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Ignacio Albornoz

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AN ARCHIVE OF FACES:  
UNIVERSITY FILM IN CHILE THROUGH THE 1960S AND 1970S

Ignacio Albornoz (Université Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis)

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Panel «Reanimating the Past.

Latin American Media History and Practice and the Archive»

Abstract ♦ Drawing on Carlos Ossa’s notion of an “uneven archive”, the present paper will propose an archive-oriented and situated reading of the filmic catalogue produced by the cinema departments of Chile’s three main universities —the University of Chile, the Catholic University and the State’s Technical University— between 1957 and 1973. Rediscovered in the last decades thanks to the digitalization of collections formerly thought to be lost and the publication of relevant academic material (Corro, 2008; Salinas & Stange, 2008), the numerous films that constitute this catalogue will then be approached as receptacles of what the French film scholar and historian Antoine de Baecque calls “cinematographic forms of history”.

Resumen ♦ Inspirándose en el concepto de «archivo desigual» de Carlos Ossa, este artículo propone una lectura orientada y situada del catálogo de películas producido por los departamentos de cine de las tres principales universidades chilenas —la Universidad de Chile, la Universidad Católica y la Universidad Técnica del Estado— entre 1957 y 1973. Redescubiertas en las últimas décadas gracias a la digitalización de colecciones que se creían perdidas y a la publicación de material académico pertinente (Corro, 2008; Salinas & Stange, 2008), las numerosas películas que componen este catálogo serán abordadas a continuación como receptáculos de lo que Antoine de Baecque denomina «formas cinematográficas de la historia».

Résumé ♦ S’inspirant du concept d’« archive inégale » de Carlos Ossa, cet article propose une lecture orientée et située du catalogue filmique produit par les départements de cinéma des trois principales universités chiliennes – l’Université du Chili, l’Université catholique et l’Université technique de l’État – entre 1957 et 1973. Redécouverts au cours des dernières décennies grâce à la numérisation de collections que l’on croyait perdues et à la publication de matériel académique pertinent (Corro, 2008 ; Salinas & Stange, 2008), les nombreux films qui constituent ce catalogue seront ensuite abordés comme des réceptacles de ce qu’Antoine de Baecque appelle des « formes cinématographiques de l’histoire ».

## INTRODUCTION

In Chile, film production, teaching, and conservation, have traditionally been linked to institutions of higher education (Ferrari, 1972: 29; Horta, 2015: 4). Indeed, it was at universities that a significant part of film creation, as well as the more or less sustained theoretical reflection that supported it, took place in the 1960s and 1970s (Reveco, 2017: 357; del Valle Dávila, 2014: 370). Especially relevant in the Chilean case, university film appears as a privileged matrix to apprehend the development of the cinematographic image of the *New Cinema* (Corro *et al.*, 2007: 25; Pinto, 2016: 191; León Frías, 2013: 121; King, 1990: 169; López, 1990: 271; Pick, 1990: 111; Salinas and Stange, 2008: 26-30), to which, according to Pinto and Horta, it granted towards the end of the decade “a documentary role, of witnessing and raising awareness about the problems of the country” (2010: 129).

Arising from the creative and political turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s, “a time of a boiling society, with profound social and cultural transformations” (Pinto, 2016: 186), three major production units emerged, attached respectively to the University of Chile, the Catholic University and the State’s Technical University: the *Cine Experimental* (CE), the *Instituto Fílmico* (IF) and the *Departamento de Cine y Televisión* (DCT). In spite of their relatively short life and the sometimes limited distribution of their works (Dittus & Ulloa, 2017; Mouesca, 2005), the CE, the IF and the DCT were, in their historical context, unique and daring projects, with distinctive editorial policies and no less diverse institutional ramifications.

In a period marked by an “increasing polarization of the political debate which extended into almost all spheres of social life” (Camargo, 2013: 113), the documentary films of these university production centers contributed actively to shaping a new cinematographic image. Partly informed by the methods and outcomes of the NCL, this image could be broadly characterized by the will to trigger a “critical return to reality” (Corro *et al.*, 2007: 10) and to “*liberate* the poor, the blind, the orphans and the anonymous subjects of capitalist modernization and neocolonialism from invisibility” (Ossa, 2013: 11). For Susana Velleggia, however, this “appetite for redemption of the human being through art [...] acquires a very precise *face* [in the case of Latin America]: that of the hungry and oppressed [...], whose physiognomies, values and practices burst onto the screen” (Velleggia, 2009: 206). This appeal to what we could describe, quite

roughly, as the “facial” features of these new “peripheral social sectors” (Flores, 2013: 5), I would argue, is not uncalled-for and should be further analyzed.

From a purely ethical standpoint, the face is, following Levinas, the first step in the path towards the Other. “The face speaks” (2007: 66) and “formulates the first word” (2007: 178), writes the philosopher in *Totality and Infinity*, meaning that “the manifestation of the face is already discourse” (2007: 66). In a more concrete vein, Pablo Corro considers that the close-up appears as a way for Chilean cinema to compensate for a long-standing “scenic and representational abandonment of the lower classes” (Corro *et al.*, 2007: 39). As such, he suggests, it is exemplary of “a different form of recording, a more sustained time” that proved to be more suited to unveil “the territories [...] of static action and its characters (2007: 15). Ultimately, however, the facial shot helps us to bear in mind, in Gonzalo Aguilar’s words, that “among other things, cinema is an archive of faces” (Aguilar, 143), and that the face “offers a unique axis to study the history of cinema” (Habib, 2006: 154), particularly *via* the close-up, “film’s true terrain” according to the well-known statement of Bálazs (2010: 38).

While Aguilar recognizes the relevance of the facial shot in documentaries of the “post-memory” generation, that he judges “obsessed with the *facialisation* of the image, in which they try to encode a history, a memory, a subjectivity” (2015: 143), he seems to be somewhat dismissive of its role in the political documentary of the seventies, which he relegates to a mere expression of the collective: “bodies, in those films, did not stop losing their faces, [...] dissolved in the crowds [...] in those groups that were waiting for the signifier of the ‘people’” (2015: 143). If the face is thus the “landscape” of the documentary of the post-dictatorship generation, the political documentaries of the 1960s and 1970s are far more preoccupied, Aguilar seemingly argues, by “gestures [that] were not concentrated on one face or on one body, but moved from one body to another [...]” (2015: 143). Writing on Chilean documentary, Dittus & Ulloa, *surrender, mutatus mutandi*, to the same assumption. The films of that period, they observe, “addressed the representation of a popular subject of a collective nature [...] showing the massiveness of the labor movement or political struggles” (2017: 38).

Nuancing the hypothesis of the “faceless bodies”, and the allegedly exclusively collective subjects of political documentaries of the 1960s, my argument here is that a closer reading of the particular “archive of faces” of Chilean university cinema helps us reach a somewhat different conclusion. In what follows, I trace this alternative path through three films.

## THE FILMS

Perhaps the more eloquent example of a direct and sustained approach to the look-to-camera in university documentary is Pedro Chaskel's and Alberto Leite Sanz's *No es hora de llorar* ([*It is not the time to cry*], 1971, 30'). Composed of a series of testimonies by militants of the Brazilian Tactical Armed Front (*Grupo Tático Armado*) who sought asylum in Allende's Chile, the film recounts the narrative of the tortures to which they were subjected in Brazil. These testimonies are alternated with a series of scenes in which the gestures and motions prior to the torture itself are reenacted for the spectator through detailed close-up shots, without however falling into morbid imagery. Essentially silent and thus evidently separated from the rest of the film, the reenactments signal, according to Ruffinelli, "both the artificial nature of the visual display, and the respect for real scenes —that are not shown, and were perhaps never filmed— of the physical constraints, of the degrading and humiliating treatment of the individual" (in Salinas & Stange, 2008: 133).

In a brochure published in 1972 containing a transcription of the dialogues of the film, Sanz describes the purpose of the enterprise in the following terms, putting an emphasis on its testimonial aspect as well as on the frugality of the approach: "The director's vanity is absent [...]. [T]here is no better agent for the revolution than the five comrades who speak to us, the camera fixed on their faces. This is why we thought it was essential to value their word. [...] we have fulfilled our duty to make an honest, solid film, which is on the side of its protagonists (Sanz, 1972: 4).

As explained by one of its directors, *No es hora de llorar*, while clearly positioning itself on the victims' side, uses the close-up as a means to inquiry into the individual narratives of the former detainees —who state their full name and profession in turn— and to bring them closer to the audience. Thus, theirs are not "faceless bodies" but, instead, bodiless and essentially motionless faces, inscrutable in the final analysis. By placing the camera at such a near distance to the face of the political refugees, the film mimics in a way the very practice of the interrogatory —to which they were previously brutally subjected— albeit in a life-affirming, expiatory manner, offering thus, so to say, its benign reverse, its well-meaning facet. Proximity, then, becomes an index of humanization of bodies hitherto reduced to their pure physicality, defaced under torture.

Despite its tangibly less political nature and its visible preference for themes that fell within the realm of "productive and industrial development" (Corro *et al.*,

2007: 11), the IF's catalog has its own share of socially-oriented films, focused mainly on living conditions in the shantytowns and informal encampments of Santiago's suburbs. This "housing" cycle was inaugurated early on with Rafael Sánchez's *Las callampas* ([*The slums*], 1958, 19'), a film which indisputably "prefigured the social cinema of the following decade" (Trabucco, 2014: 87), merging "gestures of *proximity* unusual for the time" (Corro, 2012: 29). Also directed by Sánchez, *La cara tiznada de Dios* ([*God's Mottled Face*], 1963, 10') expanded the exploration of the world of the slum proletariat, this time focusing on the consequences of precarious housing conditions and nearby landfills on the health of inhabitants in the barracks. Using a first person voiceover recorded by actress Carmen Barros, intended to evoke the experience of a young girl — and therefore making a first gesture of opening towards an individual testimony —, *La cara tiznada de Dios* stages, in spite of the naive account it gives at times, an "I" which bears witness to the daily life of the *pobladores*.

While *Las callampas* displays numerous instances of transient and ephemeral looks-to-camera, especially from children, *La cara tiznada de Dios* stages in contrast a progressive, more sustained use of it, which rests largely upon the montage of still images. The film opens with a series of crossfade look-to-camera snapshots of the girl, who slowly uncovers her eyes and proceeds afterwards to introduce the members of her family, also through still frames. Gradually acquiring motion in the course of the film, these family snapshots will act as matrices of the events evoked by the narrator, reappearing and establishing various logical relationships with the images with which they are confronted.

More significantly, however, facial and look-to-camera shots will serve here, by their *mise en mouvement*, as a counterpoint to the inherent stasis of life in the slums, thereby offering characters a fleeting escape from it. Immobility is indeed evoked throughout the film, whether it is in the form of a miniature model of a barrack or in that of the precarious school the young protagonist attends — "The express" —, set up in an outworn train wagon whose wheels have been removed. By the same token, the little girl will declare later on: "My father promised to take us by train to the city, but he now says that the prices are too high". Her description of the queues to access the encampment's only tap will only complete this dim image.

Embracing a more visceral rhetoric, *Explotación del hombre por el hombre* (*Exploitation of Man by Man*), directed in 1972 by Kristiane Gagnon, Gustavo Moris and Olinto Taverna, is, at first sight, antipodal to the more sanctioned or plainly institutional films that Fernando Balmaceda produced in the DCT. Adopting an

approach more in line with that of CE productions, although succumbing at times to Manichaeism, *Exploitation* relies further on the experiences of a group of peasants and villagers in the context of the recent Agrarian Reform. Shot in black and white, the film also assembles, during its forty minutes, images of different kind, deploying on the visual level a whole range of expressive resources, among which one can find still pictures, newspaper clippings, drawings, etc. This time, however, the slightly patronizing tone adopted at times by the voice-over—which here provides the historical account of the processes of land appropriation since colonial times—is shattered and punctuated by the testimonies of the peasants themselves, who share their opinions and political beliefs, in an apparently spontaneous manner.

In this respect, it is not trivial that the film begins with a “faceless” speech, spoken against a black screen and accompanied only by folk music of increasing intensity. These hasty and vivacious words formulate, in their swift rush, an injunction—“we must create a unitary consciousness, seek the substance of things, their roots”—, as well as an apparently prosaic and rudimentary question which the film aims to answer: “Where does the evil come from? [...] Since the time of our great-grand-parents, of our ancestors and up to us, grandchildren, still stuck in misery, without waking up?” Taking the interrogation of a peasant who does not hesitate to state their complaints in the first person of the plural, as the starting point in their filmic enterprise, Gagnon, Moris and Taverna make a gesture of openness which will nevertheless be partially denied towards the end of the film, since, despite a promising start, the narrator and the government authorities will have the final word.

Filmed during a people’s assembly celebrated in the city of Chillán and led by the then Minister of Agriculture Jacques Chonchol, the last sequence of the film shows an essentially informative gathering in which are detailed—for an audience composed mostly of peasants and small farmers—the designations and dimensions of the land expropriated as part of the Reform. During the five minutes that the sequence lasts, the camera repeatedly fixes on the Minister’s body and face—in front or in profile, standing or seated— his energetic and confident voice resounding continuously on the soundtrack. However, despite the numerous and very expressive plans capturing the faces and look-to camera gestures of the assistants, only one peasant is interviewed during the assembly, his categorical challenge to one of the measures announced by the minister in the previous shot therefore remaining unanswered. All in all, I would argue, the whole scene is highly ambiguous from a visual standpoint. Whose face has here, as it

were, the lead? Those of the peasants, who have built the narrative of the Reform only to see it hogged, towards the end, by the Minister? In any case, what do these faces express? Can their expressions be labeled? Do they enjoin us to commitment and struggle? Do they energetically command engagement? Or do they convey, instead, suspicion, surprise, mistrust and incredulity?

Although the editing of the shots reveals, here, an awareness of the contradictions intrinsic to the revolutionary process in question, this final deficit in the speaking capacity of peasants and workers constitutes a tangible symptom of what certain researchers describe, in the context of Chilean cinema of the period, as an “almost ontological predisposition to contradiction” (Palacios, 2013: 128), or as “opposite visions with regard to the process of the UP and the agents responsible for guiding it” (del Valle Dávila, 2014: 412). In *The Exploitation*, the height occurs, so to speak, when the narrator, after the sequence just described, affirms that “the government of Popular Unity is committed to [...] complete this process with the *real* and *preponderant* participation of the peasants, *real actors* of the Agrarian Reform” [emphasis mine]. What seems to be said by this flagrant gap between image and text is precisely the disorder and the irresolution of a cinema which, as Jacqueline Mouesca sums it up admirably, found itself trapped in terms of its aesthetic and social ends: “a cinema”, she writes, “militant in its content but with an immediate propagandist aim of government projects” (Mouesca, 2005: 75).

#### FINAL REMARKS

Be it sustained or ephemeral, revealed *dans la durée* or in the paradoxical stillness of the frozen frame, the “straightforwardness” of the face-to-face encounter is, all things considered, one of intensities and thus one of affects, hardly reducible to the “questioning gaze [*mirada interpeladora*]” Silvana Flores recognizes as being characteristic of the New Latin American Cinema of the 1960s. According to her view, this *mirada interpeladora* would drive the viewer “to unite with the experiences of the characters, and finally commit with the objectives of the liberation struggle proposed by the directors [...]” (Flores, 2011: 28).

While undeniably possessing an interrogatory or even accusatory facet —this was, after all, the *raison d'être* invoked by their makers, as evidenced by more than one manifesto— the look-to-camera is not however an all-transparent and automatically



intelligible exhortation to the viewer to join or commit to the liberation struggle, however heroic its goals may be. For much as it is tempting, one cannot ignore the fact that the look-to-camera indicates first and foremost a proximity that, going back to Levinas, is not limited to physical contiguity, as the cinema apparatus demonstrates. Unquestionably, the look-to-camera has in levinasian terms a capacity to simultaneously command and petition. Yet, as later developments of the idea of face-to-face encounter in his philosophy show, “the face not only pleads and commands; it is [also] strange and disorienting; it unsettles —and overwhelms” (Morgan, 2011: 81).

From this disorienting encounter, one could argue, unlabeled, indefinite affects may arise which cannot be limited to an all-encompassing although only latent political action. Perhaps a more convincing way of gathering these diverse instances of the look-to-camera could be, in Antoine de Baecque’s terms, to consider them, on the whole, as “cinematographic forms of history”, that is to say, as essentially “affective moments” that mark the “irruption of history into the film”, an untimely emergence of reality which would have the capacity to disrupt “the materiality of the film itself” (de Baecque, 2008: 20).

In varying degrees of intensity and length, the facial shot and the look-to-camera, its “reflexive” and “silent” other (Metz: 28), are in conclusion polysemous filmic gestures in Chilean political documentary of the late 1960s. Their occurrences, as shown, are not merely coincidental. On the contrary, they constitute a rather stable visual strategy, adjusted to different purposes and meanings in each particular film. In other words, it is not merely a collective signifier (e.g. that of “the people”) that is being constructed or assembled in the encounter between the lens of the camera and the gaze of a given filmed individual. What arises, instead, is rather a potentially plural constellation of usages — apprehending both the individual and the collective— in a rapport that is not always one of compliance of the former to the latter.

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