


DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW ESSAY

Uneven Reproductive Landscapes: The Abortion Documentary in Latin America

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This essay reviews the following films:

Aborto en Colombia / Abortion in Colombia. Dir. Nicolás Cuenca Rodríguez and Ángela Amaya Aguirre. Prod. Nicolás Cuenca Rodríguez and Ángela Amaya Aguirre. Colombia, 2021, 16 min. Film is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahjO46Hwokw>.

Fly so Far. Dir. Celina Escher. Prod. Women Make Movies and Prämfilm. El Salvador and Sweden, 2021, 88 min. Film is available on Vimeo and DVD.

Las Libres: La historia después de . . . / Las Libres: The Story Continues. Dir. Gustavo Montaña in collaboration with Centro Las Libres. Prod. At Dusk Media. Mexico, 2014, 94 min. Film is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpW7KJblkbc>.

Que sea ley / Let It Be Law. Dir. Juan Solanas. Prod. Cinesur, Les Films du Sud, and Gameland. Argentina, France, and Uruguay, 2019, 86 min.

The overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, alongside the upsurge of abortion restrictions in states such as Texas and Oklahoma, has put Latin America at the forefront of the public conversation in the United States. *NPR* observes that “as abortion gets harder and harder to access in the U.S., Latin America is moving in the opposite direction.”¹ The *New York Times* notes that, while few people could have imagined that Latin America would become a benchmark for advances in sexual and reproductive rights, “inspiration is now coming from the south rather than the north.”² And the *Guardian* goes as far as to advise US women to learn from their Latin American counterparts and to acknowledge that there is “a new and powerful force rising from Latin America, where the right to abortion was won by a mass feminist movement in the streets.”³

Although some of these statements are on point—for instance, the social movement commonly known as the Marea Verde (Green Tide) has spread across the globe, redrawing

¹ “What Overturning *Roe v. Wade* Could Mean for Global Abortion Access,” National Public Radio, May 10, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/10/1097940922/what-overturning-roe-v-wade-could-mean-for-global-abortion-access>.

² Catalina Martínez Coral, “The Key Argument on Abortion That Changed Everything in Colombia,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/14/opinion/latin-america-colombia-abortion.html>.

³ Verónica Gago, “What Latin American Feminists Can Teach American Women about the Abortion Fight,” *Guardian*, May 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/10/abortion-roe-v-wade-latin-america>.

the geopolitical map of women's rights—they also reveal both an ethnocentric view of the so-called South as having historically been more backward than the so-called North and an underlying assumption of Latin America as a monolithic entity.⁴ Such assumptions paradoxically ignore the diverse realities regarding abortion, reproduction, and sexual rights in the region. Indeed, an overview of recent Latin American documentaries on abortion challenges a monolithic conception and illuminates a wide range of national situations as well as a heterogeneity of historical moments, from the total ban on the procedure in El Salvador to its complete decriminalization up to twenty-four weeks of gestation in Colombia, including more complex cases such as Mexico, where states have their own laws and are moving in different directions at uneven paces. This broad range also translates into a wide scope in the amount of documentary production. While films on the topic are scarce in Honduras, Costa Rica, or Paraguay—to give just a few representative examples—in Argentina, the vast number of films suggests that there is a new, distinct genre (or subgenre) with its own rules, conventions, and already well-defined historical trajectory.

These two aspects—breadth and heterogeneity—drive the selection of films reviewed here. First, rather than focusing on documentaries from those countries with a larger pool, I examine four documentaries that represent the uneven reproductive landscapes in the region: El Salvador, where the procedure is illegal even under extreme circumstances such as incest; Mexico, where termination is legal up to twelve weeks of gestation in several federated entities including Ciudad de México, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, and Colima, but restricted in others such as Nuevo León or Tabasco; Argentina, where, since 2020, a federal law guarantees free and safe access to pregnancy interruption within a fourteen-week window and with no time limit in cases of rape or if the gestating person's health is at serious risk; and Colombia, where in February 2022 the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of decriminalizing abortion up to twenty-four weeks of gestation and with no time limit on three instances: rape, critical danger for the pregnant person's health, or fetal pathology incompatible with life outside the womb. Second, instead of addressing the films that have circulated more broadly or in the most typical format, I selected documentaries that show the regional variety in terms of circulation, authorship, and style. The Salvadoran and the Argentine films are classic ninety-minute documentaries by school-trained directors released at international film festivals. The Mexican documentary is part of a series produced by a human rights organization with a more informal circulation. And the Colombian example is a sixteen-minute documentary short accessible via the personal YouTube channel of an amateur filmmaker.

Breadth and heterogeneity also guide the analytic approach to the films I chose. As several scholars have already observed, the organization of an internal historical sequence is arguably the most important phase in the creative process. Philip Rosen, for instance, claims that the document only becomes meaningful when placed within a concrete historical sequence “that makes it part of an assertion of meaning from the real . . . Sequences organize temporality, providing endings that confer retrospective significance on shots.”⁵ Moreover, as Michael Chanan has brilliantly analyzed, this internal, filmic temporality of the document cannot be disentangled from the external, afilmic present: “When you stage a fiction, in the studio or on location, you are suspending

⁴ Marea Verde (Green Tide/Wave) refers to the feminist movement that originated in Argentina around the year 2000 and adopted the green scarf as its main symbol. Since 2005, when some of its members launched the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion, the Marea Verde has become increasingly visible and has spread across the world, influencing the global fight for sexual and reproductive rights. For further details on the movement, see María Florencia Alcaraz, *¡Que sea ley! La lucha de los feminismos por el aborto legal* (Buenos Aires: Marea Editorial, 2018).

⁵ Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 246–247.

time and day and entering a temporality belonging to the narrative to which the scene belongs. When you film a documentary, what you capture in the camera is a moment grabbed from the day and time given by the calendar and the clock.”⁶ Drawing on Rosen’s and Chanan’s observations on the close links between filmic sequence and afilmic temporality, I center my analysis on how these four documentaries’ internal structures allow us to read the breadth and heterogeneity of the historical moments in which they were shot. In other words, each documentary’s internal sequence points to the national situation regarding reproductive rights at the moment of the film’s shooting, thus staging the diverse and uneven realities in the region.

Fly so Far, a 2021 documentary by the Swiss-Salvadoran filmmaker Celina Escher, opens with a wide-angle shot of police officers escorting a handcuffed woman to prison. We then hear a brief dialogue in which a journalist asks her what happened to her baby, what she is being accused of, and whether she has any messages for the judge in charge of her case. “To my baby?,” Teodora Vásquez replies calmly. “She came out when I was nine months pregnant. [I am being accused] of killing my baby. But I wanted her to be with me. [I am begging the judge] to set me free.” These opening images give way to a careful juxtaposition of aerial shots of poverty-stricken El Salvador and a long interview between the director (off camera) and Vásquez, who begins her testimony by telling us that she is serving a thirty-year sentence for aggravated murder following a late-term miscarriage. We soon learn that Vásquez’s is far from an isolated case. Seven more women appear on screen sharing an almost identical story: extreme poverty, pregnancy (often because of rape), miscarriage, and prison. Most of these women are also, like Vásquez, mothers who are not allowed to see, let alone raise, their children. Contrasting footage of politicians and religious leaders who argue against abortion and of pro-abortion lawyers and activists points to a polarization running deep in Salvadoran society. While the former insist that life begins at conception and that abortion should carry a sentence similar to that of aggravated murder, the latter denounce how the total ban results in the criminalization of poor women.

Escher’s professional training at the famous International Film and Television School in San Antonio de los Baños in Cuba becomes evident in the mathematical organization of the internal sequence. At forty-four minutes, exactly halfway into the film, the documentary returns to the opening images of Vásquez’s court sentence. We soon learn that—contrary to what we were left to assume at the beginning—Vásquez has already been in prison for ten years and that the opening images did not refer to the first time that she was sentenced but to a confirmation of the initial thirty-year sentence. The film’s fast-paced rhythm comes to a halt. For ten long minutes we witness firsthand the devastating effects of this confirmation on Vásquez, her family, her lawyers, the other inmates, and the activists fighting for her case. Yet our understanding of the afilmic temporality is fooled once again as soon as the long interview with the film director resumes and Vásquez says that she is being released from prison the next day. The documentary then closes with footage of Vásquez’s release and with images of her reuniting with her family and becoming a pro-abortion activist. Finally, closing captions tell us that, despite Vásquez’s release, the total ban on abortion in El Salvador has not ended and that most of the other women are still in prison.

At first sight, *Fly so Far* seems to contradict Chanan’s observations regarding the documentary’s camera capturing the afilmic historical moment and bringing the day and time given by the calendar and the clock to the filmic world. The connection between the internal and the external temporality is the most confusing, yet also intriguing, aspect in Escher’s narrative. Throughout the film, we wonder many times: Are we watching a documentary about a woman who has just been sentenced to thirty years? Is this a film

⁶ Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 4.

about the injustice of the initial sentence being upheld ten years later? Or is this an empowering story of how she regained her freedom? It is precisely the arrangement of the internal historical sequence that prompts these questions. The organization of the internal sequence, alongside the lack of temporal markers such as dates, makes it impossible for us to ascertain which is the day and time given by the calendar and the clock that is supposedly unfolding in front of our eyes.

Rather than limiting the film's potential, however, this confusion allows us to read its ideology and, most importantly, its present of enunciation (that is, the historical moment of the film's shooting). *Fly so Far* allows neither of the above options as well as all of them at the same time. In other words, the temporality of the internal sequence makes of Teodora Vásquez a collective character embodying all poor women in El Salvador. Escher's film then denounces how the total ban results in the criminalization of poor women; highlights the prevalence of this situation; suggests, via Vásquez, that human rights organizations can play a crucial role in dismantling reproductive injustice; yet makes it clear that her regaining of freedom was an exception. As a feminist activist tells us toward the end of the film, between Vásquez's initial sentence and the moment of the scene's shooting, there have been 129 new similar sentences—a reality that is also the primary topic of *Cuerpos juzgados*, a documentary in which the Argentine director and journalist Mariana Carbajal travels to El Salvador to interview many of those women.⁷

Far from being an example of the Latin American benchmark for advances in sexual and reproductive rights that, as the *New York Times* hopes, will inspire the North, El Salvador, along with Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras, penalizes abortion without exception. Furthermore, the country's complete criminalization is not really a remnant of the past that is likely to change soon because, according to NPR, Latin America is moving in the opposite direction to that of the United States. The modifications to the Penal Code that eliminated the three causes formerly allowing legal access to abortion—danger to the health or life of the gestating woman, congenital fetal malformation incompatible with life, and rape—are fairly recent, from 1998. Rather than the mass feminist movement securing sexual and reproductive rights on the streets that the *Guardian* romantically sees as representative of the region, in El Salvador, politicians and religious leaders have criminalized abortion to the point of passing legislation that forces health workers to denounce every obstetric emergency and to prevent them from intervening until there is no fetal heartbeat, even in the case of ectopic pregnancies.

Las Libres: La historia después de . . ., by Gustavo Montaña, also confronts the viewer with a disjointed sequence that, as in Escher's film, confuses the connection between filmic and afilmic temporalities. Montaña, a Colombian filmmaker, wrote and produced the documentary in collaboration with Centro Las Libres, a human rights organization based in Guanajuato, Mexico, that aims to advance marginalized women's sexual and reproductive rights. Among other services, it provides legal, psychological, and economic support to victims of rape and sexual violence, develops educational workshops, and defends victims in court.

Summarizing the documentary's primary content is a complicated task. The opening images, explicitly dated 2010, show a confrontation between Guanajuato government officials denying that there were women in jail on abortion charges and the testimonies of six women sentenced to twenty to thirty-five years. As in *Fly so Far*, these women come from rural, Indigenous, and very poor areas. They either had late-term miscarriages or have been accused of abortion without even being pregnant. The film intersperses their testimonies with interviews of lawyers, activists, and academics who connect their stories with longstanding sexism in Guanajuato and Guerrero. Yet this organized, and quite straightforward, sequence is interrupted thirty minutes later as the film abruptly switches to

⁷ Mariana Carbajal, dir., *Cuerpos juzgados* (Argentina, 2022).

images of US Republican officials arguing against abortion and of US pro-abortion activists and academics. From that point onward, the documentary's logic becomes unpredictable. It goes back and forth between images of the release from prison of some of the Mexican women, their testimonies, people in the United States talking about abortion, a longer interview with an imprisoned woman from Guerrero, footage of the Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai, and television clips alluding to the struggle for abortion rights in Argentina. The documentary closes with captions telling us that they lost contact with the woman from Guerrero in 2012, but then adds an epilogue with footage alluding to her release in 2014.

Although the organization of the internal sequence leads to a confusion similar to that of *Fly so Far*, I would argue that its overall meaning is quite different. Rather than confronting us with a stagnant situation regarding reproductive rights like the one in El Salvador, Montaña's film captures the fast-paced changes and uneven realities in Mexico. There, abortion is both a right and a crime. At the federal level, the Norma Oficial Mexicana 046 guarantees legal access in cases of rape. At the local level, each state determines under what circumstances termination is either decriminalized or a heavily punished crime. During the film's shooting, between 2010 and 2014, Ciudad de México was the only federated entity recognizing the right to abortion up to the twelfth week of gestation. As of 2022, seven additional states (Oaxaca, Veracruz, Hidalgo, Baja California, Guerrero, Colima, and Baja California Sur) have modified their laws to guarantee access to termination within the same window, or up to thirteen weeks for one state (Sinaloa). Yet, while these states enhanced access, others, such as Guanajuato, implemented further restrictions.

Las Libres' loose ends capture these uneven and rapidly evolving realities. The documentary's messy and open-ended form is attuned to the awareness of a messy, ongoing, and open-ended historical moment in which states are pulling in opposite directions at different rhythms. Put simply, Montaña's film should be seen as a work in progress, just like the afilmic world at that same moment. The film's confusing sequence, then, offers traces of the present, staging its contradictions. In this line, the combination of images from Mexico, the United States, Argentina, and Pakistan, which at first sight seemed erratic, becomes clearer. Rather than organized logically, the montage is grounded in affect. In other words, the film solves the impossibility of representing Mexico's contradictory structures of feeling by staging this contradiction via geographical realities that are moving in opposite directions within the same time frame—an interpretation that gains force if we contrast *Las Libres* with *Accompaniment*, another documentary that Montaña and Verónica Cruz, the founder of the human rights organization, also shot and released in 2014. As opposed to the former, and probably because it revolves around informal networks of abortion support, *Accompaniment* has a straightforward, quite typical sequence that consists only of talking heads who share their experiences.⁸

A very typical sequence is also at the core of Juan Solanas's *Que sea ley* (2019), a tale of Argentina's most recent struggle for reproductive rights, which won several awards at international festivals including Havana, Saint Sebastian, and Busan. For those viewers familiar with Fernando "Pino" Solanas's documentary production and with his son's collaboration and training in this type of production, *Que sea ley* offers little surprise. It indeed follows the conventions of political cinema by the book. *Que sea ley* begins in the exact same manner as *La hora de los hornos* and *Memoria del saqueo*: white captions on a black screen, accompanied by the sound of drums, provide data on weekly deaths caused by clandestine abortions and situate the audience on June 13, 2018, the day the lower chamber of the Argentine Congress will vote on a new bill enhancing access to

⁸ Verónica Cruz and Gustavo Montaña, dirs., *Accompaniment* (Mexico, 2014).

the procedure.⁹ The sequence is then organized thematically, rather than chronologically. Activists, politicians, relatives of women who died owing to unsafe abortions, health workers, and a few women who interrupted their pregnancies share, in the form of talking heads, their arguments, stories, and opinions. After this careful exposition, captions tell us that the lower chamber has passed the bill and that it is now the Senate's turn to confirm the successful outcome. The film then closes with footage of the Senate narrowly rejecting the bill intercut with street images of Marea Verde activists. Contrary to what we might expect, however, the ending does not have a pessimistic tone. Accompanied again by the festive sound of drums, activists either take to the streets or look directly at the camera confidently, chanting "Let it be law," a wish that will be realized very soon, in December 2020.

In line with Pino Solanas's political cinema, *Que sea ley* organizes its direct message around three primary pillars: a didactic argumentation, an aesthetics of contrast, and a historical sequence that incorporates events that are very close in time to the film's release. Yet, if these strategies helped *La hora de los hornos* mobilize the viewers and call them to political action, in *Que sea ley* they have an effect more similar to that of *Memoria del saqueo*: they provide closure. Even when the historical sequence ends with the Senate's rejection, the documentary's uplifting final messages, alongside the festive street images, give the impression that the fight for reproductive rights in Argentina is soon to be over. Social justice, the documentary suggests, is about to be achieved with the imminent passing of the federal law. The fact that the film, as opposed to the other documentaries to which I refer in this review, is not accessible via YouTube, Vimeo, or DVD is telling. *Que sea ley* was less conceived as a call for political action than as a celebration of the Marea Verde's successful political struggle. Indeed, Solanas's film is very similar, especially in terms of its celebratory spirit, to another one shot right after the passing of the law: *Marea verde*, a documentary that portrays the movement's accomplishments and its influence around the world, from feminist organizations in Ecuador to the YPJ, the Kurdish Women's Protection Unit.¹⁰

With these observations I do not intend to criticize *Que sea ley*'s ideological or aesthetic choices. Indeed, I find the documentary invaluable on several fronts. For instance, the interviews with relatives of dead women, shot on location, give visibility to communities especially vulnerable to reproductive injustice and who have been absent from dominant pro-abortion narratives in Argentina. The historical influence of psychoanalysis in the country, coupled with the direct intervention of feminist psychoanalysts who crafted the abortion bill and shared their expertise with Congress, led to psychoanalysis-based notions of desire dominating the public conversation on reproductive rights. This centrality is palpable in the Marea Verde's most popular slogans ("desire moves us" and "motherhood will be desired or it will not be"), in the national campaign's motto ("sex education for choice, contraceptives to prevent abortion, legal abortion to prevent death"), and in the fourteen-week window to access the procedure legally—all of which assume that lack of reproductive desire, or abundance of other types of desire, is the primary reason for seeking termination. As a result, despite constant allusions to poor women being affected the most by clandestine procedures, their experiences, which do not quite fit these psychoanalytic narratives of desire, rarely come to the front.

Que sea ley fills this gap by taking the realities of these most vulnerable populations to the center and giving them a concrete and material presence within Argentine feminist discourse. In this sense, Solanas's film is indicative of the important contribution that the

⁹ Fernando Solanas, dir., *La hora de los hornos* (Argentina and Italy, 1968) and *Memoria del saqueo* (Argentina and France, 2004).

¹⁰ Ángel Giovanni Hoyos, dir., *Marea verde* (Argentina and Colombia, 2021).

documentary genre has recently made to Latin American feminisms. As seen, for instance, in the Salvadoran and the Mexican films discussed above, the documentary's format is especially suitable to giving voice to those marginalized women who are often referred to as inspiration for activism but whose reproductive realities we rarely witness. Another outstanding local contribution in this respect is *Vicenta*, a powerful film that uses figures made of Plasticine sculpting clay to tell the real story of Vicenta Avendaño, a low-income woman who is forced to fight for several months so that the Argentine judicial system authorizes an abortion for her disabled nineteen-year-old daughter, pregnant as a result of family rape.¹¹ My observations regarding Solanas's film, then, are less a critique of its overall ideology than a suggestion that the documentary is attuned to a broader sense of the status of reproductive rights in Argentina. As in *Fly so Far* and *Las Libres*, *Que sea ley*'s organization of the historical sequence offers a glimpse into the dominant social discourse in the afilmic world. In this case, however, the documentary reveals a generalized perception of success—a perception that may well be accurate, since, according to data provided by Argentina's Ministry of Health, within one year of legalization, 32,758 persons had safe and free access to the procedure in public hospitals (the exact same number of people who, prior to the law, were admitted yearly to public hospitals from complications arising from unsafe abortions).¹²

The close connection between the documentary genre and recent Latin American feminisms is also palpable in the last of the films addressed in this review, Nicolás Cuenca Rodríguez and Ángela Amaya Aguirre's *Aborto en Colombia*. Although Colombian filmmakers have had a relatively significant presence in documentaries on abortion in other countries, such as Gustavo Montaña in Mexico and Ángel Hoyos in Argentina, and despite Colombia currently having the most liberal legal framework in the region, films on the topic are scarce. Arguably, the shortage is related to the fact that the struggle for reproductive justice that ended in decriminalization is quite recent. As opposed to what happened in Argentina, where the national campaign for the right to legal, safe, and free abortion has had a strong public visibility since 2005, it was not until September 2020—when *Causa Justa*, a feminist coalition, sent a lawsuit to the Constitutional Court demanding the complete decriminalization of abortion—that the topic took center stage in Colombia. The way the pro-abortion fight gained momentum and its legal technicalities are also quite different. In Argentina, the conversation on reproductive rights was at the forefront of the public sphere for fifteen years. Television and radio programs, newspapers, and magazines covered the topic extensively. Parliamentary debates were broadcast live, often on a big screen in public squares. Thousands of women carried the green scarf, the defining symbol of the *Marea Verde*, on the streets everywhere: as a bandana, as a wristband, or tied to their purses. The passing of the 2020 federal law was the result of this long and widely held conversation. In fact, while President Alberto Fernández officially sponsored the bill and sent it to Congress himself, the passing was a multipartisan endeavor. In Colombia, on the contrary, the initiative that ended in decriminalization originally came from only two public health workers, Ana Cristina González and Cristina Villarreal, who collected data on abortion and incarceration.

As in Argentina, in Colombia around half a million people seek an abortion each year. The annual number of deaths and health complications arising from unsafe abortions is, however, comparatively much higher, even considering that Colombia has five million more citizens. Between 2010 and 2020, the Fiscalía General de la Nación received around six thousand criminal complaints against women who sought abortions. Ninety-seven

¹¹ Darío Doria, dir., *Vicenta* (Argentina, 2020).

¹² Sandra Rodríguez Ramos, "Aborto legal: Las cifras de la Argentina a un año de la sanción de la Ley IVE," *La Nación*, December 30, 2021, <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/aborto-legal-las-cifras-de-la-argentina-a-un-ano-de-la-sancion-de-la-ley-ive-nid30122021/>.

percent of these women belonged to low-income households, and 30 percent of them had presented charges for sexual and domestic violence prior to being prosecuted for seeking an abortion. Still, around three hundred were condemned to up to six years in prison.¹³ Considering this deeply unequal reality, González and Villarreal drafted a lawsuit arguing that the criminalization of abortion violated constitutional rights to health, equality, freedom of profession, and freedom of conscience. They then formed a coalition, *Causa Justa*, centered on this specific lawsuit and received enough support to send it to the Constitutional Court. The shorter lifespan of the reproductive struggle as a public phenomenon and its quick resolution in court—two aspects that bring Colombia closer to an undesired backlash like that in the United States—both affected the volume of films and had an impact on their circulation and style. In other words, the shorter and less visible pro-abortion movement led to fewer cultural products on the topic as well as to a more informal, yet faster, circulation and a more improvised style.

Cuenca Rodríguez and Amaya Aguirre's documentary is paradigmatic in this respect. Shot and released in 2021, while the lawsuit was pending in court, it is a self-produced, sixteen-minute documentary short by two amateur filmmakers accessible on YouTube that does not even have a formal title—"Aborto en Colombia" refers to its YouTube subject line. According to the notes on the YouTube channel, the film aims to inform on the reality of abortion in the country. Rather than informative, however, the documentary re-creates the broader feelings on the topic at the moment of the film's shooting. The internal sequence is primarily structured as a montage that condenses short aerial and handheld shots of street demonstrations and photographs of newspaper clippings on the lawsuit. There are also a few interviews with women who argue in favor of decriminalizing abortion, which add to the documentary's fast, informal, and improvised style: some are lacking captions, and we are unable to identify basic information such as the date or who the interviewees are. Others are shot like conversations in a car and increase the general sensation of fast-paced movement. *Aborto en Colombia*, then, reflects (and probably contributes to) the broader discourse circulating around Colombian society in 2021. Reproductive justice has just emerged in the public sphere, and it is a pressing issue which needs to gather support as soon as possible.

Concluding Remarks

As the documentaries in this review suggest, rather than a monolithic region with analogous trends, Latin America forms an uneven territory when it comes to reproductive rights. Together, however, the films also reveal common patterns in the representation of these heterogeneous social landscapes. There are, for instance, three notable and quite paradoxical absences that cut across most documentaries: a lack of female directors, a shortage of perspectives other than the cis-heterocentric, and an erasure of abortion per se. Despite women's strong protagonism in the fight for reproductive rights, the ratio of male filmmakers directing documentaries on abortion is much higher. Although reproductive issues necessarily intersect with gender and sexuality, the films conceive of abortion in cis-heterocentric terms: lesbian and trans gestating persons' experiences are completely missing.

Furthermore, even though abortion is the primary topic in these documentaries, it is hard to find a straightforward representation. *Fly so Far* and *Las Libres* highlight that all the women have been *wrongly* convicted on charges related to self-induced abortion. People giving their opinions in *Que sea ley* and *Aborto en Colombia* emphasize the right to choose.

¹³ Isabel C. Jaramillo Sierra, Nicolás Santamaría Uribe, Wilson Forero Mesa, Ana Cristina González Vélez, Salomé Valencia, Juliana Martínez, and Laura Castro González, *La criminalización del aborto en Colombia* (Bogotá: La Mesa por la Vida y la Salud de las Mujeres, 2021), 11.

Yet there are only two women who openly talk about having voluntarily interrupted their pregnancies in Solanas's film and not even one in the remaining films reviewed. This is also true of the other documentaries that I mentioned: *Accompaniment* focuses on activists who support women having abortions but only one of these women appears on screen. *Cuerpos juzgados* centers, like *Fly so Far* and *Las Libres*, on wrongful conviction. And *Vicenta* tells the story of the barriers to access abortion for a mentally disabled person who could not have made an informed decision for herself in any case. The ellipsis of what is supposed to be the central topic impacts the documentaries' argumentation. Except for Solanas's film, where several interviewees refer to the connection between death and clandestine abortion, the other films, more focused on criminalization, do not put forward a compelling argument. Since they mention several times that the women in jail have not voluntarily had an abortion, it is not clear how an abortion law would prevent the criminalization of poor women. Rather than an omission coincidentally shared by all the filmmakers, however, the gap is telling of the ongoing stigma surrounding people who opt for termination.¹⁴

Finally, in addition to these lacks, the documentaries share a common aesthetics. Except for *Vicenta*'s experimental use of Plasticine sculpting clay and of a second-person voice-over narrative, the other films' formal techniques are more attuned to Latin American documentary conventions prior to the 2000s. The combination of talking heads and archival footage is their most common strategy. More recent subgenres, such as the performative documentary or the fiction/documentary hybrid, do not seem to have an influence. In this sense, although its uneven reproductive landscapes prevent us from referring to Latin America as a monolithic region with respect to abortion, it may, on the contrary, be accurate to talk about the abortion documentary as a uniform genre in Latin America.

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¹⁴ Another documentary that I have not included in my review for lack of space, María del Carmen de Lara Rangel's *Expedientes (contra la criminalización)* (Mexico, 2011), portrays both women who have undergone abortions and women wrongfully convicted. Unlike the other films, *Expedientes* offers details on the former's reasons. It is interesting to note, however, that those who have voluntarily interrupted their pregnancies appear either with their backs facing the camera or as blurred images.