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Review / Reseña

Ramírez-Soto, Elizabeth. *(Un)veiling Bodies: A Trajectory of Chilean Post-Dictatorship Documentary*. Studies in Hispanic and Lusophone Cultures 20. Cambridge: Legenda, 2019.

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In the introduction to *(Un)veiling Bodies: A Trajectory of Chilean Post-Dictatorship* Documentary, Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto notes that Chile documentary film studies are still something of an "incipient field," given that most research to date about cultural production of the post-Pinochet period has focused on fiction film, as well as on literature, memorials, and other genres (9). Only since about 2005 have Chilean film critics been studying the documentaries of the postdictatorship period in a more systematic way. Works by important film critics such as Iván Pinto, Claudia Bossay, Constanza Vergara, María Theresa Johannson, Catalina Donoso, Wolfgang Bongers, and others, have tended to focus on certain aspects of documentary filmmaking: the material operations of documentary, the emergence of films narrated in the first-person, the specificities of films that address the dictatorial past, and the kinds of films being made by emerging, young directors (9). U.S.-based Latin Americanists, for their part, have tended to analyze documentary film within the context of broader debates on memory, as one genre among others that have sought to represent difficult and conflictive pasts; this kind of focus often erases the particularities of the documentary form as a filmic medium and instead privileges the thematic content of documentary

films. Within this diverse and burgeoning critical landscape, Ramírez-Soto's book is a breath of fresh air and a major contribution insofar as it is the first book to approach Chilean documentary production of the post-dictatorship period comprehensively, providing a framework for approaching a wide array of films produced in Chile between 1990 and 2011, the first two decades of the transition to democracy.

The main argument of *(Un)veiling Bodies* holds that from the early 1990s, until now, a shift has taken place within the universe of Chilean documentary filmmaking. If a first phase of documentary films produced between 1990 and 2003—what Ramírez-Soto calls the "long first decade" of the transition—tended to focus on (un)veiling the bodies and experiences of the dictatorship's direct victims and their families, a second phase of documentary filmmaking, dating from 2003, moved beyond those directly affected by the violence to include a range of other memories and legacies of dictatorship: memories of students and other actors who fought in the 1980s to bring down the regime, memories of children of militants who struggled to define their identities and understand their parents' political activism, stories of civilian collaborators and accomplices, and even the voices of relatives of perpetrators. This polyphony of memories introduced new textures and experiences that enriched the documentary landscape while also begging further reflection on the ethics of representation.

By 2003, a number of things had happened: Pinochet had been detained in London (1998); a second truth commission specifically focused on torture, the Valech Commission (2003), sought to rectify debts left pending from the early 1990s; it had been discovered that Pinochet was harboring secret bank accounts abroad, lessening his heroism in the eyes of the right and making him more vulnerable to criticism; and an uptick in trials had set in motion a greater move toward (at least, *partial*) justice. In short, by 2003, Chile had worked beyond the memory "impasse" that historian Steve Stern, in *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998* (Duke University Press, 2004), says characterized the first decade of the transition. Memory became an unavoidable subject, and documentary film affirmed its place as one of the primary media through which new configurations of memory were taking shape.

In charting a shift from a *cinema of the affected* (that is, of the victims and their families) to a *cinema of affect* (one that is capable of touching the viewer while also touching a broader range of memories and subjectivities), Ramírez-Soto maps Chilean documentary films in a way that permits us to situate and categorize them without imposing a framework that is overly determinant or teleological. While it is fair to note

an evolution in themes and forms, as well as certain shifts in emphasis over time, it is also fair to say that the "cinema of the affected" and that of "affect" coexist in certain moments; they reach backward and forward in time to inform one another and should not be understood as mutually exclusive or isolated categories. Rather, these categories are tools for understanding the mechanisms and intentions that have guided Chilean documentary production.

The book's first chapter provides a broad historical and cinematic context in which to situate the documentary production of the 1990s and 2000s, identifying both *political vocation* and *formal experimentation* as two hallmarks that have long characterized Chilean documentary. Ramírez-Soto affirms that it would be inaccurate to claim that formal experimentation has only been part and parcel with Chilean documentary filmmaking in the last two or three decades. To the contrary, she notes that a "thriving film scene" started taking shape as early as the 1950s, with the emergence of the Instituto Fílmico de la Universidad Católica (1955) and the Centro de Cine Experimental, founded in 1957 at the Universidad de Chile. Though film production inside Chile certainly suffered during the dictatorship years, the cinema of exile flourished. And by the 1980s, in a climate of political opening and protest within the country, a "deeply heterogeneous audiovisual production, ranging from video-art to fiction, including the first-person documentaries of exiled filmmakers had emerged" (35).

The late 1990s saw the opening of an important space for documentary films with the founding of FIDOCS, Chile's International Festival of Documentary Film, which was created by Patricio Guzmán in 1997 and which has enjoyed enormous success. Since the early 2000s, there has been, in general, a marked increase in the number of documentaries produced in Chile. Ramírez-Soto attributes this "boom" (of sorts) to a number of factors, including: the political juncture of 2003 (the 30th anniversary of the September 11, 1973, coup), "the increasingly widespread use of digital video, the proliferation of filmmaking schools and film festivals, and, above all, the creation of a new institutional framework" (48). Documentary films have really become an alternative space for addressing the country's recent past, largely because, throughout the transition—and until quite recently—television tended to shy away from tackling subjects that some within Chilean society found too controversial or unsettling.

Chapter 2 looks at the first "long-decade" of the transition and argues that most documentaries of that period focused on the direct effects of violence on human

bodies and on the social body. The "cinema of the affected," as Ramírez-Soto calls it, was about establishing *proof* that atrocity had occurred. Films focused on the direct victims and their relatives relied heavily on "talking head" testimonies, generally avoided the use of the first-person narrator in order to emphasize a sense of objectivity, and included images of atrocity (or reenactments) that aimed to shock the spectator (64). Films of this period, however, tended to avoid the direct representation of torture, which was a social taboo during the first decade of the transition; instead, these early documentaries focused on the lasting effects of the violence. Interestingly, in Chile, as in other countries, a documentary cinema of forensic anthropology emerged that focused on the unearthing and mourning of the remains of the detained-and-disappeared. A classic Chilean example would be Silvio Caiozzi's *Fernando ha vuelto* (1998), which follows the mourning process of Fernando Olivares Mori, a MIR militant who disappeared in 1973. This film later became quite talked about and controversial when it was discovered that the remains portrayed on screen were not really those of Fernando at all and that Chile's Legal-Medical Service had misidentified a number of bodies. This prompted Caiozzi to make a second documentary that features a long interview with Fernando's widow titled *¿Fernando ha vuelto a desaparecer?* (2006).

By the late 1990s and early 2000s the voices of torture survivors began to take center-stage: image and voice spoke together as those who had suffered under Pinochet sought words and metaphors to describe the horrors they had experienced. In that same time period, debates about the *representability* of trauma dominated literary and cultural studies. As examples from this time period, a film like Carmen Castillo's *La Flaca Alejandra* (1994) was probably ahead of its time in tackling the theme of torture and other even more taboo subjects like that of the collaboration of leftist militants with the regime's apparatus. Other films like Gloria Camiruaga's *La venda* (2000) stressed the gendered dimensions of torture. In one sequence, a group of women survivors sits in a garden together and constructs polyphonic memories of their pasts. Voices complement each other, providing mutual support and empathic listening.

As the years passed and the "children of dictatorship" (those who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s) became adults, cultural production in the Southern Cone started to focus first on the memories and voices of those whose parents suffered or were persecuted directly, and later on the voices of other young people who were not direct descendants of victims but who also had important stories to tell. This cinema was deeply affective and sensorial in nature, focused on subjective experience, and largely narrated in the first-person. Much in keeping with what was going on with documentary

production around the world, the "personal" documentary blossomed in Chile as it did elsewhere. In the case of Argentina, Pablo Piedras wrote extensively about the emergence of *El cine documental en primera persona* (2013), while Alisa Lebow, in her edited book *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* (2012), commented on the pervasiveness of the first-person documentary as a global phenomenon of the 1990s and 2000s, perhaps as a symptom of neoliberal individualism or a reaction to it. As the "biographical space" (Leonor Arfuch, *El espacio biográfico: dilemas de la subjetividad contemporánea*, 2002) prevailed and the image of the "pueblo" faded from sight (Gonzalo Aguilar, *Más allá del pueblo: imágenes, indicios y políticas de cine*, 2016) or was evoked only nostalgically by certain directors, the screen became dominated by intimate stories of young people whose lives had been deeply affected by history. In many ways, as Ramírez-Soto argues, the cinema of exile (which she examines in depth in Chapter 3)—affective, full of wanderings and longings, travelers and traveling shots—served to anticipate some of the stylistic features that would later dominate *el cine de los hijos*. This new cinema (examined in Chapter 4) contrasted markedly with that of the 1990s in various senses: truth and proof were no longer the main obsessions, but rather the attempt to complicate the very notions of truth and memory; direct testimony started to be replaced by non-representational or more mediated forms; and new voices such as those of Pinochet's collaborators or supporters appeared (137). Landmark films of this period include examples such as Macarena Aguiló's *El edificio de los chilenos* (2010), in which a daughter of MIR militants who was raised in Cuba by her parents' *compañeros* confronts a sense of abandonment and questions her parents' choice of their militancy over their family. Marcela Said's *I Love Pinochet* (2001) deconstructed the mentality of those who supported the regime, showing how widespread that support really was. Other works, like Tiziana Panizza's *Cartas visuales* trilogy (2004-2012), a series of epistolary works filmed in Super-8, blend history and personal memory through a combination of the filmmaker's own footage with "found footage, graphic animations, and handwritten texts" (141). Ramírez-Soto observes that "while the children of direct victims [tend to] use the materiality of the image to breach the gap that separates them from their fathers who died at the hands of the regime," a broader generation "develops discourses around the prosthetic quality of memory, thus cinematically exploring the possibilities of making other people's memories one's own" (147).

The book's final chapter (Chapter 5) is aptly titled "Extending the Circle," and looks at the continued expansion of the voices and memories that have appeared in

Chilean documentaries since 2003. Working beyond direct bloodlines with the victims, these documentaries of the "broader second generation" "expand the idea of the 'directly affected'" by taking into account "previously disregarded stories as well as [some] rather unsettling voices" (150). Part of the chapter looks at a series of films that harken back to 1980s street protests through the use of archival footage. The films, Ramírez-Soto argues, take an almost celebratory look at the rebellions of the past, begging the question of whether the directors are somehow longing in the present for a kind of political insurrection that they (at least at that time) felt was somehow missing. Curiously, many of these films debuted on the eve of the massive student protests that would take Chile by storm in 2006 and 2011. Read in the context of today's massive rebellion against neoliberalism, these films also acquire an almost prophetic character that complements the nostalgic gesture that Ramírez-Soto reads in them. The latter part of Chapter 5 and the Conclusion look at a series of particularly daring films: *El Mocito* (2010, by Marcela Said), *La muerte de Pinochet* (2011, by Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff) and *El pacto de Adriana* (2017, by Lissette Orozco). In films such as these, the protagonists are abject figures: lackeys who aided and abetted the dictatorship, conscripts obliged to do military service and commit horrific acts, common citizens isolated from any sense of community by the forces of neoliberalism, and the niece of a civilian collaborator with Pinochet's secret police who discovers the "true story" of her aunt's dark past. Films like *El pacto de Adriana*, in particular, are quite daring. Lissette Orozco forsakes her own blood relative and "outs" her to the viewer in the service of the greater, public good. In this important gesture, the individual sacrifices something of herself in the interest of the collective: duty to the family gives way to the filmmaker's obligation to the broader community.

Several features of Ramírez-Soto's book stand out. First, the book is impeccably documented and researched and shows a deep familiarity with bibliographies on Chile's recent past that have been produced both in Chile and Latin America, as well as in the Anglophone world. These bibliographies, interdisciplinary by nature, allow the author to situate her work in a productive dialogue at the intersection of affect theory, trauma studies, memory studies, film studies, cultural studies, politics, history, and gender, without privileging any of these literatures over the other (12). Ramírez-Soto draws productively on all of these bodies of work to point out their limitations and potential for critical inquiry.

Second, the book works with over 100 films (an impressive corpus) and includes a filmography that will undoubtedly serve as an important resource for

students and scholars seeking to pursue new lines of research within Chilean documentary studies or Latin American film studies more generally.

Third, the book makes a concerted effort to work beyond the "big names" in Chilean documentary—names like Ignacio Agüero, Patricio Guzmán, and others. Certainly, these names are present and analyzed, but the book also rescues *for/from* the archive a vast group of nearly forgotten directors and films that open the reader's mind to appreciate the breadth of what Chilean documentary film both has been and is. This is an especially important gesture for international readers who will likely be unfamiliar with Chilean documentaries beyond those that make headlines or play in major international festivals.

Fourth, the book establishes important links among several generations: the revolutionary generation of the 1970s, the generation born under military rule, and the generations born after 1990, those who came to know their country's "recent past" through socialization, education, exposure to the media, and other means. Ramírez-Soto's work reveals that films made from the 1990s until now have established—either implicitly or explicitly—important transgenerational conversations that urge us to think about how taking a broader view of the filmic landscape might enrich our understanding of individual films or directors who often get read in isolation.

Finally, throughout the book there is great attention paid to the *form* of documentary. Especially in more recent films, directors seem to be focusing on the materiality of the image, attentive to what Ramírez-Soto, citing Laura Marks, calls the "film's skin"—a "haptic visuality" in which the image "touches" the spectator, triggering in him or her a range of possible memories and affective responses. Such an approach pushes the conversation on documentary far beyond the stale, though classic debates about objectivity and subjectivity; it shows that documentary film is not only a medium capable of *capturing* memories but also of actively *creating* and *triggering* them through sensory experience.

My reading of *(Un)veiling Bodies* only captures some of its gestures and arguments in broad brushstrokes. Of course, much of the book's beauty is in the texture of its passing references, the depth of its critical apparatus, and the comprehensiveness of its approach. The book takes us up to 2011. Since then, of course, much in Chile has changed, especially recently, making us wonder what is coming next for Chilean documentarians. I can imagine a second edition of this book in several years that continues to tell the story of Chilean documentary film. And I would envision that the documentary production to come will no longer turn inward toward the realms of the

intimate and the subjective but rather outward again, toward the collective, toward the street, to document an epic struggle to undo the deep legacies of dictatorship—legacies that, as we know, have proven just as obstinate as the memories that long to destroy them.