

Texturing the Past: Women Documentary Makers and the Narration of Pinochet Dictatorship¹

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Women have played a major role in the national memory struggles that followed the fall of Latin American dictatorships² and in Chile, the presence of female documentary makers in this battle has been significant, becoming increasingly prominent in the last decade. Their presence in the audiovisual field is not something new, given that even before the end of Augusto Pinochet military regime, women were producing mostly experimental videos in which they questioned the status quo. However, since the return to democracy, after 17 years of a bloodthirsty dictatorship, the presence of women documentary makers has become increasingly significant, working with a wide range of topics³. Today, several female directors from different generations, such as Marilu Mallet, Carmen Castillo, Marcela Said and Lorena Giachino, among many others, still contribute both inside the country and abroad, to keep the memory of the past atrocities alive despite the ‘whitewashing’ process that has characterised the Chilean transition to democracy⁴.

In this paper I will focus on the work of a new generation of filmmakers that began directing more than a decade after the return to democracy. The works I examine here are directed by a ‘second generation’ of documentary makers - children of direct victims of political violence - and all of them grew up in exile. I will refer to: Macarena Aguiló’s *The Chilean’s Building* [El Edificio de los Chilenos] (2010) (co-directed by Susana Foxley), Antonia Rossi’s *The Echo of Songs* [The Echo of Songs] (2010) and Alejandra Carmona’s *Somewhere in Heaven* [En Algún Lugar del Cielo] (2003).

These are all memory documentaries that seek to rewrite the recent past. On the one hand, these works oppose the cultural amnesia fostered by the hegemonic discourses that have characterised the Chilean transition constructed on the motto of consensus and reconciliation. On the other, I would argue, these works seek to elaborate a narrative

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² See for example, Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Struggles for Memory* (London: Latin American Bureau, 2003), particularly, Chapter 6 ‘Engendered Memories’, pp. 76- 88

³ Jacqueline Mouesca *El Documental Chileno*, (Santiago: LOM, 2005) p. 131-135

⁴ Tomas Moulian, *Chile Actual: Anatomía de un Mito* (Santiago, LOM, 2002, 3rd ed)

that is at once public and intimate, while also formally conveying the texture of memory.

These documentaries may differ in some senses, but here I will focus on their common features. All of them deal with personal memories of exile and return and, therefore, have a strong autobiographical dimension; they are self-reflexive works and present a mixture between documentary and fictional strategies.

The works developed by these three young filmmakers also share similar narrative strategies. First, the use of a childlike imaginary and point of view, which might explain their sense of collage and their use of different supports, such as Super-8 or 16 mm., family pictures, letters, drawings, animation. The use of these different elements also adds to the sense of fragmentation in their narrations, and serves, consequently, to the construction of the texture of memory. Second, these documentaries seek to bring the past into the present, or sometimes even to collapse both times. Thirdly, these are metaphorical and literal journeys to the past. Finally, they present a complex interconnection between the personal and the collective and seem indeed to be looking for ways, as Argentine sociologist Elizabeth Jelin puts it 'to combine the need to construct a public narrative that at the same time contributes to the recuperation of intimacy and privacy'⁵. These young documentary makers seem to be elaborating narratives that create, in Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer's terms, a sense of 'shared privacy'⁶.

I conceive their narrations as travelling memories by travelling women. By referring to the notion of travelling, I am considering the material experience of displacement suffered by these filmmakers, but I am also aligning with a more transcultural approach to memory studies. This perspective goes beyond the nation-state model and seems more appropriate within the context of globalisation, particularly considering the fundamental role that media plays in the construction and circulation of memory throughout images and sounds. In this sense, my understanding of memory here draws

⁵ Jelin, p. 114

⁶ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, 'Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission' *Poetics Today* 27: 2 (Summer 2006) p. 377

particularly on the work developed by memory and media scholars such as Astrid Erll and Marianne Hirsch.

Hirsch's concept of post-memory stresses the generational differences in recalling the past, emphasising the affective and creative relation to an event that was not experienced directly⁷. In *Song to Life* [Canto a la Vida] (1990), director Lucía Briones, who deals with the memories of Chilean exile women from different generations, poses a fundamental question. She asks 'Can the years we never lived be recalled?'. Though the director is referring here to the years that herself and other exile women did not experience under the Pinochet regime, this deeply ethical question will be reformulated and taken further by this new generation of filmmakers who will pose this question quite explicitly. Directors Aguiló, Rossi and Carmona, will explore, either verbally or more formally, the possibilities and limitations of recalling a deeply traumatic event which was not experienced; that of the violent end of Salvador Allende's government and the dictatorship that followed, a history only heard by them through narrations.

Erll's notion of transcultural memory, on the other hand, emphasises 'the incessant wanderings of contents, forms, media, technologies and practices of memories that travel and transform through time and space and across historical, linguistic and national boundaries.'⁸ I draw both on Erll's and Hirsch understanding of memory to highlight that these filmmakers deal with, and elaborate, memories that circulate and are in permanent motion. These are memories that travel through time and space and are incorporated through other people's narrations, images and sounds and are not exclusively acquired by an experience lived directly. Thus, these memories are transformed from generation to generation; from one documentary to another and they circulate from one country to another (for instance, these works arguably circulate more widely abroad than in Chile via festival circuits). These films are inserted in a global world, yet at the same time, and this is fundamental, they remain historically and politically grounded.

⁷ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997)

⁸ Astrid Erll 'Travelling Memory: Remediation across Time, Space and Cultures', keynote address, *Transcultural Memory Conference*, 4 - 6 February 2010, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Goldsmiths and The Centre for the Study of Cultural Memory, Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of London. See also her 'Regional integration and (trans)cultural memory', *Asia Europe Journal* (2010) 8: 305-315

The displaced condition of directors Aguiló, Carmona and Rossi seems to take them to question the traditional and gendered dichotomy of dwelling and travelling⁹ as well as to establish an intimate connection between movement and emotion. One can see in their deeply affective films a shift from what Guiliana Bruno's calls an 'old cinematic voyeur' to a 'moving vessel of film *voyageuse*'¹⁰ in which both feeling and movement become intricately woven. By journeying, these documentary makers seek to put the past on the move, in order to avoid falling into nostalgia and on a fixed and homogenous version of the past. As Chilean philosopher Carlos Pérez V. puts it they seek 'To distinguish between commemoration and memory, as one opposes erection to fold; the private memory consist in that which the monument erases'.¹¹

These works are not total or reified versions of a fixed past but instead are works in transit, which might explain the recurrent use of what Hamid Naficy has termed 'thirdspace chronotopes' or sites of transit¹². I would argue that one could see in these films a distinctive use of travelling shots taken from vehicles such as cars, trains or boats in order to:

- Express female subjectivity, since it is always the voice of a woman behind these moving/subjective cameras
- Work as a device which aims to either bring the past into the present or even to collapse these temporal dimensions, following the tradition established by filmmaker Alain Resnais in *Night and Fog* (1955) but particularly, in *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959)
- Convey a feeling of displacement or estrangement. To some extent, to depict the experience of the uncanny,
- But more importantly, and closely related to this last point, to create a sensorial experience of the past, since the use of this thirdspace chronotopes is not only

⁹ For a questioning of these gendered categories see for example, Guiliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion. Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (New York: Verso, 2007, 2nd ed) and James Clifford, 'Travelling Cultures', in *Cultural Studies*, Ed. Laurence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992) pp. 96- 116

¹⁰ Bruno, p.102

¹¹ Carlos Pérez V. in *Roser Bru*, Adriana Valdés (ed) (Santiago: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1996) (unpaged) quoted in Adriana Valdés, 'A propósito de *Handle with Care*: apuntes sobre mujeres en las artes visuales en Chile', *Revista de Crítica Cultural*, n° 35 (June, 2007), p. 34. My translation

¹² Hamid Naficy, *An accented cinema: exilic and diasporic filmmaking* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2001)

visual but in Naficy terms ‘synaesthetic, involving the entire human sensorium and memory’¹³.

I would like to illustrate this by referring to a sequence from *The Chilean’s Building*. This documentary deal mostly with the memories of the children of militants from the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR), a radical left movement violently crushed by Pinochet’s regime; many of its militants disappeared or went into exile. The film shows these children today, recalling the childhood they spend in the ‘Project Home’ in the late 70s. The Project home was a community centre located in Cuba that sheltered around 60 children that were left to the care of 20 ‘social parents’ while their own biological parents returned to Chile to fight undercover against the military regime. The director Macarena Aguiló was one of these kids.

In a particular sequence at the beginning of the documentary, the director recalls her departure from Chile to rejoin her mother already in exile in France. Here, one can see how Aguiló goes from the objective, historical experience of exile - using black and white archival footage - to then gradually move to a deeply subjective narration of the past. First, by the incorporation of family pictures and drawings, and later on, by the incorporation of the travelling shot sequence, which is of a particularly grainy quality. The director uses 16mm. footage to formally convey the texture of those fleeting moments shared with her mother during her childhood while living in exile in Paris. This sequence also conveys the director’s bafflement as a child and her limitations to understand the adults’ world, making evident the difficulties to relate to their past political experiences. For example, her voice, recorded when she was a child saying ‘I want to pee!’ clashes with that of a man asking ‘What does a ‘strategy of popular war’ mean?’. Finally, the boundaries between the documentary and the fictional are also blurred since the sound, as I have said, is of documentary nature, whereas the footage, shot from the train and inside the flat, was re-staged specifically for her documentary.

The use of family pictures, letters, drawings, home movies in different formats (either of documentary nature or reenacted ones), seem not only to create a childlike point of view in the works of these directors, but also to question the limits between the personal

¹³ Naficy, p. 153

and the public spheres. Both in *The Chilean's Building* and in *Somewhere in Heaven*, the directors interrogate this dichotomy by using archive material -such as newsreel and newspaper cuts- that deal publicly with the tragic events that marked their own personal experiences. In Aguiló's case, her kidnapping as a child by the secret police and the separation from her parents, and in Carmona's case, the death of her father, Augusto Carmona, a journalist and also a militant of the MIR, murdered during the dictatorship.

In *Somewhere in Heaven*, the director, who grew up in Berlin, aims to re-construct the image of her father, but at the same time, to create a sense of shared subjectivity by interviewing friends that like her, faced similar painful experiences. Carmona constructs this shared privacy by including, for example, reenacted and deeply subjective sequences, both of her own traumatic childhood (as when she found out about the death of her father) and that of her friend (for example, when her friend's mother was captured by the secret police while she was playing on the street). In her documentary, Carmona also acknowledges the difficulties to access a past indirectly experienced and explicitly states 'I begin to collect other people's images and memories that I make my own...I make my own with the eagerness to get closer to my father'.

This idea of making other people's memories one's own in order to be able to make sense of the past, is taken further in the more experimental film directed by Antonia Rossi, *The Echo of Songs*. Located on the brink of fiction, the director recollects and interweave in a poetic and somehow chaotic way, documentary, fictional and animated images. These images are woven together by the commentary of a fictive female narrator, constructed by Rossi from numerous testimonies she gathered from 'second generation' accounts that, like her, grew up in exile, listening to their parent's songs and stories. This is a disembodied and nameless narrator that speaks in the first person, and that therefore, seems to function as a subjective embodiment of the collective experience of exile.

Rossi also uses the travelling shot in her work and uses home movies in a very interesting way. In the film, the director merges both her own home movies footage as well as that which she managed to collect from other families that lived in exile. Through the editing she is able to beautifully and wittily construct a sort of coming of age story of the narrator; an allegory of the displaced individual. Tellingly, in *The Echo*

of Songs, the official history of Chile appears almost always mediated, either by a television screen – we can see historical events through the news – or we can only access it through voices. For example, at the beginning of the documentary, the spectator can only hear the voices of the militaries against the black screen but not see them.

I have explicitly chosen to refer to least realist sequences in order to show that a political commitment with the past is still fundamental for these generations while they also experiment with formal strategies. French philosopher Jacques Rancière said in a relatively recent interview, ‘The artistic work of memory is that which accords everyone the dignity of fiction’¹⁴ and it is precisely through this playful relation to the documentary image that these filmmakers aim to come to terms with the past, their own, but also that of the country.

¹⁴ Marie-Aude Baronian and Mireille Rossello (Interview with Jacques Rancière), ‘Jacques Rancière and Indisciplinarity’, translated by Gregory Elliot, *Art & Research, A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Summer, 2008) [Online] available at <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/jrinterview.html>, (Accessed 8th March 2011).

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