapse into a kind of sentimentalist overacting of intimacy that they had become accustomed to through TV reality shows.<sup>10</sup> Although there are moments of great intensity in *Edifício Master*, the film lacks the charismatic character of Coutinho's previous work, in which testimony—like Elisabeth Teixeira's in *Cabra*—would provide the main thrust of the narrative. Yet this is fully coherent with the social experience that the films seek to depict, since no individual story can stand in for the community; common, shared social space is precisely what is lacking (Fig. 9.1).



Fig. 9.1 *Edifício Master* (2002), directed by Eduardo Coutinho

In his most recent work, Coutinho turns the very question of performative intensity into a subject of documentary inquiry. In *Jogo de cena* (*Playing*, 2007), several young to middle-aged women tell stories on camera about life-changing experiences of loss and recovery. The women were chosen from a casting call that appeared in a Rio de Janeiro newspaper. These “real life” storytellers are juxtaposed with actresses who deliver the same lines, often without giving the viewer any clues as to which of the two versions might be the “original” one. In *Moscou* (*Moscow*, 2009), an alternative theatre company embarks on a production of Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (1901), under the direction of Enrique Diaz, on the understanding that no actual theatrical performance will take place; rather, the rehearsals serve as an experimental space in which the actors’ experiences and biographies are projected onto the characters and vice versa. This fluidity provides the raw material for Coutinho and his team to investigate the relationship between performance and experience. In *As canções* (*Songs*, 2011), eighteen men and women perform a cappella and then comment on the stories behind the “songs of their lives.” All three films, then, while maintaining Coutinho’s vivid interest in the singular lives his camera encounters, are at least as interested in the empathy that arises from performative intensity. Why, he wonders, do certain stories touch us more than others, regardless of whether they have really been “lived” in the way they are being enacted?

Experience, Coutinho seems to suggest, becomes meaningful only insofar as it can be shared—although such sharing, as several performances in all three of his most recent films suggest, can be enormously difficult and costly. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is often in the re-enactments or second-degree experiences that this intersubjective or social dimension of experience, its affective substratum so to speak, surfaces most intensely. As Joanna Page suggests, rather than merely remain at the stage of a critique of authenticity and documentary authority, reflexivity in Coutinho bypasses solipsism and “refocus(es) attention on the reflexive activities and the self-constructions of the other as much as the self.” Beyond the false antagonism between artifice and authenticity, she argues, performance is being employed here (as Diaz tells his actors in *Moscou*) “to construct, not just deconstruct”—namely, as “an encounter with forms of truth and experience that generates new knowledge.”<sup>11</sup>

## PERFORMING REFLEXIVITY: THE DIRECTOR AS CHARACTER

Although Coutinho's impact on Brazilian documentary filmmaking can hardly be underestimated, I would like to continue by discussing some alternative approaches, which at least in part have emerged to contest Coutinho's focus on the theatricality of the interview. For example, Sandra Kogut's *Um passaporte húngaro* (*A Hungarian Passport*, 2002) and João Moreira Salles's *Santiago* (2007) introduce the filmmakers as characters in their own stories. In both of these films, the director's identity becomes an object of inquiry:<sup>12</sup> Kogut's, as she registers her two-year quest for Hungarian citizenship; Moreira Salles's, as he revisits his childhood and upper-class upbringing at the height of Brazilian modernity. Moreira Salles explores his own subjectivity by returning to footage from a project he began years before, but abandoned, in which he films Santiago Merlo, the family's Argentine butler. Even though both films share a strongly autobiographical character, neither Kogut nor Moreira Salles ever appears on screen except for the most fleeting of instants.<sup>13</sup> The normal documentary relationship, in which the cinematic apparatus is the purveyor of knowledge, is thus both reproduced and inverted by the fact that the subject operating the camera is also a character within the story, albeit one who only acquires consistency based on the relationships that he or she has established with others. The self who pronounces the narrative (or, in the case of *Santiago*, only appears to do so, as we shall see) is at the same time the object of the documentary quest: the self cannot be seen except through the diegetic characters it seeks out, and who themselves become impenetrable to the extent that their gaze cannot complete the picture for us as viewers. Such characters can only highlight the limitations of our—and by extension, the filmmaker's own—field of vision. In this sense, the butler in Moreira Salles's film or Kogut's Austro-Hungarian grandmother become, as Álvaro Fernández Bravo observes, "asymmetrical doubles of the self," a self that "thus establishes a relationship of dependence with the Other who becomes objectified: the double becomes necessary to display and speak of the self. The self is *subject* to the Other, because it depends upon its image."<sup>14</sup>

Yet subjecting oneself to another's gaze also potentially opens up the risk of hostile or violent identification, in the Sartrean sense of being objectified and controlled by the other's system of values. This is what happens when, in the midst of a conversation with an old Hungarian archivist about the

birth registers of her Jewish grandparents, Sandra Kogut—and we viewers through her camera’s eye—is suddenly labeled with ethnic markers. The old man tells Kogut that she does not appear “Jewish” to the naked eye, and remarks that a girl like her could “get away with denying it.” Kogut’s film is full of these kinds of moments, which suddenly seem to catapult us back into the prewar time of her grandparents’ escape from Nazism or, interestingly, signify the ongoing, ghostly presence of that “other time” of persecution and prejudice. *Um passaporte húngaro* transforms the bureaucratic procedure of applying for Hungarian citizenship into the script of a memory performance. As Kogut fills out forms and asks relatives and strangers (in Hungarian) for specific kinds of documentary proof, the film’s narrative structure becomes hinged on the director-character’s successive immersions into Brazilian and Hungarian state archives, embassies, and immigration services. She meanders bureaucratically through Budapest, Paris, Rio, and Recife, all the while interacting with relatives on both sides of the Atlantic. Her memory performance and identity further require her to encounter various (mostly foreign-accented) languages, including Portuguese, French, English, German, and Hungarian.<sup>15</sup>

Kogut-the-descendant’s attempt to recover the Hungarian nationality of which her grandparents were stripped, combined with the presence of the camera (operated, crucially, by the director-protagonist herself), transforms her encounters with state officials and relatives into re-enactments—some voluntary, some not—of the very networks of power and solidarity that obstructed and facilitated her grandparents’ journey to Brazil more than half a century earlier. This relationship between the past and the memory performance that invokes and reinscribes it in the present is wonderfully captured in the juxtaposition of the two (or actually three) Hungarian passports at issue: Sandra’s (the production of which *is* the film’s performance) and those of her grandparents (the stamps and scribbles of which are endlessly perused by customs officials, archivists, and the camera). Meanwhile, the shots of seaports and train stations separating the film’s sections, shot in Super 8 and accompanied by a Klezmer soundtrack, as if to evoke an audiovisual archive of Kogut’s grandparents’ escape that is in reality nonexistent, could therefore also be understood as time-images of the at once insurmountable distance and ghostly proximity between the “then” of memory and the “now” of its performance.<sup>16</sup>

In *Santiago*, Moreira Salles also uses the documentary idiom to construct a genealogical inquiry into his own family and class identity. Yet unlike in *Um passaporte húngaro*, the director’s reflexive attitude toward

himself as both instigator and object of the film's quest does not manifest through a performative intervention in the present that registers the effects triggered by the director-character's presence. Rather, *Santiago* (subtitled *Uma reflexão sobre o material bruto, A Reflection on Raw Footage*) offers a self-critical return to and re-editing of footage from a frustrated project attempted fifteen years earlier, about the Salles's family butler: material whose value is only recognized in and through posterity, as an aftereffect, in the way it prompts a reflection about documentary authority and about loss and the desire for presence. "Today," says Moreira Salles about an episode from the past that the 1992 film was to include only as an illustration of Santiago's personality, "I know that it was also about me, about a notion of respect that was his and that perhaps he had wanted to instill in me" (Fig. 9.2).

What Moreira Salles admits he had not realized when he visited the now-retired Santiago at his modest flat for a five-day shoot of interviews was that his film had been a memory performance all along, and not, as he still believed in 1992 (still firmly entrenched in a "sociological model" of



Fig. 9.2 *Santiago, uma reflexão sobre o material em bruto* (2007), directed by João Moreira Salles



documentary) an exploration of a domestic other. Only upon revisiting the old footage years later, following the death not just of Santiago but also of his own parents and driven by “a desire to return home,” does Moreira Salles realize that the butler’s obedient self-revelation to the documentarian’s camera was, above all, a performative re-embodiment of the complex class relationship between the child João and Santiago the manservant, who, in addition to being a domestic servant, was also the Moreira Salles children’s confidante and educator. Moreira Salles’s revelation is stunning: “He never ceased to be our butler, and I the son of his boss.” However, as I hinted earlier, the voice that reads these lines is not that of João, but of Fernando Moreira Salles, the director’s brother. This displacement of the words of one brother onto another is interesting because it underscores yet again the film’s refracted, intersubjective construction of the memory of a lost past that can only re-emerge on being confirmed in the voice and gaze of another. As Ilana Feldman puts it, Moreira Salles, on “adhering to a perspectivism that excludes from the outset any predetermined relation between subject and object, might well make ... Jean-Louis Comolli’s words his own: not to think the other, but to think the other’s thinking of myself. Thus, the director turns into a character of his character, in yet another abysmal ramification of his own *mise en abyme*.”<sup>17</sup>

### THE OTHER TAKES THE CAMERA

If we think of Salles’s and Kogut’s films—and numerous other documentaries made around the millennium, including Kiko Goifman’s (1968–) *33* (2003) or Eryk Rocha’s (1978–) *Rocha que voa (Stones in the Sky, 2002)*—as *confessionals*, in the Foucaultian sense of a discourse in which the subject of enunciation is also the subject of the statement, other films have chosen the opposite way out of the aporias of documentary authority. Rather than turn the camera on the authorial subject, these films extend authorship to various kinds of “others” whose stories they set out to tell. *O prisioneiro da grade de ferro: auto-retratos (Prisoner of the Iron Bars: Self-Portraits, 2004)* was made from material shot during a series of video workshops that director Paulo Sacramento and his team organized with inmates of São Paulo’s Carandiru penitentiary complex in the final months before the jail’s 2002 demolition. The prisoners’ “self-portraits” were then edited together with footage shot by the professional crew; the result is a kind of audiovisual conversation not unlike those that happened during the workshops themselves, conversations about everyday life inside what was,

at the time, South America's largest prison, a prison that made international headlines in 1992 when military police killed 111 inmates during an uprising. Rather than narrate the prison's history, however, this cinematic dialogue revolves around two questions. First, under what conditions does violence flourish? And second, how do prisoners resist being reduced to victims and perpetrators of systemic violence and instead reaffirm their subjectivity even under conditions of extreme abandonment? Music, faith, martial arts, and communication with loved ones: all reveal themselves as forms of "care of the self," which the film not only registers but also actively generates. The very process of learning the language of documentary filmmaking and applying it to their own reality becomes, for the prisoners, yet another technique of self-affirmation that Sacramento's film records.

Thus, the relationship between the film's two questions (which is also a relationship between an external observer's desire to know and the inmates' attempt to become authors of their own representation) provides a structuring rhythm that is expressed in the dialogue between long shots of the prison buildings at different times of day and handheld shots taken from inside. This oscillation of perspective is especially notable during the final sequence in which the inmates use the telezoom to film the city at a distance, rather than, as the director had expected, to film the inside of their cells. The vast majority of shots, however, are located somewhere in between the up-close and distanced points of view. Often there are two cameras present during the same sequence: one operated by an inmate and the other by a professional, each recording not only the action itself but also the other camera's recording of it. As soon as the other camera is out of frame, however, the authorship of the image (and, by extension, the value of the image as an "impartial" document or "self-portrait") becomes impossible to ascribe. "Hybrid authorship," Robert Stam argues, becomes in *O prisioneiro* "a partial solution to the problem of subaltern speech... Sacramento gives the camera to the other, but also reveals the limits of this gesture. The control remains, in the end, in the hands of the director and the editor."<sup>18</sup>

Marcelo Pedroso's *Pacific* (2009) also plays with this tension by handing the camera over to a rather different kind of other: the passengers of a cruise ship who are on holiday, en route to Fernando de Noronha, the Atlantic archipelago off the coast of Pernambuco. Its premise is rather different from that of *O prisioneiro*. During a one-week cruise, Pedroso and his crew identify passengers traveling on the cruise ship "Pacific" who

video record their experiences; upon returning to Recife, they ask these passengers if they would be willing to hand over their footage for a documentary project. The director's intervention is limited to editing material previously recorded for other purposes. However, structuring a narrative for the film turns out to be unproblematic because most of the videographers who agree to hand over their footage already planned their home movies as "documentaries"—complete with voice-over explanations of the ship and the trip to an implied, nonparticipant audience (probably family and friends at home). Some videographers even include interview sequences, and in the case of one couple, a histrionic boyfriend advises his partner regarding camera angles, pans, and zooms, in a self-consciously ironic take on the documentary format. In the process, many of these home movies also generate "characters" from the passengers' "vacationing selves"; the presence of these characters helps move the narrative forward.

Yet the film's interest lies not so much in the "real lives" glimpsed at through the template of a TV reality show (the format on which most of the videographers seem to have based their narratives, deliberately or not), but rather in the imperfections and amateur nature of the recordings, which, thanks to Pedroso's editing, illuminate the industrial nature of this "production of experience," with its unforgiving, nonstop succession of leisure activities. "This is no joke," one passenger says ironically while zooming in on the ship's "Daily Gazette" that details the schedule of recreational activities. But there are also moments of (perhaps unintentional) poetic truth, as when a video camera pans quickly across the rolling waves, the water blurring into abstract, light-blue clouds of color, and suddenly, still within the same panning shot, we are right back inside the cabin with the videographer's wife smiling at the camera. Nevertheless, these lines of flight only ever provide the briefest of escapes from the relentless, prefabricated narrative structure of tourist experiences that, as *Pacific* shows, are as rigid as certain modes of documentary storytelling. In reality, the film suggests, certain modes of documentary filmmaking, like tourism, ward off the true encounters they continuously seek and defer (Fig. 9.3).

More recently, Pedroso's onetime collaborator Gabriel Mascaro—both are from Recife's vibrant young film scene—released *Domésticas* (*Housemaids*, 2013), a remarkable film based on the premise of handing over the camera to seven adolescents and asking them to portray their domestic servants. Drawn from different social strata, most of the youngsters are lower- to upper-middle-class whites inquiring about the lives of their female black maids—although we also see a young, black *favelada* (shantytown



Fig. 9.3 *Pacific* (2009), directed by Marcelo Pedroso

dweller) portraying her housekeeper and a woman presenting her elderly, white neighbor-turned-housekeeper. The various medium-length film portraits that comprise the work are intriguing for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, they provide rare insight into domestic labor relations in contemporary Brazil and the impact that shifting models of family have had on these. But perhaps even more importantly, the individual portraits also showcase a fairly wide range of documentary modes and distributions of authorship and agency. The modes portrayed range from benign paternalism and fly-on-the-wall observation to more participatory and reflexive choices. At one point, one of the young documentarians actually decides to hand over the camera to his subject. For Mascaro, the interest in the film lies in being able to narrate, “the negotiations of the image the youngsters and their servants would undertake, each in (his or her) own way.” He emphasizes, “the political and ethical indetermination [that emanates] from the film from beginning to end,” an indetermination whose basis resides in whether the youths “were taking advantage of given power relations to access the intimacy of their servants, or if the servants were making use of [the] audiovisual artifice in order to fictionalize themselves.”<sup>19</sup>

I would argue that Mascaro's film works well on these two levels: it is at once a register of real lives and a metacinematic reflection on the ethics and politics of registering. At the same time, it is clear that *Domésticas* was made possible by the rich and varied corpus of reflexive and performative documentaries that Brazilian directors have produced over the last two decades. *Domésticas* testifies to the extent to which performance and reflexivity have, over the last twenty years, made inroads into the Brazilian documentary idiom, in the process becoming modes of critical interrogation of Brazilian society's present and past.

My point, then, is that over the years, documentary self-awareness has gone "beyond reflexivity," to quote Joanna Page's expression.<sup>20</sup> That is, it has moved beyond a purely self-referential critique of cinematic truth-production as embodied by the so-called "sociological model"—the most striking examples of which are probably Sérgio Bianchi's (1945–) *Mato eles? (Shall I Kill Them?, 1983)* and *Crônicamente inviável (Chronically Unfeasible, 2000)*—toward a different and more complex notion of *truth* and *experience*. Brazilian documentary films of the past two decades understand truth and experience to be neither prior nor external to the creative act that teases them out. They are never exhausted in the act of their performance. At stake here is a "real" that would not have emerged if not for its performance in front of the camera, but that does not end when the recording stops. Rather—as seems to be the wager of many of these films—its effects continue to unfold in the space and time conventionally known as Brazil.

## NOTES

1. As of late, performance has enjoyed enormous critical currency in documentary studies worldwide. If acting and *mise en scène* were always present in documentary practice, recent emphasis on the performative aspects of documentary—Stella Bruzzi argues—also needs to be understood as a response to Direct Cinema and other radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s that trusted in the camera's capacity for unmediated, "direct" registration of the real. By contrast, the performative documentary: "is the enactment of the notion that a documentary only comes into being as it is performed, that although its factual basis (or document) can pre-date any recording or representation of it, the film itself is necessarily performative because it is given meaning by the interaction between performance and reality." The prevailing presence of a real or nonfictional context into which the "performative element" is inserted, Bruzzi concludes, is therefore a

- prerequisite for the performative documentary, which seeks to highlight the interplay between performance and the real. See Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (London: Routledge, 2006), 186.
2. César Guimarães, "The Scene and the Inscription of the Real," in *New Argentine and Brazilian Cinema: Reality Effects*, eds. Jens Andermann and Álvaro Fernández Bravo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 87–102.
  3. Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 186.
  4. Jens Andermann, "Documentary," in *World Cinema Directory: Brazil*, eds. Louis Bayman and Natália Pinazza (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 190–91.
  5. Consuelo Lins, *O documentário de Eduardo Coutinho: televisão, cinema e vídeo* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2007), 33. This and all subsequent translations from the Portuguese are mine.
  6. Consuelo Lins, interview with Eduardo Coutinho, in *O documentário de Eduardo Coutinho*, 43.
  7. Lins, *O documentário de Eduardo Coutinho*, 130.
  8. *Ibid.*, 102–04.
  9. Jean-Claude Bernadet, "O modelo sociológico ou a voz do dono," in *O nacional e o popular na cultura brasileira* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1983), 11–32.
  10. Lins, *O documentário de Eduardo Coutinho*, 143.
  11. Joanna Page, "Beyond Reflexivity: Acting and Experience in Contemporary Argentine and Brazilian Cinema," in *New Argentine and Brazilian Cinema*, eds. Andermann and Fernández Bravo, 84.
  12. On the *peessoa-personagem* in Kogut's and Salles's films, see Consuelo Lins and Cláudia Mesquita, *Filmar o real: sobre o documentário brasileiro contemporâneo* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2008), 51–55.
  13. Kogut has explained her decision to stay behind the camera rather than appear on screen as follows: "It was a decision I took at the editing stage. I considered that, in a film about identity, including an image of a body would be reductive. At the same time, it's not an autobiographical film, so I considered it more important that I be present through a gaze: what interested me was to show other people through my own watching of them... There's no central motivation. If I had only been asking for a passport to obtain European citizenship, I don't think I would have made a film about it. I only wanted to make the film because it was a complex issue, because there wasn't only one reason for it." Quoted in José Carlos Avellar, "Auto-retrato do eu/outro," *Escrever Cinema* (2003), [http://www.escrevercinema.com/retrato\\_do\\_artista\\_como\\_outro.htm](http://www.escrevercinema.com/retrato_do_artista_como_outro.htm). On the shot from *Santiago* in which Moreira Salles's body eclipses that of his interviewee, see the insightful reading by Gonzalo Aguilar, "The Documentary: Between Reality and Fiction, between First and Third Person," in *New Argentine and Brazilian Cinema*, 203–16.

14. Álvaro Fernández Bravo, "The Self as Other: Reality, Archive, and the Witness in Three Contemporary Latin American Films," in *New Argentine and Brazilian Cinema*, 193–94.
15. Hamid Naficy has discussed the cinematic qualities of accent, as a token of (post)colonial double consciousness, in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
16. For an insightful reading of these tracking shots, see Natália Pinazza, "Transnationality and Transitionality: Sandra Kogut's *The Hungarian Passport* (2001)," *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 1 (2011), <http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue%201/ArticlePinazza.html>.
17. Ilana Feldman, "'Santiago' sob suspeita", *Trópico* 29 (2007), <http://www.revistatropico.com.br/tropico/html/textos/2907,1.shl>.
18. Robert Stam, "The Carandiru Massacre: Across the Mediatic Spectrum," in *New Argentine and Brazilian Cinema*, 149–51.
19. Júlio Delmanto, "Recife e a reinvenção do cinema político," *Revista Forum* (May 2, 2013), <http://revistaforum.com.br/blog/2013/05/recife-e-a-reinvencao-do-cinema-politico/>.
20. Page, "Beyond Reflexivity," 20.

## A Common Gaze: Reflections on New Documentary Practices in Peru

*Talía Dajes and Sofía Velázquez*

In the final scene of Carlos Sánchez Giraldo (1980–) and Sofía Velázquez’s (1981–) *Retrato peruano del Perú* (*Portrait*, 2013), a door-to-door portrait salesman emerges from one of Mexico City’s metro stations and walks with a painting under his arm. Set to the tune of the Mexican folk song “Cielo rojo” (Red Sky), the salesman’s journey allows the viewer to meander visually through the busy city. Yet just as the camera cuts to reveal the urban landscape, an embossed, gilded frame interrupts the cinematic shot by coming between the camera and its subjects. Several people are framed via this device; some of them pose intently while others try to remain as casual as possible. The gilded frame that has just entered the picture—which resembles the frames used to adorn formal, stately portraits from Peru’s early Republican era—not only selects and visually outlines what is shown but also calls attention to the very act of representation (Fig. 10.1).

Akin to many of its contemporaries, *Retrato* does not purport to capture an unadulterated reality on film or reveal the absolute truth about its subject. Rather, it traces the narrative of a geographical location as both an aesthetic and an affective space. The film endeavors to show what it

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**Fig. 10.1** *Retrato peruano del Perú* (2009), directed by Carlos Sánchez Giraldo and Sofía Velázquez

means to look at a specific reality through the camera lens, and it takes distance from a paradigm in which documentary production is inextricably linked to notions like truth, objectivity, and unmediated representation—a paradigm frequently seen in Peru’s national documentary tradition. In this sense, it participates in a new wave of Peruvian documentaries that question the camera’s ability to capture reality “as it is.”

Within this new wave, we can cite films like *Metal y melancolía* (*Metal and Melancholy*, 1994) and *El olvido* (*Oblivion*, 2008), by Heddy Honigmann (1951–); *Loco Lucho* (*Crazy Lucho*, 1998), by Mary Jiménez (1948–); *Nadie especial* (*Nobody Special*, 2013), by Juan Alejandro Ramírez (1958–); and *Solo te puedo mostrar el color* (*I Can Only Show You the Color*, 2014), by Fernando Vélchez (1980–)—all of which seek to fracture the usual narratives of realist representation prevalent in the expository, observational, and interactive modes of the Latin American “social documentary.”<sup>1</sup> Julianne Burton succinctly calls attention to a number of the social documentary’s main characteristics: the treatment of a “human subject,” its “descriptive or transformative concern,” and the influence of its raw realism on the fictional feature films produced in the region.<sup>2</sup> In her proposed typology, Burton also includes the “reflexive mode,” an apt term to describe certain prevailing characteristics within this set of Peruvian docu-

mentaries that “generate an awareness of the cinematic apparatus” and question realism as the most adequate aesthetic form for capturing “the real.”<sup>3</sup> These productions, to be sure, approach reality in a decidedly different, more ambiguous way. While they do not overtly denounce a social problem or expose a political issue, they do not disregard these either. Instead, the films can perhaps best be understood as visual constructions in which directors very deliberately lay bare the scaffolding that undergirds the illusions of truth and objectivity that images tend to stage.

As spectators, we are used to accepting images as proof of an already existing reality, even when we have no actual guarantee as to their authenticity. We trust images because we trust our gaze. Yet there is nothing intrinsic in an image to account for the truth of what it shows. Echoing this sentiment, Roland Barthes, upon gazing at his image in the mirror, remarks:

What is the “you” you might or might not look like? Where do you find it—by which morphological or expressive calibration? Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens [...]: even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images.<sup>4</sup>

In a similar gesture, Sturken and Cartwright debunk the “myth of photographic truth,” a term they use to refer specifically to photography but that can also be applied to camera images in general. “A photograph,” they write, “is often perceived to be an unmediated copy of the real world, a trace of reality skimmed off the very surface of life.”<sup>5</sup> However, the “truth value” we tend to ascribe to camera images is not unquestionable given that “our awareness of the subjective nature of imaging is in constant tension with the legacy of objectivity that clings to the cameras and machines that produce images today. Yet, the sense that photographic images are evidence of the real also gives them a magical quality that adds to their documentary quality.”<sup>6</sup> It is precisely this interplay between the “magical quality” of images and their potential to be seen as proof of an existing reality that certain contemporary Peruvian documentaries explore.

New documentary production in Peru has engaged in a range of reflexive visual and representational strategies that place it in dialogue with global documentary cinema more broadly. For example, we might cite the influence of Lithuanian filmmaker Jonas Mekas’s (1922–) “diary films” or

actress-director Sarah Polley's (1979–) *Stories We Tell* (2012), an autobiographical documentary that focuses on her family. Bill Nichols's concept of a “reflexive mode” of documentary outlines a practice that is deeply aware of the process of documenting in film.<sup>7</sup> Distinctive examples of this reflexive tradition include Dziga Vertov (1896–1954) and Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha (1952–), but could also be said to incorporate Peruvian filmmakers like Juan Alejandro Ramírez (1958–), Mary Jiménez (1948–), or Raúl del Busto (1978–), whose films express their points of view through autobiographical speech.

In this chapter, we will examine these new reflexive practices by studying two specific cases. First, we will look at the Caravana Documentary Project (CDP). Under the aegis of this project, documentary workshops took place in Peru's peripheral areas that turned documentary filmmaking into a tool for community building and self-expression. Second, we will examine the aforementioned documentary *Retrato peruano del Perú*, a feature film that explores collective identity through the use of *fotografía iluminada* (illuminated photography)—a now mostly outdated artistic technique that transforms photographic images into painted portraits, usually altering some features present in the original. In the film, these alterations, as we will see, reflect an aesthetic of the popular that challenges elite narrative and symbolic configurations. In both cases, documentaries are no longer strictly conceived as spaces for representing the real but rather as sites where new figurations can be constructed, interpreted, and performed. By the same token, the audience is not a passive recipient of content but an active agent in the documentary film process. The spectator's gaze, multiple and complex, becomes part of the film's narrative, which seeks to subvert the filmic gaze or pose questions about the very practice of looking.

How do we look at the other? What happens to our gaze when the lines between the self and the other start to blur or when we question the reality of what the camera has captured? These are a couple of the questions that both projects raise using strategies integral to contemporary documentary practices: for example, the deployment of metalanguage or the unmasking of the tools and artifices that lurk behind the construction of the documentary image.

But before we delve into these projects, we first want to address important predecessors of these “new” documentary practices within the Peruvian documentary tradition.

## THE COMPLEX TRADITION OF PERUVIAN DOCUMENTARY FILM

Among Latin American countries, it could be said that Peru is perhaps one of the least prolific in terms of published research about its own contemporary film and documentary production.<sup>8</sup> It could also be argued that it is one of the countries in which there has been less space for documentary film production, dissemination, and consumption due to the absence of state support. The country lacks a proper archive for photographic and audiovisual documentary images capable of consolidating, in one single—physical or virtual—space, the genre’s ever-increasing production. For instance, in the last twelve years alone, more than five hundred documentaries were produced, including feature-length, medium-length, and short films in both digital and film formats.<sup>9</sup> This, however, has not always been the case. According to a study by Sarah Barrow, only fourteen films were produced between 1993 and 2001.<sup>10</sup> The industry reached its lowest point in 1997 with zero films released.<sup>11</sup> However, film critic Ricardo Bedoya points out that there were actually two movies released that year, though outside of Lima: Palito Ortega Matute’s (1967–) *Dios tarda pero no olvida* (*God Waits but Does Not Forget*, Ayacucho, 1996) and Ramiro Díaz Tupa’s (1971–) *La fuerza de un héroe* (*A Hero’s Strength*, Puno, 1996). The omission of this small but important data reveals a fairly well-known fact about Peruvian film: the existence of a regional movie industry whose relevance and presence are consistently eclipsed or erased by Lima and its cultural production.<sup>12</sup>

The severe economic crisis of the late 1980s as well as a set of policies implemented during the first government of neoliberal President Alberto Fujimori (1990–1995) contributed to the stark situation that the Peruvian film industry faced. The first “Cinema Law” of 1972 was revoked—twenty years after it was first implemented—and replaced by another one, passed in 1995, which essentially abolished several of its predecessor’s most beneficial regulations. Now facing a new “competition-based” funding model in which the governmental organization in charge (CONACINE, Consejo Nacional de Cinematografía, National Film Council) would award film projects a portion of an allotted yearly budget, filmmakers were understandably worried, especially because the mandatory screening directive that had been part of the 1972 law was cast aside.<sup>13</sup> Other concerns such as the possibility of censorship or worries about the state keeping its financial obligation to filmmakers also surfaced.<sup>14</sup>

The new law not only withdrew state support from the social and cultural realms with the goal of privatizing national life, but also aimed to help stem the economic crisis that was tied, in part, to the ongoing internal armed conflict.<sup>15</sup> The policy's consequences became apparent early on and further debilitated an already weak national film industry that was left to scramble for private funding or for support in the form of international co-productions. Thus, the rate of national feature-length releases declined (as demonstrated above by Barrow's data on the 1993–2001 period) and did not recover until well into the first decade of the twenty-first century. While it is clear that the Cinema Law needed to be revised and updated, this new iteration was not what filmmakers and producers wanted. The first version of the legislation, repealed by Fujimori—paradoxically, to promote domestic film production—had, in reality, generated a much more prolific film scene than its 1990s replacement.

In contrast, the original law, Law Number 19327—one of the many reforms brought about by the national-populist military government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968–1975)—improved access to equipment and materials by eliminating import taxes; it also promoted local production by requiring the mandatory screening of Peruvian films throughout the country.<sup>16</sup> Due to the lack of a strong feature film tradition, the genre that most directly profited from this was the documentary short.<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps this lack that led Jon Beasley-Murray to characterize the country's cinematic tradition as “truncated” and to reflect upon the meaning of a national cinema in Peru.<sup>18</sup> Peruvian cinema—according to Beasley-Murray—has all but disappeared, but not in the sense that one might think. Even though audiovisual production is booming in Peru, national cinema has been “replaced by subnational and transnational cinemas that challenge the very notion of a ‘national’ cinema. National cinema has been usurped by a nonnational or even an antinational cinema that overturns any claim to national hegemony.”<sup>19</sup> To illustrate this idea, Beasley-Murray analyzes three recent Peruvian films, all of them fictional.<sup>20</sup> However, even if he leaves documentaries out of his analysis, a similar paradigm shift characterizes their status within Peruvian national cinema.

Throughout the 1950s—before Velasco's Cinema Law—there was a prolific documentary tradition already in place, cemented by the productions coming out of collective endeavors, such as those of Cine Club Cusco.<sup>21</sup> This second “Cusco School”—the first, of course, being the pictorial one—“registered on film different aspects of Andean life, the first concerted effort to document the life of the Andean Indians in Peru.”<sup>22</sup>

Filmmakers like Manuel Chambi (1924–1987), Luis Figueroa (1929–2012), Eulogio Nishiyama (1920–1996), and César Villanueva (1928–1974) directed shorts and feature-length documentaries whose main purpose was to portray life in the Andes, a reality with which many in modern, metropolitan Lima were unfamiliar. The Cusco School, as John King points out, would eventually take a turn toward a more committed and socially aware type of cinema that sought to represent some of the struggles of rural life.<sup>23</sup>

The Cusco School's efforts, as well as those filmmakers who benefited from Velasco's Cinema Law, shared a focus on the representation of a national reality linked to the idea of authenticity. Chambi characterizes some of his own films in a way that confirms this. When referring to the warm reception his *Fiesta de Chumbivilcas* (*Chumbivilcas Festival*, 1957) got in the titular province whose religious festival the documentary portrays, he notes, in particular, that it was due to "the authenticity the film evinces."<sup>24</sup> That authenticity, Chambi argues, arises from an interest in describing the Andean world that he and his crew were able to experience for themselves:

Because we were there and we thought we had to express a world through images, something that had not been done before ... [w]e tried to express every dimension of that world ... [G]iven that we have a feel for the Andean world, because our training is Andean, we strived to show it.<sup>25</sup>

This almost ethnographic, realist bent remained a staple in Peruvian documentary throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, thus emphasizing its usefulness as a didactic tool over other modes or functions. This was especially evident in the documentary shorts that Velasco's Cinema Law mandated be screened in conjunction with every foreign feature film shown in the country.

However, even if ethnographic realism was the norm, alternative projects—which did not necessarily seek to benefit from the law through a fast and cheap production process or a secured distribution—started to emerge. Beginning in 1982, and led by Stefan Kaspar (1948–2013), Grupo Chaski formed to promote film as a tool for economic and cultural development. Consisting of filmmakers and journalists, the group aimed to educate and empower audiences in addition to disseminating its own cinematic work. *Gregorio* (1984) and *Juliana* (1988), Chaski's most acclaimed fiction films, used documentary images to tell the story of Lima's migrant street children in the 1980s, displaying a clear neoreal-

ist influence while also conveying a harsh critique of Peruvian society. In this same vein, the group's documentary *Miss Universo en el Perú* (*Miss Universe in Peru*, 1982) explored gender issues using two points of departure: first, Lima as an absurd venue for a beauty contest given the prevailing context of civil war and political unrest; and second, a female peasant strike for labor, social, and economic rights. The film fuses reality and staging and thus becomes a hybrid production in which different Peruvian women appear on a black stage watching beauty contests, ads for hair and skin care, and reports on the beauty queens' itineraries as a way to expose the objectification of women and to question consumerism, neoliberal hegemony, and female normativity.

In the same decade, Gianfranco Annichini's (1939–) *Radio Belén* (*Belén Radio*, 1983), a film about poverty in the Belén neighborhood in the city of Iquitos, for example, offered a poetic, yet reflexive take on representing socioeconomic squalor. The director works from an uncertain point of view; as he films, he uncovers new layers of meaning that complicate the notion of “the real.”<sup>26</sup> In the film, the contrast among different elements—the voice-over and sounds emitted by the radio juxtaposed with images of faces, actions, movements, and spaces—generates a dialogue that interpellates the spectator and moves away from a cinematic gaze that is judgmental, critical, or even celebratory of poverty.

When examining *Radio Belén*, it is almost unavoidable to note how it challenges what Colombian directors Luis Ospina (1949–) and Carlos Mayolo (1945–2007) called “poverty porn.” Their term eloquently describes an exploitative way of seeing and portraying human misery and suffering that commodifies impoverished subjects and the grim contexts in which they live. According to Ospina and Mayolo, poverty porn was the paradigm for global documentary at the time. Throughout the 1970s—both in Colombia and Peru—new cinema laws fostered an increased film production whose style and content centered on social tragedy through a gaze that was at once superficial and self-involved: “These deformations were driving Colombian film down a dangerous road because poverty and squalor were presented as another spectacle through which the viewer could alleviate his guilty conscience and allow himself to be moved and soothed.”<sup>27</sup> Peruvian documentarians, in general, did not confront this issue and tended to replicate the paradigm—unlike Ospina and Mayolo, whose 1978-mockumentary *Agarrando pueblo* (*The Vampires of Poverty*) subverted it.<sup>28</sup> It could be said, however, that Gianfranco Annichini was one of the few Peruvian filmmakers to avoid the poverty porn model



through his own visual aesthetic and his approach to his characters; he used a telephoto lens and eschewed close-ups, showing subjects from afar to avoid an objectifying gaze mired in the details of human tragedy. In addition to his novel camera work, he relays the main story through the eponymous radio station's sound broadcasts, and not through a linear narrative or voice-of-God narration.

Yet *Radio Belén* was hardly the only film trying to forge a new path for Peruvian documentary. One of Anicchini's predecessors, Armando Robles Godoy (1923–2010), also proposes an unstable relationship between picture and sound in the documentary short *En vivo y en directo . . . via satélite* (*Live . . . Via Satellite*, 1973): a voice-over narrates a soccer match, play by play, while images of a deserted, albeit modern Lima roll across the screen. The gaze here is not fixed on any one character or issue. Rather, it presents an unstructured, fragmented landscape in which recognizable monuments and urban landmarks seem devoid of meaning and lose their traditional function: to furnish symbols of national identity for the country's citizens. Instead, the monumental nodal points that structure a Peruvian imagined community give way to popular culture's redefinition of patriotism and belonging via the soccer match.

A third and final production that might also be considered a precursor to the new turn in Peruvian documentary is Heddy Honigman's (1951–) *Metal y melancolía* (*Metal and Melancholy*, 1994), a nostalgic and poetic look at life in Lima through the first-person accounts of taxi drivers. Honigman approaches social issues—such as the economic crisis and endemic poverty of the 1980s—by concentrating on her subjects' inner worlds and their emotional connections to the places where they live and work. This intimate portrayal helps the director elude the “deformations” typical of poverty porn, while at the same time hinting at the sociopolitical questions that underlie the taxi drivers' personal narratives, which constitute a common thread that strings together life in the city.

Even though, out of the three, Robles Godoy is the one who takes the most formal risks, all of these projects distance themselves from a traditional social documentary perspective. Their primary motivation is to frame their subjects' inner worlds—be they spaces or people—in a way that invites the audience to connect those worlds to larger social, political, and cultural landscapes. Thus, documentary shifts away from being a didactic tool or a representational device that purports to show reality as such and instead becomes a space in which images are constructed in ways that subvert the idea of the authentic. What matters in these films is not an



ability to capture the real or provide the audience with a window through which to gaze upon the lives of others trapped in bleak situations. To the contrary, it is the ability to instantiate, through the image, a dialogue among heterogeneous, subjective perspectives that rub against the grain of a normative national identity.

In this case, as Jacques Rancière puts it, the image “is a complex set of relations between the visible and the invisible ... the said and the unsaid. It is not a mere reproduction of what is out there in front of the photographer or the filmmaker. It is always an alteration that occurs in a chain of images which alter it in turn.”<sup>29</sup> In that sense, images not only affect or are affected by reality; they are also affected by other images, which, in turn, alter the flow and meaning of accepted narratives and representational aesthetics.

In short, these documentaries do not purport to be a pure reflection of reality. Rather, their aim is to open a reflection on images as constructed, partial, and subjective entities that show as much as they hide.

### CARAVANA DOCUMENTARY PROJECT: UNMAKING THE SPECTATOR’S GAZE

The Caravana Documentary Project (CDP) emerged in 2002 as a space for discussion, reflection, and self-representation.<sup>30</sup> It was conceived as a traveling workshop that would traverse different urban and rural locations throughout Peru, offering participants practical, theoretical, methodological, and technical approaches to documentary filmmaking. The workshops were free and open to the public to encourage local populations to take part in producing documentary video. In the course of its work, the CDP intentionally took distance from the framework of “participatory video”; rather, it defined its mission as an attempt to confront and question an objectifying view of the world and the other.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, CDP sought to go beyond the common tenets of participatory video—such as giving a voice to marginalized people, empowering communities, and articulating key issues or concerns. Its process, by contrast, was grounded in the concept of deconstruction.<sup>32</sup>

CDP’s goal, therefore, was to uncover the assumptions undergirding concepts, ideas, common symbols, and images: to pick them apart and expose them as social constructions that have been naturalized to seem commonsensical. It sought to democratize documentary production, while also providing a space in which hegemonic discourses—on a range of topics such as gender, race, national identity, and politics—could be

disrupted. By removing material constraints like access to equipment and funding, CDP also eroded sociopolitical and cultural barriers like the censorship, silencing, and marginalization of subaltern groups.

The project brings together filmmakers and audiovisual professionals to teach workshops on documentary theory and practice in Peruvian towns along the coast and in the Andes and the Amazon.<sup>33</sup> The workshops, which include Peruvian and foreign documentary screenings, take place on the mornings of the first three days of a weeklong stay at a given location. From the beginning, participants think about a topic or idea they would like to capture or a story they would like to tell on camera. They are then divided into groups of four and decide on roles for the upcoming shoot: producer, director, camera operator, or sound recorder. After selecting topics, participants dedicate the first three afternoons to preproduction issues so that, on the fourth day, all the groups can go out and shoot footage that will then be edited into a documentary short on day five. Evenings are devoted to documentary screenings held in public spaces—usually town squares or parks—and are free and open to the community. The fifth and last night features screenings of the participants' documentaries.

The collaborative aspect of the workshop's documentaries and the multiple, layered gazes they produce, challenge the idea of a single subject able to capture the unique "truth" of reality. We might say that the workshop's mission flies in the face of Heidegger's statement that "the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture"—an idea that implies an objectification of the world, seen from the outside, whose net effect is to bring about the emergence or exaltation of the self.<sup>34</sup> For Heidegger, the subject no longer needs to participate in the world to gain knowledge about it; rather, it is the representation of the world that usurps the place of reality, which is now constructed in terms of its relationship to the subject. Following this line of thought, the subject who holds the power to represent—in fact, to decide who to represent, when, and on what terms—is the one who gets to shape reality.

Conceptually, CDP strives to stand against the egocentric, ethnocentric, and colonizing gaze that has permeated documentary practice for so long and that has been used to construct identities and consolidate power. It proposes a critical approach to visual production that asks what is represented, how, and by whom. By activating alternative spaces for distribution and foregrounding personal stories and ideas that would not normally be heard, it questions a hegemonic, Peruvian paradigm that has

long suggested that those who are not part of the *criollo*, Lima-based, Spanish-speaking elite belong to the periphery of culture: a periphery that many *limeños* have historically viewed as passive and outside modernity both because of its reluctance to merge with the circuits of global capitalism and because of its alleged obsession with preserving traditional ways of life.<sup>35</sup> As the essential others of the nation, citizens of indigenous descent whose first language is not Spanish and/or who inhabit communities peripheral to big cities are seen, in Laura Mulvey's conceptualization, "as bearer[s], not maker[s] of meaning."<sup>36</sup>

Conversely, CDP provides a much-needed space to create and explore meaning, to build organized networks around aesthetic practice. Members take on dual roles as spectators and creators: they gain access to means of production, take control of the content, choose which topics to cover in their documentaries, determine each frame's audiovisual composition, select scene progression during montage, and take charge of the film's initial interpretation. Thus, workshop participants exercise a kind of agency—as citizens—that so far the Peruvian government has not been able to guarantee universally.

Furthermore, the project redefines the spectator's role by moving it away from conceptualizations like those developed by Guy Debord and Laura Mulvey and drawing it closer to Rancière's idea of an "emancipated spectator."<sup>37</sup> For Rancière, "[b]eing a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation ... Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor ... is the spectator of the same story."<sup>38</sup> There is no active-passive dichotomy between spectator and spectacle here. Rather, there is a relationship of equals in which the spectator appropriates and translates the story to make it her own. By becoming "[a]n emancipated community ... a community of narrators and translators," the participants in the CDP workshops inject their own voices, their own stories, into the flow of national history even if, in practice, their status as citizens of the nation is not validated in the same way as their elite counterparts.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, the CDP workshops give birth to poignant and relevant work that allows communities to pursue meaning and belonging through narratives that run contrary to the nation's official story. Take, for example, the number of documentaries that address Peru's *batallas por la memoria* (battles for memory)—the struggles to negotiate how the political violence of the 1980s and 1990s should be remembered.<sup>40</sup> Even though the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2001–2003) published its final report

more than ten years ago, the Lugar de la Memoria (Place of Memory) museum has only recently opened to the public. When the government announced that the museum would be built in Lima's upscale Miraflores district, a controversy erupted regarding the politics and ethics of anchoring the country's memory in that particular place. For many survivors and relatives of the dead and disappeared—mostly of Andean descent—Lima hardly represents *their* place of memory.

To explore memory through documentary filmmaking in this particular framework is a way for communities to stake their claim in an ongoing conversation about the internal armed conflict with which Peruvians still grapple. Projects like the CDP foster contestatory practices of memory and provide both a basis for activism and a mouthpiece for populations whose right to be heard and seen has been systematically denied.

### A PORTRAIT OF REPRESENTATION ITSELF

*Retrato peruano del Perú* (2013) begins with a slow montage of images of different kinds of portraits—focusing on faces, eyes, frames, colors, and textures—accompanied by the evocative melody of César Oliva's *criollo* waltz “Me voy, adiós” (I'm Leaving, Goodbye). The lyrics—which juxtapose sadness and joy, celebration and tears, laughter and farewells—imbue the images with a melancholy undercurrent that seems to foreshadow the stories that are about to be told. We first encounter Miguel, a painter who reflects on his own craft and, later on, Eva, whose search for a portrait turns into a transformative journey.

Miguel, an artist with a degree from Peru's prestigious Escuela Nacional Superior Autónoma de Bellas Artes (National Fine Arts School) who struggles to find work in his field, finally discovers a way to make money and at the same time tell stories through images. As he reflects upon his new position as one of three owners and resident artists of El Retrato de Carmela (Carmela's Portrait)—a small art gallery and shop where people can commission painted portraits from photographs—Miguel's voiceover tells us:

I used to ask my questions succinctly . . . . Now I do it more politely and try to find out as much as I can in the process. I want to learn the story behind [each piece]. Whether it's aesthetics, beauty, memories, or nostalgia . . . I want to know why someone wants a portrait made. In the end, these portraits . . . play a role: they allow people to satisfy something within themselves—a recollection, a memory, or simply beauty . . . . It moves me.

The people represented in Miguel's portraits usually ask the artist to alter the image: to add or remove colors, to enhance smiles or reduce noses, and to create or change clothes and accessories. The story that interests Miguel, then, is not necessarily that of a revelatory truth—a history that exposes an ontological essence—but rather, an imagined one, put together by the subject to construct itself for others.

As the image of Miguel—who is painting in a secluded field that captures the ideal of bucolic beauty—fades out, we meet another character, Eva, whose picture fades into the scene. Eva, who would like to become a photographer one day, is looking for something, too, and although it is not very clear what it is, what is evident is that her search is organized by and through images. Portraits, photographs, cameras, and landscapes are all parts of the story she wants to tell about herself. In her voice-over, she states: “When I think of a picture of me, I think about how I would like to be remembered. I think about freedom, about the color blue and the evening's red light. I am learning how to turn those feelings into images.”

Both Miguel and Eva's off-camera thoughts allude to the ways in which they are constructing both the past and present. Their speech acts function as hinges connecting their own narratives to that of the filmmakers—either mirroring the filmmakers' narrative or problematizing it. Their stories, along with that of Johnny (the door-to-door portrait salesman referenced at the beginning of this chapter), can be read as reflections on the process of representing reality and as metadiscourse on documentary filmmaking.

All three subjects suggest that reality is never just reproduced, but rather constructed, invented, changed, enhanced, or embellished. While Eva's journey explores the creation of images and their connection to subjectivity and memory, Johnny and Miguel take part in the pictorial tradition of “illuminated photography,” a technique that lets subjects alter their external appearance and material conditions. Illuminated photography, more precisely, is a process that allows the artist to paint over photographic paper and “illuminate” some features of the face. It can be used to retouch the image or make changes to the very aspects by which society judges individuals, such as facial features (markers of race and ethnicity) or clothing and jewelry (markers of class and status). Furthermore, illuminated photography—common in photo studios at the turn of the twentieth century—was generally seen as a sign of distinction and sophistication, accessible only to the Peruvian upper classes. Eventually, the cost associated with it decreased and, consequently, so did its symbolic value;

illuminated photography eventually became a mass commodity synonymous with popular culture, disconnected from its original elite context and connotation. Given its history, then, illuminated photography, in *Retrato*, functions as a symbolic index of how changing tastes and aesthetics have been used to define a group's assigned place in Peruvian society's stratified social apparatus. The technique, however, has recently regained some of its cachet thanks to a growing appreciation for kitsch aesthetics among young *limeños*. It has now become a practice whereby images can be made to question and even contradict the parameters of an established social order—a kind of subversive use of the illuminated image.

The stories in *Retrato* are relayed through the voices of the three characters such that the audience can become part of a shared narrative rather than one generated by the directors' omniscient, authoritative gaze. By challenging the inner workings of visual representation, the characters do not appear as a reality captured in its "natural state" but as very deliberately constructed images of the self.

In *Retrato*, memory is always on display on the living room wall—in the form of a picture, as a link between present and future. What memory normally shows, however, is an idealized version of the past, perhaps created as a way to battle against a reality that is not always friendly. For the documentary subjects, the portrait signifies the possibility of building their own story and telling it on their own terms, regardless of what their real lives look like. The possibility of constructing that memory vindicates a claim to power: the power to build one's own myths. *Retrato*, then, sets forth the idea that every story we have been told—personal, collective, or historical—is embellished, made up, and repackaged. Furthermore, it suggests that documentary film should work as a space for constructing and thinking through new possibilities for representation that explore multiple, contradictory, and even fragmentary ways of seeing. The documentary should be a dialogue among past, present, and future; between community and individual; and between the evidence of representing artifice and artifice itself.

Nico Baumbach, following Rancière, explains that "[w]hat's needed are new fictions or new memories ... montages that through associations and disassociations allow us to rethink the conceptual networks that determine our impressions of what constitutes the real."<sup>41</sup> The practices outlined through the experience of the CDP and the theoretical framework laid out in *Retrato* seem to indicate that this is precisely the route Peruvian documentary filmmaking is taking. The paths that this new exploration

will forge still remain to be seen. However, the evidence points toward a less restricted—and more inclusive—gaze, both in aesthetic and political terms.

## NOTES

1. Julianne Burton, *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 4.
2. *Ibid.*, 3–6.
3. *Ibid.*, 5.
4. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 35.
5. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 32.
8. There are two recent projects that represent a welcome addition to the available literature on Peruvian film: Mauricio Godoy's *Lo autobiográfico dentro del documental contemporáneo en el Perú* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Facultad de Ciencias y Artes de la Comunicación, 2012) and film critic Ricardo Bedoya's forthcoming work on Peruvian documentary.
9. See Mauricio Godoy, "En busca de la memoria documental I," *Hablando de documental*, <http://documentalperuano.wordpress.com/2010/06/30/en-busca-de-la-memoria-documental-parte-i>.
10. Sarah Barrow, "Images of Peru: A National Cinema in Crisis," in *Latin American Cinema: Essays on Modernity, Gender, and Nationhood*, eds. Stephanie Dennison and Lisa Shaw (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005), 43.
11. *Ibid.*, 56 n10.
12. Ricardo Bedoya, e-mail message to Sofia Velázquez, July 8, 2013.
13. Barrow, "Images of Peru," 48.
14. *Ibid.*
15. The twenty-year internal armed conflict, which began in 1981, was launched against the state by Marxist-Leninist-Maoist organization Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path). The violent confrontation between the guerrillas and government forces spread from the Andean countryside to the coast, thereby prolonging the effects of the economic crisis and leaving a trail of seventy-thousand dead and fifty-thousand disappeared in its wake. According to the 2003 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the majority of victims were of indigenous descent.

16. Additionally, any commercial showing of a foreign film was to be accompanied by a locally produced short film that benefited from 25% of the tax levied on the ticket's value. Meanwhile, feature films received the full value of the tax.
17. Jon Beasley-Murray, "Subalternidad, traición y fuga: tres películas recientes del Perú," in *Miradas al margen: cine y subalternidad en América Latina y el Caribe*, ed. Luis Duno Gottberg (Caracas: Fundación Cinemateca Nacional, 2008), 367.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 369.
20. The three films are: Josué Méndez's *Días de Santiago* (*Days of Santiago*, 2004); Gianfranco Quattrini's *Chicha tu madre* (*Your Tacky Mother*, 2006); and Claudia Llosa's *Madeinusa* (2006).
21. In December 1955, a group of Cuzco intellectuals and artists founded the Foto Cine Club del Cusco. Their aim was to spread film culture and produce their own movies. Influenced by Italian neorealism and French poetic realism, they focused on documentaries that stood out because of their technical control of light, their mix of realism and visual lyricism, and their commitment to showing the many facets of Peruvian indigenous cultures.
22. John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London: Verso, 2000), 200.
23. Ibid., 201.
24. Quoted in Giancarlo Carbone, *El cine en el Perú (1950–1972): testimonios* (Lima: CICOSUL, 1993), 99.
25. Ibid., 100.
26. The short film *Radio Belén* focuses on the public market in the port of Belén (Iquitos), located in the Peruvian Amazon. A rudimentary radio station broadcasts via speakers situated throughout the city, announcing births, marriages, deaths, and healthy living tips mixed with bitter images of the struggle to survive that takes place along the riverbanks.
27. Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo, "¿Qué es la porno-miseria?: ensayo-manifiesto," *Tierra en trance: reflexiones sobre cine latinoamericano* 10 (2012), <http://tierraentrance.miradas.net/2012/10/ensayos/que-es-la-porno-miseria.html>.
28. Ospina and Mayolo's film revolves around a group of filmmakers hired by a German television station to produce a documentary on poverty in Latin America. The film deploys a sarcastic tone to critique the crew's approach to marginalized subjects and its marketing of Latin American poverty for profit.
29. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (New York: Verso, 2009), 93–94.
30. The project was created by DocuPerú—originally called Documental Independiente Peruano (DIP)—an institution that promotes documentary work in many regions across the country.



31. "Participatory video" is a method of producing video with the active participation of a community and its members. It provides them with tools to communicate their ideas and construct their own self-representation, which, in turn, empowers them.
32. A critique of participatory video began in the 1970s; it targeted the presence of an "external" gaze in the editing process and in the subsequent interpretation of the resulting videos. The liberal politics behind participatory video and its use of terms like "community," "empowerment," and "voice" have also been questioned recently.
33. Among the participants were producers José Balado and Lali Madueño; film directors Héctor Gálvez and Javier Corcuera; and Miguel Rubio, director of the Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani theater troupe.
34. See Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), 134.
35. The nineteenth century Peruvian nation-building project was based on European positivist values and was handled, politically and economically, by a small, Spanish-speaking, lettered elite that regarded the indigenous majority as inferior and bereft of *criollo* cultural traits. Paternalistic, patriarchal, racist, and classist, the new republic configured an exclusionary national identity that marginalized most of its citizens.
36. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35.
37. For Debord, in the context of capitalism, the spectator is always passive in the face of images that mediate reality: the spectacle replaces actual human relations with commodified relations. The spectator has to be shaken out of his or her stupor by a radical altering of reality; otherwise, he or she will remain alienated forever.
38. Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator*, 17.
39. *Ibid.*, 22.
40. Some of the works that deal with issues related to the conflict are: Susana Sánchez Ríos, Valey Sáenz, Ariana Bustos Gálvez, and Miishel Soto Garay's *Huanta 840* (2012), about the Barrios Altos massacre; Johorman Gonzáles Inga's *A María (To Maria)*, 2012) and Andrea Esqueche Mamani's *Manzana Lote (Block and Lot)*, 2012), both about immigration from the Andes to Lima due to the onslaught of violence; and Diana Cueva Saucedo's *Otro día más (One More Day)*, 2009), about the life and struggles of Andean peasants in the postviolence period. Currently, the CDP is working on narratives dealing with the forced sterilization of women performed during the Fujimori regime.
41. Nico Baumbach, "Jacques Rancière and the Fictional Capacity of Documentary," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8, no. 1 (2010): 68.

## Audiovisual Affect: Sexuality and the Public Sphere in the Work of Colombia's Escuela Audiovisual al Borde

*Marta Cabrera*

Colombian gender- and sexuality-related activism has focused largely on securing legal rights. A by-product of this prevailing trend is the production of stable identities. To challenge this model, the Colombian audiovisual collective *Mujeres al Borde* (Women on the Verge) embodies alternative activist practices that manifest in a wide array of artistic forms: short films, plays, drawings, radio shows, and so on. Another distinctive trait is the group's all-inclusive stance: while *Mujeres al Borde* explicitly mentions race, class, disability, age, and beliefs in its declaration of principles, thereby celebrating intersectionalities that other social movements frequently leave unmentioned, the collective goes even further to claim "the right not to take part in any center, to live on the edges, on the borders," as well as "to construct multiple, mobile, diffuse, tangled identities [and] to renounce imposed ways of life."<sup>1</sup>

Thus far, the group's success has hinged on its ability to generate affective ties within the confines of specific projects like *Escuela Audiovisual al*

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Borde (Audiovisual School on the Verge). In this chapter, I will explore the creative strategies that Escuela Audiovisual al Borde deploys, as well as some of the theoretical inputs that undergird its particular brand of activism—something the collective calls *artivismo* (artivism). Mujeres al Borde locates its theoretical inspiration in both feminist and queer theory, as well as in visual studies. *Artivismo* establishes connections between specialized fields in the arts and nonspecialized forms of social intervention that take into account popular forms of knowledge in addition to a host of other practices. Historically, Latin American *artivismo* reworks existing images or produces new ones to challenge hegemonic forms of representation. Consequently, it seeks to reinscribe certain bodies and subjects into public spheres typically constrained by political reason.<sup>2</sup> *Artivismo* plays a key role in Mujeres al Borde’s political stance insofar as it provides a noninstitutional, relational, and intersubjective space for collaboration among the group’s participants. This methodology allows the collective to seek emotional engagement actively, which is key to its politics and its project of community building.

### SEXUAL POLITICS: MUJERES AL BORDE AND THE EMERGENCE OF LGBT ACTIVISM IN COLOMBIA

Mujeres al Borde emerged within a 1990s wave of activism characterized by the birth and diversification of organizations in several Colombian cities (Medellín, Cali, Bucaramanga, and Armenia). Its origin also roughly coincides with the 1994 creation of the Asociación Colombiana de Lesbianas y Homosexuales (Colombian Association of Lesbians and Homosexuals), which came to serve as an umbrella for other existing organizations.<sup>3</sup> This association’s name used the word “lesbian” for the first time, thereby providing impetus and energy to other pioneering groups like Triángulo Negro (Black Triangle). Triángulo Negro was founded in 1996 and had a significant impact on the definition of a “lesbian” subject; by 2000, the group came to include bisexual women as well. This reality, paradoxically, generated irremediable conceptual confrontations within the group, to the point where some of its members decided to leave to create other spaces, such as Colectivo Lésbico (Lesbian Collective), GLC (Grupo de Lesbianas de Colombia, Colombian Lesbian Group), Dalai, Labrys, Grupo de Mamás Lesbianas (Group of Lesbian Mothers), Lesbianas Bogotá (Lesbians of Bogotá), Corporación DeGeneres-E, De-liberar

(De-liberate/Concerning Freedom), Sentimos Diverso (We Feel Diverse), and Corporación Femm (Femm Corporation), among others.

One of these new groups was *Mujeres al Borde*. Created in 2001 by Ana Lucía Ramírez and Claudia Corredor with the intention of opening a more inclusive space that would also present a clearly defined strategy for intervention, *Mujeres al Borde* sought to “create art and culture with and for women who [had] chosen different gender and sexual options: bisexuals, lesbians, and transgender.”<sup>4</sup> However, despite the specific identities the collective mentions in its “Declaration of Principles,” *Mujeres al Borde* gradually opened up to virtually anyone interested in participating in its meetings and projects, including individuals who were not interested in defining their identities at all.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after its founding in 2001, the collective gained momentum. Early on, it decided to participate in a political process called *Planeta Paz*, an initiative sponsored by the Norwegian government that gathered twelve social sectors to devise agendas for negotiating a political solution to the Colombian conflict: Afro-Colombians, environmentalists, farmers, indigenous peoples, youth, women, trade unionists, civic organizations, communications professionals, cultural actors, the co-op movement, and a new sector called “LGBT.”

There can be little doubt that the *Planeta Paz* initiative represented a key turning point for the LGBT sector. On the one hand, in a pioneering gesture, it boldly posited a role for gender- and sexuality-related activism in the peace process; on the other hand, it provided the collectives and individuals who comprised the LGBT sector with vital spaces for discussion. It was in those spaces that the acronym LGBT was first used and the advantages and limitations of such a designation discussed. While proponents of the LGBT designation liked its inclusiveness of different practices and identities, as well as its expression of a political will to form a community, naysayers cited the reductionist nature of all labels and also expressed deep concern about subsuming cultural, class, regional, and other differences within a single, overarching term. Taking these two opposing positions into account, the Colombian LGBT sector’s birth can be viewed as a strategic political convergence: the fruit of prior efforts by both individuals and organizations to make a cultural and social impact rooted in the particular circumstances of their condition.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the LGBT sector’s participation in the *Planeta Paz* initiative faced resistance from other sectors that argued, in a discriminatory fashion, that LGBT activists would not be able to contribute productively

to the peace agenda because they lacked a significant trajectory or “important” proposals. Despite this blockage, the LGBT sector advanced its mission to make sexual and gender identities visible through its campaign “El cuerpo: primer territorio de paz” (The Body: The First Territory for Peace), which located the heart of political struggle in “respecting the body, the free exercise of sexuality, free gender options, and affective expression as the first road to peace.”<sup>7</sup> The leaders of *Mujeres al Borde*, Ana Lucía Ramírez (1976–) and Claudia Corredor (1968–), contributed to this process by producing a short film that shared the campaign’s title.<sup>8</sup> This was the collective’s first audiovisual work.

A simple, two-minute video was an important catalyst, then, for *Mujeres al Borde*’s subsequent work and for publicly articulating its particular political and aesthetic stance. This first film, shot in black and white, showed close-up fragments of nude male and female bodies engaging in various displays of affection: touching, smiling, and caressing. The film posits the body as a political subject, an “affective territory” that vindicates autonomy, respect, and freedom of expression as a ground zero for peace in a Colombia. This body-territory functions as a site for emotional disputes—both personal and political—and not just as a surface for inscribing identity. Because of its bold gestures, images, and messages, some people found the film offensive; in fact, the directors were told at one point that what LGBT people did in bed “should stay there.”<sup>9</sup>

The controversy surrounding “El cuerpo: primer territorio de paz” reveals the paradoxical persistence of the public/private divide that social movements face when working to promote dialogue and peace. This public/private divide suggests that sexuality, as a function of nature, should remain relegated to the private sphere, sheltered from the public domain and, hence, from the political. This particular work, like much of *Mujeres al Borde*’s *artivismo*, not only challenges the public/private divide, but also sheds light on the contours of heterosexual culture, which achieves its intelligibility through specific ideologies and institutions of intimacy.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the work of *Mujeres al Borde* exposes the fluid connections between the public and private spheres by revealing bodies, desires, and affect as deeply political—as forces capable of mobilizing subjectivities as well as individual and collective emotions.

As Claudia states in an interview: “Activism is carried out by all those who accept their sexual condition, who live freely and happily with absolutely nothing to hide.”<sup>11</sup> *Mujeres al Borde* thus opens exciting possibilities

for challenging heteronormative understandings of intimacy, pleasure, and desire by drawing attention to forms of association grounded primarily in emotion rather than in the production of stable, “legal” identities. In a similar vein, Ana Lucía sees “identity politics” as useful when strategically deployed to pursue certain demands. Indeed, identity politics can help subjects gain visibility. But when those subjects are not embraced or are actively shunned by repressive institutional structures, identity politics can also turn out to be isolating and debilitating. According to Ana Lucía, this is precisely what has happened to the LGBT social movement in Colombia and other countries.

These views, as well as tensions within the movement, played a key role in *Mujeres al Borde*’s decision to focus not on defined identities, but on *forms of dissidence*:

We discovered that what can identify us, in practice, is our political stance toward certain issues, such as dissidence, more than the fact that we have a vagina, we want to get rid of one, we have a penis, or that I sleep with a man or a woman . . . . Such dissidence is a practice, a way of being, a way of positioning ourselves and of being able to connect with each other, because there won’t be any conditions regarding who you sleep with or how you name yourself. This is important because when we share affective bonds, when I respect you and you respect me, and we are willing to learn from each other, our [individual] histories are still important, but they don’t become something that separates us or that places you in a position of privilege [over me].<sup>12</sup>

Since its early days, *Mujeres al Borde* chose to work in visual media not only because doing so was practical (both Claudia and Ana have media-related degrees), but also because of the serious lack of visual representations that existed in Colombia of local bodies and subjects. Without representations, it would be impossible to reconstruct the stories and memories of particular forms of sexual dissidence. Ana Lucía adds: “That’s where I clearly see the topic of memory . . . [in] the need to share our memory . . . to tell this untold story . . . not only locally, but also [regionally], as a South American story.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, *Mujeres al Borde* considers the visual medium to be a form of political action and knowledge production, since it encourages sharing common experiences among a wide range of individuals, regardless of their educational level or theoretical savvy. The visual thus challenges the theory-practice divide.

SHARING TRANSNATIONAL STORIES OF SEXUAL DISSIDENCE:  
ESCUELA AUDIOVISUAL AL BORDE

Mujeres al Borde's inclusive stance manifests in its project Escuela Audiovisual al Borde, which trains "bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, hetero-dissident, *tortillera*, trans, intersex, [and] queer activists ... to be audiovisual producers."<sup>14</sup> I had the opportunity to accompany Escuela during its first round of productions. These took place in 2011, first in Bogotá and, months later, in Santiago, Chile. In both cities, Mujeres al Borde made its technical equipment and know-how available to participants: three in Colombia and four in Chile. A coordination team chose the participants, mostly activists. More recently, and given the success of the documentaries that the first production round yielded, activist organizations from different countries have requested further editions of Escuela.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the two-month-long workshops, each participant wrote a screenplay, directed an autobiographical documentary, and collaborated in other participants' films as part of the technical team. The production process unfolded in an atmosphere of intimacy, trust, and collaboration. Moreover, the workshops were guided by an impetus to "share knowledge" rather than "teach." The result was seven short films that premiered at the XII Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano y del Caribe (Twelfth Feminist Meeting for Latin America and the Caribbean). The Encuentro took place in Bogotá on November 24, 2011, in front of a highly emotional audience from all around the hemisphere, which included members from the Colombian and Chilean production teams, friends and families, as well as funding agents.

Escuela is an interesting and innovative endeavor from several points of view. First, it promotes transnational, inclusive activism. Second, it reaches beyond the creative sphere to actually train activists and distribute their works, thanks to the collective's participation in film festivals and other events. Finally, the initiative explicitly foregrounds affect, which, as the group puts it: "crosses borders, creates links, partnerships, and generates exchanges that are [at once] emotional, cultural, organizational, memory-driven, and [grounded in the] desires of activists from various countries. [These activists possess] diverse, multiple, fluid identities/identifications and want to tell their stories in their own voices and use them to transform reality!"<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 11.1).

It is important to emphasize that the creative process—not just the product of that process—is what generates an intimate, emotional



Fig. 11.1 *Todo un hombre* (2011), produced by Escuela Documental al Borde

experience capable of fostering different kinds of exchange. This experience takes place while filming, but also trickles down and spreads into other areas of daily life. As Berlant and Warner argue, “Affective life slops over onto work and political life; people have key self-constitutive relations with strangers and acquaintances.”<sup>17</sup> The work of making a documentary therefore becomes a touch-point for resexualizing other, sometimes unforeseen areas of life that harbor the potential to become places to experience affection. Ideally, the collective’s work strives toward promoting a more participatory and inclusive public sphere.

The creative process Escuela uses is rooted in principles like collaboration and co-responsibility. To that end, participants take on roles in the production of each other’s documentaries. Writing screenplays, filming the documentaries (in private), and publicly presenting them are emotionally charged events. This emotion derives both from the films’ content and from the individuals who make them. The co-mingling of



process and product creates lasting impressions on everyone involved: on audiences, workshop participants, as well as members of the broader collective. In short, these collaborative workshops open up a space in which to articulate forms of intimacy, common histories, exclusions, and shared fears. In the process, marginal and subordinate knowledge formations are valued, and the particular universes that marginalized subjects inhabit become visible:

We have to work well as a team ... [Therefore] affection is important—that people like each other, that they know each other, that they trust each other, especially when we're asking people to write autobiographical stories. People have to trust everyone else, know that all of the roles are equally important and necessary for the final product to work out. Audiovisual practice demands loving, understanding, complicity, respect, caring ... Documentary teams in particular are small, so they require intimacy, which stimulates lots of emotional stuff that is important to people's lives and activism. Another advantage [of the documentary] is that it makes visible things that have been largely invisible. So when you go ahead and do it, when you take your chances and explore, you might find images and words fit to name your experience, thus creating new possibilities ... for you and for other people as well. And it changes you because you end up understanding things about yourself ... You understand, you are transformed, and the people on your team are transformed. Those who watch your work might even be transformed as well.<sup>18</sup>

In this way, *Mujeres al Borde's* audiovisual work generates *affective economies* that reorder social and sensory space. The group's political potency is evident in the production process, in how its films and plays circulate (through festivals, screenings, or performances at universities and political events), as well as in the medium itself (the audiovisual), as I will explain below. Understood in this way, affect becomes a performative, mobile force, capable—by the sheer strength of its attachments—of linking bodies and experiences, individuals and collectives; it promotes agency and is key to the production of other ways of knowing.<sup>19</sup> To foreground and centralize affect and emotion is to ascribe to them an eminently political role; they are no longer considered “natural,” primitive, or merely linked to the irrational, nor are they discounted as illegitimate, as Descartes once led us to believe.<sup>20</sup>

## IMAGE, AFFECT, AND INTERVENTION

The audiovisual medium is capable of producing significant ties among filmmakers, their works, and audiences. W.J.T. Mitchell, for instance, underscores that images are:

go-betweens in social transactions, ... a repertoire ... that structure[s] our encounters with other human beings ... As go-betweens or subaltern entities, these images are the filters through which we recognize and of course misrecognize other people. They are the paradoxical mediations that make possible what we call the unmediated or face-to-face relations that Raymond Williams postulates as the origin of society as such. And this means that the social construction of the visual field has to be continuously replayed as the visual construction of the social field, an invisible screen or lattice-work of apparently unmediated figures that makes the effects of mediated images possible.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, images should not be understood as mere representations, but rather as *presentations* that seek to interpellate viewers beyond the intentions of their producers; they are imbued with agency insofar as they act on or affect audiences.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, images link the natural and the social and thus become a site where apparatuses, institutions, discourses, and bodies, among other elements, interact in a complex fashion. Consequently, they are an ideal site for intervention.<sup>23</sup>

Based on this rationale, Mujeres al Borde has decided to use the visual field as battleground to fight what it considers to be a long history of exclusion and public invisibility of certain bodies, practices, and subjectivities. This challenge requires experimenting with expressive techniques that not only work *with* images, but also *on* them and *through* them. As Ana Lucía puts it:

We feel we are getting closer to the kinds of stories [and people] that interest us, people who are actively integrated into their communities, doing stuff, recognizing art as place of action, of creation. It's so cool to ... push the idea of the community [further], to practice audiovisual activism in a real community school, [to work beyond] an evacuated sense of "community."<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, the group's activism is akin to feminist cinema in more than one sense. On the one hand, it engages in a quest for ways of seeing

and objects of representation that have no place in mainstream cinema. On the other hand, it creates the conditions of possibility for making marginalized social subjects visible.<sup>25</sup> Escuela's documentaries thus allow certain subjects to gain access to self-representation, though perhaps more importantly, they allow access to other kinds of relationships and forms of desire. In a word, for Escuela, documentary is the place where *artivismo* comes to life.

The images that appear in Escuela's autobiographical, self-reflexive pieces encompass a wide range of emotions—anger, fear, pain, or joy—and are deeply connected to the speaking subjects' life narratives. By making certain lives visible, stories can be appropriated and reworked by others who recognize elements of themselves in what they see on-screen. In this sense, Escuela invites viewers to:

Invent new words to name ourselves in different ways, so that we resemble what we want to be, to make visible what has remained invisible through our own images, to challenge the bitterness and violence of the heteronormative, patriarchal gender order with our laughter, our sense of humor, our art, our pleasure, and our creativity.<sup>26</sup>

This invitation harbors political power because it advances a notion of action rooted in shared negative emotion and its eventual transgression through language, the body, the creative process, or different affective responses. The audiovisual field serves as a site to destabilize, or as Nelly Richard puts it, to agitate (rather than to lull) the gaze,<sup>27</sup> to produce dissident publics,<sup>28</sup> and to *affect* and challenge hegemonic representations.

In this regard, one of the most successful documentaries (both in terms of its reception and circulation in film festivals) is *¿Quién me dice qué es el amor?* (*Who Can Tell Me What Love Is?*, 2011), a five-minute autobiographical account that reflects on monogamy and desire. In the film, Paula Sánchez, who has been with Sofia for seven years, feels attracted to someone else.<sup>29</sup> Using photos from her personal album, Paula reconstructs her life: her marriage at an early age, the birth of her daughter (fourteen years old at that time), and how she met and fell in love with Sofia and formed a lesbian-parental family. She then addresses her present life with Sofia, their daily existence, and particularly how monogamous relationships can become oppressive as time passes. The documentary was particularly challenging to shoot since it features an intimate scene between Paula and Sofia, as well as a closing scene in which Paula appears naked. Filming this

scene required patience and trust among the participants. However, the work paid off because audiences often feel engaged by this simple, honest, intimate, and heartfelt narrative that entwines a variety of emotions—fear and guilt, and love and desire.

This short film, narrated in the first person, goes beyond the surface to capture the intricacies of desire. Its value lies in how it makes lesbian lives visible in all their complexity. More than a simple affirmation of identity, the film works to recover the intimate textures of lesbian histories and memories. By mixing expository documentary footage with a metaphorical closing scene (an anguish-ridden scene featuring a nude Paula), the short film succeeds by admitting, with sincerity, that love and relationships can sometimes be oppressive. From there, it reflects on the existence of different possibilities for desire and relationships and, based on that logic, seeks to connect with its audience. The “community” that the film fosters—using the image as intermediary—therefore reminds us, yet again, that the personal is collective and political.

Another successful short film by Escuela is *Trashumantes* (2011), an untranslatable mixture of Spanish words, that blends “transgender” and “nomadic”; the film was born out of the Chilean workshop and touches very different emotional fibers.<sup>30</sup> The director, Damián San Martín (1989–), playfully recounts several moments from his transition from being a woman to being a man. He equates being a man or a woman with being a tree, a rock, or an insect like Gregor Samsa. He thus opens endless creative possibilities for inventing and reinventing bodies and subjectivities. Damián uses humor and irony to inscribe his ever-changing self into a world where “heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape.”<sup>31</sup> Instead of feeling out of place, Damián joyfully dives into the social world and shares affect with his audiences.<sup>32</sup>

*Trashumantes* provides a good example of how *Mujeres al Borde* challenges heteronormativity by recognizing and appropriating various forms of dissidence and turning them into flexible spaces—spaces suited to the transit of genders, identities, desires, and pleasures. This is a key feature of localized activism in Colombia, since it is the very awareness of discrimination within traditional LGBT movements that mobilizes the excluded in their search for alternative spaces for transformation. Since the days of the Planeta Paz initiative, *Mujeres al Borde* has been aware of the dangers of LGBT identification. In response to those dangers, the collective called for the production of a theoretical discourse, whose basis would be queer

theory, that could have an impact on the LGBT sector's overall imaginary and ways of intervening. This theoretical turn had a major impact.<sup>33</sup>

The recourse to queer theory that *Mujeres al Borde* used was strategic. It entailed resistance to naming and defining identities and also served as a tool for warning against the dangers of exclusion present in the “multi-cultural” moment that Colombia was living in the 1990s. At a crucial time in which LGBT public policy for Bogotá was taking shape,<sup>34</sup> the group wanted to combat an understanding of identity as a “stable and natural essence,” or of the “homosexual” as “a being with homosexual desires.”<sup>35</sup> Sexual identities, the group held, are social and historical products that have a tendency to slip into myriad binaries (homosexual/heterosexual, male/female) that form the basis for oppression. Trapped in these binaries, the fluid and unstable zones of the self become fixed in the service of social control. The group's idea, instead, was to dismantle binary categories and reject the status of the “minority.” The downside, however, was that, without fixed identities, it would be impossible to achieve tangible political gains (such as equal marriage or property rights, to name the most prominent examples). In the end, though, the rejection of binaries trumped pragmatism.

Although movements that base their claims on “identity” always face theoretical challenges and binds, it does seem useful to think about the role that emotions and affect can play in disrupting traditional or monolithic understandings of family, kinship, and gender constructs. To explore a range of emotions and life experiences, while appealing to affect as a basis for constructing community via the cinematic image, is a means to radically question policies aimed at “normalizing” those whom society previously considered to be “abnormal.” A disruptive and dynamic approach to identity seeks, at the very least, to avoid reproducing emotional and institutional forms that sustain heteronormative cultural practices and fuel neoliberal capitalism.

Thus, beyond the (real or supposed) shelter of queer theory, it is perhaps more productive to think about the ways in which work on (and with) affect can shape practices to potentially destabilize the dynamics of heterosexual culture; question and redefine the contours of family, the nation, and citizenship; or even generate new relationships based on affect.<sup>36</sup> In this vein, projects such as *Escuela Audiovisual al Borde*, born out of the general commitments of *Mujeres al Borde*, challenge and resist stable identity formations. Yet they go much further than that to delineate what Berlant and Warner have called a *queer world*—“a space of entrances, exits,

unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, [and] incommensurate geographies.”<sup>37</sup> Within a complex web of changing cultural, political, and social realities, the documentary interventions of Escuela Audiovisual al Borde create the conditions of possibility for subjects to join forces with others to resist the very regimes that label them as abnormal and that condemn them, as a consequence, to isolation and invisibility.

## NOTES

1. For the complete mission statement of Mujeres al Borde, see its website, <http://www.mujeresalborde.org/spip.php?rubrique1>. All translations from the Spanish are mine unless otherwise noted.
2. Marcelo Expósito, Ana Vidal, and Jaime Vindel, “Activismo artístico,” in *Perder la forma humana: una imagen sísmica de los años ochenta en América Latina*, eds. Roberto Amigo Cerisola and David Gutiérrez Castañeda (Madrid: Red Conceptualismos del Sur/Museo Reina Sofía, 2012), 49–56.
3. Camila Esguerra, “Decir nosotras: actos del habla como forma de construcción del sujeto lésbico colectivo y de mujeres LBT (lesbianas, bisexuales y transgeneristas) en Colombia,” in *Saberes, culturas y derechos sexuales en Colombia*, ed. Mara Viveros Vigoya (Bogotá: Centro Latinoamericano de Sexualidad y Derechos Humanos (CLAM), Centro de Estudios Sociales (CES), Tercer Mundo Editores, 2006), 131–58.
4. Claudia Corredor and Ana Lucía Ramírez, “Documento estado del arte: sector LGBT,” *El movimiento LGBT en Colombia* (2001), <http://www.choike.org/nuevo/informes/687.html>.
5. Ana Lucía Ramírez, interview by author, tape recording, Bogotá, Colombia, May 2013.
6. See Planeta Paz, *Documento de caracterización sectorial LGBT* (Bogotá: Ediciones Antropos, 2002), 11–12.
7. Corredor and Ramírez, “Documento estado del arte: sector LGBT.”
8. *El cuerpo: primer territorio de paz*, Al Borde Producciones, Bogotá, Colombia, 2001, video.
9. Ana María Agredo, “Aproximación a los usos y reinterpretaciones de las políticas queer en el activismo audiovisual del Colectivo Mujeres al Borde,” undergraduate thesis, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia, 2011, 42.
10. For an explanation of the logics and disciplinary mechanisms of heteronormative culture, see Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–66.

11. Agredo, *Aproximación*, 57.
12. Ana Lucía Ramírez, interview by author, tape recording, Bogotá, Colombia, April 2014.
13. Ibid.
14. “Escuela Audiovisual 2011,” *Mujeres al Borde* (2011), <http://www.mujeresalborde.org/spip.php?article196>.
15. Since then, the seven documentaries have been screened in countless film festivals around the world, and in 2012, Escuela organized a workshop in Asunción, Paraguay, that yielded four new documentaries. At the time of writing, a new edition of Escuela was taking place in La Plata, Argentina.
16. “Escuela Audiovisual al Borde,” *Mujeres al Borde* (2011), <http://www.mujeresalborde.org/spip.php?rubrique49>.
17. Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 560.
18. Ana Lucía Ramírez, interview by author, tape recording, Bogotá, Colombia, April 2014.
19. See Sara Ahmed, “Affective economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 79 (2004): 119.
20. See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), and Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007).
21. W.J.T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 165–81, 175.
22. Keith Moxey, “Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 2 (2008): 131–46.
23. See Hal Foster ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987).
24. Ana Lucía Ramírez, interview by author, tape recording, Bogotá, Colombia, April 2014.
25. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alicia ya no: feminismo, semiótica, cine* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1992), 111.
26. “Desde el Borde,” *Mujeres al Borde* (2011), <http://www.mujeresalborde.org/spip.php?rubrique12>.
27. Nelly Richard, *Fracturas de la memoria* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2007).
28. See Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public.”
29. *¿Quién me dice qué es el amor?*, dir. Paula Sánchez, Al Borde Producciones, 2011.
30. *Trashumantes*, dir. Damián San Martín, Al Borde Producciones, 2011.
31. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics*, 148.
32. See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
33. Corredor and Ramírez, “Documento.”

34. Bogotá took the first steps toward adopting LGBT public policy during the 2004–2008 period, under Mayor Luis Eduardo Garzón.
35. Joshua Gamson, “¿Deben autodestruirse los movimientos identitarios?: un extraño dilema,” in *Sexualidades transgresoras: una antología de estudios queer*, ed. Rafael M. Mérida (Barcelona: Icaria, 2002), 142.
36. Amelia M. Viteri, Fernando J. Serrano, and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, “¿Cómo se piensa lo queer en América Latina?: dossier de presentación,” *Revista de ciencias sociales Iconos* 15, no. 39 (2011): 47–58.
37. See Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 558.



## Capturing the “Real” in Panama’s Canal Ghettos

*Emily F. Davidson*

### FRAMING THE CANAL

In 2012, the Panama Tourism Authority launched its publicity campaign “Panama the Way” with a series of television spots and newspaper advertisements designed to lure tourists and foreign investors to a booming isthmus whose canal expansion project and burgeoning metropolis embody the new and modern Panama. The flashy spots feature sweeping views of skyscrapers, shipping ports, and the canal, as well as picture-perfect scenes of virgin beaches, ritzy casinos, and upscale shopping malls. The advertisements, which were uploaded to YouTube and circulated on social media sites, became the object of public scrutiny. Several commentators lauded the campaign with patriotic fervor: “Long live Panama!” and “I’m 100 percent proud of my country and of being Panamanian.”<sup>1</sup> Other viewers contested these laudatory reactions and problematized the campaign’s whitewashed representation of the country’s racial diversity, as well as its promotion of a “false modernity.” One commentator asked: “What do we call progress? Skyscrapers? The airport? The canal? Beneath those giant buildings ... there’s a chaos that we can barely stand. If Panama City wants to be a cosmopolitan city, it needs more than gigantic buildings; it needs efficient public transportation, better housing conditions, and justice.”<sup>2</sup>

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One need not look further than Panama's daily news for evidence of the "chaos" lurking behind the modern façade that the YouTube detractor describes. Tabloid television shows and newspapers propagate a simulacrum of Panamanian reality, replete with sensationalist stories of gang activity, violent murders, and kidnappings. In a critical study of Panamanian mainstream media, Fernando Martínez García describes a pervasive reporting practice in which the same crime story, accompanied by the same set of images, is retold up to five times within a one-hour broadcast.<sup>3</sup> He contends that before authorities even arrive at a crime scene, suspects are put on trial or framed by the media. Ubiquitous narratives about the dangers of historically marginalized neighborhoods in Panama City and Colón filter these places and their residents through a pejorative and discriminatory lens; they frame a normative and selective reality. "To be framed," as Judith Butler contends, "is to be set up," to be falsely represented and incriminated.<sup>4</sup> Butler reminds us that normative frameworks are "politically saturated ... operations of power"; consequently, such frames precondition how marginalized communities are perceived through memories, rumors, stories, and geopolitical histories.<sup>5</sup>

I have chosen these divergent simulacra of Panama as the point of departure for my analysis of ghetto documentaries to underscore the difficulty of capturing the reality lived in these spaces. Paradoxically, media culture renders precariousness invisible through neoliberal narratives of progress while, at the opposite extreme, it feeds upon marginalization through an exploitative quotidian spectacle of death, violence, and poverty. The dawn of the new millennium in Panama was marked by both euphoric celebrations of the canal handover and a 2006 voter referendum that approved the current expansion project. The triumphant narratives of progress and sovereignty that dominate official renderings of these recent chapters in Panama Canal history serve as backdrop for the ghetto documentaries *One dollar: el precio de la vida* (*One Dollar: The Price of Life*, 2001), by Héctor Herrera (1972–) and Joan Cutrina (1976–), and *Curundú* (2007), by Ana Endara Mislov (1976–). Although the canal is not the primary focus of these works, they feature marginalized barrios with historic ties to the waterway. Both films share a desire to expose, analyze, and denounce the profound socioeconomic and racial inequalities that plague these spaces, as well as how they are stigmatized as *zonas rojas* (hot spots), a pejorative euphemism used to label black or immigrant neighborhoods. The films' varied success speaks to the difficulty of aestheticizing precariousness and proves that even the most well-intentioned projects can fall into ethical traps that ultimately undermine attempts to capture the reality of the ghetto.

The question of how documentary filmmakers can effectively portray poverty, vulnerability, and even violence, without exacerbating or replicating normative modes of viewing marginality, guides the first part of this chapter. I enter this discussion through an examination of the discursive strategies and approaches employed in ghetto documentaries, a diverse genre whose production surged at the start of the millennium. I contend that formulaic narrative structures and exploitative filming practices often undermine the political impact these films can have, yet I agree with Colin Gunckel’s assessment that the mixing of genres and modes of address “produces an ambivalent and complex range of representations that have yet to be fully examined by media scholars.”<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, through a comparative analysis of the narrative strategies and modes of storytelling that shape *One dollar* and *Curundú*, I pay special attention to moments of rupture that destabilize normative frames for viewing Panama’s historically marginalized *barrios canaleros* (canal barrios).<sup>7</sup> I do not conceal my preference for the latter film’s careful and ethical approach to unpacking the structures behind marginality; however, I hope to accomplish more than an exploitation litmus test that measures the merits of these two films. Even *One dollar*, whose political project is limited by its likeness to “*porno miseria*” (poverty porn),<sup>8</sup> manages to inject fissures in hegemonic renderings of Panama’s *zonas rojas*. The testimonies, performative speeches, and narrative refusals of young barrio residents highlight their agency in controlling their own stories and unmask tensions embedded in the filmmakers’ representational strategies. *One dollar* and *Curundú* therefore have strengths and limitations in their ability to convey the realities of Panama’s ghettos, but both provide an important countermemory to the official progress narratives of the “new” and improved Panama. They reframe the millennial moment ambivalently, revealing the ennui felt by many Panamanians in the face of nationalist calls to embrace a future-oriented vision of a prosperous Panama, united, once again, around the symbol of the majestic canal.

### GHETTO DOCUMENTARIES: BETWEEN DENOUNCING AND GLORIFYING VIOLENCE

My first intention behind using the term “ghetto documentary” is to describe a wide range of films that explore poverty, narcotrafficking, gangs, and violence in *favelas* (shantytowns), squatter communities, ethnic enclaves, and marginalized barrios. At the turn of the millennium, there

was a noticeable surge in this kind of documentary. Ghetto documentaries range from mainstream journalistic programs and Hollywood-style productions to independent films and low-budget gang documentaries.

My second intention is to highlight how both the residents of marginalized neighborhoods and music and film producers have appropriated this pejorative term. The latter, of course, gravitate toward these spaces because of their alluring and potentially lucrative draw as the backdrop for cultural production. The emergence of favela tourism in Brazil, the mainstreaming of *reggae en español* (reggae in Spanish),<sup>9</sup> *reggaetón*, and Latin American hip-hop, attests to the fact that the “ghetto style” sells. In addition to its branding or consumer power, the appropriation—or reappropriation—of the term “ghetto” bespeaks an attempt to celebrate these spaces and their residents’ political power and agency.

Finally, by bringing the words “ghetto documentary” together, I wish to underscore the inherent tension in these films as they negotiate the mandate to educate and entertain, waver between an objectifying gaze and a celebration of diversity, and navigate the fine line between denouncing and glorifying violence.

Ghetto documentaries’ cinematographic and documentary techniques vary substantially, but they tend to reproduce formulaic and rather predictable narrative structures. Many offer redemptive stories with happy, Hollywood-style endings, like the US-Brazilian co-production *Favela Rising* (2005), by Jeff Zimbalist (1978–) and Matt Mochary (1968–), which heralds the success of the Grupo Cultural AfroReggae (AfroReggae Cultural Group) in reducing violence and providing at-risk youth with alternatives to gang life in Rio. *Favela Rising* celebrates the triumph of the human spirit, and the film’s peaceful resolution allows spectators to sleep soundly at night, assured by the myth that anyone who works hard enough can overcome the perils of poverty. A critic’s comment on the film’s website lauds its easy consumption, characterizing it as “an extremely watchable addition to a growing movement of ghetturista movie-making.”<sup>10</sup> While the film, and the AfroReggae project it depicts, has some very valuable aspects—the involvement of favela youth in the filmmaking process being principle among them—the film’s adherence to Hollywood formulas runs the risk of turning its subjects into exoticized characters, as evidenced in one critic’s description of its “hero,” Anderson Sa, as “a veritable Gandhi with a samba beat.”<sup>11</sup>

The National Geographic Explorer series “The World’s Most Dangerous Gang” represents another variant of the ghetto documentary. This jour-

nalistic piece offers no happy ending like *Favela Rising*, but assures narrative closure through legal, military, or police intervention. Former gang members who have given up life on the streets appear on screen to deliver the message that crime does not pay. While the program does have journalistic and educational aims, a significant portion of its contents borders on sensationalism. In particular, it risks promoting a voyeuristic gaze into the Mara Salvatrucha gang’s brutal fights and initiation rituals that are captured on amateur video. “Poverty porn” and fear-mongering narrative practices, frequent in discourses that aim to justify the need for increased law enforcement or militarization of borders to ensure national security, exacerbate both the banality and misunderstanding of complex structures of violence. Such discursive strategies affirm Gunckel’s observation that the “boundaries” between social documentation, tabloid journalism, and even reality television “have become disturbingly indistinct.”<sup>12</sup>

The third variant of ghetto documentary foreshadows from the onset that things always end badly in the ghetto. In this brand of ghetto film, the filmmakers “infiltrate” the communities they depict and acquire an insider’s views of marginality, gang life, and violence. Narrative emplotment is such that death is usually portrayed as inevitable and violence framed as virtually impossible to escape. Key examples of this variant are *La Sierra: Urban Warfare in the Barrios of Medellín, Colombia* (2005), by Margarita Martínez (1970-) and Scott Dalton (1969-), and *La vida loca (The Crazy Life)*, 2008), by Christian Poveda (1955–2009). The former of these films is bookended with portraits of death—a cadaver thrown into a ditch and a dramatic funeral—while the latter ends with a brutal gang initiation.

In a way, one might claim that both *La Sierra* and *La vida loca* were self-fulfilling prophecies. The main protagonist in *La Sierra*, Edison Ocampo (“La Muñeca”), was killed during the course of filming, and the murder of photojournalist Christian Poveda speaks to the dangers involved in inhabiting and documenting conflict zones. It might not be a stretch to argue that both films garnered success in the wake of these deaths, as if these real deaths somehow sealed the films’ promise to examine real violence. The media hype surrounding both deaths seemed to validate the predetermined conclusion that the young gang members depicted are monsters, thus taking away from the films’ thought-provoking portrayal of gangs as entities that can sometimes protect and provide for communities when state structures fail.

To document and aestheticize “precarity” is a tricky endeavor. Beyond the corporeal vulnerability all humans share, Butler defines precarity as

a politically induced “condition of maximized precariousness” in which “certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.”<sup>13</sup> In my view, an ethical and politically impactful portrayal of this condition must expose the structures behind it, rather than merely revel in voyeuristic displays of its effects. The allure of the abject is not a new concern, yet in the digital age and in the context of today’s sensationalistic media culture, in which images of violence and death seem to pose very little threat to viewers, documentarians face the additional challenge of not distorting reality or rendering its complexity invisible. Imperative to this endeavor is the question of how the filmmaker portrays the communities he or she seeks to represent, or the extent to which he or she empowers communities to represent themselves—even when the final narratives do not tell the story the filmmakers or producers originally set out to tell.

#### VIOLENCE IS “PRITY”: THE TRAPS OF POVERTY PORN

*One dollar: el precio de la vida* (2001) presents a crude view of the Panamanian ghetto, effectively rejecting redemptive narratives and happy endings. Catalan filmmaker Joan Cutrina and Panamanian documentarian Héctor Herrera co-directed the documentary to denounce the urgent situation in Panama’s poorest urban neighborhoods and document it for Panamanians who “don’t accept reality.”<sup>14</sup> The film’s storyline is neither chronological nor guided by a predetermined argument. Instead, it offers a fragmentary view of various aspects of barrio life in three segments: “El gueto,” which features young *reggaeseros* (performers of *reggae en español*) who use their lyrics as a form of protest and survival; “Fat,” a segment on drugs and violence named after the cadaver collector who acts as its protagonist; and “Crazy Killa,” an intimate view of gang life guided by the gang leader, Lolo. Like in the cases of *La Sierra* and *La vida loca*, raw footage was acquired when the filmmakers infiltrated several canal barrios. Herrera, who left Panama after the 1989 US invasion, was able to gain access to El Chorrillo, thanks to his friendship with Fat. In an interview, Herrera claims that “a great deal of the movie has to do with me; it’s a mirror of what might have become of my life.”<sup>15</sup> Herrera’s positionality, akin to what Michael Renov calls a “domestic ethnographer,” is of vital importance for considering the tension that unfolds in the film among a desire to document the fallout of the post-invasion era, the need to entertain a (European) audience by aestheticizing violence, and the agency of

film participants, who take advantage of Herrera’s “co-(i)mplication” to undermine the filmmaker’s control of how they are represented.<sup>16</sup>

*One dollar*’s narrative is constructed exclusively through interview footage, impromptu scenes caught on tape, and reality television-style monologues in which participants deliver speeches directly to the camera. With the exception of one expository moment, the documentary provides no historical background or sociopolitical analysis of the marginality depicted. The film’s introductory text, which sets up an impactful scene of thousands of Panamanians gathered on Ancon Hill to celebrate the canal handover ceremony, loosely establishes a connection between the geopolitical history of the Canal Zone (as the military stronghold for the US Southern Command), the collateral damage in the surrounding canal boroughs (like El Chorrillo), and the violence of the post-invasion era:

January 1, 2000, the United States cedes the administration of the Panama Canal. The memory remains of the 1989 North American military operation known as “Just Cause,” an invasion that destroyed neighborhoods, caused thousands of deaths in the streets, and left tons of weapons in the hands of the civilian population, still today.

Euphoric chants celebrating sovereignty and freedom grate against the traumatic memory of the invasion, and in a series of impromptu interviews in the streets, barrio residents reveal ambivalent and skeptical opinions about the newly gained autonomy. An artisan, whose face is seen through a close-up of the wicker chair that he’s weaving, questions the elusive promises of sovereignty: “What matters here in Panama is the American dollar. I don’t make my living on sovereignty. I live on cash.” Echoing the film’s title, this reference to the dollar is one of many throughout the film; it not only alludes to the working class’ precarious dependence on the canal economy, but also to the low cost of drugs and guns.

Co-director Joan Cutrina’s experience in the music industry comes through in “El gueto,” which opens with a provocative music video sequence featuring confrontational lyrics by Panamanian *reggaesero* Latin Fresh. The aforementioned power of “ghetto style” and the mandate to entertain and shock clash in contrasting images of luxurious apartment buildings and squatter communities, international banks and impoverished back alleys, and stunning views of the bay and piles of garbage. Cutting through the divergent simulacra of Panamanian reality, Latin Fresh’s lyrics challenge viewers to look beneath the surface: “Don’t think

like the rest, who judge all without redress/Without knowing that the guy with the worn out shoes/Always makes the honor role at school.” These lyrics about positive aspects of daily life in the barrio, however, seem out of sync with the video’s overall, voyeuristic focus. This friction between the often-forgotten, positive things that happen in the barrio and the tendency toward voyeurism calls up an ongoing tension that hovers over the film as a whole.

Viewers accustomed to traditional, expository-style documentaries may be confused by how this film mixes music videos, amateur footage of violence surreptitiously caught on tape, ethnographic interviews, and performative speeches and songs by young *reggaeseros*. But the voices of young barrio residents are one of the film’s most provocative and powerful aspects. Given this film’s overall penchant for poverty porn, which I will discuss in a moment, it is tempting to write it off as entirely exploitative. Yet to do so would negate the agency and contributions of film participants who actively seize the opportunity to speak their truth and promote their music. Aspiring artists and youth express themselves in their own way and use a combination of Antillean English and Spanish to talk about violence, poverty, and racism. One artist questions his listener: “Reggae is a form of protest. Do you understand me?” He insists that for “los pelados del barrio” (barrio kids), music constitutes a way for “the whole world to hear what’s going on,” a way to transmit “suffering and pain, you know, real life.”

Nevertheless, this and other interviewees’ desire to “keep it real” is undermined by the film’s totalizing gaze that ultimately replicates and exacerbates problematic mass media framings of the *zona roja*. The fusion of segments filmed in unidentified barrios of Panama City and Colón, coupled with the predominance of nocturnal scenes shot in scantily lit apartments, alleyways, underground dance clubs, and *antros* (dive bars), yields a vertiginous look at anonymous and threatening spaces. The localized realities of specific neighborhoods are lost, as is the quotidian life of the working class communities who live there.

In many ways, then, *One dollar* is poverty porn at its finest. Gritty scenes of junkies shooting up, dealers selling *pegón* (a nasty mix of marijuana, diesel fuel, and other chemicals), and close-ups of cadavers may explain why the film was censored in Panama. Official reviews have been mixed. While the Havana Film Festival praised its bold social commentary, other critics, among them famed musician and former Minister of



Culture Rubén Blades, lambasted the film as “horripilante” (horrifying). Certain moments seem to lack even a basic code of ethics—like a sequence in which a drug addict repeatedly requests that the cameraman stop filming.

In contrast to this ethically questionable moment, other parts of *One dollar* intelligently reveal the limits of the ghetto film genre by challenging authorial control. For example, in the closing “Crazy Killa” segment, gang members refuse to provide a satisfactory answer to the interviewer’s question. When asked, “Lolo, what do you think of violence?” the gang member responds by saying, “I am dementia.” Attempting to clarify this cryptic statement, the interviewer insists: “What’s your opinion of violence?” But the interviewee’s body language and dilatory tactics belie the filmmaker’s intentions. After a bit of singing and stalling, Lolo replies: “I *am* violence. I don’t have anything else to tell you. I *am* violence.” Still unsatisfied, the interviewer moves on to another young gang member: “What do *you* think of violence?” He answers flatly: “Es *prity*” (it’s pretty). Whether a playful refusal or an active embodiment of violent discourse, the affirmation that violence “es prity” unmasks the aesthetic bling and spectacle of violence that the ghetto film genre exploits. The sequence flies in the face of formulaic narratives like “The World’s Most Dangerous Gang,” in which remorseful gang members confess their sins and beg forgiveness for their transgressions. In this exchange and throughout the film, viewers receive no definitive explanations of urban violence. Something about the “real” always defies comprehension.

In its final segments, *One dollar* comes undone, revealing that for domestic ethnographers like Herrera, “it is the all-too-familiar rather than the exotic that holds sway.”<sup>17</sup> Spinning out of control into what looks like a home video of a night among friends *a lo* boys-gone-wild, we hear an inebriated “participant” (friend?), directing Herrera, “Héctor, Héctor, did you record that?” signaling that for the filmmaker, “there is no fully outside position available.”<sup>18</sup> Yet unlike the famous film collapse in Carlos Mayolo (1945–2007) and Luis Ospina’s (1949–) *Agarrando pueblo* (*The Vampires of Poverty*, 1977), this film is not a parody of the poverty porn genre, and the scene does not appear to be an intentional self-reflexive gesture. Instead, the end of the film reveals a tension between Herrera’s desire to document a negated reality, his proximity to the subject matter, and the mandate to entertain, which, I suspect, resulted in concessions made to the European producer during the editing process.

## HUMANIZING THE BARRIO: PRECARIOUS PORTRAITS OF “A SEMI-RETIRED DELINQUENT”

Curundú is a shantytown built along the Curundú River, “which used to mark the boundary between the Canal Zone townsite of Curundú Heights and the Panama City neighborhood of Curundú.”<sup>19</sup> The former officers’ clubhouse, homes, and the beautifully manicured lawns of Altos de Curundú (Curundú Heights) have now become prime real estate because of their proximity to the University of Panama, the Albrook Mall and bus terminal, the Camino de Cruces National Park, and the Marcos A. Gelabert Airport. All of these sites are part of the *áreas revertidas*, the former US Canal Zone territory returned to Panama through the Torrijos-Carter Treaties.<sup>20</sup>

Released in 2007, *Curundú* predates the 2010 housing renewal project that took place during President Ricardo Martinelli’s administration (2009–2014). Featured in flashy television spots with a catchy jingle sung by a children’s choir (“It’s Curundú’s turn now!”), Martinelli’s “Curundú Project” promised to train and employ local residents by involving them in construction. Yet, as one critic noted, the celebratory ads masked a gentrification project that would wind up displacing many of the canal barrio’s residents:

The billboards portray [the project] as a big favor that the government is doing for the mostly black residents of Curundú, and some see it that way. But others don’t care to move. Sure, those who are displaced will be eligible to move back into the new buildings that will rise in the neighborhood—if they can pay the rent. But most of them can’t, and many of them, as humble as their homes may be, prefer to live in something that’s theirs.”<sup>21</sup>

*Curundú*, then, poignantly documents life in this well-established community before its gentrification. Consequently, a sequel to the film that investigates how the *curundueños* (Curundú residents) featured in the documentary have fared after the project would be both timely and relevant, as there are rumors of similar projects in the making both for El Chorrillo and the city of Colón.

First trained as an anthropologist at Florida State University’s Panama branch, the director of *Curundú*, Ana Endara Mislov, continued her studies at the International School of Film and Television in San Antonio de Los Baños, Cuba. As her first full-length documentary, *Curundú* brings a

sensitive, complex, and ethical approach to sociopolitical filmmaking—an approach that characterizes Endara’s growing portfolio. It tackles several of the same social issues explored in *One dollar*, but from film’s onset, viewers sense a drastically different tone and treatment of the subject matter.

The film opens with a series of still-shot photographs that map the neighborhood: colorful Caribbean-style wooden flats, cinderblock squatter homes with rusty tin roofs, playgrounds, and the polluted river. Next, a slow motion camera pans out to a birds-eye view of Panama City’s modern skyline; it eventually settles on a patio situated between two dilapidated, multifamily housing complexes. No musical soundtrack accompanies the images. Instead, viewers hear the sounds of everyday life: children playing on the patio, women conversing, and the rhythmic, pounding noise produced by two men tearing an old refrigerator apart to extract its copper wiring. The film’s pace is unhurried, tranquil, and even slow at times; it captures the ordinary and the mundane.

Through a collage of interviews, we get to know Kenneth, “un maleante casi retirado” (a semi-retired delinquent), as he attempts to build a home and reintegrate into society after multiple arrests and stints in jail. His friends, family, and neighbors, including the Curundú police, offer perspectives on Kenneth’s situation and the general challenges that neighborhood residents face. The film’s narrative of precarity focuses on Kenneth’s cyclical pattern of unemployment, delinquency, incarceration, and partial reintegration. This narrative logic seems to tell us that just as marginalized subjects try to find a way to make good, the structural violence that holds them down in the first place thwarts those attempts. It is therefore significant that the film ends, as we shall see, with Kenneth’s return to prison.

*Curundú* intelligently challenges ingrained tendencies to view *las zonas rojas* through a normative lens. Because Kenneth is a self-proclaimed neighborhood photographer—an enterprise he established, ironically, after stealing a camera—he gives the filmmakers exclusive access to an intimate, insider’s view of Curundú. The filmmaker, seizing upon the narrative potential of this scenario, literally displaces her gaze and instead privileges Kenneth’s camera. To that end, several sequences accompany Kenneth on photo shoots and constitute a healthy metadiscourse on the act of capturing and representing lived experience in Curundú. Implicit in these sequences are key questions: Who has the right to film poverty, and how should it be filmed? In stark contrast to *One dollar*’s selective aestheticizing of the abject, Kenneth’s photomontages portray diverse perspectives

on Curundú: these range from images of birthday parties and elementary school functions to funeral portraits of cadavers and snapshots of adolescent gang members posing proudly with their first weapons. Viewers see poverty, crime, and death through Kenneth's photographs, far removed from the mediatic gaze and free from the sensationalism so common in ghetto documentaries. Kenneth's photomontages elicit a distinct, reflexive mode of viewing.

Musing on Walter Benjamin's idea of reproducibility, Judith Butler asserts that "perpetual breakage" of frames can stir affect or create apertures that allow us to access a shared sense of human vulnerability or precariousness.<sup>22</sup> Kenneth's reflections, reminiscent, too, of Butler's evocations of Emmanuel Levinas, urge viewers to be aware of their gaze, to be aware of what precludes one from truly seeing the face of another: "Sometimes you take a person's photo, and you keep looking at his face and his features, and you can arrive at any conclusion about who he is and what he was thinking in that moment ... I mean, there are a thousand faces in any face." Kenneth's comment points to the polysemantic nature of the face: one can read in a face what one wants to see there. As the photomontage moves through portraits of adolescents in menacing poses, it eventually ends on a portrait of a cadaver in an open casket. Despite his frequent exposure to "dead bodies and mutilations," Kenneth insists that "the photograph will never die" because "it's ... a memory, that stays with you." His words and the stillness of the frame challenge viewers to really see the dead young man, to be interpellated by the face, to contemplate the violence woven into daily life—not as a fleeting media image, but as a memory that permeates our gaze and remains with us.

In several interview sequences, barrio residents problematize how their community has been stigmatized through language, geography, and selective media representation. None of the Afro-descendent neighbors explicitly references race or the pervasiveness of geographic profiling, but their comments confirm that the mere mention of canal barrios like Curundú and El Chorrillo conjures a suspicious gaze. Aware of this endemic profiling, Marilis, Kenneth's neighbor, feels compelled to change her place of residence on job applications: "Living in Curundú is like a sin for certain people. So when you go looking for a job ... Oh, no! I don't write that I live in Curundú!" Another resident refers to the pejorative and dehumanizing terminology used to characterize *curundueños*: "*maleante* (delinquent), *ratero* (petty thief)." Then, a community activist mentions how the media tends to ignore the good that happens in the barrio, like

the inauguration of six new sports leagues for residents: “Something bad happens [though], and they come looking for it! Why’s that? Because that’s what sells!” Finally, a preadolescent boy named James echoes the adults’ comments and reveals that even the young suffer as a result of stereotypes imposed on the neighborhood. His eloquent critique rejects the idea that *barrio* youth are all violent: “There are people who think that just because Curundú looks like this [because it’s poor], you have to be part of the violence. Everybody thinks that way. But not me. Not me. A neighborhood does not make a person.” This insistent first-person negation, “Not me,” signals a refusal to embody or perform a distorted image of reality.

Despite the inspirational tenor of these messages, the ending of *Curundú* does not fall into the trap of redemptive narrative closure and rejects the easily consumable “triumph of the human spirit” story noted in my appraisal of *Favela Rising*. Constructed around a conversation between Kenneth and a neighborhood man, who rallies his fellow *curundueños* to vote “yes” on the proposal to expand the canal, the film’s climax interweaves the story of the marginal *barrio* with the elusive discourse of opportunity and progress that frames the waterway. While some neighbors espouse a nationalist view of the Panama Canal as both a panacea for the country’s woes and a source of employment, Kenneth undercuts this narrative by quipping that the Canal should be expanded so there are more tourists to rob. This mischievous scene is ultimately tragicomic; it transitions to a text that informs viewers of Kenneth’s arrest. Ironically, the same crime that first facilitated his photography business—stealing a camera from a tourist—comes back to haunt him, as he is jailed for allegedly repeating this misdemeanor. Detained in jail without evidence or formal charges, Kenneth waits a grueling six months for his case to be reviewed. Unlike in “The World’s Most Dangerous Gang,” law enforcement agencies are not featured as guardians of safety and order, but rather as bastions of ineffective bureaucracy. The uncertainty surrounding Kenneth’s arrest and the failures of Panama’s judicial system disrupt the mainstream narrative trajectory of crime, punishment, and repentance. Kenneth is eventually declared innocent, and his release from jail coincides with a devastating fire in Curundú. The cinderblock home that he was building is looted, including all of his photographic equipment. The film’s narrative thus comes full circle: Kenneth returns to square one of a vicious cycle of precariousness and unemployment. In the closing scene, we hear the interviewer ask Kenneth what he thought about while he was in jail. His

response—“[I thought about] getting out to take photos”—signals the beginning of yet another cycle in the circular narrative of his struggle to make it.

Like *One dollar*, *Curundú* ends without clear resolution, leaving viewers to interpret the material on their own. Kenneth’s self-designation as a *maleante* is an ironic and revealing appropriation of the pejorative and anonymous label assigned to stereotype people who commit crimes. Through his perceptive camera lens, Kenneth defies these labels, capturing humanizing portraits of the people of Curundú. The centrality of Kenneth’s photography calls attention to the power of images to make “‘real’ (or ‘more real’) matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore.”<sup>23</sup> The self-portrait of his attempt to reintegrate into society provides a much-needed and authentic illustration of what it takes to beat the odds; it portrays transgression as part of a daily struggle to overcome discrimination, unemployment, and desperation. Kenneth’s perpetual status as a “maleante casi retirado” (a semi-retired delinquent) brings into relief the precarious space he occupies; he is always on the verge of reverting to crime to make ends meet.

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*One dollar* and *Curundú* reframe two euphoric political junctures in Panama’s recent history: the canal’s handover in 1999 and the 2006 referendum to approve its current expansion. In both cases, these events are revisited from the perspective of neighborhoods whose systematic marginalization is historically tied to the waterway. Both films’ ambivalent uses of the ghetto documentary genre challenge sensationalist views of these communities by intentionally or unintentionally laying bare the act of capturing, framing, and interpreting images of violence and abject poverty. Mixing genres and modes of address, both films suggest that marginality is structural, including its construction through spectacle and selective representation.

*One dollar* embodies the abjection of violence (like in the comment “I am violence”) and recognizes the allure that it holds for some gang members (like in the comment “violence is pretty”). At the same time, the musical denunciations of young *reggaeseros* after the US invasion, or the skeptical opinions of canal barrio residents on the occasion of the waterway’s handover, show us Panamanians who have slipped through the cracks of national narratives of progress and sovereignty. Yet, unfortu-

nately, these poignant, contestatory voices get lost in *One dollar*’s vertiginous tailspin into poverty porn and thereby undermine the film’s political potential.

In contrast, *Curundú*’s circular narrative effectively portrays the interwoven structures of precarity. By literally placing the camera in the hands of those whom it seeks to represent (e.g. Kenneth’s hands), the film manages to reframe images of canal barrios, distancing them from a pejorative, mediatic gaze. Furthermore, denunciations by Curundú’s residents (like James’s vehement rejection of how others have stigmatized his barrio—“Not me!”) constitute important refusals of the violent narratives inscribed on black bodies and subvert the exploitative leanings inherent in so many portraits of the ghetto. By not reveling in violence or the effects of poverty, and by refusing the narrative closure of both happy and bloody endings, Curundú stretches the ghetto documentary genre’s established boundaries.

The diverse and sometimes discordant voices we hear in *One dollar* and *Curundú* suggest that the ghetto’s reality lies in the materiality of life and death, in daily practices to make ends meet, and in the dreams of youth who reject or capitalize on the controversial otherness inflicted on their barrios.

## NOTES

1. Eisman Morales and Madelaine Marie Malca Zarak, comments on “Panama the Way,” YouTube video, 1:01, posted by “dialce,” December 21, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2UxYIXZf6A>. These and all other translations from the Spanish are mine.
2. MariPili2O, comment on “Panama the Way.”
3. Fernando Martínez García, “El poder de los medios,” in *¿Por qué nos odian tanto?: estado y medios de comunicación en América Latina*, ed. Omar Rincón (Bogotá: Centro de Competencia en Comunicación para América Latina, 2010), 133.
4. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 8.
5. *Ibid.*, 1.
6. Colin Gunckel, “‘Gangs Gone Wild’: Low-Budget Gang Documentaries and the Aesthetics of Exploitation,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 60, no. 1 (2007): 37–46.
7. In this chapter and other publications, I use the term “canal barrio” to describe the proletarian boroughs established on the peripheries of the

former Canal Zone in Panama City and Colón. Despite their location on the Panamanian side of the borderline that divided the port cities from the US territory, these neighborhoods, which were heavily populated by West Indian communities and migrants from all over the world, have been historically viewed as sites that are “other,” “foreign,” or an extension of the maladies of the Canal Zone. Today, the Panamanian press often refers to these spaces as *zonas rojas*. It paints an image of dangerous neighborhoods racked by theft, gang activity, narcotrafficking, kidnapping, condemned housing, and abject poverty.

8. Coined in a text written for the premiere of their documentary parody *Agarrando pueblo* (*The Vampires of Poverty*, 1977), filmmakers Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina employed the term *porno miseria* to talk about voyeuristic films that exploit poverty for its entertainment value and lack even the most basic code of ethics. For more on Mayolo and Ospina, see Felipe Gómez and Margarita de la Vega-Hurtado, “Third Cinema Documentary in Colombia: The Case of Luis Ospina,” in *Rethinking Third Cinema: The Role of Anti-Colonial Media and Aesthetics in Postmodernity*, eds. Frieda Ekotto and Adeline Koh (Berlin: Lit, 2009), 53–80.
9. *Reggae en español* is a combination of rap and verse with trans-Caribbean rhythms and styles. The term is used to differentiate this Panamanian musical form from its Puerto Rican offshoot, *reggaetón*. For more on this genre, see *Reggaetón*, eds. Raquel Z. Rivera et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
10. Quote from *Esquire* featured on the *Favela Rising* website, <http://www.favelarising.com/press.html>.
11. Quote from *The Fort Worth Star* featured on the *Favela Rising* website.
12. Gunckel, “Gangs Gone Wild,” 38.
13. Butler, *Frames of War*, 125.
14. L. Gutiérrez and F. Robinson, “La realidad del *ghetto* panameño: entrevista a Héctor Herrera,” *Día a día*, nd, <http://portal.diaadia.com.pa/archivo/03052005/imp13.html>.
15. Gemma Medina Estupiñán, “Entrevista con Héctor Herrera,” *Cadencia latina*, nd, <http://www.cadencialatina.com/cadencialatina3.0/articulos/websrevista51/Onedollar.html>.
16. Michael Renov, “Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the ‘Other’ Self,” in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 6:141.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 142.



19. Eric Jackson, “The Slums of Curundú: Unsanitary, Unsafe, Soon to Disappear ... But Theirs,” *The Panama News: Panama’s English Language Online Newspaper*. December 23, 2010. The author and editors were unable to verify a web address for this article.
20. Signed in 1977, the Torrijos-Carter Treaties consisted in two accords. The first, the Panama Canal Treaty, stipulated the gradual transfer of responsibilities for the operation and defense of the canal to Panamanian authorities until the definitive US withdrawal on December 31, 1999. The “reverted areas,” which were returned to Panama in 1999, encompassed more than three hundred thousand acres of land and more than seven hundred buildings, including residences, schools, workshops, and military installations. The second treaty, the Treaty Concerning the Permanent Neutrality and Operation of the Panama Canal, granted the USA perpetual rights to defend the canal against any threat that would compromise its neutral service to the world.
21. Jackson, “The Slums of Curundú.”
22. Butler, *Frames of War*, 11.
23. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 7.

PART III

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Performing Truth: Memory Politics  
and Documentary Filmmaking

## Beyond Autobiography: Rethinking Documentary Production by the Children of the Disappeared

*María Laura Lattanzi*

My purpose in this chapter is to explore processes of transgenerational and family memory construction by focusing on Argentine and Chilean documentaries produced after the turn of the millennium. I am particularly interested in analyzing films made by the biological children of victims of the Chilean dictatorship (1973–1990) and Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983), films in which sons and daughters negotiate around, reconstruct, and compensate for the void left by the absent father or mother. One of the great contributions of this emerging corpus of documentary films, in my estimation, is the way in which they deploy autobiography. In documentaries by the children of the disappeared, the autobiographical has less to do with reconstructing a life *as it was* than with thinking about how subjects exist and persist in a postdictatorial moment characterized by the exhaustion of community and the end of utopia. These new documentaries, I will argue, privilege daily life and the family as strategic arenas for reconfiguring and reconstructing identities

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torn asunder by dictatorial violence. More than attempting to fictitiously integrate life narratives, the films, as I will explain, stake their claim on questioning the very notion of autobiography.

### THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION AND THE COMMUNICABILITY OF EXPERIENCE

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, a vast number of theoretical and aesthetic reflections have called attention to how traumatic memories are constructed in the aftermath of war or other forms of political violence. These reflections have posed questions about the possibility and impossibility of representing what have often been called “limit experiences.” In many instances, critical analysis has centered on testimonial and autobiographical discourse, in which narrating a life in an integral way turns out to be impossible after trauma—or if not impossible, sufficiently difficult such that the resulting narrative becomes a fragmented utterance. These ideas have potently permeated memory studies in recent years, saturating critical discourse so heavily, in fact, that it has become difficult for us to imagine that a limit experience could ever be represented within the symbolic order of the real. The critical literature on the Holocaust and the postdictatorship period in Latin America focused insistently on “unrepresentability” and its derivations: the unthinkable, the impossibility of narrating, the unsayable, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Such an excessive proliferation of terms has, paradoxically, limited their analytical and conceptual usefulness.

Film, of course, has always been linked to contemporary debates on the possibilities and impossibilities of representing traumatic memory. In fact, cinema is in many cases the genre that has most foregrounded these debates. Some key references come to mind: for example, Gillo Pontecorvo’s (1919–2006) famous close-up of a cadaver in his film *Kapo* (1959). Here viewers are confronted with the image of a character’s corpse that has been thrown into a patch of electrical wires. Such a graphic image turns death into an object of the spectator’s gaze, or even an object of desire, thus problematizing the limits of what can be represented and calling into question the ethics of representation. Likewise, in Claude Lanzmann’s (1925–) landmark *Shoah* (1985), the film’s discourse revolves around the theme of the unsayable and the obscenity of affirming that the Holocaust can, in any sense, be understood. Lanzmann grapples with the idea that memory and its representation often elude the witness. As a final

example, a later wave of films about the Holocaust—Steven Spielberg’s (1946–) *Schindler’s List* (1993) or Roberto Benigni’s (1952–) *Life Is Beautiful* (1997)—sparked discussion regarding the ethics of fetishizing horror or turning it into a spectacle for consumption.

In all of these debates, the *witness* became the privileged figure, not only as a mediator whose job was to navigate the turbulent waters of what was representable (or sayable) and what was not, but also as one who rehearsed his or her own coming-into-being as a subject via the narrative act. Many films—mostly documentaries—functioned as stages upon which subjects could reconfigure, reclaim, name, or rehearse subjectivities torn asunder by the experience of political imprisonment in torture chambers or concentration camps. Narration, according to this logic, became a space in which to generate experience.

Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “The Storyteller” (1936) considers the crisis of experience to be intrinsically intertwined with the crisis of narration. Yet within Benjamin’s thought, we must be careful to distinguish between the notions of “experience” and “lived experience,” which in common parlance are often conflated or confused. While the notion of lived experience is tied to the chain of events a person has lived, which in turn implies a need to make sense of those lived events by configuring a coherent, fluid narrative, Benjamin’s idea of experience is linked, conversely, to a break in narrative flow and a questioning of communicability predicated on the possibility of a relationship with the other. Benjamin writes: “With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?”<sup>2</sup> If we consider Benjamin’s famous question in all its breadth, we can see that the notion of experience, particularly in the aftermath of war and trauma, is not linked to individual, lived experience, but instead to the very possibility of communication with another, to the very transmissibility of experience. The crisis of experience after the war, therefore, implies the exhaustion of communicability in narration as well as a breakdown in the ability to find common ground with a listener.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, if narration is no longer possible as an act of sharing—of sociability—it therefore becomes difficult to generate “experience.” The crisis of experience, in that sense, is simultaneously linked to the exhaustion of community. Benjamin’s insights force us, then, to consider the context in which narratives are received, their transmission, their development, and the role they play in the formation of communities.

## NARRATIVES BY CHILDREN OF THE DISAPPEARED

In his article “En busca del futuro perdido” (In Search of Future Time), Andreas Huyssen affirms that “What is at stake today is how to resolve the inevitable transmission of humanity’s traumas to those generations born after the victims, the victimizers, and the comrades, through myriad types of discourse (art, museums, the media, autobiography, and science).”<sup>4</sup> It is in this same context that “postmemory” discourse emerged within memory studies as way of referring to the lasting nature of traumatic events in generations that came after those that directly suffered the trauma. Postmemory focuses mainly on the cultural and generational mediation of memory processes.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most paradigmatic examples of postmemory discourse is Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991), a graphic art project published in installments throughout the 1980s whose goal was to challenge canonical discourses about Auschwitz.<sup>6</sup> Born in Switzerland and exiled to the USA, Spiegelman, the son of Jewish survivors of Auschwitz, chose a noncanonical artistic genre—the comic—to convey what it was like to be the son of Holocaust survivors. His comics gave a sense of the horror his parents lived, but always through a critical and distanced lens (e.g. the oppressed characters are mice); in so doing, he assumed the responsibility that his own role as the son of survivors implied. Spiegelman therefore simultaneously dealt with his parents’ memory and the obligation to speak of Auschwitz, as well as with the pressure the culture industry exerts on postmemory narratives. Confronted with discourses like Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (a paradigm for the ethics of testimony) and Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (a paradigm for horror as spectacle), Spiegelman instead opted for a reflexive critical position situated at the crossroads of fiction and the biographical.

In Latin America, and specifically in the Southern Cone, there has been a proliferation of narratives by victims’ children. These narratives have appeared in formats ranging from novels to theater, photography to the plastic arts. Within this archive, film—specifically documentary film—has occupied a prominent place. By way of example, in Argentina, we find titles like María Inés Roqué’s (1968–) *Papá Iván (My Father, Iván, 2004)*; Albertina Carri’s (1973–) *Los rubios (The Blondes, 2003)*; and Nicolás Prividera’s (1970–) *M (2007)*; while in Chile, we find films like Lorena Giachino Torrén’s (1972–) *Reinalda del Carmen, mi mamá y yo (Reinalda del Carmen, My Mother, and Me, 2007)*; Macarena Aguiló’s

(1971–) *El edificio de los chilenos* (*The Chilean Building*, 2010); René Ballesteros's (1975–) *La quemadura* (*The Burn*, 2009); and Antonia Rossi's (1978–) *El eco de las canciones* (*The Echo of the Songs*, 2010). (*The Echo of the Songs*, 2010). What these films share in common is an attempt by younger generations to question processes of subjective memory formation, taking as a starting point their own personal experiences as children of disappeared parents. Because they narrate at a temporal remove, their memories are often full of gaps and distortions that serve as the impetus for the narrative act (Figs. 13.1 and 13.2).

Critics frequently categorize postmemory films under the heading of autobiography. From my perspective, however, we should not think about these films primarily as autobiographies, but as variants of a *domestic cinema* whose major thematic axis is research on the family. These films narrate history by attempting to reconstruct the figure of the missing father or mother. Probing family origins allows the children of the disappeared to account for certain events, moments, and people and, as a result, to recover or construct some semblance of personal identity. Resolving family secrets acts as a motor, either conscious or unconscious, that drives their inquiries into the past.

Clearly, then, postmemory films are frequently structured around the family and childhood, and their protagonists search for reference points (places, objects, memories) around which to anchor their identities and gain a sense of security (as in Carri's *Los rubios* and Aguiló's *El edificio de los chilenos*). At the same time, they also emphasize processes of constructing and deconstructing subjectivities, oftentimes in contexts marked by violence and upheaval (as in Carri's *Los rubios*; Prividera's *M*; Roqué's *Papá Iván*; and Giachino Torrén's *Reinalda del Carmen, mi mamá y yo*). Nevertheless, we should not be misled into thinking that the "everydayness" or familiarity of what these documentaries show necessarily brings the object of the documentarian's gaze closer to him or her. To the contrary, more often than not, a sense of estrangement ensues, and rather than proximity, the viewer notes a distancing from the very object that the filmmaker's gaze seeks to apprehend. These films, therefore, conjure a paradox that serves as their binding logic: the narrative universe revolves at once around the interplay between family intimacy and estrangement. We most keenly observe this distancing or estrangement dynamic at play in the case of testimonies or documents that fail to verify incontrovertible truths. Instead, testimonies and documents are constantly questioned, undermined, or become objects of suspicion.



Fig. 13.1 *Los rubios* (2003), directed by Albertina Carri



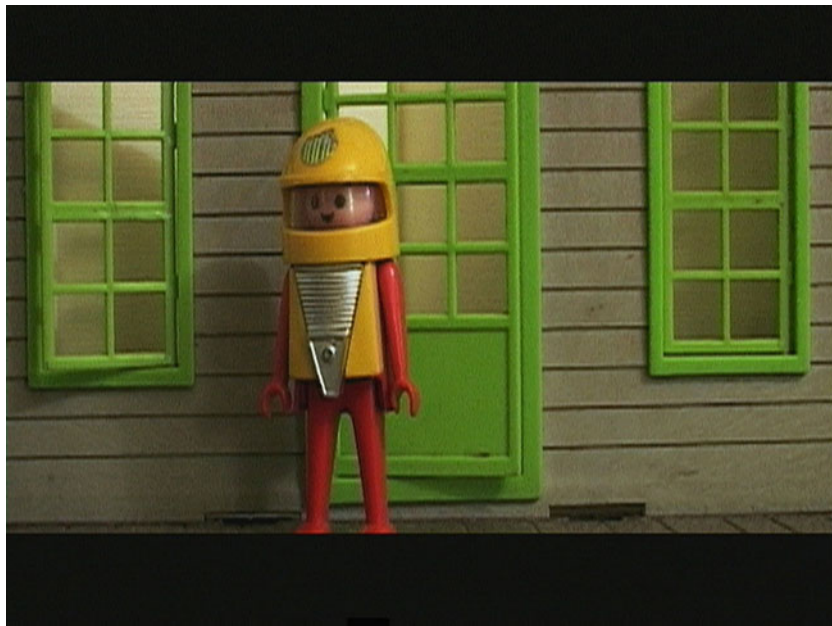


Fig. 13.2 *Los rubios* (2003), directed by Albertina Carri

### *PAPÁ IVÁN: DEMYSTIFYING MILITANCY*

In the case of *Papá Iván* (2004), director María Inés Roqué's father, Juan Julio Roqué, was a high-ranking militant in Argentina's Armed Revolutionary Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, FAR); he was considered a hero for his political trajectory as a leftist militant and for the sacrifice of his heroic death. Roqué exposes her subjectivity as the daughter of a father who fought valiantly to the end. The idea of the heroic father undoubtedly impacts Roqué, yet she is reticent to blindly adopt a discourse that holds her father up on a pedestal as a hero or martyr. Instead, she reads the figures of martyrdom and heroism from a position of distance and confusion. This confusion not only stems from the silences and subtexts that permeate narratives of militancy, but also from the figures of suspicion and betrayal that hover around such narratives. For example,

in the film, the person who narrates the moment of Juan Julio Roqué's death is accused of having offered a toast when the military captured Roqué. By including this informant's testimony, María Inés Roqué questions the ethics of the witness's voice and disrupts the status of "truth" that stereotypically forms the bedrock of any documentary investigation. For Roqué, there are no utopias to restore, only pure demystification; the transcendence of the "revolutionary cause" teeters when filtered through the daughter's postmemory unease. Demystifying the father is a strategy Roqué uses to deconstruct his subjectivity and undo history's utopian impulses (both political and theological). At the same time, demystification is derivative of a postmemory that wants to take distance from a "humanitarian" narrative modality—that is, a way of referring to the dead as heroes and martyrs—that is so frequently invoked by families of the disappeared, especially those of the generation that preceded Roqué's.

What I am calling a "humanitarian" narrative modality arose, quite logically, out of Latin America's dictatorships and was the product of long, arduous, and urgent struggles by family members of victims, former detainees, and political exiles. Their humanitarian vision was anchored in a moral imperative to protect all people's rights based on a belief in their fundamental humanity. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, the families of the disappeared sought verification and factual description of human rights violations committed by the military—not their historicization. They sought to inculcate the criminals while proving publicly that their loved ones were "prisoners" or "disappeared" people whose human rights had been violated. They did not seek primarily to reconstruct the details of their family members' biographies, much less analyze their militancy or political commitments, which were often kept hidden for different reasons, including the family's safety.

At a generation's remove, directors like Roqué are now looking to fill in the gaps and explore the revolutionary period from new angles. They want to speak honestly, insofar as it is possible, of their parents' militancy, political affiliations, and contradictions as historical subjects. Their goal is not to subsume their parents' identities within the universal category of "people with a right to life." Under the humanitarian aegis, family members demanded the recovery of missing bodies, but did so without calling attention to that body's individual characteristics; rather, they subsumed those identities within the more universalizing category of the "disappeared hero." By contrast, the new generation is interested in recovering the textures of individual lives. Not afraid to fail in the pursuit of truths that

often prove elusive, they persist, even though they know their attempts will never lead to the universalizing identity constructions that families arduously demanded in the 1970s and 1980s. We clearly see this tendency at play in *Papá Iván* when Roqué asks one of her father's former comrades if her father's passage into the clandestine life happened during the day or at night. The comrade is taken aback by the question. "Is that important?" he asks Roqué. Roqué responds: "Yes, for me it is." The interchange is telling. From the perspective of the former militant, the detail is totally insignificant and has little relevance for History (with a capital H). For Roqué, however, who is interested in the messiness of histories (in the plural and with a lowercase h), the detail holds great personal significance.

### *M*

Nicolás Prividera's film *M* (2007) is the result of a long investigative process whose goal was to understand the circumstances of his mother, Marta Sierra's disappearance in 1976.<sup>7</sup> The director adopts a first-person perspective and carries out his search like a detective. In reflexive, metacinematic style, Prividera's process of research and filming take center stage. Throughout the film, the detective-son not only investigates and uncovers, but also assumes the emotional baggage that being the son of a disappeared mother implies. To research his mother's death, he turns to human rights organizations as resources but constantly runs into bureaucratic red tape. When he turns to the testimonies of those who knew his mother personally, their stories are equally subjective and questionable. In his filmic montage, Prividera juxtaposes their voices such that their versions of the past dialogue with and even contradict one another, always vying for legitimacy and acceptance. The witnesses accuse each other and defend themselves, all the while bringing into relief the gray zones and complexities of militancy. Along the way, new enigmas arise that the filmmaker-protagonist cannot resolve.

The film opens with a quote from Faulkner, taken from *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), in which Rosa tells Quentin the story of his family: "His very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts."<sup>8</sup> From the onset, then, Prividera longs to explore a community—a narrative community—because, for him, searching for "echoes" of his mother is part of a process whose goal is to reconstitute a community in which he can subsume individuality, socialize

his pain, and in Benjaminian terms, generate “experience.” Even though that community no longer exists, Prividera still pursues it as a method of questioning the society in which he lives. We clearly observe this when one of his mother’s comrades prefers not to bear witness on camera; the director expresses his discontent, claiming that bearing witness has nothing to do with desire, that it is not an individual decision, but rather an obligation she has to society. Later, he adds: “How could I not be angry? We should all be angry,” implying that despite his efforts, impotence and anger will sometimes prevail.

Although Prividera never manages to know the depth of his mother’s militant commitments or how aware she was of the danger they implied, *M* confronts viewers with real discourse that imposes a semblance of meaning, albeit broken and open-ended. The director creates meaning in the most honest way he knows: by making visible the constructedness of his filmic project. For him, this means not only pointing out that the construction of memory is a chimera, but also exposing the limits of discourse and exposing his own vulnerability: his theoretical questions (like those he poses in dialogue with his brother), his personal objects (photographs and home movies), his obstacles, discoveries, and achievements.

## HOME AND PARENTS

In the Chilean documentary *El edificio de los chilenos* (2010), Macarena Aguiló, using testimonies, letters, and photographs, attempts to shed light on a very unique phenomenon that she lived: her experience growing up, first in Belgium and then in Cuba, in a housing project for the children of MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, Leftist Revolutionary Movement) militants whose parents, in 1977, abandoned them to return to Chile to “fight for the cause.” In the so-called Proyecto Hogares (Project Home), “social” or foster parents (*padres sociales*) raised the children of fellow *miristas*, indoctrinating them with a political worldview. The community comprised sixty children and twenty adults. Aguiló’s documentary, which reflects on her years in Proyecto Hogares, features testimonies by people from the different groups involved: children from that time (who are now young adults), the adults who cared for them, and the parents who decided to leave their children in exile when they returned to Chile to fight the Pinochet regime. The letters that the biological parents sent to their children are also an important element in the narrative.

Unlike in *Papá Iván* and *M*, Macarena Aguiló does not attempt to deconstruct narratives, nor does she introduce her own first-person inquiries into the film in a blatantly reflexive way. Nevertheless, her voice undergirds the narrative, implicitly rehearsing the question: Why did our parents abandon us? The way people deal with this question differs in every case, whether that person is an abandoned child, a biological parent, or a “social” parent.

Throughout the film, Aguiló never questions her parents directly, nor does she speak of her abandonment; her gaze is more permissive because she lets all of the parties involved speak for themselves, often revealing the intimate moral dilemmas that this type of decision implies. In other words, the director seems not to want to reveal her own voice; she would rather speak indirectly, rooted in the material objects that aid her: videos, photographs, and above all, the letters her mother sent to her. The only time she speaks is when she reads her mother’s letters aloud.

Toward the end of the film, Aguiló transcribes all of the letters on her computer, prints them, and gives the bound set to her mother as a gift. She appears to be repeating verbatim a narrative that she does not fully understand, but does so with the new possibilities that mechanical reproduction (Benjamin) affords her. This gesture toward generating an archive might be read in two ways: first, as a strategy for conserving the family’s past so that it can be transmitted to new generations, and second, as a gesture that goes beyond the circumscribed family sphere to create a material legacy, a document, that can be continually actualized through social memory.

## GENERATION GAPS

We therefore see a struggle in these films between intimacy and distance, between a present need to nurture the parent–child bond and a generational impetus to speak about deep-seated feelings of abandonment. As Ana Amado notes, these filmmakers allow us to glimpse an unspeakable aspect of the historical record: the paradoxical relationship “between [an image of] their parents as protagonists in an epic, collective historical enterprise, and as deserters in the private economy of affects.”<sup>9</sup>

These films show that between the revolutionary generation of the 1960s and 1970s and the postdictatorship generation of the 1990s and 2000s, the process of transmitting experience through narrative has been undeniably interrupted. The directors are aware that they must speak from a different place than their parents did; that place is a narrative community

in crisis. This crisis is inexorably linked to a historical shift in the status of the subject. Indeed, the way in which subjects were produced in the revolutionary moment is quite different from how they are produced today. If, in the 1960s and 1970s, becoming a subject meant situating oneself in the world and recognizing oneself as a historical subject, that is, as a protagonist who could potentially effect change in the world, today utopian narratives have all but died. Today's subjects, like these filmmakers, have instead turned inward toward personal fictions. The problem is no longer the individual's discontent with society (as in the 1960s and 1970s), but rather the individual's discontent with his or her own individuality. We can therefore begin to understand the dichotomy between the two generations that appear in these films: one fought for utopia and clearly saw itself as a protagonist of history; the other, devoid of master narratives, can only cite those master narratives in the form of personal fictions crafted at an unbridgeable distance from the revolutionary moment. The representational vision of the world that guided their parents' thinking no longer holds sway for children who fail to comprehend why their parents abandoned them for a utopian dream. All of the mechanisms that could potentially bridge the gap between these two generations—testimonies, visits to sites like former detention centers, human rights organizations, or the places of their parents' lives—fail to open spaces for intergenerational dialogue and lead only to profound frustration. Despite it all, however, we note the directors' urgency to know, to gain familiarity, to establish bonds between the generations and, consequently, to construct fictions that acknowledge their condition as fictions; all the while, they wholeheartedly assert the relevance of their pursuit.

How these films deploy visual archives reflects the epochal shift in subject formation that I have just described. While classic documentary filmmakers of the "Third Cinema" moment (e.g. Fernando E. Solanas [1936–] and Patricio Guzmán [1941–]) constructed their films using material from the sociohistorical archive, today's filmmakers construct their documentaries using intimate, everyday archives, particularly those of the family. Specifically in the case of Argentine documentaries, directors often use techniques like dissociation and fragmentation to pose an aesthetic challenge to the totalizing, humanitarian narrative of their parents' generation.

What, then, can these children of the disappeared salvage of their parents and their times? Are they doomed to carry out endless exercises in self-reflection, to rehearse their individual discontent with their own

individuality? Not necessarily. Although this is indeed one possible narrative consequence of the generational crisis to which I am referring, narratives of self-awareness do not necessarily have to manifest as intimate or introspective. Rather, directors have begun to explore new ways of producing subjectivity in late modernity. Some of these experimental forms include: irony, fictionalizing the biographical, and intertextuality. The most emblematic examples of irony, of course, come in Albertina Carri's *Los rubios*: the use of wigs, the dialogue with a neighbor who pretends not to remember much about the Carri family, and the delegitimation of testimonies projected on a blurry screen. The second element, fictionalizing the biographical, shows up in the majority of the films I am discussing, which repeatedly blur the boundaries between fiction and documentary: the use of the detective genre (*M*) or the use of animation (*Los rubios* and *El edificio de los chilenos*). The final element, intertextuality, manifests not only in the films' hybrid use of genre, but also in how family histories interface with broader historical or societal narratives.

### BEYOND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that many of the films I am discussing have typically been classified as "autobiographical." From my perspective, however, I prefer to think of these films as a type of *domestic cinema* whose specificity lies in the search for what is familiar and, I would now add, in the desire to restore to the familiar the status of the quotidian, the everyday. This is a complex statement, so let me unpack it starting with the relationship between the biographical and the quotidian.

If it is true that autobiographical theory has undergone a transformation ranging from Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" to Paul de Man's "defacement," and that it is ever more recognized as a hybrid genre containing a heavy dose of fiction, I feel that autobiographical theory's obsession with the subject (the narrative "I") deflects our attention from the context and place of enunciation from which the "I" speaks, that is, from the very possibility of communicability that makes experience possible in the first place.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the search for the familiar (i.e. the family, the intimate, the stories of parents' lives) that the directors I have studied pursue goes beyond the individual realm and necessarily takes into account the broader, domestic or quotidian context in which the individual exists. Individuals, as we know, do not exist in isolation but are part of larger groups and collectives that give their lives meaning. If we only

think of autobiography as an intimate, individualized genre, then we are misled, because the autobiographical impulse always acquires meaning in relation to broader constructs like family or community.

Another characteristic that makes these films “domestic” is that the raw materials used in montages derive from the domestic realm. In his book *There’s No Place Like Home Video* (2002), James M. Moran ascribes five basic functions to the domestic mode in film and video production: to represent the everyday, to construct a liminal space in which to explore and negotiate one’s identity in both personal and collective terms, to offer a material vehicle for articulating generational continuities, to construct an image of home that situates us in the world, and to offer a narrative format for communicating personal stories that cover the whole life cycle and its major rituals.<sup>11</sup> We observe all of these characteristics in the documentaries I have mentioned, even though in the vast majority they do not manifest fully. For example, as I have already explained, articulating intergenerational structural continuities proves impossible. Furthermore, narratives take on hybrid formats marked by irony and fragmented intertextuality, and identity can never be integrally restored. The functions of the domestic that Moran mentions, then, act as narrative impulses in these films, yet never find adequate resolution: the narratives are instead best characterized by suspicion, anger, and obscurity.

It is not coincidental that all of these films, in their quest for the familiar, use audiovisual forms of capturing daily life as their cinematic building blocks: home movies, photographs, travel sequences, street scenes, chats with the film crew or family members that reveal the day-to-day processes of constructing narratives, as well as the feelings that emerge in those processes. In the final assessment, then, what happens to the representation of daily life? I contend that these films recover the familiar and the domestic to make them quotidian.

The historical processes of the last forty years have torn lives asunder and introduced profound existential crises into people’s lives. Despite all that has happened, the quotidian is the only sphere that remains intact, that has not been displaced. The everyday persists in spite of all. The question, then, is how to restore to the everyday a familiarity that puts subjects at ease. This is the dynamic, the motivation at work in these films.

A phenomenological approach might hold that the quotidian—the everyday—is the most immediate and spontaneous space in which people exist. The quotidian is the realm in which being manifests as *ontic* reality, the space in which human beings recognize their existence as real. From



this perspective, it becomes clear that what happens in the “world” does not destroy the realm of the everyday. The less “world” a subject possesses, the more he or she will cling to that which is immutable: the quotidian.

These films, taken together, therefore remind us that a seismic shift is occurring in postdictatorial art. Current artistic production about the Southern Cone dictatorships no longer takes pleasure, as it did for so long, in the impossibility of representation, but rather in the possibility of making subjectivity quotidian, of persisting, of reestablishing the communicability of experience, in spite of all.

*Translated by Michael J. Lazzara*

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Jacques Rancière, “The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics,” *Critical Horizons* 7, no. 1 (2006); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2000); and Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado: cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo, una discusión* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2005).
2. Walter Benjamin, “The Narrator,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 84.
3. For more references to the debates around the need for an empathic listener, see: Dori Laub, M.D., “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57–74; Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage International, 1989); and Paolo Jedlowski, *Il racconto come dimora: “Heimat” e le memorie d’Europa* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2009).
4. Andreas Huyssen, *En busca del futuro perdido* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002), 123. This and all subsequent translations from the Spanish are by Michael J. Lazzara.
5. See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). And for a critical review of the “postmemory” concept in Latin America, see Beatriz Sarlo, “Posmemoria, reconstrucciones,” in *Tiempo pasado*, 125–57.
6. Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).
7. The film’s simple title, *M*, harbors several implicit meanings: M as in Marta (his mother’s name), M as in *mamá* (mother), M as in Montoneros (the

armed militant group to which his mother belonged), M as in *militancia* and *militante* (militancy and militant), and M as in *muerte* (death). And if we inquire into the history of cinema, *M* is also the name of the first sound film by Fritz Lang, which tells the story of a psychopathic murderer who cannot be caught by state agencies. Consequently, the neighbors—mostly vagrants, prostitutes, and even criminals—organize to catch the murderer and judge him. The film, like *Privera's*, refers us to a heterogeneous multiplicity of stories.

8. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 7.
9. Ana Amado, *La imagen justa* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2009), 157.
10. See Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), and Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
11. James M. Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

## Caught Off Guard at the Crossroads of Ideology and Affect: Documentary Films by the Daughters of Revolutionaries

*Bernardita Llanos*

In the last two decades, Latin American documentary film production has played a major role in reshaping the sociopolitical fabric and in taking a stand against forgetting recent history and state-sponsored abuses. In contrast to the “New Latin American Cinema,” which has had a much broader circulation and reception because of fiction film’s marketability and the public’s penchant for consuming plot-driven narratives, documentary has arguably gone deeper than fiction film in its ethical engagement with the recent past. Whereas fiction film since the 1990s has certainly not shied away from the battles around history and memory—bringing into stark relief how collective struggles for democracy in the region have either been whitewashed (*La Frontera* [*The Border*, 1991], by Ricardo Larraín [1957–]); glossed over (*No* [2012], by Pablo Larraín [1976–]); or encoded in psychological plots (*La luna en el espejo* [*The Moon in the Mirror*, 1990], by Silvio Caiozzi [1944–])—documentary film has gone much further toward creating an alternative archive, filling in history’s

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gaps, and denouncing cultures of forgetting. Akin to *testimonio* in its desire to decry grave injustice, documentary, in the visual field, has come to fulfill the function that *testimonio* has long played in the lettered and legal realms. Its social and political role is to make visible what history has distorted or effaced, to foreground new voices and silenced stories.

Memory studies and trauma studies are two fields that, since the 1980s, have addressed violence across different temporalities and geographies; they have taken the Holocaust as their main historical and theoretical paradigm.<sup>1</sup> More recently, the intersections between violence and history have been revisited under the rubric of “vulnerability studies.” In this emergent field, inspired by the work of Judith Butler, Marianne Hirsch, and others, the most relevant question is *decidability*: a term that implies asking who has the power to create, administrate, and regulate life in the vulnerable times in which we live.<sup>2</sup> Vulnerability studies, as an interdisciplinary field, stem from legal and feminist theorists’ concerns with stretching the limits of the law and defining the state’s responsibilities in situations of violence and crisis. According to scholars working in this area, the state’s purview and responsibilities should include not only the rights, but also the *needs* of human beings. Vulnerability, rather than autonomy, is what defines the subject and what connects him or her to others, thereby building a new ethical foundation for the law, the state, and politics.<sup>3</sup>

Aware of life’s vulnerability, or sometimes speaking from a position of vulnerability themselves, contemporary female filmmakers of the second and third generations after dictatorial rule have been using their films to explore the subjective dimensions of postmemory, that is, “the ephemeral affective dimensions that persist in the interstices of the small archive left behind.”<sup>4</sup> Their films feature subjects—namely, the children of disappeared militants—whose precariousness and vulnerability is both universal and singular. The protagonists of these documentaries are individuals with needs, left unprotected or forgotten by the state, sometimes by their blood family and partners, their political party, or other institutions. Affect and the web of emotional ties they sustain become sites from which to critique—at a generational remove—the patriarchal party values or masculinist logics that contributed to their vulnerability in the first place. In this sense, the presence of affect and its “uses” by *hijas* (daughters) comes close to what we find in testimonial literature by female militants from the 1960s and 1970s, thus creating an intergenerational bridge that is worth noting. In this chapter, I will focus on contemporary documentaries produced by women from the Southern Cone to understand the dynamics at

play in their visual narratives of memory and postmemory. I will explore the contradiction between a defeated, masculine, revolutionary utopia and the effects that such utopian projects had on women, particularly daughters, within the family contexts of revolutionaries.

Postmemory is a term that has emerged to characterize narratives produced by subjects who remember through stories and images from an inherited past. In documentaries, militants' daughters and granddaughters are the ones who most often create postmemory accounts; in general, they speak from affective and emotional positions rather than ideological ones. First coined by Marianne Hirsch, postmemory finds its basis in the fact that even though all memories are communicated through acts of mediation and representation, memory's imaginative character becomes more intense when generational distance is at play.<sup>5</sup> This generational gap, coupled with postmemory's indirect, fragmentary, and creative qualities makes Hirsch's theoretical category worthy of distinction in its own right, insofar as it links the Jewish female role of preserving memory to the problematic task of filling in historical gaps when the official archive is riddled with silences and omissions. In Hirsch's conceptualization, it is to be expected that the daughters of victims offer accounts dotted with contradictions and fictionalizations of the past, especially when we consider that their narratives are produced in the present, at a temporal remove from the events that give rise to them. My interest in the gendered nature of memories aligns with Hirsch's because it brings to the fore what historical accounts have obliterated by focusing on the witness's testimony and emphasizing women's unique contributions in creating, preserving, and intergenerationally transmitting stories that would otherwise be lost.<sup>6</sup> Southern Cone cultural production, as in the Jewish tradition that Hirsch discusses, has clearly shown the decisive role that daughters play as the present and future guarantors of a past revisited.

In the specific case of Chile, documentaries produced after "truth" (i.e. after the 1990 National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation) and after democracy have played a key role in representing that which has fallen outside the scope of human rights organizations' accounts, as well as those of the state. One might even say that the omissions inherent in such "official" accounts—which are plentiful—were not only symptomatic of a generalized culture of oblivion that permeated Chile's transition to democracy, but also of the particular structure such narratives had to assume as they responded to institutional demands for truth and justice in contemporary cultural and social contexts. In contrast to the official

archive, several critics have acknowledged that documentary film constitutes an alternative archive and is truly one of the best tools for circulating other interpretations of history, thereby shaping and influencing national consciousness and popular memory.<sup>7</sup>

The documentaries I will analyze here—María Inés Roqué's (1968–) *Papá Iván* (*My Father, Iván*, 2004); Camila Guzmán Urzúa's (1971–) *El telón de azúcar* (*The Sugar Curtain*, 2005); Albertina Carri's (1973–) *Los rubios* (*The Blonds*, 2003); and Macarena Aguiló's (1971–) *El edificio de los chilenos* (*The Chilean Building*, 2010)—are all directed by daughters of former leftist militants or guerrillas, some of whom were disappeared by the Southern Cone dictatorships. As I see them, these female narrators and autobiographical protagonists are trapped at the crossroads of ideology and affect, conflicted by the masculinist, bourgeois family attachments that regulate their lives, social roles, and identities in the present. In their films, male subjects whose actions make women vulnerable feature as “perpetrators” within the family scene. Nevertheless, the filmmakers challenge these masculine versions of history and mobilize memory as a powerful tool to rewrite their experiences and stories and affirm an identity in the present while examining the past.

For a younger generation of female documentary filmmakers, postmemory has become a frequent position from which to critique and revise macrohistories and microhistories, both national and familial. Their films foreground how difficult it is to represent the past at a remove from the “direct” experience of trauma. At the same time, they transmit an ethics rooted in a belief that memories are shaped by experience—gendered experience, class experience, and ethnic experience—and should not be determined by flattened, eminently patriarchal interpretations of history. More importantly, generational distance enables these women filmmakers to search for their own explanations and reflect on the ideological limits of the familial and institutional contracts that patriarchal societies impose.

## LOVE BONDS

A careful assessment of postmemory documentaries by women seems to affirm that the 1960s and 1970s revolutionary project not only failed in the economic and ideological realms, but also in the realms of the affective and the intimate. Women's participation in the revolution often meant betraying or slighting their domestic or intimate lives, sacrificing them for the loftier (political) goals that the revolution's male imaginary

demanded. Documentaries by revolutionaries' daughters therefore show how their mothers' existences were framed by ideology and how, in the domestic sphere, women sometimes paid a heavy price for their gendered roles and affective bonds.

Revolutionary organizations in Argentina and Chile did not consider the cost that class struggle would have on interpersonal relationships and affective ties in the long run. Revolutionaries from armed leftist groups like Montoneros (in Argentina) or MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, Leftist Revolutionary Movement, in Chile), for example, conceived of the revolutionary process through the analogy of the factory. By this logic, all human relations were relations of class and exploitation, divorced from any embodied or gendered dimension shaped by emotions, affect, or the body. From the standpoint of militant orthodoxy, affective life was an entirely bourgeois creation, an ideological deformation that only served the dominant classes to the detriment of workers. Because the purpose of the revolution was to liberate the workers from class oppression, all other forms of submission or commitment, particularly those related to the domestic sphere, were deemed either secondary or irrelevant. Society was conceived as a working-class social fabric devoid of other intersectionalities or positionalities that would shape or complicate human relationships and identities. Within a class model, the political party and the factory became substitutes for affect and the family. By extension, the family came to be seen as a source of bourgeois indoctrination and capitalist consumption rather than as a crucial space for human social development and individuation. Consequently, institutional structures aimed to abolish the bourgeois family and its emotional attachments and make way for the new society that Marx and Engels imagined in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). To implement these revolutionary ideas in the 1970s in Argentina and Chile meant to dismantle old social structures and identities that would be replaced by the male ideal of the "New Man," in the spirit of Che Guevara.

Myriad films, many by male directors, bear witness to the postdictatorial search for truth, particularly in the face of impunity measures like Argentina's Full Stop Law (1986) and Law of Due Obedience (1987), or the silences inherent in Chile's various truth commission reports. Several goals guided these memory films: to perform the process of mourning, to work through traumatic experiences like death and torture, to produce legal evidence, and to open a dialogue between private and public discourses. Landmark documentaries like Patricio Guzmán's (1941–)

*Nostalgia de la luz* (*Nostalgia for the Light*, 2010) and Silvio Caiozzi's (1944–) *Fernando ha vuelto* (*Fernando Is Back*, 1998) portray the political defeat, torture, and killing of leftist militants, but do so, nevertheless, from a patriarchal and paternalistic place of sorrow in which women are mainly cast as weeping mothers, wives, and daughters. However, these male filmmakers have also acknowledged women's protagonism as activists, as politicized mothers and grandmothers. Yet this recognition of women's activism has been more characteristic of Argentine documentaries like David Blaustein's (1953–) *Botín de guerra* (*Spoils of War*, 2000), which focuses on the valiant struggles of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, than of Chilean documentaries in which women are mostly portrayed as relatives of the disappeared. However, differences notwithstanding, in general terms, female politicization has been filtered through a traditional gender lens in both countries; to that end, the political mother is a frequent trope.

Despite their merits, then, postdictatorial documentaries created from a masculine gaze often fall short of fully exploring the intimate textures of experience that characterized women's protagonism and politicization as revolutionaries. In contrast, daughter-filmmakers like Roqué, Guzmán, Carri, and Aguiló do not shy away from love bonds or from a candid revision of their revolutionary upbringing, with all of its intimate textures and complexities. Conscious of the aforementioned context of militancy, which tried to divorce affect from labor, these filmmakers explore the tensions between a heterosexual cultural model determined by patriarchal and political structures and their own gendered, authorial aesthetics and choices. This change indicates a shift within Latin American documentary film from an ideologized, collective *male* subject—the ideal agent for the revolutionary enterprise, as in early works by Julio García Espinosa (1926–), Glauber Rocha (1939–1981), Fernando Birri (1925–), Fernando E. Solanas (1936–), and Patricio Guzmán—toward a gendered subject who unveils how revolutionary utopias and male collective projects often damaged kinship ties.<sup>8</sup>

The documentaries to which I now turn problematize love bonds vis-à-vis militant narratives that are rooted in concepts like heroism and sacrifice. To metanarratives based on the revolutionary ideal of the “New Man,” these daughters and activists oppose an irreparable sense of personal loss and abandonment. The subjects who tell their stories and explore their identities on screen are conflicted and trapped: while on the one hand they seem to want to forge their own paths and, in some cases, even levy harsh



critiques against the patriarchal structures that governed the revolutionary moment; on the other, they cannot escape from the affective ties that formed them or from the indelible imprint revolution left on their lives.

Moreover, these documentaries problematize traditional avant-garde poetics in which aesthetics and politics share languages, goals, and contexts rooted in hegemonic, male, or nationalist imaginaries. My contention is that by introducing new rhetorical grammars centered around love and ideology, these women filmmakers pose a formidable challenge to deeply consolidated lines in Latin American documentary that date back to the “Third Cinema” wave of the 1960s. While Doris Sommer, in her seminal book *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1984), astutely reads the analogy of love and marriage as the foundational ideological discourse for reconciling social differences in nineteenth-century Latin American nation-states, I would argue that post-memory documentaries by twenty-first-century female filmmakers deploy affect to much more radical ends.<sup>9</sup> These films remind us that neither the liberal state nor the revolutionary project incorporated women and gender into their social and institutional configurations in lasting or drastically novel ways. For women, the social contract is still bound to gender and sexual roles, a reality that these documentaries confirm in their retrospective assessment of the revolutionary moment and its repercussions on family ties and identities in the present.

### MODES OF AFFECTIVE REMEMBRANCE

Three modes of affective remembrance dominate the corpus of films I have chosen for this chapter: *vicarious memory*, *metamemory*, and *revisionist memory* that upsets the male epic narrative and questions its utopian remains. I will explore these in turn.

The first mode, vicarious memory, can be observed in films like María Inés Roqué’s *Papá Iván* (2004). In this mode, the speaking subject participates imaginatively in another’s experience. Stated differently, the speaking subject loves the father (or another male authority figure) and cannot let go of her original attachment to him; consequently, she tries to reconcile past and present by creating an imaginary continuity between the male epic and her own identity, even though she may or may not be able to do so comfortably or without tension. Gender and experience shape the speaking subject’s identity, but without canceling or negating the heroic combatant’s epic narrative. In the case of *Papá Iván*, the director’s search

for her father's tomb—which not only symbolizes a place to lay him to rest, but also a place to lay to rest the many stories that circulate about him as a husband, militant, fighter, and social theorist—irrevocably fails. Tensions arise, however, when Roqué includes her mother's testimony in the film. The matriarch, a key figure, offers a poignant perspective on the man who not only abandoned her and their two children, but also formed a new family while living clandestinely. Trapped, the daughter cannot betray the mother—and thus cannot ally herself with a father who jilted the woman he chose to be the mother of his children—nor is the daughter willing to abandon her heroic vision of the father. For these reasons, she is left with an unresolved quest for the father (Fig. 14.1).

The second mode, metamemory, is perhaps best illustrated by Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (2003). Metamemory discourse, through generational and aesthetic-methodological distancing, seeks to reveal memory's limits, both individual and collective.<sup>10</sup> In this mode, a lack of information about the hero figure's death eclipses love bonds; it introduces an aesthetic and narrative distance that flattens affect. In Carri's experience, when so little



Fig. 14.1 *Papá Iván* (2004), directed by María Inés Roqué

is known, when life is in such turmoil, it is difficult to speak from a place of emotion. *Los rubios*, therefore, sublimates affect, casting it as a void, and chooses to focus instead on illustrating memory's limits and its decidedly performative and fictional qualities.

To that end, *Los rubios* juxtaposes metadiscourse about memory's mechanics with the craft of filmmaking. Propelled by multiple versions of truth, Carri resorts to parody and irony to openly question master narratives about the past and debunk certain myths surrounding militancy. Testimonies, visits to memory sites in Buenos Aires, and interviews with family, friends, and former comrades all provide no stable truth about Carri's disappeared parents, Montonero militants Ana María Caruso and Alberto Carri, who were disappeared by the Argentine military in 1977. Most information that Carri receives is simply anecdotal or useless. The disappeared couple's biographies as militants, parents, or even human beings prove elusive to a daughter who hardly remembers them and who can only grasp traces of who and what they were by listening to others' accounts.

Carri's subsequent documentary, *Restos (Remains, 2010)*, continues the reflection begun in *Los rubios* by playing cinematically with the "remains" of a film that her father made in the 1970s, exploring how those remains intersect with her own fragmentary memories. As she examines her personal, subjective connections to history, she simultaneously reflects on the ways in which the Argentine military not only disappeared people, but also many films that comprised a visual archive of militancy. Faced with a void in the archive that is at once personal (existential), historical, and cultural, the "remains" of the past lead her to observe that in the 1970s, "action was possible and violence was necessary." Her comment signals a personal distancing from the revolutionary utopia and call to arms in which, a generation earlier, her parents and other leftist activists fervently believed.

The third mode of affective remembrance, which I am calling revisionist memory, evokes Julia Kristeva's idea of undoing the *pere-version* (the father's dictum) and strives to dismantle the heroic myth.<sup>11</sup> In this type of narrative, the daughter perverts the father's grandiloquent narrative by confronting and imbuing it with the mistakes, shortcomings, and ultimate failures of his grandiose projects for social change. As a result, she challenges the father's authority—relegating his narrative to the margins—while also performing her own suffering, sometimes openly, sometimes in veiled and somber ways. The daughter's inability to understand and accept why the militant parent knowingly did what he or she did fuels her need

to give meaning to her own life and identity, to address the fragmented stories and unanswered questions of the past.

Macarena Aguiló's *El edificio de los chilenos* (2010) and Camila Guzmán's *El telón de azúcar* (2005) carry out this revisionist task against a dramatic backdrop: both films stage a return to Cuba, the birthplace of their parents' revolutionary political commitments. Along the way, the directors undo the tapestry of their fathers' heroic memory by emphasizing the collapse of utopia in the present, both in their own beliefs as well as in the chorus of voices of former activists and Cubans whom they interview. Aguiló and Guzmán share a sense of disenchantment with the revolution and its ideals and poignantly represent the failure of an alternative family model (the socialist family) that the left attempted to construct.

Aguiló and Guzmán grew up as exiles of sorts in Cuba and participated in different social and family experiments, the most important of which was called Proyecto Hogares (Project Home). Proyecto Hogares was a paradigmatic urban commune in Havana that housed forty children. Chilean militants and Cubans cared for the children in surrogate domestic arrangements so that the children's parents could be free to pursue their political commitments. Macarena Aguiló, for example, was left there while her parents took part in Operación Retorno (Operation Return, 1977–1979), a historic episode in which exiled MIR activists returned clandestinely to Chile intending to fight and ideally overthrow the Pinochet regime. The urban commune's goal was to collectivize time, space, duties, study, and cultural activities to advance the revolution: everyone was to live in service to the "cause." Aguiló's documentary is the first to capture the testimonies of Chilean children, now adults, who participated in Proyecto Hogares; their voices not only evoke diverse experiences, but also differing degrees of acceptance of their new circumstances—forced as they were to live in a foreign culture, far from their biological families. The alternative family model that the revolution proposed was founded on the premise that biological ties are not essential to forming kinship and community; different individuals from the party or the state, it was thought, could perform the parental role. The biological family, in other words, played a subordinate role to the collective—national or political—family. The experiment's success varied according to each individual child and the extent to which he or she was able to forge new bonds and adapt to life in Cuba.

Macarena Aguiló's letters to her mother, her childhood drawings from the seven years she spent in Cuba, as well as her close relationship to her

siblings and “social” father (*su padre social*), all point to the paradoxical and sometimes conflicting outcomes that Proyecto Hogares children experienced. Her mother’s personal reflection about her decision to leave Macarena in Cuba surfaces in their present-day conversations, underscoring MIR’s patriarchal/military structure, on the one hand, and its gender bias, on the other. In MIR’s strict value system, a true militant gave up everything for the revolution, disavowing affect and emotional attachments to parents, partners, and relatives. As many former female militants have asserted, the revolutionary organization became a kind of “uterus,” the place where all forms of social interaction and relationships took place.<sup>12</sup> The militant, like Che Guevara, was the one who sacrificed himself and his family for the “people’s” cause. Personal interests were always subordinate to the revolution’s demands. Militancy required discipline and a stern sense of sacrifice that was masculine and military in nature, first and foremost.

Camila Guzmán’s *El telón de azúcar* poignantly critiques how the 1959 Cuban Revolution betrayed its original utopian goals. She shows how the revolution’s “Young Pioneers,” a nickname given to youngsters in Cuba still today, are trained to repeat empty phrases and slogans that have all but lost their meaning. She re-examines the economic difficulties and scarcity after the “Special Period” of 1990–1993, comparing that period to the present, only to find that political freedom is still lacking and economic opportunities scarce. The truth she encounters seems to be that the dream of building a new and egalitarian society was unattainable. By comparing and contrasting what happened to her childhood classmates, Guzmán reveals her generation’s unfulfilled dreams: after the fall of the Soviet Union, those who once reaped the revolution’s benefits (free education, housing, work, health, vacations, etc.) eventually had to leave the island due to a lack of opportunities.

In the film, Guzmán’s mother provides a counterpoint to the younger generation: through her memory, the director inherits the story of the family’s exile from Pinochet’s Chile and of Cuba’s generous welcome to all those seeking political asylum. More than a reality, Chile, for Camila Guzmán, is a mythic construction that her exiled parents pass down to her. In contrast, Cuba is her home, where she grew up from childhood to adolescence, her adopted country, as her Cuban accent reminds the audience. Visions of Cuba’s difficult present and of the revolution’s failure as a political and economic project stand in stark contrast to her parents’ romanticized memories of the past. Nostalgia and melancholy,

then, serve as affective triggers for the daughter's revision of the revolutionary past—a past that, in the long run and due to geopolitical factors, proved unsustainable.

### ORPHANS OF HISTORY

In all the films I have mentioned—*Papá Iván*, *Los rubios*, *El edificio de los Chilenos*, and *El telón de azúcar*—female narrators appear torn between revolutionary demands and ideals and the emotional attachments forged within a traditional family model. Their reflections have anthropological relevance insofar as they question conventional, Western family models and contracts that are based on blood and patrimonial ties, thus making explicit the oppressive thrust that patriarchal revolutionary mandates had on family structures. While it is clear that the 1960s and 1970s revolutionary juncture propagated a break with the traditional Latin American model of the Catholic, bourgeois family, it is also clear that despite their rhetoric of equality, the movements did not achieve equality across gender roles.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the revolutionary process often brought unforeseen consequences for families. As *El edificio de los chilenos* illustrates, it propagated the ideal of communal and egalitarian responsibilities, suggesting that parental roles could be shared by comrades who would act as surrogate caregivers for children whose parents were otherwise engaged in the struggle. In reality, however, these children, like Macarena Aguiló, were left feeling abandoned and empty when their parents gave up their personal lives for the “cause.”

The revolutionary action produced a militarization of everyday private life, and clandestine existence eroded the boundaries separating political activities from the domestic sphere. In this way, the demands of full-time militancy often put the family at risk. As we know, total war is not confined to a battlefield; it inevitably impacts daily routines and interpersonal relationships. Military doctrine's mandate to bear arms is a case in point. Families often grappled with the ethics of bearing arms, particularly when women did not favor their use. These debates generated other forms of vulnerability and violence. This is apparent in *Papá Iván* when María Inés Roqué's mother recounts that she literally got sick thinking of her militant husband using a gun and opting for violence as a means to change society. In *Los rubios*, we also hear one of the interviewees highlight how the Carri family had arms around the house when the children were little but lived carefree despite the danger.

In short, the postmemory landscape signals, in its various modalities, a profound chasm between younger generations and the revolutionary generation. The novelty of the postmemory documentaries I have examined is that love attachments within the family become a lens through which to remember traumatic temporalities and revise parental narratives of heroism, betrayal, and abandonment. The crisis of the revolutionary family model for most of these directors, with the possible exception of Albertina Carri, gives birth to a new kind of memory narrative shaped by *both* love and ideology, revealing that most males chose political commitment over love bonds while women suffered the consequences of those choices. Within this context, public, political life became entirely militarized and, as a result, produced negative and drastic effects on private life.

In contrast to the figure of the glorified guerrilla, the male revolutionaries of yesteryear appear in these films as ethically flawed heroes who left home, wife, and children to struggle for an ideal of collective justice and equality that ultimately excluded those dearest to them. One could view these directors, then, as the new orphans of the postdictatorship, in line with Rodrigo Cánovas's take on Chilean literature of the 1980s and 1990s or Sonia Montecino's concept of the *huacho* (orphan or illegitimate offspring).<sup>14</sup> They call attention to the father-heroes who left them, re-enacting the wounds and identity issues that have plagued Latin America time and again since the foundational violence of the conquest. The directors speak from a marginal and "secondary" position, as the title of the documentary *Actores secundarios* (*Secondary Actors*, 2004) by Pachi Bustos (1971–) and Jorge Leiva (1970–) affirms.<sup>15</sup>

Too young to make decisions for themselves, these daughters of the dictatorship were left virtually fatherless (or motherless) in their most formative years.<sup>16</sup> By revisiting personal, family, and other memories, their acts of documentary filmmaking summon intimate zones of experience that have escaped the public record throughout most of the postdictatorship period. What is crucial to understand about their plight is the paradox of parents who fought fervently for a more equitable and just society, but in so doing knowingly put themselves and their children on the line.

## NOTES

1. The applicability of the Holocaust paradigm to approach and understand the workings of South American dictatorial governments has been hotly debated. Opponents of the use of the Holocaust as a universalizing trope

argue for the historical specificities that give rise to repression in different contexts. But there has also been a strand of thought that has linked political repression in South American torture centers to Nazi concentration camps, signaling a type of violent matrix with a comparable goal: to exterminate individuals and groups deemed enemies of the state. For the latter perspective, see Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición: los campos de concentración en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Colihue, 2006). Survivor and journalist Miriam Lewin in her *Putas y guerrilleras* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2014) also tells about her experience as a detainee in the infamous Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (Mechanics School of the Argentine Navy, ESMA). She underscores the clandestine prison's systematic organization and how the military threatened, tortured, and killed political prisoners. She also talks about pregnant militants whose babies were taken away by the guards before killing the mothers.

2. Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004) is a major forerunner to other scholars' reflections on vulnerability. Indicative of this emerging concern, the 2014 Modern Language Association convention, presided over by Marianne Hirsch, took as its presidential theme the idea of "Vulnerable Times." Her presidential address, delivered on January 10, 2014, was titled "Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times."
3. See Martha Albertson Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject and the Responsive State," *Emory Law Journal* 60, [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1694740](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1694740). Fineman is the founder of the "Feminism and Legal Theory Project" at Emory.
4. The quote is derived from Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer's abstract to their article "Vulnerable Lives: Secrets, Noise, Dust," *Profession* 17 (2011): 51–67. See also, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "What's Wrong with This Picture?: Archival Photographs in Contemporary Narratives," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5 (2006): 230–50.
5. See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also Hirsch's *The Postmemory Generation: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
6. I am indebted here to the contributions of Holocaust studies and trauma studies, as well as to feminist theorists of family ties and memory: Marianne Hirsch, Nora Domínguez, Ana Amado, and Elizabeth Jelin, to name a few.
7. See Kristin Sorensen's *Media, Memory, and Human Rights in Chile* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 57. Among the critics who have underscored the significance of the documentary in Latin America as a social and political vehicle are Julianne Burton, Michael Chanan, Ana López, Bill Nichols, Jacqueline Mouesca, and Elizabeth Ramírez.



8. Examples of documentaries that feature a collective, eminently masculine subject include: *Aventuras de Juan Quinquín* (*The Adventures of Juan Quinquín*, 1967), by Julio García Espinosa; *História do Brazil* (*The History of Brazil*, 1975) and *As armas e o povo* (*The Guns and the People*, 1975), by Glauber Rocha; *Tire dié* (*Toss Me a Dime*, 1958), by Fernando Birri; *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968), by Fernando E. Solanas; and *La batalla de Chile* (*The Battle of Chile*, 1975–1979), by Patricio Guzmán. After the wave of military coups, many film directors were exiled. In the Chilean case, in particular, it is noteworthy that more than 178 films were made abroad. A number of exiled filmmakers and documentarians played vital roles in expanding the filmic field and placing gender center stage: for example, Marilú Mallet (1944–), Angelina Vázquez (1948–), Valeria Sarmiento (1948–), and Carmen Castillo (1945–). For more on this, see Laura Senio Blair Vásquez, “El lente circular del exilio: (re)fundar la identidad chilena por el medio filmico,” *Aisthesis* 54 (2013), [http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0718-71812013000200012](http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0718-71812013000200012). See also, José Miguel Palacios, “Valeria Sarmiento y Marilú Mallet: dos cineastas, dos mujeres,” *La Fuga*, <http://www.lafuga.cl/valeria-sarmiento-y-marilu-mallet/632>. For an overview of Chilean documentary, see Jacqueline Mouesca, *El documental chileno* (Santiago de Chile: Lom Ediciones, 2005).
9. In addition to the films I analyze here, I can cite several exemplary cases of this new trend in political documentaries. In Argentina, we find Andrés Habegger’s (*h*) *historias cotidianas* [*Stories of Everyday Life*, 2001]; Andrés Di Tella’s *Montoneros, una historia* [*Montoneros: A Story*, 1995]; and Nicolás Prividera’s *M* (2007). In Chile, we find Gloria Camiruaga’s *La venda* [*The Blindfold*, 1999]; Lorena Giachino’s *Reinalda del Carmen, mi mamá y yo* [*Reinalda del Carmen, My Mother, and Me*, 2007]; Sebastián Moreno’s *La ciudad de los fotógrafos* [*The City of Photographers*, 2007]; and Germán Berger’s *Mi vida con Carlos* [*My Life with Carlos*, 2009], among others. All these documentaries were produced after the return to democracy and have forged new paths for the use of autobiographical and subjective accounts that bring the past to bear on the present.
10. For another take on how to film loss, see Michael J. Lazzara’s article “Filming Loss: (Post)Memory, Subjectivity, and the Performance of Failure in Recent Argentine Documentary Films,” *Latin American Perspectives* 168, vol. 36, no. 5 (September 2009): 147–57.
11. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.
12. Marta Diana, *Mujeres guerrilleras: la militancia de los setenta en los testimonios de sus protagonistas femeninas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Planeta, 1997), 270.

13. Pilar Calveiro is very clear on this point in her book *Política y/o violencia: una aproximación a la guerrilla de los años 70* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2005), a text that also participates in the revisionist mode.
14. See Rodrigo Cánovas, *Novela chilena, nuevas generaciones: el abordaje de los huérfanos* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Católica, 1997). *Huacho* comes from the Quechua meaning “orphan,” or “illegitimate offspring” in the more colloquial definition. The term has its origins in colonial times but also has modern-day pejorative uses. See Sonia Montecino, *Madres y huachos: alegorías del mestizaje chileno* (Santiago de Chile: Cuarto Propio, 1994).
15. *Actores secundarios* takes a different stand by paying attention to social movements and collective action as observed through student activism and protests. In this case, high school and college students are key actors in opposing neoliberalism and for-profit education.
16. Throughout this chapter, I have referred mainly to the militant fathers who complicated family relations for their wives and daughters. In some cases, however, like those of Carri and Aguiló, mothers were also militants. This detail, though vitally important, does not change the overall thrust of my argument because even when women were militants, they still participated in the masculine ideological and organizational structures that governed the revolutionary organizations. In this sense, my argument is a structural and systemic critique that goes beyond the biographical specificities of individual cases.

Filming Responsibly: Ethnicity, Community,  
and the Nation in Ana Lucía Cuevas's *El eco  
del dolor de mucha gente*

*Valeria Grinberg Pla*

In recent decades, the ethical and aesthetic dilemma of how to write or visually represent another's traumatic past has been the subject of extensive debates in the humanities, the social sciences, and beyond. It concerns us not just as researchers and critical thinkers but also as citizens. It further concerns us as human beings in the sense that it deeply affects our understanding of what humans are capable of doing to each other, precisely because they/we have done it.

By emphasizing two aspects of the aforementioned debate, I would like to engage with the question of how the memory of the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996) has taken shape in documentary films. First, I want to understand the challenges that arise in representing traumatic pasts. Second, I want to explore what it means to film responsibly in the wake of violence and atrocity. How does one articulate the survivors' perspectives without appropriating or displacing their stories?<sup>1</sup> To do this is particularly vexing when we consider that 83% of the war's victims were

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indigenous Mayans and that the genocide of the Ixil peoples in the early 1980s represented the culmination of more than five hundred years of racism.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, how does one create images to represent the victims *justly*, that is, in a way that does not take away their dignity?<sup>3</sup>

Edgar Esquit explains that since the beginning of the nineteenth century, citizenship in Guatemala has been restricted based on ethnicity. Endemic discrimination perpetually reproduced colonial segregation. Citizenship was selectively granted to *ladinos* (whites) and *criollos* (creoles), while indigenous peoples tended to be viewed as second-class citizens, as *mozos* (lads or laborers) from an inferior race. Esquit concurs with historian Arturo Taracena that the exclusion of indigenous peoples from political participation proves that the Guatemalan nation has historically been *la patria del criollo* (the creole nation), an allusion to Severo Martínez Peláez's seminal work.<sup>4</sup> As a result, until the late twentieth century, Guatemala's dominant national discourse and practice have consistently equated nonindigenous, Hispanic culture with Guatemalan national identity.<sup>5</sup> If indigenous peoples were to participate in the nation, it meant that they would have to assimilate to *ladino* culture and deny their own identities. Consequently, as Beatriz Cortez has argued, the cultural, social, and political eugenic policies that we identify throughout Guatemala's history prefigure the genocide of the 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

Both Marianne Hirsch and Dominick LaCapra have argued that one of the biggest challenges faced by all representations of extreme traumatic events like ethnic cleansing or genocide is the ability to convey the victims' perspective without appropriating their voices, using them for our own purposes, or displacing their stories with our own.<sup>7</sup> This means that the truth of what happened during thirty-six years of civil war in Guatemala cannot be told without accounting for the victims' suffering or acknowledging the ways in which bystanders and those affected less directly by that violence try to make sense of victims' traumatic pasts in respectful, empathetic ways. However, Dominick LaCapra warns that "empathy should not be conflated with unchecked identification, vicarious experience, [or] surrogate victimage"; thus, he calls for a "form of virtual—not vicarious—experience [...] in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one's own."<sup>8</sup> Yet to achieve this is no easy task.

In Central and Latin America, where there is a long history of paternalism toward the indigenous population, that is, an assumption that "their" stories are not as important as "ours," the question of *who speaks for whom* is

a particularly sensitive issue. This question has drawn scrutiny to the work of well-meaning activists and intellectuals who have historically spoken for subaltern others. The most obvious and well-known example of this is *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1985), edited by anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos, who claims authorship (and receives royalties) for the book.<sup>9</sup> A filmic counterpart is *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983), directed by US-based director Pamela Yates. The documentary, which takes Menchú as a narrator, follows Yates as she immerses herself in the Guatemalan war zone with her camera. When one sees this film, it is clear that it is as much about a courageous young American woman risking her life to create a record of the Civil War for all the world to see as it is about Menchú or the Guatemalan people's suffering.

To think about the question of what it means to create responsible visual representations of traumatic pasts, I have frequently returned to Georges Didi-Huberman's reflections on the "representability" and "sayability" of the Shoah, which can provide a framework for thinking about the Guatemalan context as well. That the Guatemalan genocide, like the Holocaust, was conceived and planned by humans implies that as much as it pains us, both historical episodes are indeed thinkable and human.<sup>10</sup> Films and photographs play a key role in detonating this thinking because they provide material support for our imagination and shape our ethical engagement with others' suffering. To that end, Didi-Huberman's discussion of four gas chamber photographs taken in Auschwitz by Alex, a *Sonderkommando* member who smuggled the photos out of the concentration camp, speaks to the power that images have to contest denial and provide a window through which we might glimpse the horrors others have endured. For this to happen, though, we must be willing to gaze upon those images empathetically and try to imagine and understand what happened.

Thomas Trezise adds to this debate that images of human atrocity are unspeakable not only because they are "indescribably or inexpressibly bad or objectionable," but also because the frameworks available for naming or judging the disaster are not always entirely adequate.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, to recall Didi-Huberman's phrase, the need to represent the atrocities that took place in Guatemala during the war, most notably in the early 1980s, remains "in spite of all." Thomas Trezise therefore concludes that "the question now is not whether the Holocaust *can* be represented, but [...] whether it *should* be represented, or [...] rather] *how* it should be represented."<sup>12</sup> I argue with Trezise (who follows Adorno) that a key question is how to represent what happened in a way that avoids "aesthetic

pleasure” and disrupts “complacent familiarity,” while also “challeng[ing] the very norms of the culture or civilization that produced [the genocide in the first place].”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, to film responsibly in the wake of violence and atrocity in Guatemala means to create images that, in spite of all, bear witness to the horror endured by indigenous peoples and to listen to their voices on their own terms and in their own irreducibility.

Not surprisingly, documentary filmmaking has been a key tool for calling attention to the massive human rights violations committed during the Guatemalan Civil War, for documenting the work of activists, and for providing a platform for survivors to voice their pain and demands for justice. Due to the social nature of the trauma that ensued, film has been a vital vehicle for raising public awareness about ongoing processes of mourning and the labors of memory.<sup>14</sup>

Within the growing corpus of films about the genocide, the work of Comunicarte (loosely translated “to communicate to you”), a grassroots organization created in the early 1990s, has been crucial. To date, the group has produced more than eighty short and medium-length documentaries whose ethical force lies in the counternarrative they provide to the official denial of massacres perpetrated against indigenous peoples.<sup>15</sup> These documentaries not only unveil the extermination logic behind the Panzós massacre, carried out in 1978, or the 1982 Dos Erres massacre, but also play a role in amassing survivors’ testimonies to hold the Guatemalan state accountable for crimes against humanity. Aesthetically, the works use techniques like alternating mid and long-range shots of military power with close-ups of skulls and other body parts discovered in mass graves during exhumations; in that sense, they strategically allow viewers to see the aftermath of the violence that the state systematically denied.<sup>16</sup> Many full-length experimental films—frequently international co-productions—also take a documentary approach to issues of memory and justice. Some key examples include: *Discurso contra el olvido* (*Address Against Oblivion*, 2003), by Sergio Valdés Pedroni (1958–); *La isla: archivos de una tragedia* (*La Isla: Archives of a Tragedy*, 2009), by Uli Stelzner (1961–); *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* (2011), by Pamela Yates; and *El eco del dolor de mucha gente* (*The Echo of Pain of the Many*, 2011), by Ana Lucía Cuevas’s (1963–).

The documentaries by Cuevas, Stelzner, and Valdés Pedroni stand out for their concern with formal aspects of representation. This is evident in how their films reflect on language and the image as producers of meaning, in how they contrast competing narratives about what happened in Guatemala during the war, and in how they explore figurative visual language and imaginative discourse as possible vehicles for conveying historical truth.

A prominent feature in both Ana Lucía Cuevas's *El eco del dolor de mucha gente* and Uli Stelzner's *La isla: archivos de una tragedia* is how these films make indigenous peoples visible as subjects. What is further remarkable about *El eco* is Cuevas's conscious subordination of her authorial "I." By subordinating the "I," she directly challenges the racist ideology inherited from colonial rule that enabled the genocide in the first place. While, at its core, the film records the director's personal account of Guatemala's recent past, Cuevas takes distance from first-person enunciation (without abandoning it completely) and instead privileges the voices of indigenous survivors who speak on their own terms about what justice, pain, or the future mean to them. Her approach also opens new possibilities, as I will show, for the constitution of community. To that end, the *echo* is a central trope in Cuevas's memory narrative.<sup>17</sup>

The echo, as trope and metaphor, connects Cuevas's individual experience to the greater community of indigenous women, thereby redrawing and reimagining categories like family, community, and the nation. Her documentary shatters traditional foundations of familial and social ties, which in Guatemala have been historically defined by the ethnic divide separating nonindigenous (*ladinos*) and indigenous people. At the same time, it challenges representational modes in which the intellectual co-opts the other's voice or uses it to specific ends. Instead, Cuevas explores new modes of narrating the nation in which a situated, gendered body articulates an "I" capable of listening to the voices of others. What makes this film unique, then, is how it disrupts a dominant Guatemalan national discourse that provokes indigenous repression and extreme suffering.

In what follows, I will explore several key aspects of Cuevas's film: its function as an "echo chamber" that mediates between private trauma and the public space; the relationship between (a lack of) legal justice and the use of film as an instrument for memory; and finally, the challenges involved in crafting an ethically and aesthetically just representation of the dead.

### FILM AS AN ECHO CHAMBER: PERSONAL TRAUMA, MOURNING, AND THE PUBLIC SPACE

One of the most important aspects of *El eco del dolor de mucha gente* (2011) is its strong social dimension, that is, the way it builds bridges among innumerable individual traumas and the nation as a whole. By making visible both the process of mourning and the labors of memory, the film creates a collective archive of testimonies; it weaves together a patchwork, a community of survivors whose words and personal pain can

resonate in the collective social body. This staging of survivors' accounts harbors the potential to trigger a mourning process in the audience or to encourage the audience to engage in its own memory work.

For an "echo" to ripple outward, however, there must be a starting point. In this case, that starting point is the director's life experience. Indeed, the film's demand for collective justice arises out of Cuevas's familial and emotional connection to her disappeared brother<sup>18</sup>: "I started a return journey [to Guatemala] and placed myself in front of the camera. I don't like to see myself on screen, but now I understand and accept that I'm also part of this story."<sup>19</sup> Although she acknowledges her role in shaping the narrative she presents, Cuevas's off-camera voice provides the film's guiding thread. She interviews an array of individuals in different scenarios: at their homes or offices, during mass grave exhumations, or in the aftermath of trials. As the camera accompanies her on her journey, it makes the viewer a participant in Cuevas's project of documenting truth and justice initiatives in postwar Guatemala.

The trope of the journey and the return—Cuevas's return to Guatemala, her return to a traumatic past—are central to her memory narrative. The director's narrative "I" assumes a situated point of view as a woman, a *ladina*, an exile, and the direct relative of a disappeared person. By placing herself in Guatemala, by returning, so to speak, to the scene of the crime, she counters the hegemonic discourse of the nation and of history, a discourse whose impersonal and universalizing vantage point reflects the normative values of *la patria del criollo*.

Taking her brother's death as a starting point, she reframes her personal pain as "the echo of the pain of many people,"<sup>20</sup> thereby linking her family to the broader collectivity; in so doing, she reshapes the very notions of family, community, and nation. In narrative terms, the documentary builds a history of the war from the ground up, moving from the personal to the social by layering different source materials: testimonies of indigenous survivors; archival material on the formation of opposition groups like the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM), that is, the Mutual Support Group run by and for relatives of the disappeared; stories of human rights activists; as well as interviews with many women who, like Cuevas and her family, are involved in the struggle for justice. By linking all of these voices together, Cuevas's narration describes the milestones along her journey and the role of each person she interviews.<sup>21</sup> In the process, she reveals family member solidarity networks that exist throughout the country and highlights the crucial role that women play in them.<sup>22</sup>



Personal pain generates a point of empathetic contact between Cuevas and her interviewees. She forges affective and emotional bonds with other victims, and these affective ties bring creative and transformative potential. One of the main contributions of Cuevas's film, then, is that its cinematic inertia is rooted in blood ties that are at once posited and transcended: the film posits a ripple effect that unites individual iterations of pain, thus (re)creating and sustaining community without eviscerating the specificities of individual instances of trauma. To the contrary, each testimony presented is unique. But in juxtaposing these unique testimonies, Cuevas establishes an intersubjective network of survivors whose epicenter is the genocide suffered by Guatemala's indigenous peoples, a network in which her own personal loss, as the film's title suggests, ceases to be an origin and becomes instead a mere echo.

Given this dynamic, which simultaneously centralizes and decentralizes (authorizes and deauthorizes) the authorial "I," the figure of the echo grounds a narrative structure that places indigenous victims both at the film's center and at the center of the nation. The survivors' suffering comes to supplant and amplify that of the director; it leaves lingering traces of myriad traumatic experiences that may, in turn, resonate with the audience. At bottom, an encounter between the director and the Ixil women she interviews mediates a broader encounter between the Civil War's victims and the public at large.

In sum, Cuevas interweaves personal and familial loss into an overarching context of national tragedy. This shift from the personal to the collective formally conveys the director's ethical position vis-à-vis the war victims: that position consists in moving her own experience to the margins of the scene, as an echo of the indigenous experience. Not only does her approach resist displacing or appropriating indigenous voices, it also subverts the dominant narrative that privileges a *ladino* view of Guatemalan national identity.

### (LACK OF) LEGAL JUSTICE AND CINEMA AS AN INSTRUMENT OF MEMORY

In postwar Guatemala, the legal and political mechanisms for redress are extremely limited and even contradictory. When I say this, I am referring most notably, but not exclusively, to the controversy over the Guatemalan genocide that arose with the 2013 trial of José Efraín Ríos Montt and the subsequent annulment of his sentence.<sup>23</sup>

Because of the legal system's fragility and the general lack of justice, it should come as no surprise that Guatemala is a context in which the ghosts of the dead return continually. Lack of legal justice amounts to an extrapolation of the war's violence, that is, to the denial of indigenous rights by other means; the dead and disappeared hover over the nation as an unresolved symptom of a traumatic past that spills ominously into the present.

*El eco del dolor de mucha gente* insists that violence persists in Guatemala for two main reasons: genocide denial and the military establishment's imperative to forget its crimes and protect its own people. As a result, the documentary explicitly points out the disturbing continuities that link Ríos Montt to the current president of Guatemala, Otto Pérez Molina, a retired military officer who has been accused of (though not formally charged with) participating in scorched earth campaigns that led to nearly two hundred deaths in the early 1980s. Pérez Molina has consistently denied responsibility.<sup>24</sup>

In an attempt to challenge these denials and establish symbolic justice, Cuevas shows two indigenous women who survived the Choatalúm massacre. They contest and undermine the military's discourse of impunity and forgetting by defending a counterimperative not to forget.<sup>25</sup> Immediately following the women's voices, we hear the testimony of a military man, who says:

It's normal for them to feel a certain resentment, especially toward the military. I think their wounds are still there, and they, well, as part of their suffering, with the limitations that they have had to live with, it is normal that they've held on to that resentment, but I think that it would be very helpful and good for them to try to forget the past and think about the future.

The contrast between these two stances (the military officer's perspective and that of the indigenous women) thematically introduces the lack of justice in Guatemala. In the next sequence, we see Ana Lucía Cuevas in her car, on the way to a mass grave where forensic anthropologists are trying to identify victims. Against a visual backdrop of bones, Cuevas reflects on the relationships among trauma, memory, and forgetting. Her intention is to call into question the military officer's arguments. Yet more than anything, the remains of the dead—the visual image of bones and skulls piled in a mass grave—are what most eloquently articulate the demand for justice.

In addition to the testimonies of women who survived the slaughter in Choatalúm, Cuevas registers the trial of Felipe Cusanero, the army officer

responsible for that massacre. The sequence concludes with a celebratory recounting of the achievements of the case, as well as of a handful of other successful landmark human rights cases: the case of Myrna Mack, the case of Carlos Cuevas (still ongoing at the time the film was made), and the case of Choatalúm. In this sense, the documentary's narrative structure permits a certain amount of optimism regarding the possibility of obtaining legal justice in Guatemala.

At the same time, however, Cuevas seems interested in highlighting the limitations of legal justice; to that end, she includes an interview with Mario Minera, a figure affiliated with the Centro para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos (Center for Human Rights Legal Action), who explains that although the Cusanero trial is historically significant because it provided the first conviction in a case of forced disappearance, it merely represents the tip of the iceberg in a context of near-total impunity. (Let us remember that the trial assigned responsibility for only six disappearances, while another forty-five thousand have yet to go to trial.) Overall, then, Cuevas's documentary sparks an awareness of the fragility of justice initiatives in postwar Guatemala, a reality sadly confirmed by the 2013 nullification of Ríos Montt's sentence. The nullification has, in turn, also made the working through process much more difficult for victims in the absence of meaningful legal redress and reparations.

On another level, the search for justice that Cuevas's film embraces suffers from the "cruel optimism" present in every search for justice-based healing, whether that healing be achieved through legal redress or symbolic repair.<sup>26</sup> That cruel optimism lies in the ethical and existential need to create mechanisms for justice while knowing or intuiting that there is always something irreparable about the traumas of war. Aware of this paradox, Ana Lucía Cuevas's narrative insists on the impossibility of forgetting, regardless of the fact that justice mechanisms are only partial salves for the victims' wounds. In that sense, the politics of memory in her documentary are—maybe unwittingly—informed by French psychoanalyst Jean Allouche's position on mourning. In contrast to Freud, Allouche maintains that one must have a very poor concept of love to think that it would be possible to forget or replace the loved-and-lost object.<sup>27</sup> Allouche starts from the assumption that the labors of mourning (and memory) are a lifelong endeavor. In other words, the subject wants—and at the same time does not want—to work through the trauma because successfully "completing" the task of mourning would necessarily mean betraying the one who was lost.

The cruel reality of memory and justice processes, then, is that these searches necessarily end up as partial failures. To evoke Lauren Berlant's idea, survivors cannot stand the lack of justice, but they know that obtaining the justice they so desire paradoxically threatens their well-being insofar as it represents a step toward healing and potentially forgetting. Despite this, the discourse of memory that Cuevas's film sustains hinges on survivors' capacity to recognize that their individual, familial, and national identities depend—cruelly—on the pursuit of justice, while knowing that even if justice is achieved, they will never really gain closure. In the words of Mariana Taybalán, one of the indigenous survivors whom Cuevas interviews: “The pain won't go away from me.” And, thus, *El eco del dolor de mucha gente* shows how the dead and disappeared persist as a demand to overcome unfinished justice—how they literally echo, in the voices, faces, and narrations of their loved ones.

#### WHO WILL HEED THE ECHO?: TOWARD THE CONSTRUCTION OF A COLLECTIVE SUBJECT

At every turn, *El eco del dolor de mucha gente* questions the paternalistic attitudes that have long existed in Guatemala toward indigenous peoples: the assumption that “their” stories are not as important as “ours” and that “we,” the nonindigenous, know what is best for “them.” The film, in this sense, gives agency to victims and allows them to speak on their own terms and in their own words.

Solidarity manifests in different ways throughout the film; bridges are constructed diversely. On the one hand, Cuevas suggests the possibility of gender solidarity among the female family members of the dead and disappeared, whose memories are anchored in their bodies and voices. On the other hand, narratives of pain resonate outwardly to generate an interethnic link between Cuevas and the indigenous survivors of Choatalúm. This interethnic link allows the director to film from a position of empathy that bridges distance, downplays difference without negating it, and draws out connections and commonalities of experience. Quite importantly, Cuevas respects the irreducible nature of the victims' sorrow, while positing justice and memory as the pillars of indigenous citizenship in Guatemala (Fig. 15.1).

Taking the politics of Cuevas's film as a starting point, I would argue, as Edgar Esquit also does, that achieving equality for all ethnic groups in Guatemala's social, political, and cultural life does not depend “on our



Fig. 15.1 *El eco del dolor de mucha gente* (2011), directed by Ana Lucía Cuevas

similarities, but on the possibility that we make Guatemala livable for the dreams of us all.”<sup>28</sup> To make Guatemala livable for indigenous peoples means, as the voices of the Ixil women in the film suggest, that we see and hear their suffering and heed their demands for justice. Only by creating awareness of crimes against humanity can the groundwork be laid for the state to acknowledge those crimes and provide legal reparation. This, and only this, can generate the conditions of possibility for full citizenship for indigenous people.

As the film constructs the echoes that ultimately reach outward to interpellate the viewer, it is significant that the survivors’ testimonies displace the “I” to construct a collective subject. These voices, like the director’s, emphasize the commonalities of suffering among indigenous women. We notice, for example, in the following oral account that even on a grammatical level, the use of *nuestro* (our or ours) instead of *mío* (my or mine) reflects the creation of a collective subject:

The children, the army grabbed them by the feet and struck them like this against tree trunks. And the women who were pregnant, the army just stuck the machete in like this. And the children gutted like this, in front of the mothers, and the men hung, chunks cut off of them, wherever. And the women, the ones who weren’t pregnant, sometimes they were raped and left hanging, feet to the side, their feet bound using our own belts.

But our feeling, our suffering, what we have suffered, is impossible to forget, ever. It's worse now that we have come back here. We've started to think about everything that was done to us in these places, where we suffered, where we ran from the army, where the army shot at us with their machine guns, bullets flying behind us.

Through these words, the experience of war touches viewers who have not experienced it like a distant echo that disturbs us and shakes us out of complacency. Yet the film does not make false promises, nor does it ask us to occupy the places of hundreds of thousands of indigenous victims whose testimonies give rise to the film and who are structurally encompassed by the acts of memory it portrays.

In sum, starting from the pain caused by her brother's disappearance, Ana Lucía Cuevas transforms her personal loss into a political call for justice, both legal and symbolic. At the same time, she transcends traditional family narratives based on blood ties and the interethnic divide that separates *ladinos* from indigenous people in Guatemala. Cuevas works through her personal trauma and loss by creating kinship ties with other female survivors (several of whom are Mayan); they, like her, mourn the death and disappearance of family members. As a result, her documentary proposes a reconfiguration and expansion of categories like family, community, and the nation. It is through these transethnic kinship ties that *El eco del dolor de mucha gente* combats the racist logic that gave rise to the Guatemalan genocide while articulating a gendered discourse of memory.

Ana Lucía Cuevas's film incites a provocative shift in the dominant Guatemalan discourse on race, ethnicity, and nationhood, which has historically relegated indigenous people to the margins. As I have shown, she uses the echo as a central trope to situate indigenous experience at the heart of her filmic narrative. She therefore invites us *to imagine* (in order *to know*) what happened (to *them*) during the war. Enveloped by that echo, it is up to *us* to watch and listen with empathy.

## NOTES

1. On the roots of historical racism and genocide against indigenous peoples in Guatemala, see Marta Elena Casaús Arzú, *Guatemala: linaje y racismo* (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2010). See also Victoria Sanford, *Violencia y genocidio en Guatemala* (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2012).

2. Both *Guatemala: nunca más, Informe del proyecto interdiocesano de recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (also known as *Informe REMHI*), published in 1998 by the Human Rights Office of the Archbishopric of Guatemala, and *Memoria del silencio*, published in 1999 by the Historical Clarification Commission, demonstrate the systematic and mass character of state human rights violations and crimes against humanity during the war. These documents statistically affirm that the main victims were indigenous peoples. Thanks to this evidence and to the struggle of human rights organizations like FAMDEGUA (Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos de Guatemala, Association of Families of Guatemala's Detained-and-Disappeared) and GAM (Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo, Mutual Support Group), Guatemalan courts have tried a number of those responsible for massacres or specific murders: like the murder of Myrna Mack, the murder of Bishop Juan José Gerardi Conedera, or the massacre at Las Dos Erres. The recent trial of Efraín Ríos Montt also owes much to the truth commission and human rights organizations.
3. Here I evoke Serge Daney's definition of a "just image," that is, an image that does not linger on the aesthetic contemplation of the victims. See Serge Daney, "El travelling de Kapo," *El amante* 53 (1996): 29–34.
4. See Severo Martínez Peláez, *La patria del criollo: ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1970).
5. Edgar Esquit, "El nacionalismo guatemalteco del siglo XX: Asturias y el problema social del indio," in *Tensiones de la modernidad: del modernismo al realismo*, eds. Valeria Grinberg Pla and Ricardo Roque Baldovinos (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2009), 441–42.
6. Beatriz Cortez, "Racismo, intelectualidad y la crisis de la modernidad en Centroamérica," in *Tensiones de la modernidad: del modernismo al realismo*, 418–19.
7. See Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103–28, and Dominick LaCapra, "Writing History, Writing Trauma," in *Writing and Revising the Disciplines*, ed. Jonathan Monroe (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 147–80.
8. LaCapra, "Writing History," 179. Because complete identification with the victim's suffering is not only morally questionable, but also undesirable, LaCapra's notion of "empathic unsettlement" reminds us of the need to recognize the other's pain without pretending to grasp its dimensions fully.
9. To complicate matters further, the symbolic representation of indigenous peoples' experiences in Guatemala cannot be properly addressed without considering issues of power, access, and citizenship, that is, of political representation. Héctor Díaz Polanco has drawn attention to the fact that



- the logic of indigenism as both state policy and ideology lies at the core of ethnic inequality and injustice in Latin America. See Héctor Díaz Polanco, *Indigenous Peoples in Latin America: The Quest for Self-Determination* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 23–24.
10. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 25–27.
  11. Thomas Trezise, “Unspeakable,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): 39, 42.
  12. *Ibid.*, 43.
  13. *Ibid.*, 46.
  14. On the social character of war and state terrorism, see Diana Taylor, “Trauma and Performance: Lessons from Latin America,” *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (2006): 1674. On the “labors of memory,” see Elizabeth Jelin, *Los trabajos de la memoria* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2002).
  15. Some of Comunicarte’s documentaries include: *Las Dos Erres (Dos Erres, 1995)*; *Morir para ganar la vida: la Masacre de Panzós (To Die for a Living: The Panzós Massacre, 1998)*; *Mártires de la Embajada de España (Martyrs of the Spanish Embassy, 2000)*; *Para que no se repita (So It Does Not Happen Again, 2001)*; *No podemos quedarnos callados (We Can’t Stay Silent, 2002)*; *Oj k’aslik: “Estamos vivos” (Oj k’aslik: “We’re Alive,” 2003)*; *Sobrevivientes: testigos de la vida (Survivors: Witnesses to Life, 2006)*; and *No al olvido (Never Forget, 2007)*.
  16. The later productions by Comunicarte revolve around survivors’ testimonies and legal justice initiatives, with a clear educational and political component. Another example of how film has been used to work through trauma and politically intervene in ongoing memory and justice debates is the 2010 creation of an independent film festival dedicated to human rights issues, the “Muestra Internacional Memoria, Verdad, Justicia,” which takes place every April in Guatemala.
  17. With this documentary, Ana Lucía Cuevas places herself in the tradition of politically motivated filmmaking in Central America, which emerged in the context of the 1980s revolutionary movements. Her approach to the social, which takes personal experience as a starting point, situates her among other female contemporary filmmakers from the Central American isthmus: for example, Tatiana Huerdo (*El lugar más pequeño [The Tiniest Place, 2011]*); Laura Astorga (*Princesas rojas [Red Princesses, 2013]*); Mercedes Moncada (*Palabras mágicas: para romper un encantamiento [Magic Words: To Break a Spell, 2012]*); Ishtar Yasin (*El camino [The Path, 2008]*); Florence Jaugéy (*La Yuma [Yuma, 2010]*); and Katia Lara (*Quién dijo miedo [Who Said Fear, 2010]*).
  18. Carlos Cuevas was kidnapped on May 15, 1984.
  19. This and all translations from the Spanish are by Peter Krupa.



20. This continuity between Cuevas's personal pain and the pain of hundreds of other victims gives the documentary its title. The film's closing credit sequence explains that the title "was inspired by a poem by Ruth Molina Abril," mother of Ana Lucía and Carlos Cuevas.
21. The people portrayed in the film include her own mother, exiled in Costa Rica; her sister-in-law, who was kidnapped and murdered in retaliation for her participation in the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM); Nineth Montenegro, a co-founder of the GAM; Gustavo Meoño, director of the "La Isla" archive; Rolando Orantes, whose father was murdered; Helen Mack, Myrna Mack's sister, who was also brutally murdered; Blanca Hernández, co-founder of the GAM; Aura Elena Farfán, co-founder of the GAM; and Fredy Peccerelli, director of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation.
22. Likewise, Cuevas uses part of her narrative to document the significant responsibility of the USA—the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), specifically—in the war in Guatemala. For this, she first interviews Noam Chomsky and later Kate Doyle (who directs a research project on US intervention in Guatemala that analyzes State Department, Pentagon, and CIA documents). To further drive this point home, she incorporates archival material on the overthrow of President Jacobo Árbenz, the speeches of former CIA director Allen Dulles, and footage that shows squalid living conditions on the United Fruit Company's banana plantations.
23. On May 10, 2013, in a historic ruling, Judge Iris Yassmín Barrios Aguilar found General José Efraín Ríos Montt guilty. She sentenced him to fifty years in prison for his military and political responsibility for the genocide of the Ixil people that took place between April and August 1983; she further sentenced him to more than thirty years in prison for crimes against humanity committed by military and paramilitary forces during those same years. For the text of the ruling, see *Condenado por genocidio: sentencia condenatoria en contra de José Efraín Ríos Montt* (Guatemala: F&G, 2013). Yet, as is well known, Ríos Montt's trial was temporarily interrupted in the midst of a right-wing media campaign titled "The Farce of Genocide in Guatemala." Although the trial and the genocide ruling were eventually reinstated, Ríos Montt's sentence was soon annulled, probably due to pressure from Guatemala's current president, retired military officer Otto Pérez Molina, who not coincidentally was in charge of the troops in Quiché's Ixil zone when the genocide took place. Pérez Molina publicly stated on more than one occasion that genocide did not take place in Guatemala. See, for instance, his article "Quiero que alguien me demuestre que hubo genocidio" (July 25, 2011), and his declarations on the trial: "Pérez Molina también afirma que el juicio por genocidio hace peligrar la paz," printed in the July 16, 2013 edition of *Plaza Pública*. To understand

- genocide denial from the left, see the paid ad “Traicionar la paz y dividir a Guatemala,” published on April 16, 2013 in *El periódico*; see also Oswaldo Hernández’s interview with Gustavo Porras: “Lo que se va a romper es la paz política,” published in *Plaza Pública* (April 17, 2013). Among the many responses to the forgive-and-forget position, see Edelberto Torres Rivas, “Confundir, dividir, traicionar,” published as well in the April 17, 2013 issue of *Plaza Pública*, and Rodrigo Rey Rosa’s column in *Plaza Pública*, “Yo, genocida” (April 25, 2013).
24. As this article goes to press, an unprecedented social movement demanding Otto Pérez Molina’s resignation, “#RenunciaYa,” is taking place in Guatemala. On April 25 and May 16, 2015, respectively, two massive demonstrations took place in Guatemala. A third demonstration was planned for July 4, 2015, “#RenunciaYa, #JusticiaYa.” For press coverage of these events, see “El clamor de una maniferstación: #RenunciaYa,” *Plaza Pública*, April 26, 2015, and “El origen de la crisis,” *Plaza Pública*, June 26, 2015.
  25. As Ana Lucía Cuevas explains toward the end of the documentary, it was during the trial of Felipe Cusanero (the first military officer in Guatemala tried and convicted for his role in cases of forced disappearance) that she had the opportunity to interview these indigenous women, who expressed their desire to tell their stories.
  26. Lauren Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism” refers to the inevitable, yet cruel attachments one feels to the lost love object. Those who have experienced profound loss persist in these attachments, even though on some level the process of “repairing” the past is destined to fail because egregious past wrongs can never be fully repaired: “‘Cruel optimism’ names a relation of attachment [...]. What is cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.” See Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3 (2006): 20–21.
  27. See Jean Allouche, *Érotique du deuil au temps de la mort sèche* (Paris: EPPÉL, 1995).
  28. Esquit, “El nacionalismo guatemalteco,” 457.

## Toward a Nondiscursive Turn in Argentine Documentary Film

*María Guadalupe Arenillas*

In 1951, musician, theorist, and philosopher John Cage composed a piece using the oracle of the *I Ching: The Ancient Book of Changes* to determine temporal durations. He left out pitches and sounds altogether. This now iconic postwar composition was titled “4'33'.” The following year, David Tudor sat at a piano for that same amount of time and played *nothing*. And so, with an unorthodox maneuver that was both admired and criticized, Cage posited a theory about silence and spectatorship: instead of listening to audible tones, the audience would listen to the noises and interruptions that inhabit silence.

Silence is not, then, only a lacuna, a void, or the ostensible evidence of the repressed, but also a means of producing knowledge. As Cage once stated, certain historical times call for the production of new aesthetics. “Quiet sounds,” in this case, allow for the emergence of worn-out voices, permit us to rethink past narratives, and make them pertinent for the present.<sup>1</sup> In the same manner, Jonathan Perel’s (1976–) films and Martín Oesterheld’s (1974–) first documentary *La multitud* (*The Multitude*, 2012) deploy silence to take a step back from entrenched and fossilized discourses about the past. It is not that those discourses have lost

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relevance, but rather that they belong to another realm and have somehow become disconnected from present struggles.

The documentary films I examine here announce a new paradigm, what I call a “nondiscursive turn” that emerges in several documentaries that deal with spatial inscriptions of Argentina’s recent past. Among them, Jonathan Perel’s *El predio* (*The Site*, 2010) and *Tabula rasa* (2013) record the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (Mechanics School of the Argentine Navy, ESMA), a former clandestine detention center turned into a memory site, while *Toponimia* (*Toponymy*, 2015) focuses on towns that the military built in the Tucumán province, an epicenter for the 1970s guerrilla movement, ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo, People’s Revolutionary Army). In a similar vein, Oesterheld’s *La multitud* narrates the fate of two abandoned sites in the city of Buenos Aires.<sup>2</sup> Representative of a nondiscursive turn that focuses on “quiet sounds” and the gaze, these films produce a poetic effect whose goal is to defamiliarize the spectator with quotidian images so that he or she can truly see them or see them otherwise.

In this chapter, after briefly examining Perel’s *Tabula Rasa* and *Toponimia*, I look at *La multitud* to demonstrate how these documentaries rethink Pierre Nora’s ideas about the proliferation of *lieux de mémoire* (memory sites) as sites of forgetting.<sup>3</sup> I begin by arguing that *El predio*, by documenting both the transformation of ESMA into a memory site and the multiple memory projects that take place there, draws attention to a society obsessed with memory and the problems that this obsession can cause. By turning attention to the mnemonic inscriptions encoded on destroyed and forgotten territories, this and the other films I analyze deal with the spatial and social legacy of destruction and its visible consequences in the present. In this sense, films like *Toponimia* and *La multitud* make a most important contribution: they talk about the presence of the past and its effects on the quotidian lives of citizens.<sup>4</sup>

To understand this presence of the past, I evoke Walter Benjamin’s concept of the afterlife. In “The Task of the Translator” (1923), Benjamin argues that to read or listen to a text in translation engages the reader with an echo.<sup>5</sup> In the same way, for Benjamin, the “after” in the “after-life” arises in the spectral echoes between times, between past and present. His interest lies in listening to the echoes of the past in the present, even though it is impossible to fully translate times and spaces. A translation exists, then, as a derivative of the original but undergoes

changes. As Werner Hamacher states, Benjamin's notion of the afterlife implies not only an alternative temporality to the prevailing one, but also a political structure that demands a different "us" to listen to the echoes of the past in the present.<sup>6</sup> A film like *La multitud* demands that "we"—spectators and citizens—recognize two forgotten places in the city as well as the overlooked lives that inhabit the downtrodden and ruinous environs of Buenos Aires. *Tabula rasa*, in turn, questions the idea of building heritage sites by turning a site that embodies past stories into rubble. Finally, *Toponimia* presents the spectator with the question of how to awaken to the dangers of the past in the present. It shows towns whose inhabitants are passively unaware of their repressive past. These films, in short, distance themselves from traditional memorialization processes and turn the gaze toward processes of destruction and ruination.

Finally, I argue that by using a silent approach, that is, by not consciously using voice over or providing historical explanations, these documentaries distance themselves from *testimonio*, first-person narratives, the "subjective turn,"<sup>7</sup> and "the performative documentary"<sup>8</sup> that characterized the "first wave" (to use a term coined by Idelber Avelar) of postdictatorship documentary films in Argentina.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the films dialogue with Gastón Gordillo's differentiation between haunting and memory. For Gordillo: "Strictly speaking, a haunting is distinct from memory, for it is not reducible to narratives articulated linguistically; it is, rather, an affect created by an absence that exerts a hard-to-articulate, non-discursive, yet positive pressure on the body, thereby turning such absence into a physical presence that is felt and that thereby affects."<sup>10</sup> Echoing Gustavo Furtado's reading of Deleuze and the question of "the people" in documentary film (see Chap. 7 in this book), the people here are mainly absent. In *La multitud*, absence and emptiness have occupied the place of the imagined cheering crowds, while the workers that do appear in the film never come together as a political force. In *Tabula rasa*, bulldozers have replaced any human form. Likewise, the provincial towns in *Toponimia* are mainly desolate. Absence, here, obviously has to do with forced disappearance and a lost generation in Argentina—that of the revolutionary moment of the 1970s—but it also functions as a haunting and a micropolitics of the everyday that demands our immediate attention. Instead of discourses about the past, we encounter a camera that functions as an archeology of the present.

RUPTURED PLACES: JONATHAN PEREL'S  
*TABULA RASA* AND *TOPONIMIA*

As I have written elsewhere, Jonathan Perel's film *El predio* (2010) charts the transformation of the former ESMA, one of the Argentine military's most notorious detention and torture centers, into a memory site: a "Space for Memory and the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights," as it is officially called.<sup>11</sup> The film provides no historical background about the place and its afterlives or about the most recent Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983); it simply documents different artistic and social projects that take place there. On the one hand, the projects appear as both polyphonic and disjointed and thus raise thought-provoking questions about the nature of memory sites and their uses. On the other hand, with its silent approach, *El predio* breaks with testimonial narratives and the "subjective turn," as well as with the notion that only those related by blood ties to the detained and disappeared have the right to talk about the recent past.

*El predio* also expresses concern about Argentine society's postdictatorial obsession with memory. Reminiscent of Pierre Nora's often-quoted ideas about modern societies' obsession with memory as a sign of incapacity to truly remember, Perel's film questions the uses of memory sites and therefore functions as a countermonument. For James E. Young, countermonuments "challenge the very premise of the monument." They are created by a new generation of artists for whom the possibility that terrible events "might be reduced to exhibitions of public craftsmanship or cheap pathos remains intolerable."<sup>12</sup> Like a countermonument, *El predio* "reject[s] the traditional forms and reasons for public memorial art, those spaces that either console viewers or redeem tragic events, or indulge in a facile kind of [reparation that would] purport to mend the memory of a murdered people."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the film makes it incumbent upon the spectator to form a narrative about the past and judge the urgency or banality of certain memory practices. Symbolic of this open-endedness, in the final scene, the open door of the former ESMA invites the spectator, who is situated on the other side of the gate, to intervene, to appropriate the space and construct memories connected to the social struggles of the present.

In *Tabula rasa*, Perel returns to the ex-ESMA, but this time to record, between July 2012 and January 2013, the demolition of one of its buildings, the so-called "módulos de acomodación" (accommodation modules) where soldiers slept. The building was demolished to create a museum and memorial about the Guerra de las Malvinas (The Malvinas War, 1982). Using fixed shots and diegetic sounds characteristic of Perel's cinema, the

film opens with a working table and a computer that shows an image of the site. This first shot is crucial and marks an important distinction with *El predio* insofar as it situates, from the very beginning, the filmmaker as a researcher and active witness whose job is to document destruction. From then on, Perel recovers the story of the site and its annihilation while also revealing a contradiction inherent in constructing heritage sites—namely, that by constructing a site, one (advertently, as in this case, or inadvertently) destroys or eradicates other stories and experiences that already inhabit it.

A close-up of an intensely highlighted page from a book narrates the site's chilling origin. We learn that the soon-to-be-demolished building was situated toward the back of the ESMA property. A train passes every day, separated from ESMA only by the Lugones Highway. Looking out the window of the train, the writer sees the work in progress: "new construction whose ugliness is difficult to describe, cube-like structures ... built one next to the other that cover the back part of ESMA." The new buildings function like a "concrete curtain" that impedes a view of the inside.

The transformation of ESMA into a memory site produced important debates. Memory sites are alive while they are discussed and intervened by everyday practices. Some critics, like Hugo Vezzetti, criticized the allocation of the buildings to different human rights organizations and argued that the site did not achieve its objective of engaging civil society "in the creation of a material artifact of memory that is national in scope [and that generates] knowledge about the past."<sup>14</sup> Yet even if some critics and citizens were disappointed about the ways in which the ESMA site was used, almost no one was aware of the demolition that Perel's film shows. In a dossier on Perel's work, for example, Adrián Gorelik writes about how surprised he was when he watched the film: "I don't think I'm the only one who found out about the demolition by watching the film ... or who learned that the objective of the demolition was the creation of a museum and memorial about the Malvinas War." According to Gorelik, Perel's position regarding the destruction is very clear.<sup>15</sup> He is shocked. The director thus shares his aesthetically austere amazement at this historic site whose story, he feels, demands to be told. Perel films the destruction by concentrating on the bulldozers and on tedious and long shots of the production of rubble. By the end of the film, piles of rubble accumulate. Some of them are packed up, making it such that one cannot help but wonder if they are going to be exhibited somewhere on ESMA's grounds.

Perel's latest film, *Toponimia*, moves away from a concern with memory sites and monuments toward a politics of haunting. As Avery Gordon

writes: “Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future... [S]pecters and ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer ... contained or repressed or blocked from view.”<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Perel works with remnants, with mnemonic inscriptions of the past; he films what has been “blocked from view” and reveals the devastating material evidence of this blockage. Concretely, the filmmaker travels to the province of Tucumán to film different towns built by the military in the mid-1970s. Like in *Tabula rasa*, Perel goes to the archives: he uses documents, pictures, and sketches to bring to light the creation of these towns. The film’s claustrophobic structure, its divisions, replicates the architectonic logic of the towns: flat and segregated towns, apparently built so as to be easily controlled. The four parts of the film focus, respectively, on the four towns the military created and echo the anonymous, monotonous, and square design of these places. The film’s eighty-two-minute duration—this is Perel’s longest film to date—gives a sense of repression and hyperorganization; the viewer is forced to endure the almost identical images on screen for excruciatingly long periods of time. During this runtime, we find only slight variations of the same topic. All four towns are named after dead soldiers—Teniente Berdina, Capitán Cáceres, Sargento Moya, and Soldado Maldonado—and all of them have similar columns at the entrance, mostly rusted welcome signs, and a series of practically indistinguishable chapels, rural communes, schools, sports complexes, wide streets, busts of heroes, statues, and plaques (Fig. 16.1).



Fig. 16.1 *Toponimia* (2015), directed by Jonathan Perel



The documents and pictures that Perel recovers are remarkable. We read the story through a military lens and reflect on pictures of the towns' inauguration ceremonies that include, for example, children rigorously lined up and a teacher guarded by soldiers. According to the documents, the places were built in the jungles of Tucumán with the expressed purpose of combating the guerrilla movement. We read: "The place where this town stands today was the stage for the armed subversion that ravaged the jungle hills of Tucumán. Sheltered by the jungle, the guerrillas established their base of operations there." The documents go on to tell us that the military conquered the guerrillas, thus "returning peace to those who did not accept the arrogance of organized terrorism." The second town, Soldado Maldonado, for instance, was created "thanks to the efforts of soldiers and workers ... [I]t symbolizes the victory of the Argentine Army over armed subversion. Its inhabitants, proud of their town, wait full of hope for the establishment of some source of work that might make their dreams of progress possible." In a review of the film, Guillermina Walas concludes that the idea was to rename, appropriate, and regulate the space, to construct a story about it consonant with the ideology of the elites in power.<sup>17</sup>

The town's present desolation—we hardly see people, except for some children, a woman sweeping the street, a man on a motorcycle going toward the camera, or men participating in recreational activities—questions the notion of progress. The impossible linear time of progress that the military expected to take root here produced towns with alternative temporalities and plenty of inscriptions of repression that nobody today seems to question. It is here where the radical proposal of *Toponimia* lies: in its inquiry about the town's inhabitants, the few we can observe, who live as if completely unaware of the town's repressive past even though signs of it are everywhere. We are left wondering: Do the people who live in these towns sometimes read the decaying plaques that honor the deaths of military captains and lieutenants? Do they ever stop to think about the signs that read "Dios, Patria, Hogar" (God, Fatherland, Home)? Do they know when, how, or why their blocks and houses were built? Do they care?

As is usual in Perel's films, there are no answers to any of these questions. Instead, there are only more questions and the silence of provincial towns, with their everyday noises and some popular or romantic music that produces an overwhelming feeling of unsettledness, sameness, and lack of life. However, the film closes with an epilogue that focuses on the land, on what, I imagine, is the jungle surrounding the towns: parts of



Fig. 16.2 *Toponimia* (2015), directed by Jonathan Perel

it that have not yet been controlled. There are some extremely ruinous buildings in the jungle. When Benjamin envisioned a better future, he started by recognizing that the root of the word revolution is “to revolve” rather than “to evolve.” He indicated that “overcoming the concept of ‘progress’ and overcoming the concept of ‘period of decline’ are two sides of one and the same thing.”<sup>18</sup> The archeological search in *Toponimia* may therefore suggest that there are still uncontrolled spaces and that they harbor potential for change and alternative futures. It signals a need for social and aesthetic forms that can generate new kinds of subversion, perhaps a different kind of subversion from the guerrilla encampments that the military wiped clean (Fig. 16.2).

#### THE AFTERLIFE OF ABANDONED SPACES: MARTÍN OESTERHELD’S *LA MULTITUD*

In his first feature-length documentary film, *La multitud* (2012), Martín Oesterheld, one of the “children of disappeared” and grandson of Héctor Oesterheld, creator of the science fiction comic *El Eternauta* and who also disappeared during the last Argentine dictatorship, narrates the afterlife of two abandoned spaces: La Ciudad Deportiva, the sporting complex for the popular La Boca Sport Club, and the Interama amusement park. Both projects embody a relation to two military dictatorships: that of General Juan Carlos Onganía (1966–1970) and that of the military juntas (1976–1983).

Construction started on La Ciudad Deportiva, La Boca, in 1965, a year before Onganía's coup. A sector of the River Platte was given to the club to build a city that would contain, among other wonders, the biggest stadium in the country, tennis courts, swimming pools, an amphitheater, cinemas, recreation areas, and a giant tower with a revolving coffee shop, which was later built at Interama. All of these areas were to be connected by bridges, as if the place were a sort of futuristic suburban Venice. The river terrain was filled in with rubble and mud. Ironically, this beginning of rubble and mud would anticipate the project's ultimate fate: a dream of progress would soon turn into a Benjaminian "catastrophe of progress," as evidenced by the piles of debris that are so easily encountered there today.<sup>19</sup>

Interama, also known as Parque de la Ciudad (City Park), was inaugurated in 1982, during the last military dictatorship. Rides and carnival games that originally cost millions of dollars are now rusted, useless ruins. Over the years, the amusement park closed and reopened several times; eventually, the city government turned it into green space for the neighborhood: a green space to enjoy among omnipresent rust, prairies, and bird's nests.<sup>20</sup> However, none of this is explicitly told in the documentary. What we do observe is how both lower- and upper-class neighborhoods, slums, and an ecological reservoir now surround these spaces within the city of Buenos Aires. By filming them, the director focuses on what is left of the grandiose promises of the past, as well as on the effects that ruination has on the daily lives of those who inhabit these forgotten zones, the ones who are there "to pick up the pieces." If these places once represented the thriving promise of modernity, they now embody alternative temporalities bound up in modernity's ruins. But I should add that places like these are not unique to Buenos Aires; they are everywhere in "modern" cities and remind us how incomplete and full of debris and ruptures the very idea of modernity is.

The film, as I mentioned, does not contain any explanations. It only deploys diegetic sounds and includes the subtitled dialogues of two of its protagonists, Ukrainian immigrants. It combines the feel of an urban symphony with the aesthetics of "expanded cinema."<sup>21</sup> As an urban symphony, the film places the city and its rhythms at its center. Like in expanded cinema, the spectator plays an important part in the film. Gene Youngblood defines expanded cinema as a cinema that stands apart from commercial films. The director's conscience, the driving force behind the artistic work, stands in relation to the spectator who receives the

information and then creates meaning.<sup>22</sup> Oesterheld could have told the heart-wrenching and heroic story of his family, but he chose to “displace the ‘I’” (see Gómez, Chap. 4) and take us to the haunted places that belong to all of us.

The film’s structure is beautifully simple. Three elements create a relationality among the ruinous spaces portrayed: construction, socioeconomic difficulties, and the Ukrainian immigrants. When the Ukrainian woman visits her friend, she takes us from the surrounding areas of Ciudad Deportiva to those of Interama. *La multitud* opens with a series of stills: mock-ups of the Ciudad Deportiva, La Boca. These pictures have the unmistakable aura of the 1970s because of their kitsch aesthetic that immediately connects them to the dictatorship in the spectator’s mind. In the next sequence, we see smoke, buildings under construction, and glass structures. This is followed by a series of sequences featuring workers and construction sites: workers preparing yerba mate, trucks, more smoke, and polluted skies, followed by what we later learn are the slums of Rodrigo Bueno and the affluent towers of Puerto Madero. In the film’s very first minutes, it therefore visually captures the striking contradictions within the city of Buenos Aires. All at once, we confront the remnants of a delirious military past, busy construction sites, poor neighborhoods, and Puerto Madero, a neighborhood emblematic of the neoliberal 1990s. Different camera angles help to capture these contradictions. There are close-ups and panoramic views, far away and intimate perspectives, and still images and images in movement. Surface shots of the mighty river cut off others taken from the vertiginous altitudes of the towers and skyscrapers. For instance, a detailed and intimate close-up of the Ukrainian woman sleeping and then waking up is contrasted to her devastated environment: a car cemetery, rubble, and the dilapidated structures of Ciudad Deportiva. Here it is important to note that even those who do not know that this was the Ciudad Deportiva can recognize one of its extremely deteriorated buildings from the pictures shown in the opening sequence. But what do all these paradoxes highlight?: that “an urban ruin is a place that has fallen outside of the economic life of the city.”<sup>23</sup> This is certainly not a landscape of romantic ruins or a monumental evocation of the past; it is the site of the unfinished, the deteriorated, and the corrupt (Fig. 16.3).

In this sense, the film seems to channel Ann Laura Stoler’s suggestion that we need to turn away from our obsession with ruins and pay attention to the *process of ruination*. As Stoler argues, ruins are often desolate, enchanted spaces, “large-scale monumental structures abandoned and grown over ... the quintessential image of what has vanished from the past



Fig. 16.3 *La multitud* (2012), directed by Martín Oesterheld

and has long decayed.”<sup>24</sup> Ruination, is an ongoing activity, is alive in the present. In concordance with Stoler, the film urges us to consider that “to ruin” is “an active process,” “a vibrantly violent verb,” and that ongoing ruination is “what people are left with.”<sup>25</sup> These people inhabit a territory that is continuously *being ruined* and that, as I will later demonstrate, threatens to displace and further marginalize them. Construction workers are the protagonists of a sequence that highlights the effects and inequalities of these spaces. One worker first appears carrying building materials, crossing the Ecological Reservoir, and later rowing in the brown, dense river. Once again, it is surprising to note the confluence and closeness of these varied landscapes. The man is then shown building his own home, a slum in Rodrigo Bueno, under very adverse circumstances. He is one of the many foreign workers, from Paraguay, who came to build the Puerto Madero skyscrapers but whose own, more than modest home is threatened by demolition. This is a very common occurrence in the city of Buenos Aires, where the city government does not recognize the rights of slum inhabitants and constantly places them under threat of relocation or eviction. In 2005, for instance, employees from the city government intimidated the residents of Rodrigo Bueno and vowed to evict them. Officials built a ten-meter wall around the neighborhood, suspended key services, controlled the entrance and exit of individuals, and verbally threatened them.<sup>26</sup>

Reminiscent of Benjamin's idea of translation as a conjunction of two temporalities, the only characters who speak in the film do so in a foreign language. They belong to the relatively recent wave of immigration that then-President Carlos Saúl Menem supported after the fall of the Soviet Union. A woman takes a train to visit her friend, and the camera follows her. We realize that she is in Lugano because the Interama tower is present. Known as the "Tower of the Future," it was then the highest point in Latin America. The woman's trajectory in the train makes it possible to understand Henry Lefebvre's statement that "it is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived, and produced."<sup>27</sup> She visits her friend, another Ukrainian immigrant, who makes a living selling coffee in the streets. He lives in the huge, working class buildings known as Lugano 1 and 2. There is an uncanny resemblance between these buildings and Soviet satellite cities; both places feel comfortable to them. Yet the place they currently inhabit is haunted by another absence, by those *other* communal dreams that erected the satellite cities of a bygone era. The man exclaims: "Look at the view. I love it. I like the nocturnal view. This is spectacular. I like it very much when there are windows with lights. It's comforting ... I like it when there are many windows, many lights." She replies: "It is beautiful."

But this conversation about the beauty of the place is interrupted by the problems they face. If the multitude or "the people" are absent from the film, the effects of living in crowded, marginal places are intensely present. Reflective of the film's characteristic economy, the woman's words highlight the difficulties of living in the slums. She explains that there are many power outages in Rodrigo Bueno, that a glut of people overloads the electrical circuits. As for the man, the rent he pays for his apartment has increased twice in one month. He does not know if he will be able to afford the apartment when summer arrives, and no one wants to buy coffee (Fig. 16.4).

Through the quiet story of these precarious lives in distressed environments, the film reminds (or teaches) us that we live in the "age of human disturbance."<sup>28</sup> As Anna Tsing states, we live in times of mass extinction, but also of emergence. For Tsing, "contaminated diversity" is a hallmark of the present era:

Contaminated diversity is collaborative adaptation to human-disturbed ecosystems. It emerges as the detritus of environmental destruction, imperial conquest, profit making, racism, and authoritarian rule—as well as creative becoming. It is not always pretty, but is who we are and what we have as available working partners for a livable earth.<sup>29</sup>





Fig. 16.4 *La multitud* (2012), directed by Martín Oesterheld

Through a nondiscursive turn and a distancing from more canonical approaches to memory, the film captures two abandoned spaces and *occu-pies* them. In this sense, it revives the spaces, actualizes them, and brings them back from abandonment. It also brings us face to face with the affective economies that inhabit these landscapes by focusing on the Ukrainian immigrants' calm peregrination.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The documentary films examined here produce a break with more established memory narratives about the recent past. They dislocate and silence the “I” by using an approach that focuses not on personal accounts but on the materiality of places and their afterlives. The former ESMA detention center, the abandoned Ciudad Deportiva de la Boca, the ruinous Interama amusement park, and the towns built in the mid-1970s by the military regime haunt the spectator and function as an invitation to occupy these spaces. These films tell a story of destruction. They abdicate an aestheticizing of ruins and focus instead on processes of annihilation and ruination.

With their “quiet sounds,” these films do not propose simplistic alternatives to the ravages of history or radical forms of political participation.

They do, however, make us aware of the fate of these symbolic spaces and, in the cases of *Toponimia* and *La multitud*, of the lives that inhabit these territories. By doing so, they illuminate our present and constitute engaging critical practices.

## NOTES

1. In Cage's illuminating words: "[W]hen the war came along, I decided to use only quiet sounds. There seemed to me to be no truth, no good, in anything big in society. But quiet sounds were like loneliness, or love or friendship. Permanent, I thought, values, independent at least from Life, Time and Coca-Cola ... I must say I still feel this way, but something else is happening: I begin to hear the old sounds—the ones I had thought worn out, worn out by intellectualization. I begin to hear the old sounds as though they are not worn out. Obviously, they are not. They are just as audible as new sounds. Thinking had worn them out. And if one stops thinking about them, suddenly they are fresh and new." John Cage, *Silence* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), xii, 115–17.
2. Within this tendency, we might also include a film like *Habitat* (2013), by Ignacio Masllorens (1973–), a haunting film about a silent and deserted Buenos Aires.
3. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24.
4. David Lowenthal has explained how the notion of the ruin is an invention of modernity and how it can be presented as a break from the past. According to Lowenthal: "It is no longer the presence of the past that speaks to us, but its pastness." David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xviii.
5. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 69–82.
6. Werner Hamacher, "'Now': Walter Benjamin on Historical Time," in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), 38–42.
7. Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado: cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo, una discusión* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2005).
8. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).
9. Avelar uses the term to talk about Argentine novels. See Idelber Avelar, "History, Neurosis, and Subjectivity: Gustavo Ferreyra's Rewriting of Neoliberal Ruins," in *Telling Ruins in Latin America*, eds. Michael J. Lazzara and Vicky Unruh (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 184.
10. Gastón Gordillo, *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 31.



11. María Guadalupe Arenillas, "Hacia una nueva ética y estética de la memoria en el cine documental argentino: *El predio* (2010) de Jonathan Perel," *A Contracorriente* 10, no. 3 (2013): 371–88.
12. James E. Young, "Memory and Counter-Memory: The End of the Monument in Germany," *Harvard Design Magazine* 9 (1999): 3.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Hugo Vezzetti, *Sobre la violencia revolucionaria: memorias y olvidos* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2009), 206. This and all other translations from the Spanish are mine.
15. Adrián Gorelik, "Materiales de la memoria," *Informe Escaleno*, March 29, 2014, <http://www.informeescaleno.com.ar/index.php?s=articulos&cid=134>.
16. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.
17. Guillermina Walas, "Sobre los pueblos y sus nombres: *Toponimia* de Jonathan Perel," *Informe Escaleno*, April 17, 2015, <http://www.informeescaleno.com.ar/index.php?s=articulos&cid=311>.
18. Cited in Shannon Lee Dawdy, "Clockpunk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity," *Current Anthropology*, 51, no. 6 (2010): 769.
19. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 258.
20. Mauricio Giambartolomei, "Villa Soldati: El Parque de la Ciudad, olvidado y arruinado como una feria fantasma," *La Nación*, May 31, 2013, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1587106-el-parque-de-la-ciudad-olvidado-y-arruinado-como-una-feria-fantasma>.
21. See Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970).
22. *Ibid.*, 68.
23. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 90.
24. Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 4.
25. *Ibid.*, 9.
26. Instituto Gino Germani, "Sobre la urbanización del Barrio Rodrigo Bueno," *Bifurcaciones: revista de estudios culturales urbanos*, October 15, 2014, <http://www.bifurcaciones.cl/2014/10/sobre-la-urbanizacion-del-barrio-rodrigo-bueno>.
27. Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 102.
28. Anna Tsing, "Contaminated Diversity in 'Slow Disturbance': Potential Collaborators for a Liveable Earth," in *Why Do We Value Diversity? Biocultural Diversity in a Global Context*, eds. Gary Martin, Diana Mincyte, and Ursula Muster, *RCC Perspectives* 9 (2012): 95–97.
29. *Ibid.*

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