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Review/ Reseña

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Documentary Turns in Latin America

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Latin American Documentary Film is often associated with the revolutionary activism of the 1960s and 1970s and the bold forms of Third Cinema that aimed to increase social consciousness about structures of power. As exemplified in Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's iconic criticism of neoimperialism *La hora de los hornos* (1968), the aesthetic and political dimensions of Third Cinema undermined the cinematic norms of "first cinema" (i.e. Hollywood) and challenged the passive viewing experience. Scholars in the fields of Latin American Studies and Film Studies have produced a solid corpus of research dedicated to examining the complexity and import of Third Cinema. However, Latin American documentary filmmaking has surged since the 1990s and new ground has been broken. By creating innovative filmic strategies to track shifting cultural climates and to engage lingering problems anew, filmmakers have generated paradigms that merit their own in-depth analysis. In response to the need to explore how the genre has changed over the last 25 years,

Michael Lazzara and Lupe Arenillas present their collection of essays, *Latin American Documentary Film in the New Millennium*.

In this timely volume, contemporary documentary film is framed as dynamic and relevant. It continues to provide a powerful outlet for social commentary, but with its own rhythms. This book defines the salient characteristics of Latin American documentary within its late 20th and early 21st century context, while at the same time tracing its longer trajectory and looking to the future. As Arenillas and Lazzara suggest, recent militant cinema movements, like Argentina's *cine piquetero* (picket-line cinema) or indigenous filmmaking by activist collectivities are, "in many ways connected to, although also distinct from, the Third Cinema movement" (4). The book articulates these different modes as "turns." Among them, the authors note the "Subjective Turn," the "Mobility Turn," the "Memory Turn" and the "Nondiscursive Turn." Questions regarding what lies beyond these modes are also explored. The volume additionally looks at certain tendencies, not considered turns per se. One section deals with the ethics of ethnographic filmmaking and the shifting roles of the filmmaker. Each trend is unique, but perhaps a common thread between them is a search. As Arenillas and Lazzara suggest, many documentaries are "exploratory journeys into the past" (v). Yet they find their strength not in concealing the often messy, difficult and incomplete process of the search, but rather in revealing it in all of its complexity.

The book is divided into three sections, each concentrating on an overarching theme from the 1990s to the present. The first investigates the "subjective turn," which involves a move to challenge the quest for objectivity while remaining hesitant to abandon it entirely. The book foregrounds the assertion that reflexive techniques allow filmmakers "to deconstruct the narratives that shape individuals and modern societies" (6). At the same time, many of the chapters in this first section are interested not only in showing that a subjective turn exists, but also how filmmakers today complicate and move beyond simple metacinematic referencing of the director's presence as an actor in his or her own films. In the first chapter, Michael Lazzara illustrates how Patricio Guzmán's filmic trajectory mimics, in a way, the move from Third Cinema toward the "subjective turn". He details how the observational approach that largely characterized the 1970s *La batalla de Chile* (1975-1979) contrasts with his more personal *Chile: La memoria obstinada* (1998) and *Salvador Allende* (2004) produced over twenty years later. Lazzara then juxtaposes Guzmán with the enduring combative and somewhat less self-referential mode of

Fernando Solanas, both then and now. By concluding with a consideration of new grassroots activism in Argentina and its cinematic channel known as *cine piquetero*, Lazzara indicates a certain return to the radical political cinema of the 1960s and 70s—a coexistence of multiple cinematic temporalities in present-day documentary work.

The conceptual core of each ensuing chapter in the first section adds nuance to our understanding of self-referential filmmaking—nuance that recognizes how this form might complicate the relation between the self and the other (6-7). Jorge Ruffinelli centers on the influential Argentine documentarian Andrés Di Tella, whose first-person films *La televisión y yo* (2002) and *Fotografías* (2007) exemplify the “subjective turn.” To the extent that they trace the multilayered personal stories that have shaped the filmmaker’s identity, these films contrast to some degree with the militant political cinema of 1960s. Yet Ruffinelli’s essay also reflects upon how Andrés Di Tella’s autobiographical documentaries provoke thought on the relationship between the public and the private. In this sense, Ruffinelli’s interpretation of Andrés Di Tella dialogues with Lazzara’s reading of Patricio Guzmán. Both critics eloquently demonstrate how “first-person cinema can be a powerful vehicle for engaging with and exploring the very public and collective dimensions of history and politics” (10).

Also under the rubric of the “subjective turn” is Antonio Gómez’s analysis of films revolving around 1980s countercultural figures in Argentina otherwise consigned to oblivion. Gómez takes into account films like *Luca* (2008) by director Rodrigo Espina and *La peli de Batato* (2011) by Goyo Anchou and Peter Pank. He contends that the subjective “I” constructs the narrative framework of the documentary, but intentionally “fades into the background” to alternatively bring into focus the collective dimensions of history. Since numerous films focused on Argentina in the 1970s or 1980s address the “Dirty Wars,” Gómez values the different perspective that these documentaries offer by rendering visible the Argentine underground music scene. Gómez is interested in charting a move beyond the subjective turn, or at least an attenuation of it, in the interest of promoting community and the recovery of alternative histories.

Pablo Piedras agrees that the subjective point of view is far more than an exercise in narcissism. For Piedras, life stories told through the documentary genre have the potential to raise questions about the relation between border crossings and identity formation. His chapter compares *Familia tipo* (2009), a documentary that links Argentina and Spain through a first person narrator, and *La chica del sur* (2012), a film

that traces the documentarian's travels first from Argentina to North Korea and later to South Korea. Using these films as examples, Piedras not only addresses subjective filmmaking tendencies, but also signals a "mobility turn" in recent Latin American documentary film. For Piedras these films illustrate the "mobility turn" because their "directors work beyond national and territorial borders and use movement or displacement to make first-person inquiries into foundations of identity (personal, political, and cultural)" (83). For instance, he reads Cecilia Priego's *Familia tipo* not only as personal journey from Argentina to Spain to better understand her own paternal roots, but also as a passage in time and place that urges viewers to consider the shaping of identities. In that journey, Priego discovers a second family that her father had attempted to efface from memory. Such abandonment and concealment is narrated by family members as part of a chain of effects linked to the Spanish Civil War, the dictatorial aftermath and exile. As the director deconstructs her own family's archive, she chronicles the multilayered effects of political conflict. She also illustrates the constructed nature of both identity and documentary film.

In "The Politics-Commodity: The Rise of Mexican Commercial Documentary in the Neoliberal Era," Ignacio Sánchez Prado asks often ignored questions about the structures of production and circulation of documentary films. He points out that the exclusive control of multiplex movie theaters like Cinemex, Cinépolis and Cinemark means that only scant time goes to Mexican films and that they often "cater to middle-and upper-class urban audiences" (99). That kind of restriction in turn "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" (100). He explains that "some documentaries proactively participate in neoliberal structures of circulation and production, even when, perhaps counterintuitively, their subject matter sets forth a critique of neoliberalism" (99). Using Juan Carlos Rulfo's *En el hoyo* (2006), he provides an example of a shift away from an explicit discourse of leftist resistance and towards a more paradoxical reflection on political engagement (103). He concludes that many films owe their wide distribution and success to "their politically ambiguous messages," which "manage to appeal to a diverse viewership" (11). Sánchez Prado recognizes that politically active documentary film is not entirely obsolete in México, but that its presence and impact is comparatively limited. His conclusion signals another contrast between the 1960s Third Cinema and trends in documentary film at the turn of the millennium.

Part one concludes with Gustavo Furtado's essay "Where are the People? The Politics of the Virtual and the Ordinary in Contemporary Brazilian Documentaries." For Furtado, documentary film has the potential to effectively contest the current "hyper-individualized neoliberal moment." His chapter looks at how certain Brazilian documentaries experiment with alternative constructions of intimacy and community that allow us to think in new ways about the individual and the collective-and spaces that they inhabit. He elaborates by analyzing three Brazilian films that capture everyday lives of a range of characters and the experience of isolation that often shapes them. For example, *O céu sobre os ombros* (2011) by Sérgio Borges features what Furtado calls "a virtual community of strangers" (120). The protagonists of the film are intentionally framed together, riding on public buses, yet they are physically so far apart that they are living a "collective solitude" (121). Their paths never actually cross. Images of these intersecting lives in transit signal another instance of the mobility that Piedras discusses; however here this trope is used to invite viewers to reflect upon disconnected social interaction. Furtado then compares this film with *KFZ-1348* by Gabriel Mascaro and Marcelo Pedroso (2008), which focuses on objects in ruins, namely the rusty remains of cars in a junkyard. It is significant that these objects represent lost mobility. The film sets the stage for viewers to recognize what is typically invisible, abandoned or decayed—that which "exists without fully belonging" (124). Through a montage of archival footage from a 1960s Volkswagen factory and interviews with the abandoned cars' previous owners, the film shows the social history of such evocative objects. By zooming in on the passage of objects into ruin, viewers are encouraged, on the one hand, to think about disconnection and loss, and on the other hand to see the unquenchable thirst for consumption in late-capitalist culture. In the end, the VW in question is torn apart, yet its social story is salvaged by the film. Without collapsing difference, Furtado's juxtaposition of films pushes readers to distinguish patterns of thematic focus and filmic strategies that function to stir thought on the current cultural climate and the need for connection in the shared present.

Part two is titled "The Ethics of Encounter." This section asks how documentary film might "represent the experience of another in a way that is not objectifying" (14). It assesses various attempts to democratize the conditions in which filmmakers render the other's experience knowable to the viewer. The strategies filmmakers choose become the basis for an "ethical" treatment of difference. In the first chapter, Joanna Page articulates the concept of "interculturalism" through an

analysis of new Argentine films that depart from views of ethnographic filmmaking as a way to simply gain an “objective” perspective about the other. She uses as examples Fermín Rivera’s *Huellas y memoria de Jorge Prelorán* (2009) and Ulises Rosell’s *El Etnógrafo* (2012). Both films focus on indigenous populations in Argentina and “experiment with certain forms of reflexivity without undermining their own truth-claims” (136). For instance, Rivera’s *Huellas* is a documentary about the filmic strategies of an esteemed documentarian. Page notes a “subjective turn” that is at once reflexive and politically engaged. Rivera’s biographical film tells the personal story of a filmmaking pioneer, but at the same time captures the commitment to projecting portraits of indigenous people that go beyond images of the primitive. As the younger filmmaker (Rivera) catches on screen his mentor’s creative process through interviews and archival footage, viewers witness how the art of ethnographic filmmaking and the art of cross-cultural relationships become intimately intertwined. For Page, such documentaries render visible an image of “encounters that bring people together, respect difference, and foster understanding without appropriating another’s experience” (12).

Other chapters in part two focus on Brazil, Peru, Colombia, and Panamá to further explore how documentary film might present horizontal rather than vertical relationships. In “Performance, Reflexivity, and the Languages of History in Contemporary Brazilian Documentary Film” Jens Andermann examines the multiple modes of filmmakers from various generations. The first mode can be described as documentary reflexivity, which Andermann traces back to Eduardo Coutinho’s *Cabra marcado para morrer* (1984). The film is shot over a four-year period against the shifting backdrop of Brazil’s transition from dictatorship to democracy, which took place roughly between 1979-1985. Coutinho’s *Cabra* brings to the fore a reunited group of former peasant activists as they reflect on their former selves, their loss and the passage of time. The second mode, which Andermann finds in works by Sandra Kogut and Joao Moreira Salles, “introduce the filmmakers as characters in their own stories. In both of these films, the director’s identity becomes an object of inquiry: Kogut’s, as she registers her two-year quest for Hungarian citizenship; Moreira Salles as he revisits his childhood and upper-class upbringing at the height of Brazilian modernity” (163). Finally, filmmakers Paulo Sacramento, Marcelo Pedroso and Gabriel Mascaro exemplify the third mode, which involves a displacement of the camera. By putting the camera in the hands of the people the filmmaker aims to represent, these films blur “the conceptual distinction and distribution of

representational agency between subjects and authors” (156). Representation becomes a collective act. This essay demonstrates Arenillas and Lazzara’s contention that recent ethnographic filmmaking complicates the encounter; it “ceases to produce a unidirectional, hierarchical, or positivist gaze and instead becomes an organic process of give-and-take” (12).

In a similar vein, Talía Dajes and Sofía Velázquez use the Caravana Documentary Project (CDP) in Peru to examine how documentary filmmaking might become “a tool for community building and self-expression” (176). The CDP was conceived as a workshop “offering participants practical, theoretical, methodological, and technical approaches to documentary filmmaking” (182). It sought to provide “a space in which hegemonic discourses—on a range of topics such as gender, race, national identity, and politics—could be disrupted” (182). This chapter shows how the work of collectives like CDP break down the subject/object hierarchy and democratize filmic practices by putting cameras into the hands of the underrepresented. In the following chapter Marta Cabrera also highlights this type of filmmaking in the context of Colombia. Cabrera studies the work of a Colombian collective that teaches “bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, heterodissident, tortilleras, trans, intersex, [and] queer activists to be audiovisual producers” (196) Cabrera argues that “the collective’s work strives toward promoting a more participatory and inclusive public sphere” (197). This section concludes with Emily Davidson’s “Capturing the ‘Real’ in Panamá’s Canal Ghettos.” This essay critically looks at the problems of representing poverty. Davidson explains that whereas some documentaries run the risk of falling into a voyeuristic “poverty porn”, others subvert such power dynamics by featuring subjects that film their own experiences and thereby the move away from the objectifying gaze of the elite filmmaker. Taken together, the authors in this section underscore the effort to construct a “less restricted—and more inclusive—gaze, both in political and ethical terms” (14).

The third and final section is titled “Performing Truth: Memory Politics and Documentary Filmmaking.” Taking Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala as examples, the contributors deal with the representation of contentious memories of social upheaval, revolutionary movements, and dictatorial power. María Laura Lattanzi revisits the history of the disappeared in the Southern Cone through the eyes of the biological children of the victims. Using *Papá Iván, M*, and *El edificio de los Chilenos* as case studies, Lattanzi makes it clear that recent autobiographical documentaries produced by the second generation depart from the goal of total reconstruction and instead center on

how and why memories are constructed. In their attempt to apprehend the past, filmmakers often expose a sense of estrangement produced by the search for roots, rather than a comfortable sense of proximity. In sum, Lattanzi indicates that such critically complex and historicized narratives become far more instructive than heroic eulogies.

Bernardita Llanos describes similar processes of trans-generational communication of memory and its representation; however, her chapter brings out the important element of gender in the construction of identities, memories and bonds. By focusing on films by and about women, Llanos details how documentary becomes a site from which to critique patriarchal values that have impacted women of the political Left and their children in the context of Argentina and Chile. She argues that militant mothers and their daughters have found themselves conflicted by masculinist versions of history that have often regulated their social roles (246). Their films thus function to “mobilize memory as a powerful tool to rewrite their experiences and stories and to affirm an identity in the present while examining the past” (246).

Whereas Llanos pays attention to how mothers and daughters remember and represent their own memories of upheaval in the Southern Cone, Valeria Grinberg turns to the case of Guatemala to ask how the firsthand perspectives of survivors’ might be represented by others without appropriating or displacing them (259). In considering the context of the Guatemalan Civil War, she points to the important intersection of race in the construction of identities and hierarchies of power. Since the legacies of colonial segregation and racial discrimination played an integral role in the extermination of indigenous peoples during the war, it is even more important to consider how to move away from an objectifying gaze. To frame her discussion of the film *El eco del dolor de mucha gente* by Ana Lucía Cuevas, she considers Dominic LaCapra’s call 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” (260). This chapter dialogues with the essays in section two and adds another dimension to the “Ethics of Encounter.”

The volume ends with thoughtful reflection on how silence might become a means of producing knowledge. María Guadalupe Arenillas announces a new paradigm that she calls the “nondiscursive turn,” which she identifies in films that zoom in on former clandestine torture centers in Argentina now converted into memory sites. She focuses, in particular, on films by Jonathan Perel and Martín

Oesterheld. For Arenillas, it is not that past discourses “have lost their relevance, but rather that they belong to another realm and have somehow become disconnected from present struggles” (275-276). Without discrediting the import of testimonio, she vindicates a move away from voice over narration and traditional talking head interviews. She wonders how nondiscursive films might grapple in new ways with Argentina’s recent past and finds that films featuring quiet sounds and the gaze “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” (276). In a word, her chapter redefines silence and attunes the reader’s ear to better appreciate the finer subtleties of absence as a representation of destruction.

To conclude, this collection of essays illustrates why documentary film continues to be relevant. As Arenillas suggests, this cinematic genre might provoke a “step back” from entrenched discourses about the past (275). In reimagining the possibilities for documentary expression and mapping its evolution over time, this book makes inroads, with clarity and direction, to numerous fields, even beyond Latin American Studies and Film Studies. I would recommend this book to students, researchers and the wider reading public interested in issues of memory, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, trauma, neoliberalism, emerging collectivities and the representation of these in film. The essays are beautifully written, thoughtfully organized and carefully edited. This book would be a useful text in the classroom and a valuable addition to collections in academic libraries, public libraries, and general interest bookstores. With a distinctive voice *Latin American Documentary Film in the New Millennium* offers fresh conceptual insights into the most current films and examines contexts that are often underrepresented.