

Latin American Documentary

A Political Trajectory

Michael Chanan

Engagement

In the felicitous phrase of the Chilean documentarist Patricio Guzmán, “A country without documentary films is like a family without a photo album” (Guzmán 2015). In *La ciudad de los fotógrafos / City of Photographers* (2006), a documentary by Sebastián Moreno about the photographers who documented protest and repression during the dictatorship in Chile, a mother of four *desaparecidos* reflects that “Not to have a photo of your family is somehow like not having played a part in the history of humanity.” In the revolutionary decade of the 1960s, documentary played a key role in Latin America’s great moment of cinematic self-discovery, when a new generation of filmmakers came together from across the continent to form the movement that in 1967, at a legendary meeting in the Chilean seaside town of Viña del Mar, they dubbed *el nuevo cine latinoamericano* – the New Latin American Cinema. The desire for documentary and its social image was already in play when John Grierson, founder of the British documentary movement of the 1930s, was guest of honour in Montevideo in 1958 at the film festival of Uruguay’s national broadcaster, the SODRE, where Fernando Birri made his debut with *Tire Die / Throw Us a Dime* (1960; Figure 7.1) whose social enquiry into the shanty towns around the Argentine city of Santa Fe became emblematic of the documentary flowering that soon followed. The sociological imperative (as Jean-Claude Bernadet [1985] has called it) is exemplified by films like Geraldo Sarno’s *Viramundo* (1964), on Brazil’s internal migration from the drought-ridden north-east to São Paulo, or the Uruguayan Mario Handler’s *Carlos: Cine-retrato de un caminante / Carlos: Cine-Portrait of a Walker* (1965), about the life of a vagabond: inclusive films that give image and voice to groups or individuals who have been relegated to invisibility and silence in a public sphere controlled by the narrowest interests. If this is a political impulse, then as Handler later explained to a North American scholar, the Latin American filmmaker “inevitably begins to become politicised, because the existing situation prevents him from being simply a filmmaker” (Burton 1990, 19). Especially the documentarist, whose proclivity for reality is prone to be disconcerting. They were not naive realists, however. Birri once spoke of documentary as a process of “successive approximations towards reality” without ever being able to seize it fully (cited in Chanan 2004, 35).

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Figure 7.1 A scene from *Tire dié/Throw Us a Dime* (1960), the first product of the first Latin American documentary film school, the Escuela Documental de Santa Fe, founded by Fernando Birri in 1956.

The endeavour behind such films accorded with what the Brazilian philosopher of education Paulo Freire would call the process of *concientización*, or consciousness-raising. They would break the “culture of silence” by speaking urgently and directly to the viewer’s moral sense of the world as a place of inequality, injustice, and repression. They did not hide their partisanship. At the same time, they sought an active relation to their viewers, whom they wish to address as intelligent citizens with a vital stake in society. A characteristic of many of these films is the weakening or dissolution of the authoritative monologue of voice-over narration in favour of a dialogical manner of construction; this allows the filmmaker to apply a dialectical interpretation of the subject matter, which works to transform the viewer’s becoming aware into political cognition. The dialectic of *concientización* is why the politics of “political cinema” is readily taken to mean leftist politics, with the rider that those who use the term disparagingly for what they deem propaganda are speaking from an ideologically opposed position.

Some of earliest initiatives occurred in out-of-the-way places, like Cuzco in Peru, where a film club was set up in 1955 and Manuel Chambi and others started making short documentaries on ethnographic and sociocultural themes (the French film historian Sadoul called them the Cuzco School). They were part of a growing movement. The 1950s saw the spread of film clubs throughout the continent, which provided small but eager audiences, along with a proliferation of filmmaking courses and competitions and, in due course, the publication of magazines. It was in

the pages of titles like *Hablemos de cine* (Let's Discuss Cinema) in Peru and *Cine al día* (Present-Day Cinema) in Venezuela, not to mention *Cine Cubano* (Cuban Cinema), that the movement debated its values and sense of identity. This identity was political in conception because it was immediately aware of being situated within a force-field of power and authority, subject to ideological and economic realities fundamentally hostile and inimical to both creative freedom and social justice. How this translated into the artistic work is another matter. Since art is ludic, ambiguous, and polysemic, this is not a straightforward matter, and the political documentary can adopt many forms and styles, especially in the hands of filmmakers as inventive as these.

Part of the movement's utopianism was its appeal to *latinoamericanismo*, which posited the social, cultural, and economic unity of Hispano-America. Nevertheless, conditions for independent documentary varied in each country, in part depending on the state of country's film industry, which provided the infrastructure for the production of this alternative cinema within its interstices. Only three countries – Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina – were large enough, with a big enough domestic market, to support national film-production industries in the face of Hollywood's dominance (and even these were plagued by structural problems and weak access to their own markets). Everywhere else the technical infrastructure was deficient (small countries typically lacked their own film laboratory) and efforts at documentary production were intermittent, but this began to change with the arrival of television. With its demand for product, including commercials and publicity, television provided employment for young filmmakers who, at the same time, were strongly attuned and highly sensitive to political circumstances, prompting them to turn their skills independently to documentary as the appropriate form to express their preoccupations. They were also increasingly technically adept and agile – like Birri, some of the new filmmakers had gone to study their craft in Europe, which was more conducive to their sensibilities than going north. Documentary offered them the double promise of throwing off both the political and aesthetic constraints of institutional production, while remaining cheap to produce.

In Chile, the social documentary became overtly political alongside the growing strength of left-wing politics, and in the run-up to the election of President Salvador Allende in 1970, filmmakers were prominent in support of Popular Unity. In Argentina, where military coups took place in 1955 and 1962, and political parties were banned in 1966, a number turned to working clandestinely and the political impulse became highly combative, as in the films of Raymundo Gleyzer and the Grupo Cine de la Base. Most famous was the epic militant documentary *La hora de los hornos/The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) by the Grupo Cine Liberación, whose leading figures, Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, wrote the key manifesto of the period, "Hacia un tercer cine" ("Towards a Third Cinema") (Solanas and Getino 1983), which provided the whole movement with a powerful philosophy of cinema as a form of political intervention – a task to which documentary was well suited. The concept of Third Cinema invoked the "Three Worlds" theory adopted by the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1950s but applied to the virtual geography of the screen. At the risk of oversimplifying, if the Hollywood genre movie which dominates screens worldwide is the model of First Cinema, and the European art film that of Second Cinema, then Third Cinema is the political alternative to both, consisting in films that the system as a whole cannot assimilate because directly or indirectly they oppose its ideology and values. They also reject its methods – the industrial organization and finance of First Cinema, the auteurism of Second Cinema – in favour of collective or cooperative forms of production and alternative distribution. Because this is a virtual geography, all three types of cinema might be found anywhere, at least in principle – hence the epithet Bollywood, or low-budget art movies in Argentina. Similarly, Third Cinema wasn't just found in the Third World. Solanas and Getino themselves gave examples from around the planet, like the U.S. New Left film group Newsreel,

the *cinegiornali* of the Italian student movement, the films of the *Etats Généraux du Cinéma Français*, and those of the British and Japanese student movements. Entirely marginal films, they also demonstrate the characteristics of what the Cuban Julio García Espinosa, in another key manifesto of the moment, called “imperfect cinema” – films that eschew the model of cinema as spectacle, the dream screen that lulls the audience into a semi-comatose state, and seek instead to stimulate and galvanize (García Espinosa 1983).

Many of the films in question were made by small dedicated groups working in the interstices of whatever film industry existed in their respective countries. As a veteran of the movement in Argentina later put it, “You worked in commercials and what you earned went into making militant films” (Ríos 2014). Only in Cuba were conditions more favourable, for here the revolution of 1959 set up a film institute, the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos or ICAIC, which quickly became a key player in generating the new cinema. The institute fostered documentary strongly, producing dozens of them every year by a growing band of young directors, who thereby became schooled in social reality before attempting fiction. They were emboldened above all by the example of Santiago Alvarez, who was in charge of the weekly newsreel, where he developed a playful and experimental approach to film language (though always within the bounds of revolutionary ideology) which was taken up by documentarists like Pastor Vega, Sara Gómez, Sergio Giral, and many others. The result was a paradox: Cuba, where supposedly the public sphere had been replaced by the totalitarian control of the communists, nonetheless maintained a space on the cinema screen for a vivid documentary encounter with social reality which was not so easily found elsewhere, where commercial criteria were driving documentaries out. To be sure, some of these films were indeed propagandistic, but a good number were didactic and focused on civic education in a Griersonian mode which downplayed the political rhetoric. Many were devoted to celebrating different aspects of popular Cuban culture, especially its music, for which there were rich archives to draw upon; these were seen as contributions to the socialist reimagining of the nation, along with portraits of individuals with notable stories to tell, which recover their memories for the collective. And another aspect of the paradox: many young directors cut their teeth in the 1970s and 1980s with short documentaries which were personal, poetic, and unconcerned with the political. The Cubans were not unaware of the contradictions: as Armando Hart, who as Minister of Education at the beginning of the revolution had overseen the literacy campaign, once put it, “To confuse art and politics is a political mistake. To separate art and politics is another mistake” (Craven 1992, 91).

Conventional film history privileges the fictional narrative as what Christian Metz called the royal road of cinema, with the effect of reducing “all non-narrative genres – the documentary, the technical film, etc.” to “marginal provinces, border regions, so to speak” (cited in Chanan 2007, 26 n12, 36). Metz agreed, but it is a blinkered view of film history that ignores the rich dialectic that has always existed between fiction and documentary (or in the earliest days of cinema, story films and actualities). It is certainly not true of the New Latin American Cinema, where fiction manifested a strong affinity with documentary and fell under its spell. Following the powerful example of Italian neorealism, filmmakers in several countries turned their backs on accustomed genres, eschewed the studio, and emulated the documentary sense of the real lifeworld. In the desire to escape the distorted imagery of the dominant cinema’s imaginary, fiction was inflected by documentary approaches and shared the documentary call to witness and testify to social reality. As Ana López has put it, by the late 1960s, as cinema was theorized as an instrument of *concientización*, documentary realism “became intertwined with increasingly more complex fictional representational strategies” (López 2014, 25–26). The result is a long list of dramatic films, from those of Nelson Pereira dos Santos in Brazil in the 1950s, by way of Jorge Sanjinés in Bolivia and Miguel Littín in Chile in the 1960s, not to mention Cuban directors like

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, to Víctor Gaviria in Colombia in the 1990s, which represent the persistent pull which the documentary instinct and its disciplines have exercised on the Latin American fiction film.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the heyday of *el nuevo cine latinoamericano*, documentary was understood across the continent in terms of a partnership with revolutionary political agitation. The movement's orientation was broadly Marxist, but relatively free from the dogmatism frequently associated with left sectarianism, more inclined towards Gramsci's understanding of subjective factors in both society and the revolutionary process. They were also attracted by his concept of the organic intellectual who does not pretend to disinterested wisdom but identifies with the popular classes whose interests they seek to articulate – this, after all, was exactly how the filmmakers conceived their own endeavours. They were therefore also sensitive to the diversity of cultures across the continent, and their hybrid and syncretistic forms of expression. There was no call for aesthetic conformity (even in Cuba, which Che Guevara once described as “socialism with *pachanga*” (festive spirit) (cited in Moore 1997, 84). Communism did not automatically bring socialist realism). More importantly, what the conditions demanded was radical modes of filmmaking to connect and engage with audiences outside the dominant commercial film circuits (except in Cuba, where they weren't commercial any more). Filmmakers in several countries began to set up alternative means of distribution. In short, Latin American documentary became involved in the creation of an alternative audiovisual public sphere parallel with popular organizations within the community, and sharing the same preoccupations. The movement was never aesthetically prescriptive but encouraged experiment along many different lines, including the exercise of creative authorship exemplified by a number of striking and original films from Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and elsewhere.

The diversity is an inscription of the continent's complex social and cultural multiplicity, which was registered in a turn towards ethnographic film practice. Suffice it to mention three outstanding examples. The Colombian filmmaker Marta Rodríguez had been a student of in Paris of the anthropological filmmaker Jean Rouch and the radical sociologist-priest Camilo Torres in Bogotá before teaming up with Jorge Silva, who came to documentary through journalism, photography, and the film club movement. In making *Chircales/The Brickmakers* (1972). They spent five years working with a family of indentured labourers in the brickyards on the outskirts of Bogotá, to produce an exceptional film that moves from the sociological and political register of the opening towards the subjective and introspective, drawing the viewer into the subjects' lifeworld without losing a sociopolitical perspective. The Mexican director Paul Leduc also drew on fieldwork by anthropologists in making *Etnocidio: Notas sobre el Mezquital/Ethnocide* (1977), an ABC of indictments against the modern Mexican state and a major work of the experimental avant-garde. A portrait of the Otomí of the Mezquital Valley, north of Mexico City, the film is organized by chapters in which successive letters of the alphabet name the theme to be treated – A for Antecedents, B for Bourgeoisie, C for Class, D for Democracy, etc. The effect, together with the stylization of the cinematography, is one of Brechtian distancing and in this sense the opposite of Rodríguez and Silva, but its very formalism gives palpable shape to the whole complex of relations which lie behind the visible surface of social reality. Ciro Durán's *Gamín/Waif* (1977) enters another community, using the techniques of observational cinema to reveal what is under everybody's nose but never seen: the private life of the Bogotá street urchin. Durán, however, is prepared to violate the institutional codes of observational filming and engage his subjects' collusion in order to film their daily life. The result is a theatre of the streets, the children playing themselves, making the viewer into an uncomfortable and sometimes disbelieving witness.

Even in the briefest survey mention must be made of Patricio Guzmán's extraordinary three-part chronicle *La batalla de Chile/The Battle of Chile* (1976–1979; Figure 7.2), a record of the



Figure 7.2 *La batalla de Chile/The Battle of Chile* (Patricio Guzmán, 1976–1979). This is the last image recorded by the Argentinian cameraman, Leonard Hendrickson, of the right-wing soldier who was about to shoot and kill him. The graininess of the image enhances the drama.

tumultuous months leading up to the brutal military coup of 1973, backed by the CIA, in which Allende was overthrown. A fertile mixture of direct cinema, investigative reportage, and political analysis, the footage was smuggled out immediately after the coup and edited in Cuba at the ICAIC, the first part coming out in 1976 and the last in 1979. With numerous films on the coup appearing in the intervening period, the novelty of *La batalla de Chile* was not in telling an unknown story but in the way it was told, from inside the unfolding drama but structured retrospectively by what the viewer already knew – the tragic outcome. In short, a work of historical testimony rare in the annals of documentary for its scope, density, and poignancy.

Democracy

The New Latin American Cinema was not an artistic movement in the usual sense, unified by some common set of aesthetic ideas. There was no common stylistic or aesthetic model. There were manifestos, to be sure, but the only stylistic obligation was a proscription – to reject the commercial, Hollywood, First Cinema model – and the movement's own sense of identity was always primarily political, driven by a double imperative, anti-imperialism and revolutionary socialism. The political thematics and engagement of Latin American documentary in this period was an expression, direct or indirect, of the polarized geopolitical landscape of the Cold War, in which the Cuban Revolution opened up a new front directly under Washington's nose. It was a powerful example. Ruling elites were challenged by an upswing in mass mobilizations across the continent, and the spread of rural guerrilla movements in countries like Venezuela and Colombia.

The death of Che Guevara in Bolivia in 1967 resonated across the continent (indeed the world), and the rural focus shifted to new urban guerrilla groups in Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina. The reaction of right-wing forces, at home as well as in the North, was both fearful and fearsome. By the mid-1970s, much of South America was ruled by military juntas with economic policies favouring local elites and foreign capital, supported by a huge flow of credit, aid, and investment from the U.S.A. Central America was convulsed by civil wars. Militants, union members, peasant activists, reformist politicians, priests, and teachers were persecuted; hundreds of thousands were killed by security forces and death squads. Filmmakers were forced into exile; some disappeared. These were hardly auspicious conditions for documentary or any other kind of serious cinema in the countries concerned, but the spirit of rebellion was riding high at the end of the decade when the Sandinista Revolution was successful in Nicaragua and the first newsreel by its new film institute was premiered in Cuba in December 1979 at the first edition of the ICAIC's International Festival of the New Latin American Cinema. A year later it was the turn of the even smaller country of El Salvador, where the liberation movement created a film institute in the midst of the guerrilla war, and proudly presented its first feature documentary on the struggle, *El Salvador: el pueblo vencerá/El Salvador: The People Will Win* (Diego de la Texera, 1982), which is cited here as a rousing example of cinema of urgency, one of the characteristic modes of militant documentary.

Nevertheless, the movement would soon begin to unravel, and not just because artistic movements are always subject to historical cycles which diminish them. Its political character left it exposed to a signal shift in political climate as military rule wound down, civilian government returned in one country after another, and dictators were replaced by elected presidents. The dictators' undoing was a combination of popular resistance and economic mismanagement; the trouble came to a head in the early 1980s when major Latin American debtors were unable to service their loans. According to Edward Herman and James Petras (1985), the threatened collapse of the Latin American economies and the international credit system triggered a massive patching-up operation under U.S. and IMF auspices. "It was by no means the case that a return to civilian government had been chosen in advance by Washington and its military allies; on the contrary, it represented a strategic retreat in which both now sought to impose limits on the civilian politicians." The limits included a large measure of protection for the military against prosecution for their crimes. At the same time, under the guise of democratization, the new civilian regimes fell prey to the ascendant ideology of neoliberalism – which had already been applied in Chile by General Pinochet – leaving them beholden to free-market doctrines that only exacerbated unequal exchange and inequality, the age-old conditions of underdevelopment.

This was a new and confusing scenario which disoriented a left wing demoralized by state brutality and failed guerrilla struggle. The appeal of revolutionary politics was weakened by its defeats, and for a cinema founded on a political conception of itself, the transformation of the political space in which it operated threatened to cast it adrift. As the decade proceeded, the rhetoric of militant cinema began to seem misplaced and the movement found itself in a growing crisis of both confidence and identity. Revolutionary militancy was slipping away even before the collapse of communism in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union shifted the global balance of power. At a conference of film scholars at Iowa in 1986 (here I speak from memory), the claim was made that the New Latin American Cinema was an unrealized utopian ideal; in reality it was becoming fragmented and it would be better to speak of new Latin American cinemas in the plural. A year later, when the question was raised at the annual seminar of the Havana Film Festival, it provoked heated debate. Convictions remained, but the old rhetoric and the old prescriptions, it was said, no longer served (Aufderheide 2000, 240). By the time the Berlin Wall came down, almost every Latin American country had returned to some form of civilian rule,

and a supposed new world order was consolidated by the collapse of communism, the apparent victory of globalizing capitalism, the loss of socialist aspirations and utopian ideals, and the delegitimization of revolutionary programmes. Only a few marginal countries failed to fall, but one of them was Cuba, where film production, however, almost collapsed in the economic turmoil; the weekly newsreel ceased and documentary production was heavily curtailed.

Elsewhere the return to democracy brought the reconstruction of the public sphere, and documentary played a role in the process, “providing an alternative to media discourses that had until then been produced by corporations complicit with the military,” as Vinicius Navarro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez have put it (2014, 2). There quickly emerged a new thematic and a new task to be engaged – documenting the repression of the years of military dictatorship, militating for a new politics of human rights in which the perpetrators would be brought to justice. A stream of films appeared, including institutional, cooperative, and individual productions, characterized by testimonials and denunciation, dealing with issues of memory and amnesia after state terrorism. An early paradigm of the genre, *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo/The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (1985) by Lourdes Portillo and Susana Muñoz, portrays the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who gathered weekly in front of the presidential palace in Buenos Aires to remember their disappeared children and demand justice. An emotionally powerful work of conventional reportage in terms of style and technique, this is also a film that announces the presence of a new women’s cinema, by and with women, which asserts their growing struggle for empowerment. The new women’s film collectives developed different strategies, sometimes working with men, sometimes not, but always bringing women’s issues and perspectives to the screen, and entering the same alternative distribution circuits.

In Brazil, as the first signs of liberalization appeared, Eduardo Coutinho picked up where he was forced to leave off by the coup 17 years earlier, when he was shooting a neorealist drama about the assassination of a peasant leader in the north-east. In *Cabra Marcado para Morrer/Twenty Years Later* (1984), as he investigates what has happened to the dead man’s family, and shows the previous footage, rescued from its hiding place, to prompt people’s memories, what emerges is a film about its own history, about the inscription of history in the form of film, which signals the aporias that accompany repression. In the process, the film becomes a self-reflexive account of the politics of filmmaking that also problematizes the nature of documentary authorship. Coutinho’s role in the film is self-consciously just one more social actor among others, with his own memory of the events to put alongside other participants and the now historical film footage. The result is a film in which the history of the struggle for representation has itself become part its own subject, and it also thereby marks the moment when Latin American documentary arrives at a new self-consciousness.

Video

One aspect of *El Salvador: el pueblo vencerá* is prophetic for the future of documentary, and not only in Latin America: a film of eclectic style, some of the borrowed footage taken from various sources originates on video. It was precisely around the time it was made that video was being adopted by television for newsgathering, and its incorporation here had a striking effect, the imperfect image not only signifying urgency but also marking a new form of presence on the screen of images of struggle. The spread of video was a result of the growing global penetration of electronics accelerated by neoliberal policies, but its employment varied according to the regime in different countries, sometimes with paradoxical or unexpected results. The first striking

example of alternative video production in 1980s Latin America took place in the wholly inimical circumstances to be found in Chile, where film production had been brought to a halt as the filmmakers active during Popular Unity were driven into exile, television was tightly controlled, and Pinochet managed to resist giving up power until 1989. Here, because video enabled them to work covertly, a new generation of documentarists became active in the popular resistance which eventually brought him down. Beginning around 1983/4, as economic crisis led to escalating social unrest, a movement of activists took shape, with groups like Fasic, Teleanálisis, Cámara en mano, Ictus TV, and Grupo Proceso engaging in what Antonio Traverso and Germán Liñero describe as a 'battle of the audiovisual field' (cited in Navarro and Rodríguez 2014, 169), which not only documented state violence and political resistance but constituted a form of resistance in its own right, producing a constant flow of images of political events never seen on television to create a counternarrative to the dominant discourse both at home and abroad. *Teleanálisis*, for example, was an alternative newsreel produced by the independent journal *Análisis* with foreign NGO funding, filmed on the professional Umatic format and distributed clandestinely on domestic VHS cassettes as well as sent abroad. Others worked independently, including Pablo Salas and the veteran of Popular Unity (and editor of *La batalla de Chile*), Pedro Chaskel, who employed video to document protest events like the women's demonstration *Somos más* (We Are More) (1985). Their approach is quite distinct from conventional reportage. Dispensing with verbal commentary, the event unfolds in long takes by a mobile and highly observant camera. A minimalist technique which corresponds to the limitations of the circumstances, this is also a style of shooting in which the camera acquires its own sharp-eyed personality, in powerful contrast to the anonymity of the television news camera.

Teleanálisis was made by a new breed of television journalists, but in places where there was no supervening necessity, practising filmmakers often held back from adopting video and left the field to a new generation of social activists, in part because the film artistry of the former was not yet possible in video, and in part because the latter didn't think in terms of art anyway. When video first appeared in the 1970s, it was hailed by community activists in metropolitan countries for its potential as an instrument of democratization, but the promise was hardly fulfilled. It began to take off in rather less likely circumstances the following decade in Latin America. In a report on "Grassroots Video in Latin America," Pat Aufderheide mentions a network of 40 video production groups operating in Brazil in 1984 (2000, 258). According to another source, there were 413 grassroots organizations in Latin America using video by 1989 (cited in Traverso and Liñero 2014, 168), and a Brazilian video activist told an interviewer in 1992 that "The social movements appropriated the medium before the professionals" (Alberto López, cited in Goldfarb 2000, 278).

The emergent video sphere was neither uniform nor homogeneous, but it was spread across civil society, from corporate publicity and international aid agencies, by way of universities and the church, to trade unions, political groups, local communities, and the grassroots. Most of what was produced was factual, educational, or publicity, without aspiring to the condition of documentary as an art form (what in Europe is called the "creative documentary"). By the nature of the medium, circulation was small (analogue video can only be copied in small batches, unlike discs, which can be mass-produced, and digital video, which is infinitely reproducible by streaming over the Internet). Nevertheless, even though its low resolution couldn't yet match the material quality of the film image, and editing analogue tapes was linear, which it never was with celluloid, video was qualitatively different from film – more direct and spontaneous – and the medium would have critical effects on documentary practice and aesthetics. Crucially, it entered the most marginalized spaces of society, allowed communities to address each other in new ways, and thus established a new realm of subjects and identities. Towards the end of the 1980s,

video began to reach Brazil's Indigenous communities and the *video indigena* movement was emerging. (The first Indigenous video production can be dated to around 1987, when a project called Video in the Villages was set up by the Centro de Trabalho Indigenista, and it began to work with the Nambiquara of northern Mato Grosso.) The Native Indian population had been represented in cinema since the earliest days, but not by themselves. With video, they are no longer objects of an exoticizing, ethnographic, or objectifying gaze, but become the subjects of their own discourse, speaking in their own language and voice. And as Freya Schiwy (2009) points out, they didn't even need to be literate.

Subjects chosen were often a ritual in danger of loss, the documentation of a land campaign, the investigation of a massacre. New sub-genres were invented, like the video letter to be sent between communities. There are testimonial documentaries, messages to government agencies, documentation of ceremonies, daily life, and community stories, not excluding short fiction, which are assembled into packages for distribution. The spread of the movement to Indigenous communities in different countries corresponded to an upsurge across the continent of the peasant and social movements engaged in novel types of struggle. Confronting an environmentally rapacious socio-economic system, their resistance is infused with a strong commitment to the defence of a sustainable ecology, and encompasses concern for women's issues and gender equality. Clearly, the movement has an activist and political rationale, but what happens aesthetically is a little paradoxical. *Video indigena* evokes the inscription of social struggle in classic new Latin American documentary and seems to stand in the tradition of Third Cinema, but not its modernist tendencies, which were aimed at displacing hegemonic codes of representation. The basic style of *video indigena* largely reiterates the conventions: talking heads, stabilized hand-held shooting, conventional televisual editing, different tropes varied according to the sub-genre. But it speaks from a different position, which produces a new mode of documentary address. The well-known formula suggested by Bill Nichols for the classic documentary, "I speak about them to you" (Nichols 2001, 13), is transformed into "We speak about ourselves to each other."

A short documentary about Indigenous video production, *La otra mirada/The Other Gaze* (1999), made by the Bolivian group CEFREC for international audiences, makes the claim that Indigenous media not only invite an exchange of gazes and perspectives on diverse issues felt in the communities to be pressing for attention, but they do so in a form in which the communities are themselves the protagonists, in a world of change and transformation that obliges them to find a way of answering back. Video thus becomes an instrument for the active negotiation of modernity. Something similar happened in an urban setting in Argentina with *cine piquetero* at the moment of the *Argentinazo*, the country's economic breakdown at the end of 2001, when the banks put up the shutters, the country defaulted on its international debt and got through five presidents in twelve days, and the effect, as a friend described it to me soon after, was that "documentary was boosted by an explosive reality" (De Carli). The movement was named after the *piquetes* who took to blocking roads and bridges in protest. Young filmmakers, for whom the advent of consumer video meant that they now owned their own means of production, needed no funding or commissions to go out on the streets and film. The most interesting things were happening, "from spontaneous videos which record the popular mobilisations and the *cacerolazos* – which are then sold on the streets from stalls piled with copies – to filmmakers who are turning to documentary, and who discover a know-how, even a certain Argentinean tradition, in the way of presenting or narrating what is going on." These highly militant videos were mostly filmed by groups aligned with the popular organizations that began to organize themselves in response to the crisis, and were often made "almost anonymously" as an immediate response to an urgent situation (De Carli). At a time when the videocassette was still a significant means of distribution, the work was shown at factories, community movement assemblies, local cafés, and street festivals, but not on television or in the cinemas. Screened in meetings and assemblies, in parks and

on the streets, bypassing the official media entirely, they entered a parallel and alternative public sphere lying outside the channels and tributaries of parliamentary democracy, but which is rooted instead in the popular movement itself.

Sharing the dynamic of popular protest, *cine piquetero* presented a vivid panorama of the extent and sheer inventiveness of popular action in a wide range of forms, from short reports to music videos, often in a style that could be called “participant reportage”: fluid hand-held camera, direct sound, street interviews, the same ingredients as television reportage but differently put together: sans commentary, cross-cut with found images taken from television and the press, edited with a sense of irony and deconstructive intent, and often backed by the new Argentine rock music. In short, a style that recuperates modernist experiment in a postmodern environment, where the sobriety of *video indígena* gives way to the performative spirit and dynamic of popular protest on the streets – especially the action known as the *escrache*, a kind of fiesta of public shaming, denunciation, and street theatre. The extraordinary spectacle of the *escrache* can be seen in several of these videos, and its spirit pervades the whole movement, which could consequently perhaps be called *video escrache* – a style which brings to the screen the same energy and popular feeling, the same mixture of elements, the symbolic gestures and imagery, the same intent for the video not just to represent but itself to constitute an intervention, a communicative action, an act of video speech.

A few of these groups date back to before the *Argentinazo*, and already earlier that year, at the Mar de Plata film festival, Fernando Solanas, the old man of Third Cinema, praised the young activists for their passion and for showing what never gets seen on television, even calling them the heirs of Third Cinema. Wishful thinking? It is not as if the new videographers themselves claimed such allegiance, in part because their knowledge of the 1960s and its models was limited, in part because the political conjuncture had shifted drastically away from Marxist militancy. But another factor was at play: they were now beginning to work with digital video, which offers novel possibilities for fulfilling old dreams about the democratic potential of new media. Dreams that go back to Dziga Vertov in Soviet Russia in the 1920s, conceiving the idea of a network of local cine-amateurs providing a continuous flow of newsreel footage. And Bertolt Brecht writing about radio in 1932, described it as a medium with the inherent capacity to become “the finest possible communications apparatus in public life,” a vast system of channels of communication, or it could be if it were allowed to transmit as well as receive, “to let the listener speak as well as hear [...] to bring him into a network instead of isolating him” (Brecht 2000, 42–43). Or Julio García Espinosa in Cuba in 1970, pondering the likely effects on artistic culture, “if the evolution of film technology (there are already signs in evidence) makes it possible that this technology ceases being the privilege of a small few” (García Espinosa 1983). These are all utopian ideas, and as Brecht added, in that case, one should ask why they’re utopian. In the meantime, the conditions created by consumer video and the Internet have unleashed an endless torrent of mass participation, from the trivial and the intimate to the citizen journalism of political protest and denunciation. This prompts a caveat: if this looks like the conditions Espinosa prophesied, the results are wide open, since the democracy of the Internet serves the right as much as the left. But it also impacts on the art of documentary, reconfiguring its modes of representation, breaking aesthetic boundaries, multiplying sub-genres, expanding both its range and its reach.

Melancholia

The refashioning of documentary by means of video found a key proponent in the work of Eduardo Coutinho in Brazil. What video provided him with was mobility, the long take, and above all, conversational speech, its spontaneity, its nuances, its hesitations and lacunae.

Turning to contemporary everyday life in films like *Boca de Lixo/Scavengers* (1993), *Santo Forte/The Mighty Spirit* (1999), *Babilónia 2000* (2001), and *Edifício Master/Master, A Building in Copacabana* (2002), what Coutinho does is fix on a location and present the people to be found there: a rubbish dump on the outskirts of the city, a favela overlooking the bay of Rio de Janeiro, an apartment house a block away from the beach. The principle of the “unique location,” as Coutinho called it, enables him to establish a relationship with his subjects on the basis of their common lived space, allowing the film to portray a social microcosm, setting up a dialectic in which the location defines a certain place in the world which then becomes a metaphor for the lives of the people living there (Lins 2003). The rubbish dump becomes a metaphor of social rejection, the apartment block of the internal life of the city dweller; and in case of *Babilónia 2000*, since the film is shot in a shanty town overlooking the bay of Rio de Janeiro on December 31, 1999, the metaphor is simply people’s hopes at the turn of the millennium. Paradoxically, at first sight these films don’t look unlike many television “talking heads” documentaries, but there are crucial differences, to do with place, people, and the filmmaker’s procedure, because he never treats his subjects as stereotypes or pawns. This is a cinema of the encounter. The people we meet are not presented as examples of anything, the personification of some kind of category, and as he draws out of them fragments of the unique and personal stories of their life experiences, he’s never judgemental. He isn’t trying to prove an argument or demonstrate a thesis, and there is no commentary to centre the narrative; in fact there’s no overarching narrative at all, only lots of little ones. But in every case, what emerges is a certain structure of feeling in a certain community.

When critics commented that Coutinho seemed to have turned away from politics towards the intimacy of private life, Coutinho responded that he considered his films were still political, but not in the conventional mould. By casting aside the idealization of the people by left-wing politics, you arrive at real people and what they have to put up with (Campaña Ramia and Mesquita 2012). Yet this is not just a shift in perspective, for at the same time, while these films are full of human warmth, they are nonetheless imbued with a sense of disenchantment with a world unable to deliver people’s hopes and desires. In a word, this is a cinema of melancholy; a cinema trying to come to terms with the profound sense of loss which came to overwhelm the left in the aftermath of military dictatorship, only to be compounded by the end of the Cold War – not because actually existing socialism in eastern Europe provided a proper model, but because its demise seemed to announce the victory of capitalism and to nullify the very language of socialism.

Melancholy, as Freud attested, is closely related to mourning, from which it borrows some of its features (Freud 1957). Both are responses to loss of a love object – generally a person, but also of what Freud called an “abstraction”: an ideal such as one’s country, or a sense of liberty, for example. But where mourning, he averred, is a healthy and normal process to be worked through, melancholy is an abnormal and persistent state in which the ego wishes to let go of the lost object and at the same time holds on to it, thereby blocking the work of mourning. The debilitating result is that the ego is split, and generates fears, anxieties, denial, and self-reproach, a condition which can be traced, he says, to “what is commonly called ‘conscience’” (1957, 247). Where Freud was thinking in terms of individual pathological dispositions, when Walter Benjamin spoke of “left-wing melancholy” in early 1930s Germany, he used the term to indicate a mood or disposition towards the world that he found in certain popular left-wing poetry, and summed up as the attitude to which, though it remains ensconced as an ideal, “there is no longer [...] any corresponding political action” (Benjamin 1999). This also captures the situation that arose in Latin America in the 1990s, although for different reasons, in a different time and place, and with different effects. Freud had noted that the psychiatric definition of melancholia fluctuates with individual circumstances, and the same is true of melancholy as a sociopolitical structure of feeling.

Freud had suggested that the melancholic's lost object isn't fully dead since it still exists within the melancholic unconscious, as if buried alive. Exactly like the condition of the *desaparecidos*, neither dead nor alive, and thus the feeling that they cannot be properly mourned, that mourning is blocked. Time is telling. It needs a few years to reveal the persistence of melancholia, and then the camera first captures it in the picture of personal loss, as anguished affect in the individual, in their voice, on their face, in their body language. But as the camera registers the presence of unresolved mourning, the melancholic subject is assaulted by doubts and reproaches, the inevitable urge to moral judgement with which conscience (the Freudian superego, the Big Other in Lacan) punishes the ego. Here I think of two films by the Argentine documentarist Andrés Di Tella (b. 1958), *Montoneros, una historia/Montoneros, a History* (1994) and *Prohibido/Banned* (1997), which are among the first documentaries to begin the task of tackling the bad memories of the Dirty War. The first centres on the story of Ana, a former low-level militant who gave birth while living in clandestinity, before the child's father disappeared and she herself was kidnapped, but soon broadens out to include a number of other testimonies to become a collective history of political illusions. The latter concerns the repression and sometimes complicity in the cultural and media sector under the dictatorship. Both films include heart-wrenching sequences of the remembrance of victims of political violence by survivors, but these moments are embedded in a space in which these same historical actors start to question the rationale for the history in which they participated. But not the filmmaker. Di Tella, who was 18 at the time of the 1976 coup, spent much of his boyhood abroad (his parents were exiled during the earlier military regime of 1964–1973) and then went to study abroad again after the coup. These films are driven by his need to understand the experience of his own generation from which he had been separated. With his questioning voice on the soundtrack, this makes him the perfect foil for his interlocutors, and the films become a kind of cognitive mapping of the terrain of this new left-wing melancholy and its complex layering which collapses past, present, and future; where recognition of historical contradictions brings the memory of compromises and betrayals and the pain of guilt and recrimination, while failure returns as the loss of the promised future, to leave a present in which there is no utopia, no clear moral and political vision, nor even a coherent course of political action.

Melancholia is persistent but not fixed, and the power of an aesthetic form like documentary is the safe therapeutic representational space it offers for working through trauma, moving from the stage where melancholia has not yet separated itself from mourning to a more detached condition. This is the move Di Tella makes with his next film, where he steps out in front of the camera to become the pivot of a rambling inquiry into his own social and historical identity. Di Tella has spoken of "el instinto del documentalista, ese que te impulsa a meterte donde dice 'no entrar'" (Pinto Veas n.d.). The door he goes through in his next film is that of his own family. *La televisión y yo/Television and I* (2003) is an autobiographical essay which leaves behind the earlier mode of investigating the other's unfinished mourning to explore the intersection between the private sphere of family history and the public domain of national history through the story of his own entrepreneur grandfather and the rise and fall of his industrial empire. Di Tella manufactured television sets, and his grandson meets the grandson of the entrepreneur who founded the television station which these sets were designed to receive. The story of the two dispossessed entrepreneurs, he muses, "is also the story of a national project that lost its way." Indeed the film struck one Argentine film critic as "an assembly of stories all marked by loss" (Kriger 2003). A melancholy tale indeed, told by a cheerful, inquisitive, and sometimes wistful storyteller, the film rehearses a shift in authorial stance from inquisitive interlocutor to performative first-person narration which has imbued documentary everywhere since the 1980s, but with particular significance in Latin America, says Antonio Gómez, where it signals the singularities of individual experience "against the backdrop of a damaged collectivity" (2014, 47).

Another very striking demonstration of personal political melancholia is found in the work of Patricio Guzmán, who was now living in Europe, and stands in here for a whole generation of Chilean filmmakers working in exile. In *Chile, la memoria obstinada/Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997), he goes back to Chile with *La batalla de Chile*, which had never been shown there, to trace a number of people whose image was captured in the original film, and to find out what memories or impressions it evokes in viewers old and young. The film stages a personal confrontation with his own melancholic imaginary, only to discover that it isn't only his. The Spanish film scholar María Luisa Ortega draws an interesting comparison between the two films by Di Tella and Guzmán (cited in Chanan 2007, 248). Both of them draw on archive images and use first-person narration, the presence of the filmmaker within the film, and hence a self-reflexive mode of filmic construction, in order to re-enter history. But Guzmán is borrowing his own images whereas Di Tella borrows those of others (including his family's home movies). Guzmán is re-entering a history that he himself has lived from behind his own camera. Di Tella is investigating a history that came before him, and for the next generation of filmmakers this would become the norm. When Albertina Carri makes *Los rubios/The Blondes* (2003), which focuses on the disappearance of her parents in 1977 when she was 4 years old, she presents us with a highly conflicted subjectivity, "a 'self' defined around the absence of knowledge," as Gómez puts it (2014, 49). In short, the crisis of identity that constitutes the historical situation of subjects without direct experience or memory of the traumatic events which nevertheless have helped to shape them.

Conclusion

Periodization always breaks down the closer one gets to the present. A few examples like these may be indicative, but not necessarily representative of broader tendencies, especially within the increasing circulation of the digital moving image, which makes a comprehensive survey of more recent trends a kind of hopeless task. This wide variety of films, long and short, in continuous flow, belongs to a process which Latin America fully shares with documentary everywhere else, since nowhere is now beyond the reach of globalized culture, even if its distribution remains unequal. There is now a new virtual geography of the screen, whose multiple sizes with highly variable sound have radically altered both the site and the mode of consumption, such that words like "film" and "documentary" no longer quite fit the object. Does this mean that the old political documentary is over and done with, and the spirit of *el nuevo cine latinoamericano* with it? Concerning the latter, as Ana Nahman (2015) has recently demonstrated, opinions differ. Some writers believe it died in the 1970s, some extend its applicability to the early 1980s, but some take the line that there is no end point, because the whole experience remained inconclusive (as any utopian project must). In the story I've been telling here about the authored documentary, there is a major break in the middle, when failure and the rise of neoliberalism, compounded by the end of the Cold War, brings about a mood of revolutionary disillusionment. But there's another story in which the rapid development of video and mobile communication expands the alternative public sphere of small media to encourage citizen participation, and this, for a new generation of filmmakers, constitutes a natural field of activity, although not without complications. The barriers to entry have been lowered, but the Internet is so heavily dominated by consumerism that dissident politics is still marginalized, and, like their forebears, political filmmakers are faced with the problem of how to earn their living. But there is also a further element. *Latinoamericanismo* has never died. On the contrary, it lies behind a certain political exceptionalism compared to other continents, and the same period sees the beginnings of a political resurgence, starting in

Mexico with the Zapatistas, then building up with the election of left-wing governments of various tendencies in Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, but all dedicated to promotion of a wider Latin American identity and politics, which includes breaking out of the stifling dominance of the empire in the North. If a new anti-capitalist politics is taking shape within this resurgence, we should expect to see signs in the films it inspires, either directly or indirectly, of the tenacity of political conscience, and of the emergence of a new political subject, who recognizes the impossibility of reaching the objective but nevertheless holds on and refuses to cede. However, this is a hypothesis which must wait for another occasion to be tested.

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