

Different Ways of Evoking the Past. Archive and Testimony in the Ecuadorian Documentary of the 21st Century

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RECEIVED
March 11, 2019

APPROVED
May 23, 2019

PUBLISHED
July 9, 2019

[https://doi.org/10.32870/
eloquepiensa.v0i19.318](https://doi.org/10.32870/eloquepiensa.v0i19.318)

ABSTRACT / Since the beginning of the century, a series of documentaries of historical themes have been produced in Ecuador, backed up by the work of archival research and the creative use of testimony. The emergence of these films is an unprecedented fact since throughout its history the Ecuadorian documentary has scarcely addressed topics related to the historical past. The emergence of a group of filmmakers interested in understanding collective history is then presented as a symptom of the need for a generation that seeks to revise and rewrite social memory. What are the political, cultural and subjective factors that lead this generation of filmmakers to dig into the past? What policies on memory are traceable in their emblematic works? What role does the archival material occupy in these works? What place does documentary film occupy in the recent re-positioning of national history and collective memory? Based on the analysis of the films *The Death of Jaime Roldós* (Manolo Sarmiento and Lisandra Rivera, 2013) and *With My Heart in Yambo* (María Fernanda Restrepo, 2011), I seek to reflect on the uses of the archive and the work of the memory of the Ecuadorian documentalism of the new century.

KEYWORDS / Documentary Film, Memory, History, Ecuador.

RESUMEN / Desde inicios de siglo se han producido en Ecuador una serie de documentales de temática histórica respaldados en el trabajo de investigación de archivos y uso creativo del testimonio. El surgimiento de estas películas es un hecho inédito ya que a lo largo de su historia el documental ecuatoriano ha abordado escasamente temáticas relacionadas al pasado histórico. El apareamiento de una pléyade de realizadores interesados en comprender la historia colectiva se presenta entonces como un síntoma de la necesidad de una generación que busca revisar y reescribir la memoria social. ¿Cuáles son los factores políticos, culturales y subjetivos que llevan a esta generación de cineastas a escarbar en el pasado? ¿Qué políticas sobre la memoria son rastreables en sus obras emblemáticas? ¿Qué función ocupa el material de archivo en dichas obras? ¿Qué lugar ocupa el cine documental en el reposicionamiento reciente de la historia nacional y la memoria colectiva? Partiendo del análisis de los filmes *La muerte de Jaime Roldós* (Manolo Sarmiento y Lisandra Rivera, 2013) y *Con mi corazón en Yambo* (María Fernanda Restrepo, 2011) se busca reflexionar sobre los usos del archivo y el trabajo de la memoria del documentalismo ecuatoriano del nuevo siglo.

PALABRAS CLAVE / Cine documental, memoria, historia, Ecuador.



THE HISTORICAL DOCUMENTARY, THE MEMORY DOCUMENTARY

The documentary cinema occupies a strategic place in evoking the past in contemporary world marked by the mass media, the cultural industries, the image society and the so-called “memory culture” proposed by Andreas Huyssen (2007). Authors such as Bill Nichols (1991) and François Niny (2015) coincide when they state that a differentiating criterion between the documentary and fiction is the reference to a historical reality that predates the film and surpasses the filmmaker’s control. In the definition of documentary cinema itself it is possible to notice this affinity with the historical world and social memory.

This intimate relation between the documentary and the historical past is revealed as social urgency in contexts such as the Latin American one which during the 1970’s and 1980’s lived under bloody dictatorships that triggered systematic human rights violations, torture, disappearances, and exile that brought to the headlines the policies on memory and reparation. “From the pain of exile, State terror and the defeat of revolutions, a political protest memory cinema emerged, one that, though born in these years, continues to flourish in the present” (Arenillas and Lazzara, 2016, p. 4).

That is why authors such as Procopio Furtado consider that the job of historical and memory documentaries is reviewing the past as an urgent task to reach democratization, participation and justice in post-dictatorship times (2019, p. 4).

In studies on documentary cinema, the subjective and objective dimension of history has been problematized by the use of the testimony and the archive, the two main forms of reference to the past within the non-fictionalized cinematographic language. These two forms mark polarities that are in constant tension and intersection within the figurative and narrative structures of the documentary cinema. On the side of the testimony lies the subjective pole of narration associated with the processes of memory and the fidelity of the act of leaving a testament. On the side of the archive lies the objective pole of narration associated with the processes of history and the veracity of the documentation acts.

This does not mean that the subjective and the objective pole exist as separate entities, but quite the contrary, there are different degrees of work between one and the other. There are documentaries that work the subjective pole to a greater extent associated with memory and to a lesser degree the objective pole associated with social history and vice versa. Despite this mutual dependency between these two poles, it is possible to establish two categories based on the prevalence of one of the two dimensions: historical documentaries and memory documentaries.

According to Gustavo Aprea (2015), memory documentaries work mainly with the word of eyewitnesses of an event from the subjectivity of their experience, they approach both the moment of reminiscence and the reminisced moment and translate the objectivity of the story to an actor's life experience. According to the Argentine researcher, memory documentaries have five characteristics: a) interpretation of the events through a narration, b) the presence of a double plot: the process of remembering and remembered process, c) the testimonies from people who were directly involved in the events remembered, d) sensations, feelings and opinions

of those who lived through the events, and e) version of the subjective, polemic story (p. 95).

On the other hand, historical documentaries mainly start from work with images that were not produced by the filmmaker, images that are given a new meaning by means of editing, the voice or subtitles. Within this type of documentary, we find compilation films and found footage films (Sánchez-Biosca, 2006).

THE PAST IS BACK

Since the 2000's, a series of stories began to emerge in the Ecuadorian documentary scene alluding directly to the recent past by using the archive and the testimony. Since that moment on, we can count up to 40 documentaries that work on national history events that occurred in the last 50 years from a contemporary approach. Among this number of films, no doubt we can find the most awarded and acclaimed documentaries from the last 18 years. We mean *El lugar donde se juntan los polos* (Juan Martín Cueva, 2002), *Abuelos* (Carla Valencia, 2010), *With My Heart in Yambo* (*Con mi corazón en Yambo*, María Fernanda Restrepo, 2011) and *The Death of Jaime Roldós* (*La muerte de Jaime Roldós*, Manolo Sarmiento and Lisandra Rivera, 2013). That is why we dare say that in the new century documentary there is a marked tendency to work what some scholars have called "contemporary history".

This tendency calls our attention since in the two previous decades little attention was paid to the recent past. The 1980's generation made a vast body of work with a social character influenced by left leanings that still prevailed among Latin American filmmakers. This generation, whose work is primarily documentary in character, took a nationalistic stand regarding the rescue of the historical, cultural, artistic and natural heritage. Their concern about history referred to the ancestral pre-Hispanic past and to remembering colonial and republican history (León, 2011, p. 410).

The recurrence of themes associated with the memory and the historical past has enjoyed a boom in the last 18 years and it is linked with a new generation of documentary filmmakers that made their debut after the year 2000. This recurrence can be explained by observing Andreas Husseyn carefully, he holds that modernity was marked by a momentum towards the future up to the 1980's. At the end of the 20th century, the crisis of modernity prioritized the task of assuming responsibility for the past (2007, p. 6). By taking this observation to the Ecuadorian documentary, we can notice that both the 1980's generation –inspired in the political utopia– had the future on their horizon. As a result of the social and political crisis afflicting Ecuador at the end of the century, modern ideals are questioned and a space is opened up to investigate the past.

The persistence of uncertainties and unsolved problems in the past is the trigger for creativity for an entire generation of filmmakers that inherited an intangible history. When we speak with the filmmakers who work on reconstructing the recent past, it is easy to perceive a strong impulse to go back to the past to understand the reasons of the crisis and clarify the gaps in the collective memory that are not being assumed by the State, the academia or the media.

The new generation is avid for complex stories that can explain the past beyond the standardized stories taught in school. Manolo Sarmiento and Lisandra Rivera claim that *The Death of Jaime Roldós* is a film by and for the people of their generation who were still very young when the events told in the documentary actually happened. “It was like providing meaning for something that had no explanation when we were kids and teenagers” (Sarmiento and Rivera, 2016, p. 3). María Fernanda Restrepo hold that the motive for making *With My Heart in Yambo* was to clear up her brothers' murder at the hands of the police when she was a little girl. The documentary comes from her need to “clear up this story, this past and point a finger at all the guilty parties so that the people have a fresh memory of how the events befell” (Restrepo, 2016, p. 7).

In view of an incomprehensible, unsolved or traumatic past, one that occurred in their childhood the filmmakers set out to reconstruct history through the cinema with the aim of assuming the imaginary inherited from the previous generation. Somehow, we are in the presence of what Marianne Hirsch called “post-memory”. For the Romanian researcher, post-memory is an inter- and trans-generational knowledge and traumatic experience transmission structure by means of writing or art (2008, p. 106).

Finally, we may add that these needs expressed from the filmmakers and spectators are at a moment of consolidation of the documentary culture in the country. Let's remember that the first edition of the Festival Encuentros del Otro Cine (EDOC) was held in 2002. All of these aspects make it possible for the documentaries to become powerful memory devices through which debate on history is reactivated and the inter-generational knowledge transmission is rearticulated. That is why throughout the century in Ecuador we have witnessed the consolidation of a memory with a prosthetic character within which the cinema plays a crucial role. Perhaps that is why we see a constant presence of post-memories that attempt to turn a distant, alien and incomprehensible past into something familiar.

MEMORY, SUBJECTIVITY AND DISAPPEARANCE

No doubt, one emblematic documentary on the work of memory based on testimony is *With My Heart in Yambo*, directed by María Fernanda Restrepo. This film, which has won 16 international awards, had a successful release in movie theaters, reaching 150 000 spectators, and still today it is being programmed in educational institutions and spaces dedicated to the defense of human rights. The film managed to make a strong impact on public opinion and involve the government and the media in a debate about State violence. As a result of the public debate, it caused

With My Heart in Yambo
(*Con mi corazón en Yambo*,
María Fernanda Restrepo, 2011).



the Restrepo brothers' case to be reopened by order of the President of the Republic, Rafael Correa.

The film was made over a 5-year period thanks to a series of grants from the Consejo Nacional de Cinematografía (CNCINE), today the Instituto de Cine y Creación Audiovisual del Ecuador (ICCA). It undertook a 2-year research process and 7 script versions. The production of the film consists in using abundant archival material, as well as shots taken by the filmmaker herself which are interrogated by her voice in the first person. In this sense, the film conforms to the subjective narration arranged in the “expressive mode” of the documentary cinema by Bill Nichols (2013, p. 228) and to the performative documentary developed by Stella Bruzzi (2003, p. 185).

The movie is a narration that articulates a family history and political history around the disappearance of Santiago and Andrés Restrepo, the director's brothers, in 1988. The film thematizes the traumatic memory resulting from losing her loved ones, as well as the family's struggle to find out the truth about this State crime. By means of a series of archival and historical materials she is able to plot reflections about the power of the images as opposed to absence, the relation between the personal and the social, and transformation of

family registries into political icons of the struggle in favor of the missing people.

The film is 135 minutes long and it is organized in 54 scenes that work along two plot lines: on one hand, the pain and family crisis caused by the two brothers' disappearance; on the other, Pedro Restrepo's and Luz Elena Arismendi's actions in their attempt to find out their children's whereabouts and the subsequent search for justice. While it sets a narrative of mourning in a melancholy, intimate tone, it is also a hopeful story that exalts the Restrepo family's public struggle. The film's complex narrative goes beyond the simplification of the events or the chronological order. In a rhizome-like structure, it constantly put forth an intersection between the present and the past, public and private space, information and emotion. As the director herself has explained, “This documentary is a piece fabric, it's a braid. A journey between that personal memory and the collective story kept in the official archives, which travels constantly between the present and the past.” (Restrepo, 2016, p. 9).

In the film there is a permanent coming and going from the present to the past and vice versa. Several scenes shot in the present time refer back to the traumatic disappearance that occurred 23 years earlier. On other occasions archival

materials (photographs, videos, audio tapes) place the storytelling in the past to remit it immediately to the current state of the investigation on the whereabouts of the missing brothers. This cinematographic operation reminds us that memory is under permanent construction and the reminiscing processes swing back and forth between the present and the past, between suffering and desire (Jelin, 2012, p. 60).

In one scene in the movie the director's voice evokes the ever more elusive memory of her brothers while we see on the screen fragments of home movies and family photos. The following words are heard on the soundtrack "10 seconds. 10 seconds is all that remained of my brothers. That is all I have left to remember them by once and again. To hear their voices that I don't remember anymore (...) I can't remember their expressions (...) over the years they become more and more blurry" (Scene 37). This scene reveals the central theme of the film hinging on the relation between the image and the memory as measured by the director's subjective look. It poses a reflection on the prosthetic technologies of memory and the function they fulfill today in restituting the stories of lives that have been perturbed by traumatic events of loss. On the other hand, it establishes an affective evocation in front of the technological image that embodies it with a subjective value associated with the processes of construction of the voice and the look in front of the objective world.

In the same way, the film traces a two-way route between the private space and the public space, between the individual and the collective memory. Several sequences start with thorough shots that go over the family house building it as a metonymy of pain and loss. These spaces alternate and contrast with the Plaza de la Independencia, the court houses and the media which are the public battle fronts where the family carries on their complaints and demands. This narrative knot evinces the social and collective framework of the individual memories just like Maurice Halbwachs showed them (2004) and the indissoluble unity between the private and the public dimension of memory, as studied by

Paul Ricœur (2003). A scene in the film shows several family pictures of the missing brothers, from a pan shot photo of the two teenagers we skip to a reframing in a close-up of their faces, the image of a silk screen print constructed from the photo, pan shots of boys making a stencil and putting up posters on the streets. We hear Pedro Restrepo on the soundtrack: "Someone told me that though it is true that my sons were missing (...) they were on the retina, in our consciousness and in the image of each and every Ecuadorian (...) and that way, what better homage could there be (...) because somehow they had been immortalized" (Scene 39). This is a key scene in the movie because it reflects on the role that the image can play in its transition from the private space to the public space, from photography to icon, from the family context to the social struggle against oblivion.

Finally, the movie entails a complex game between objectivity and subjectivity, history and memory, archive and testimony in which the experience lived provides new meaning and unexpected power for the past. In a talk with the director, she maintained: "It could not have been a completely historical documentary, as if it were narrating one news file after the other, because it would have ended up being an impersonal, exclusively informative documentary, and it could not have been a completely personal documentary because people needed to be reminded of, be made to discover for the first time each and every one of the components of this horror story" (Restrepo, 2016, p. 3). She then added that she had decided to work the archive materials muting the audio to allow herself to make more personal commentaries. By doing things like this, she found a way of subjective remake that has led the film to be classified as a memory documentary that narrates a version of the story filtered by the experience lived and embodied in the filmmaker's body and pain. The same story told from an objective view, closer to the archive, would have lost the power of subjective interpellation, which is its strength.

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the most poetic moments of the film coincide with the sensorial reminiscence

that the director makes of her missing brothers' presence that still exists in a set of materials that become reminiscence objects. In one scene in the movie the director says that the only thing that remained of her brothers is their clothes. The camera stops on the dust that is hovering around the closet. Another moving moment combines the anguish of the search with the underwater takes in Lake Yambo, the place where the bodies of the minors were allegedly dumped. We feel the director's fright at the mere possibility that the bottom of the waters may yield the slightest clue.

With My Heart in Yambo is, no doubt, the emblematic Ecuadorian documentary of the contemporary work with memory that allows us to understand the way subjectivity creates passageways between the past and the present, between the public and the private, redefining history and the archive from the viewpoint of affection and subjectivity. The film is a milestone within the culture of Ecuadorian memory and it is the movie that has made the greatest impact on defense of human rights and the condemnation of State crimes.

THE ARCHIVE AND REWRITING HISTORY

The Death of Jaime Roldós (2013), directed by Manolo Sarmiento and Lisandra Rivera, was the result of a long, 8-year process, four of which were dedicated to searching for documents and films in archives in Ecuador, Mexico, Argentina, Chile and Spain. It was edited from 80 hours of archival materials. The film was produced by La Maquinita, a company dedicated to making documentary cinema, thanks to the staggered financing by competitive funding from the then Consejo Nacional de Cinematografía (CNCINE).

The 125-minute movie devotes half its length to tell facts about Ecuador's recent past by displaying a series of archival materials of different nature and origins. Due to the vast and sophisticated use of the archive and its self-reflective character, the film is the most complete expression of the Ecuadorian historical documentary in the cinema.

The film was mostly made by editing archival footage and displaying documents, audios, photos, press and television material that is organized and commented on by the filmmaker's voice-over, who is a narrator in the third person that keeps his distance from the events narrated. In this sense, it is a historical film that could well fit the category of expository film according to Nichols's typology (1991, p. 68). Nevertheless, the movie makes a series of considerations on the writing of the story and the cinematographic narrative, what they include or exclude. These allusions to the construction of the storytelling, to the script decisions and the editing work grant the film a reflexive character (Nichols, 2013, p. 221). Halfway between the expository and the reflexive modality, the film's aesthetics performs a complex game of research and exposure of the files to reread history, its omissions and oblivions.

The film enjoyed a great deal of commercial and artistic success, and it made a profound impact on public opinion. When it was released commercially, it reached 53 000 viewers and it was awarded 15 international awards. The movie caused a lot of debates associated with the return of democracy in Latin America, the defense of human rights and the role of memory in the Ecuadorian political scene.

The documentary goes back to the figure of the first president elected democratically in 1979, after almost a decade of dictatorships. By means of thorough work with archival material, the directors shed new light on the national and regional significance of the charismatic leader. The film portrays Roldós as a young idealist, the banner holder of democracy and human rights in open opposition to the powerful Southern Cone dictatorships. His death, in 1981, officially attributed to a plane accident, is reinterpreted in the context of a set of events that were occurring in national politics and regional geopolitics of the time.

From a delicate collection of documents, images and voices, the official version is delegitimized and hidden relations and interests are suggested that question the accident hypothesis. The structure of the story hinges on the filmmaker's reflexive

narrator voice who explores the possible versions of the story; it goes backwards and forwards in time, verifies facts, imagines and reflects. Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán acknowledged the originality of the film's narration: "The structure that you came up with to order the events is so complex that it is impossible to apply mechanically the 'laws' of dramatic development to analyze the work" (Personal correspondence, January 4, 2014).

The movie is made up of 32 scenes organized in four large narrative blocks: a) prolog, b) the first death, c) the second death, and d) epilog. In the prolog, the viewer is introduced into the historical context of the time, some facts are provided about the end of the dictatorship and the return of democracy and Jaime Roldós's triumph is told as well as the suspicions of a plot to assassinate him through his children's voice: Santiago, Martha and Diana. The second block, entitled "the first death", shows a biographical sketch of Roldós through his political ideals and establishes the hypothesis that the causes for the plane to fall in the Huairapungo mountains were not accidental. This block is supported by file images that are used functionally along with the narrator's voice, the filmmaker who is investigating and tying up the loose ends in the story. The third block, entitled "The second death" questions the use of Jaime Roldós's name and image by Abdalá Bucaram, his brother-in-law, a rising populist politician who will later be the president of the Republic. This section is based on an interview with Santiago Roldós, who gains preponderance and whose voice explains the file images that are presented though less so than in the previous sections. Finally, the epilog displays an argumentation on the archive's policies and the writing of history from an interview with Gabriel Tramontana, a veteran news show maker.

With a skillful, self-reflective narrative management, the documentary performs three important tasks: a settling of accounts with the past, a revision of the official history and a creative use of the archives. Firstly, the film revisits a traumatic memory allowing a healthy work of mourning for both

the family members who appear in this movie and for the country that discussed the implications of the events very little. Secondly, the film is a counter discourse as opposed to the official version of the story since it questions the accident hypothesis that sealed the fate of the debate on other possible routes as alternative to the neoliberal model. Thirdly, the documentary constructs a poetics of the archive. Its job seems to be digging in the past's materiality, retrieving the fragments of history stored in the official documents and sound and video recordings, and putting them back together to build something new. By contrasting them, putting them together once and again, the documents acquire a creative use, a new sense, an uncommon currentness. The cinema, as the "angel of history" about which Walter Benjamin (1972) spoke, works on fragments of the past to open them to the lightning of today, to the promise of another possible world.

The Death of Jaime Roldós can be read as an act of poetic justice that rewrites and disseminates the official story made up of silences and concealment. In this sense the documentary plays the role of redeeming the senses underlying in the archives to release new readings on the historical past with the purpose of articulating the possible events that the powers that be did not tell. About this film, Santiago Roldós, the main character in the movie and son of the assassinated president, maintained that "I relearned that in the theater or the cinema, unlike in politics, a certain kind of justice is possible; you can do things there that in official macropolitics you simply can't; in this case, to recovery memory" ("Un documental, un premio y seis aprendizajes", October 2, 2014). The silences inherited from history are assumed in the film as an opportunity to establish a narration that makes it possible to articulate post-memory processes on which the new generations build their identity.

Sarmiento himself has told us how during the making of the movie the archive gained ground gradually until it found its power and gave the film its materiality. The director holds that in the beginning the film was going to be about the

children's memory which would be told from the viewpoint of what they remembered. In this version the use of the archive was limited. The second possibility that they found for the story was to make a denunciation film that exposed the silence that the State had kept and the cover-up about Roldós's assassination. In this second version of the story the archive had evidential purposes; it proved that the accident was actually a crime. In the third and final version, the makers set out a problematization on how history is written, from what perspectives the story is constructed and how the archive is resignified within this writing project. In this final version, "the archive does not play an evidential role any longer. Rather than proving some events –this happened this way, this person was in this place– the archive is valuable here because of its expressive content or because of the schism of meanings its update produces, the fact that it is retrieved from its original context and presented in another one" (Sarmiento, 2015, p. 167).

In this reflexive use of images that are not our own, open to expressiveness and re-significance, lies one of the values of the documentary which puts it in tune with contemporaneity. That is why we find affinity between the film's proposal and what Antonio Weinrichter called "the new archive culture". For the Spanish researcher, in the contemporary context the archive should be understood as "a dynamic, meaning-generating agency" that is associated with the entropy of significance, with meaning-producing practices, with semantic plurality, with the circumstantiality of images and its multiple social uses (2009, p. 106). It is precisely this conception that the film recovers in its appropriation of the archive images and documents. At first glance, it might seem that the documents are used as objects of irrefutable value that illustrate the narrator's ideas, but when the archive policies that the film uses are analyzed, this first impression fades. The narrative proposes several beginnings for the story, told alternatively with different documentary materials. Then, there are the conjectural and poetic uses of the archive. Finally, the film reflects the contingent way in which the truth of history is constructed,

which places us in front of the constructive and situational character of the meaning of the images quoted on the screen. The film's epilog makes a sort of meta-reflection on the act of documentary narration itself and the routes it opens up and shuts down. While the viewer watches footage of some crocodiles, the narrator delivers the following speech: "When writing history, we do not only choose what we will remember; above all, we decide what we will forget because it is not convenient to us. It all depends then on who remembers, on who chooses to remember and who forgets" (Scene 32). The documentary questions itself then by declaring the contingency of its own story and reflecting on the bias set out by its own narrative.

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER

In sum, we can say that, since the beginning of the century, there has been an unusual *boom* of documentaries that approach the past in different ways. The production of these films is an unprecedented fact since throughout its history the Ecuadorian documentary has hardly approached themes related with the recent historical past. In fact, the filmmakers of the 1980's and 1990's generation articulated their work around the utopian horizons that privileged the future. The irruption of a plethora of filmmakers interested in understanding collective memory and history comes as a symptom of a generation's need to seek, revise, rewrite and settle accounts with a past whose voids and silences made it incomprehensible. Using the language of the cinema, the documentary emerges as a powerful device to revise the national history and the construction of prosthetic memories in the era of the videosphere. Memory documentaries such as *With My Heart in Yambo* and historical films such as *The Death of Jaime Roldós*, by means of the poetic use of testimony or the archive, reconstruct the relationship we have with the past to drive us into the future. 🍷

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