


DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW ESSAY

Memory on the Threshold: Public and Private Reckoning in Recent Argentine and Brazilian Documentary Films

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This essay reviews the following works:

Adiós a la memoria/A Farewell to Memory. Dir. Nicolás Prividera. Prod. Pablo Ratto. Argentina, 2020, 95 min. Film is available on Vimeo.

Ficción privada/Private Fiction. Dir. Andrés Di Tella. Prod. Gema Films. Argentina, 2019, 78 min. Film is available on Vimeo.

No intenso agora/In the Intense Now. Dir. João Moreira Salles. Prod. Maria Carlota Bruno. Brazil, 2017, 127 min. DVD.

A trend that has marked Latin American documentary cinema since at least the early 2000s is a disdain for the omniscient narrator. The recent films of João Moreira Salles, Andrés Di Tella, and Nicolás Prividera follow this trend. Rather than focusing on collective memory or grand narratives and taking the approach of more traditional, mainstream documentaries, these three films focus instead on the ruptures, interstices, and fragments of such totalizing accounts of history and memory. In a distinctly postmodern fashion, the repudiation of a totalizing history is at the center of these three intimate and markedly melancholic explorations of how the task of memorializing and defining shape.

All three documentary films feature personal, familial artifacts as their centerpiece. While Salles's *No intenso agora* showcases the video footage from his mother's trip to Maoist China during the Cultural Revolution, Prividera's *Adiós a la memoria* inspects home movies and family photos shot by his father before the latter's memory deteriorated in the years following the forced disappearance of his wife, the director's mother. Di Tella's *Ficción privada* focuses on the letters written between his Indian immigrant mother and Argentine father and dramatizes these epistolary exchanges using a pair of hired actors who are also in a romantic relationship. It is important to note that while Prividera's and Di Tella's documentaries revolve almost entirely around these familial artifacts and dynamics, Salles's production does not limit itself to the family story but goes beyond it to examine often anonymous archival footage of other revolutionary conflicts of the 1960s, namely the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Paris uprisings in May 1968.

Although all three documentary films explore political events, what unifies them is their exploration of this past through a heavily depoliticized lens. Rather than focusing

on historical facts and figures, Salles, Di Tella, and Prividera are more invested in looking at the shadowy underbelly of the grand narratives of history. These stories of the past are recounted through amateur footage shot by family members (and, in *No intenso agora*, by anonymous rookie filmmakers). This personal touch allows them to stray from a utopic, idealizing, or heroic vision of the past and instead center on the ruins of what is in fact an impossible re-memorialization, the accompanying disillusionment, and a mundane representation of those characters of the past.

In all three films, the audience is shown artifacts of the past: photographs, home movie clips, and manuscripts from ghosts of the past whose lives they examine. For the filmmakers, however, the interest in these artifacts lies not in what they overtly display but in what they are hiding. Rather than an interest in the thousand words a picture is worth, these documentaries ask what is still shrouded in secrecy and what has been silenced to produce images of the past. One 1968 home movie by an anonymous amateur filmmaker in *No intenso agora*, for instance, shows a clip of what appear to be a child's first steps, until the director's voice interjects to clarify that although the camera thinks it is recording a child's first steps, it "inadvertently also captures class relations in Brazil," since when the white girl moves forward, the black nanny moves back and out of the frame. He concludes, "We don't always know what we're filming."

In Prividera's film, we see that the director similarly contends that interpretation is involved in looking at artifacts of the past when he inspects old photographs taken by his father, now in cognitive decline, and states, "They are mute images that one must make speak." While the theme of specters of the past coming back to tell their story is prominent in each documentary, it is featured in Di Tella's *Ficción privada*, whose title similarly suggests that familial history is always fabricated to a certain extent. Much like Prividera's philosophy of past artifacts, Di Tella quite literally makes images of the past speak in the first scenes of his documentary, as he holds up a variety of photographs and invents possible narratives to explain them, with his daughter's help. To understand the story of his deceased mother, Di Tella visits a seer in India, and toward the end of the film he claims to have seen his mother appear in the middle of the street on the day he was informed she had died. Investigating his parents' past, he determines that it is difficult to know who our parents really were, given that children invent their parents, and vice versa, so that "the summoned spirits refuse to appear." The three documentaries delve into personalized, intimate accounts of history in an attempt to resuscitate the ghosts of the past, all while casting the filmmaker himself as a central protagonist in the process of signification.

No intenso agora

Produced entirely using archival footage of the global political uprisings of the 1960s, *No intenso agora* attempts to tell the story of what escapes the lens of history during the protests of May 1968 in France and the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, and it includes a few parallels with the repressive violence of the Brazilian dictatorship during the same year, 1968. The opening sequence features archival footage of Czechs pouring beer and celebrating something still unknown to the audience. The first-person narrator, who is also the filmmaker, states plainly, "I don't know who these people are, all I know is what the images show"; he remarks that they are happy and wear light clothing, indicating that it must be warm outside. Soon, the director reveals that we are witnessing amateur footage of the Prague Spring. These superficial remarks lead the audience to consider the central questions of Salles's documentary: What do archives and documents reveal about a political context, and what are the limitations of these historical archives? As the title *No intenso agora* suggests, the director's goal is not to parrot the consecrated and familiar narratives of the historical past but rather to scrutinize the past purely, removing as much

distance as possible so that the viewer can appreciate these moments in their most immediate nature.

The film then pivots to shots of China during the Cultural Revolution, as the director's voice informs us that unlike the previous scenes shown, he knows who may have filmed these sequences: his mother. He specifies that since the footage is amateur, it wasn't recorded to become part of history; rather, he discovered the reels by chance forty years after their genesis. The director then launches into an explanation of his childhood, revealing that the family lived in Paris starting in 1964 (the beginning of the dictatorship in Brazil) and would go back to Brazil on vacation. Despite the repressive Brazilian political climate, the director reveals that in his memory, France was dark and Brazil was luminous, and of France, where the family lived, he has no images. In this way, *No intenso agora* illustrates the limitations of archival footage and of memory itself.

In addition to *No intenso agora*, which was nominated as Best Film at the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema and the Chicago International Film Festival, Moreira Salles has produced a number of renowned documentaries. While *Entreatos* (2004), a documentary charting the campaign of former Brazilian president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, features private conversations, its tone is much less intimate than that of *Santiago* (2007), which deals with the Moreira Salles family's employment of Santiago Badariotti Merlo, a butler who worked for them for thirty years. The winner of Best Documentary at both the Miami International Film Festival and Cinéma du Réel, *Santiago*, like *No intenso agora*, deals with disillusionment at the camera's and archive's inability to capture a satisfactorily totalizing image of the past. Both *No intenso agora* and *Santiago* are markedly more family oriented and nostalgic than *Entreatos*, setting these more personal documentaries up as a kind of diptych in Salles's body of work.

The archival footage of the May protests in France moves away from a glorification of the revolutionary past and instead emphasizes the melancholic, defeating nature of a crushed utopia. Perhaps the most tragic transformation documented throughout *No intenso agora* is that of the student movement's leader, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who was central in the occupation of the Sorbonne. During a clip featuring Cohn-Bendit on a television program alongside notable cultural figures, the director declares that "no young person had ever spoken to authority figures this way." In an interview with Jean-Paul Sartre, it was the student who answered the questions and the master who asked them. Nevertheless, as the movement fizzled out, Cohn-Bendit admitted to being tamed by glory, given a car to travel to Berlin in exchange for allowing a photographer to accompany him and document his journey. At this point, Salles remarks that "no revolution was ever funded by middle-class magazines." The film culminates on a melancholic note, focusing on Romain Goupil's film *Mourir à trente ans* (1982) and the disillusioned young participants of the May protests who died by suicide and were excluded from the most famous documentaries of the uprising, forgotten by history. The director compares these deaths to those of the Czech Jan Palach, who self-immolated at the age of twenty, and the Brazilian teenager Edison Luís de Lima Souto, killed by the military police in Rio de Janeiro. In contrast to a utopian image of the historical past, in which any casualty is considered a brave martyr who died in honor of a noble and just cause, *No intenso agora* paints an utterly antiheroic and dystopian vision of the revolutionary past.

Ficción privada

Like Moreira Salles's film, Di Tella's *Ficción privada* is narrated in the first person by the filmmaker. Unlike the other two documentaries, the audience witnesses Di Tella making his own production in many scenes. The film begins with a dialogue between him and his daughter, who take turns inventing stories for a series of photographs, the final one being

of Kamala and Torcuato, Di Tella's parents. We learn through the dialogue with his daughter that before Torcuato's death, he gave his son the letters that he and his wife had written to each other over the years. *Ficción privada* is by no means Di Tella's first film with an autobiographical impetus; it follows a series of other personal films such as *La televisión y yo* (2002) and *Fotografías* (2007), the latter of which he made following the death of his mother.

Like the other two documentaries reviewed, *Ficción privada* deals with failed utopias on multiple levels. One of these is the apparent lack of romance between his parents, which is only revealed to the audience in the final scenes when Di Tella informs us that only after hearing the emotion in his father's voice in a speech he gave at his wife's funeral was he able to imagine that they had ever loved each other. Nevertheless, after recounting how the two parents from opposite backgrounds met—an Indian woman and a white man during a time when anti-miscegenation laws prevented their union in many countries—he characterizes their romance as “a twentieth-century fable.” Far from a fruitful reconstruction of these events, however, the filmmaker constantly casts doubt on his own process, remarking at one point that he doesn't know whether it's good or not what he's doing, and that his experiments with this very personal past make him dizzy. Much as in *Adiós a la memoria*, Di Tella reports that he can't decipher the slideshow photos that were left to him by his father of various trips that the couple had taken.

In stark contrast to *No intenso ahora* and *Adiós a la memoria*, Di Tella hires two professional actors of approximately the same age as Torcuato and Kamala when they were corresponding via letters (the actors are also in a romantic relationship with each other) to take on the roles of his deceased parents in an attempt to hear their voices and stories come alive. The two actors, Denise and Julián, begin to identify with Kamala and Torcuato, respectively, particularly Denise with Kamala. The role-playing of these two hired actors harkens back to Albertina Carri's docudrama *Los rubios* (2001), which inaugurated a trend of first-person documentary that departed from the conventions of the genre in order to show, much like Di Tella and Prividera do, that historical and archival evidence don't always bring us closer to the truth of who our parents were. In Carri's groundbreaking documentary, she hires an actress to play her and films the role-playing process.

In addition to Carri's clear influence in *Ficción privada*, one can read Di Tella's film as part of an adjacent theatrical trend that the playwright Vivi Tellas coined as *biodrama* in 2001 and which relates to dramatizing the roles of real people through the documentary genre. In one particularly experimental scene near the end of *Ficción privada*, Denise and Julián repeat lines from the parents' correspondence to each other in a rhythmic fashion and in time with a metronome that is emphasized in close-up. One of the most significant lines, pulled from Torcuato's letter to Kamala regarding a book that he was writing about the Haitian revolutionary hero Toussaint L'Ouverture, who led the only successful slave rebellion ever documented in history, reads, “All of the materials of his biography are supplied by his enemies.”¹ The repetition of this line leads one to wonder whether the parents would approve of the uses of their own biographical materials or whether, as the director fears, his project is too intrusive or fails to represent their story accurately.

¹ Torcuato Di Tella, *La rebelión de esclavos de Haití* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social, 1984).

Adiós a la memoria

Much like Salles's film, Privera's documentary zeros in on the fleeting moments and blurred glimpses of the past that family photographs, movies, and manuscripts can offer us, however much they seem to dissolve upon inspection. In *Adiós a la memoria*, Privera recounts his estranged relationship with his father and how they only reunited when he learned that his father was suffering from a condition that features forgetting at its center, but which Privera makes clear at the film's start is not Alzheimer's disease. Unlike the other two documentaries, *Adiós a la memoria* is narrated in the third person by the director. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, as the narrator informs us, "Freud says that childhood scenes present themselves in the third person, as if recorded by a camera," which also implies distortion on the part of he who remembers. Significantly, the documentary begins with the son's recitation of Jorge Luis Borges's short story "A Dream" (Borges reappears throughout the film) about prisoners who look alike in circular cells and write a long, indecipherable poem about one another, akin to matryoshka dolls. Later, while trying to understand his father's diary entries, Privera remarks that it is impossible. Eventually, the narrator concludes that perhaps his father chose to forget so as not to live with the painful memory of his disappeared wife, the revolutionary militant Marta Sierra, whose name the father cannot even place at the end of the film.

Adiós a la memoria is not the director's first documentary to deal with themes of memory and forgetting. Privera's *M* (2007), a film about his disappeared mother, similarly deals with the idea of misleading historical artifacts surrounding the last dictatorship in Argentina and their inability to offer a complete or even truthful account of the past. Certainly, in the country that is held up internationally as an example of justice and reconciliation with its dictatorial past, this melancholic tone comes as a contrast to cultural production about the successful reckoning with the past. As the cultural critic Cecilia Sosa writes of *M*, "Privera's film contests the comfortable position that the relatives [of the disappeared] have achieved during the Kirchnerist period."² Similarly, in contrast to the image of an Argentina that is reputed to have dealt with its repressive past, *Adiós a la memoria* questions this narrative by focusing on the theme of forgetting.

The filmmaker connects the repression of memories of his disappeared mother in his father's disease to the violent repression of the Argentine dictatorship. Overriding an interest in historical information, however, *Adiós a la memoria* centers on the gradual disappearance of his mother from living memory, first from family conversations, then finally from his father's memory, and symbolically, from a commemorative stone in front of the torture center El Olimpo, as the characters of her name are worn down by passersby. While the majority of the documentary is focused more on personal than political matters, the director asks at one point, "Why are home movies never political?," after showing a few sequences of his father's recordings that featured antidictatorship graffiti. As if to respond to his own question, Privera connects his father's forgetting with the rising neoliberal tendencies in Argentina prior to the 2019 election. The film, released following the defeat of the former conservative president Mauricio Macri by the Peronist candidate and current president, Alberto Fernández, addresses this electoral tension and fear that the then incumbent could have been reelected. This tension is often expressed through the son's shots of political graffiti that both celebrate and repudiate the Macri presidency. Indeed, the director remarks, "While the father was plunged into forgetting, the country was dominated once again by the dream of letting go of the past, of history, and of its lessons," and he goes on to speak of the resurgent neoliberalism that had taken hold

² Cecilia Sosa, *Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina's Dictatorship: The Performances of Blood* (Rochester, NY: Tamesis, 2014), 74.

of the country after originating in the 1970s with the prior dictatorship to discipline the rebellious and unruly factions of Argentine society.

In a further critique of the neoliberal, individualistic culture of the present moment, the director declares, over shots of subway passengers staring blankly at their cell phones, that now people are only interested in self-portraiture and not in filming others. In opposition to present-day selfie-mania, the filmmaker informs the audience that his father would often go out onto the street in order to record the lives of strangers. To explain the self-absorbed and historically ignorant nature of the people around him, Prividera resorts to Wilhelm Reich's maxim from *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* that the masses were not deceived at all, but that, most frighteningly of all, at a particular moment they actually desired fascism.³ Through shots of graffiti featuring green handkerchiefs, phrases reading "forcing women to give birth is torture," and homeless people on the streets of Buenos Aires, Prividera illustrates that the denial of such basic human rights as reproductive health and shelter is part of the same fascism that took hold of the country during the seventies and eighties.

Adiós a la memoria also points to a prominent trend in Argentine cinema: a seeming exhaustion of material related to the memory of the dictatorial past. As the cultural critic Verónica Garibotto outlines in her groundbreaking study of national films of the new millennium, the work of Beatriz Sarlo in *Tiempo pasado* (2005) and Albertina Carri's film *Los rubios* (2001) signaled the advent of critiques of a cultural landscape supersaturated with memory initiatives. Borrowing Andreas Huyssen's term "memory fatigue," Garibotto analyzes films that fit this paradigm of exhaustion.⁴ As the title and content of *Adiós a la memoria* suggest, it would be appropriate to categorize Prividera's film as part of the same cultural tendency.

Conclusion

In all three documentaries reviewed, the filmmakers assert constantly that regardless of their efforts, to represent a totalizing history is impossible. While Di Tella's film is also essentially melancholic in its reconstruction of the past and lamentation over a lost, irrecoverable totality, the spectator is left with a final image of the director's daughter, who appears throughout *Ficción privada*, roller-skating joyfully, implying that although his mother is dead, a part of her still is alive in the young girl whose features recall those of Kamala. Ultimately, all three documentaries seem to mourn the lost totality of the past and the impossibility of accessing fleeting moments despite the fact that they are recorded by supposedly objective tools and media. Curiously, this marks a contrast with the past documentaries of all three filmmakers (most notably Salles's *Santiago*, Prividera's *M*, and Di Tella's *Fotografías*). While the three more recent productions reviewed in this essay all point to the dubious quality of memory, and even to a need to bid farewell to memory as a reliable source of information, the earlier productions seem to remain anchored to the notion of the purifying effects of memorialization. To borrow Hugo Vezzetti's term, a certain "imperativo de la memoria" still appears to reign in *Santiago*, *M*, and *Fotografías*.⁵ Comparatively, *No intenso agora*, *Adiós a la memoria*, and *Ficción privada* are free from this imperative. In a move away from the conventions of traditional documentary cinema, Salles, Di Tella, and Prividera illustrate that fictionalization is inherent in any form of storytelling. In such a way, we see that documentary filmmaking in Latin

³ Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. Vincent R. Carfagno (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980).

⁴ Verónica Garibotto, *Rethinking Testimonial Cinema in Postdictatorship Argentina: Beyond Memory Fatigue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

⁵ Hugo Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente: Guerra, dictadura y sociedad en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2002), 22.

America continues to take a self-reflexive path in which directors are constantly aware of their own role in the process of making meaning and the subjectivity that this implies.

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