

LATIN AMERICAN GEO-POLITICAL STRUGGLES IN CANADIAN DOCUMENTARIES PRODUCTION

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Abstract

This paper analyzes two contemporary Canadian documentaries about Latin American history, specifically the ways in which the films provide an aesthetics of resistance to stereotypical and homogeneous representations of Latin American countries. Canadian documentaries on the history and the people of third world countries not only document Latin American countries but also criticize the conflicting relationships and forms of representation involved in the making of the documentary, revealing the documentary as a narrative form in its making of Latin American subjects and histories. Within this theoretical context, the study here proposed analyses two documentaries about Latin-American geopolitical conflicts. *The World is Watching: Inside the News* (1988), a British-Canadian production directed by Jim Munro and Peter Raymond, and *a Place Called Chiapas*, a Canadian production, directed by Nettie Wild (1998).

Keywords: documentary, metalanguage and representation.

Military dictatorships, guerrillas and geopolitical conflicts in Latin-American countries like Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Nicaragua

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and El Salvador have been object of analysis in various Canadian and American fictional films and documentaries in the last decades. Films like *Walker* (Alex Cox, 1987), *Carla's Song* (Ken Loach, 1996), *Salvador* (Oliver Stone, 1996) and innumerable documentaries produced in Canada and the U.S. with institutional subsidies such as the National Film Board of Canada have depicted geopolitical conflicts in Latin America. In the report of the *Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montreal*, documentaries are considered one of the categories of Canadian TV programs with fastest growth, behind TV series and mini series. As they state, the rate of growth for documentary film production in the 90s "was substantially higher than for film and television production in general".¹ Within this context of international production and circulation of images, different ethnical groups and nationalities are part of an imaginary collective world, where questions of identity and representation are central issues for academic debate.

Within a Brazilian context, recent movies like *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*), *Diários de Motocicleta* (*Diaries of a Motorcycle*) and *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*) have foregrounded important debates on the relation between film and representation. These films present a conjunction of issues which are defined by local colors, such as their *mise-en-scène* and overall aesthetics, social themes and construction of specific characters identified by their national or regional traces. At the same time, these films use an aesthetics and narrative logic close to an international classic narrative, being logic, linear, sequential, and based on the development of specific characters or protagonists. The films in question do not offer much resistance to world audiences, independently of one's nationality and cultural background, thus inserting itself within the parameters of international productions.² On the other hand, one can also think about the process of the transnationalization of film making as a two-way road if we observe that allegory, so commonly associated with third world productions, or parody, as an aesthetics associated with first world cultural production, as being postmodern, are not privileged sites for this or that nationality.

I would mention here two fictional films that make use of parody and allegory to elaborate a critical view of the cultural, political and economic intersections among first and third world countries: *Walker*, by Alex Cox, which offers a critique of the relations of power and subservience between Nicaragua and the U.S., and *Carlota Joaquina*, by Carla Camuratti, which appropriates images and narratives of Colonial Brazil to problematize Brazilian contemporary history.³ Thus, one can argue that the internationalization of film production does not necessarily imply a process of lack of political content.

Within this context of film production, I would argue that a number of contemporary historical fictional films and documentaries problematize the historical, political and economic relationship between countries of first and third worlds. Such films provide an aesthetics of resistance to blockbusters, thus problematizing stereotypical and homogeneous representations of Latin American countries. Canadian documentaries on the history and the people of third world countries, not only document Latin American countries but also criticize the conflicting relationships and forms of representation involved in the making of the documentary, revealing the documentary as a narrative form in its making of Latin American subjects and histories. Within this theoretical context, the study here proposed analyses two documentaries about Latin-American geopolitical conflicts: *The World is Watching: Inside the News* (1988), a British-Canadian production directed by Jim Munro and Peter Raymond, and *a Place called Chiapas* (1998), a Canadian production, directed by Nettie Wild. *The World is Watching* focuses on the international media coverage of the period that preceded the implementation of the peace agreement between Sandinists and the Contras in Nicaragua in November, 1987. *A Place Called Chiapas* shows the relationship between Zapatists and the Federal Mexican Government, the guerrilla force, the impositions of the USA on free trade agreements (and Canadians' indirect implication) and the very position of Canadian subjects. The paper, thus, analyses the forms through which these documentaries represent the relations of power

between Latin and North American countries as a geopolitical struggle, the aesthetics used in such representations and the various discourses implicated in such uses, also revealing of the place of those who produced the films, Canada.

In *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, Stella Bruzzi defines the narrative used in contemporary documentaries as self-reflexive as they allow for a questioning of their own forms of representation and the alleged realism associated with documentary. Bruzzi observes that the “objective” search for the real in the documentary is an impossibility since the documentary “is predicated upon a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential, that the text itself reveals the tensions between the documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim” (Bruzzi 4).

The questioning of the alleged objectivity of the documentary can also be compared to Hayden White’s questioning of the boundaries separating official historical narrative and fictional narrative when he affirms that the historical fact only makes sense to the extent narrative form reveals the significance or meaning of these events (51). Thus, the documentary and the historical narrative can be seen as narrative forms which can attribute meaning to any historical event. For White, the fictional historical narrative can in fact imagine an alternative for the existent realities and construct signification for a historical fragmentation (157). This transgression of the frontiers separating various disciplines is also identified by various cultural critics such as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. For them, such transgression is associated with a contemporary proliferation of images and narratives, constructing cultural icons and historical facts that are part of a globalized collective imaginary⁴. The term defined by Alison Landsbergh as *prosthetic memory*, used to describe how popular memory can be shaped by mass technologies that allow the spectator to incorporate as individual experience non-experienced historical events (qtd. in Burgoyne, 105)⁵, aptly summarizes the influence that icons and images can exert in the collective imaginary. In spite of the production and the

dissemination of these memories not being organically related to the individual personal experience, what can motivate a certain alienation, they can generate an engagement with past facts that can serve as "mediating basis for a collective identification" (105).

The World is Watching and *A Place Called Chiapas* present instigating political issues and innovative and self-reflexive aesthetic forms allowing for a questioning of various narrative codes associated with documentaries and with the media and its supposed neutrality as a vehicle of opinion formation: the opinion formation of audiences in First World countries about crucial Latin American political issues.⁶ In these films Latin-American cultural elements are represented through narratives which are conscious of their own act of representing a Latin-American "other," an other displaced and differentiated from the reality of a Canadian public, or from the journalist / protagonist who is experiencing this distinct reality. The similarity between the films is not limited to depicting an experience of First-World journalists or documentarists in civil wars in Latin American countries in the 80s and 90s, but also in presenting a central conflict to their narratives, which is the contradiction between the democratic and progressive discourse associated to the U.S. and Canada and the reality of destruction of the Nicaraguan and Zapatists civil wars. Between these two poles, democracy and destruction, there is the documentarist and the protagonist / journalist who reveal the inadequacies of their discourses and preconceived ideas towards a reality to be covered, photographed and narrativized. Besides these conflicts, the films juxtapose two narrative forms which reinforce, in an aesthetic level, the antagonistic relation between Latin America and the U.S. / Canada. On the one side, we have self-reflexive and metadiagetic narratives, conscious of their own act of narrating, on the other, a realist narrative associated with certain images and histories of an exotic place, displaced Latin American, be it in its natural richness or structural poverty.

The World is Watching focuses on the importance of the media in the formation of opinion about the conflict between Sandinists and the

Contras, during the period that preceded the peace agreement which should be established by Daniel Ortega's government and the Contras. The manipulation of information and journalistic coverage about Nicaragua is shown in the documentary as resultant from the editorial politics of major television and newspaper networks located in international metropolises. The structure of the documentary presents a series of interviews with journalists who were in Nicaragua to cover the events that preceded November 15th, 1988, deadline for the establishment of the peace agreement between Sandinists and Contras. After the interviews, the voice-over narrative summarizes the main ideas of the interviewed, establishing a logical connection between events and interviews. In the interviews, the journalists always show concern about the destiny their journalistic reports will have after reaching the tables of editors of great newspapers and television networks. Here the documentary shows a tension between what the journalist wants to say or mean in making the journalistic coverage and what the chief-editor of a newspaper will do in editing the material before broadcasting it on the television or newspaper in question.

The hierarchic relation between journalists and editors and the manipulation of the report by the great media before broadcasting the reports are two major themes addressed in the documentary. The interviews, however, go beyond these issues, questioning the very concept of the "news" itself in the coverage of a civil war like Nicaragua's, for the "reality" to be depicted, regardless of who depicts it, always comes preceded by pre-established ideas or stereotypes. In one of the statements given by the correspondents, Jon Snow, from England Public Television News, defines good journalism as the one which can depict individual stories that can move the spectator—specific emotional stories that can touch British spectators. In a similar way to the British correspondent who seems not to perceive the extent of the limitations of his notion of the "real" or the "journalistic fact" in reducing the Nicaraguan historical reality to the "emotional" or to the individual appeal in detriment of the collective, the chief-editor, in great

journalistic agencies, would be at the end of this assembly line with problems as complex as the correspondent's. The sequence in which Peter Jennings appears in the ABC News studios, New York, reveals his difficulties in depicting the complexity of a political reality involving the Sandinista government and the new challenges of the peace agreement and the inefficiency of the popular stereotype associated with the Sandinistas as if they were simply anti-democratic or "participants in the empire of evil"—a clear reference of Peter Jennings to the Reagan politics in associating the communist countries to the "empire of evil," an ideological instance imposed to the North-American people by the North-American government and reproduced by the media.

Both the English correspondent and the chief-editor of ABC News present a preconceived perception of Nicaragua. In the case of Jon Snow, the reality of Nicaragua to be presented is limited to the emotional and subjective appeal of individual stories; in the case of the chief-editor of ABC News, new historical developments need to be accommodated with the stereotype or with the preconception that the Sandinista Government could not deal with the Contras in a more complex way.

Such simplifications and stereotypes constitute the journalistic fact that ideally would be presented to the spectator of the great North-American television networks, but that do not fit the Nicaraguan reality. The documentary indirectly indicates that the problem involving the journalistic coverage is also due to the insertion of the correspondent within a production machine that does not allow him to question his own discursive practices in facing Nicaragua's historical reality, for he does only see himself as a victim of the system of production and representation, and not as an agent who effectively reproduces certain stereotypes with a certain emphasis in presenting Nicaragua associated with violence, exoticism and emotion. Such vision of reality is not addressed by the voice-over narrative or problematized by the documentary. Even though the focus of the documentary is the manipulation of the reports by editors, so that such reports can fit the specific time of night news or the editorial line of a great television

network, it is the conflict between the reality to be registered and the inadequacy of the liberal and individualistic discourse to be reproduced that allows the spectator of the documentary to reflect more deeply on the specificities of the Nicaraguan history and the reductionist perception of the journalistic discourse to be reproduced.

In spite of the fact that *The World is Watching* does not offer a comment on such dichotomies, the documentary, with its open form, creates an amalgam of voices that are juxtaposed rather than superimposed, thus allowing the viewer of the documentary to explore the ruptures in such different discourses. No "Voice of God" comes to define the way we should feel or receive certain pieces of information, and the audience is free to associate and question the ideological implications of certain representations. Furthermore, I would argue that there is a subjective choice from the directors of the documentary, and a certain respect for the interviewed, not to take sides but to leave to the audience the possibility of a conclusion. In this sense, in its open form, inconclusiveness and multilayered voices, reports and images, the documentary problematizes the uses of journalistic language. This openness of the documentary I would associate with a poetics of resistance: resistance to the closure implied in certain ideological perceptions of the other, to representations of stereotypes, or to any form of reduction.

The open form of *The World is Watching* and its sensibility to represent Nicaraguan revolution and individuals as being different from Canadian/British/American subjects can be associated with Munro's and Raymond's position as Canadians, and the long multicultural policy in Canada, which allows a place for difference. In spite of all the difficulties in defining multiculturalism, and historically it goes back in time to the Bill C-93 and Pierre Trudeau's policies, multiculturalism can be associated with Canadians' long coexistence with internal differences, in terms of language, aborigines and non-aborigines, and masses of immigrants.⁷ Multiculturalism is a pregnant term with varied and conflicting meanings: it has been criticized as being a melting term for differences, and conformist in that way, and

has been seen as a revolutionary term as well, as it displaces canonical views of cultural production.⁸ The contemporary documentary, here analyzed, with its open form, self-reflexive narrative and multilayered voices, creates an aesthetics that is coherent with a politics of representation of alterities. Such open perspective to otherness and to representation also foregrounds the dichotomies which are central in Canadian criticism such as nationality and border and centrality and periphery.⁹ In many ways the aesthetics presented in the films here analyzed are suggestive of the directors' awareness of these issues.

A Place Called Chiapas, awarded the prize for best documentary produced in Canada in 1998, and the recipient of the Genie Award in 1999, presents the uprising of the "Zapatist" Army for National Liberation, led by the sub-commander Marcos, against the president of Mexico, Zedillo. The conflict happens in consequence of the implantation of NAFTA (the North America Free Trade Agreement) in Mexico, in 1994. The narrative in off explains that NAFTA facilitated the suppression, on the part of the Mexican government, of the Mayan Indians' settlement in small subsistence farms, as well as favoring the boycott of the corn production by Mayan Indians, since the corn consumed in Mexico was being imported from the U.S. at a price inferior to that of corn produced by the Indians. Members of the Catholic Church tried to mediate the conflict as the Indian population, whose members are interviewed in the film, were victimized by the action of paramilitary groups, Zapatistas and landowners. The documentary can be qualified as "politically correct" in its attempt to present to different audiences an external gaze at the Chiapas conflict. Nettie Wild positions herself as a foreigner who presents the political problem in Chiapas from a personal perspective. In the initial sequence, her narration in off draws a political panorama of Chiapas, offering a particular reading of it by her as Canadian. The subsequent scenes depict Nettie's group trying to penetrate into the Chiapas territory. Nettie is then seen inside her pick-up truck, arguing with the guards about the need to show them a passport, since she is already on Mexican territory, where there should not be frontiers. The film raises a question about Chiapas—"What place

is this?"—to later answer it with a sequence of images where a map of Mexico presents some spots in red, small Chiapas villages that, according to the narrative in off, are "frontiers within frontiers," determining internal differences in the Mexican territory itself. That is, one of the purposes of the documentary is to represent these internal differences in Mexico, instead of homogenizing the diverse ethnicities and interests.

The sequence in voice-off, explaining on the map the trajectory of Nettie Wild's group, continues to inform viewers that from the small village of La Realidad there are no more roads. The subtext of the visit suggests a problem of representation since the place cannot be represented in terms of cartography, thus bringing to memory the various migration currents of cartographers that came to the Americas. The absence of roads to represent the Chiapas space can be understood as a parodic reading of colonialist-historical texts and explorers' travel writings. Authors like Humboldt, for example, "reinvented" South America's nature in a dramatic and grandiose tone, converting what was already common knowledge among the local inhabitants into European knowledge, national and continental (Pratt 120).

Various other sequences in the film reiterate the documentarist's conscious posture regarding the process of representation and hegemonic discourses that attribute to themselves a certain authority to speak of a specific and distinct historical reality. In the sequence in which Nettie begins her interview with commander Marcos, the audience is allowed to listen to Nettie's questions, while framing Marcos, and keeping Nettie off-screen. The inversion of the roles between interviewed and interviewer is revealed when Marcos asks for how long she has been in Chiapas. He then comments that eight months is a very short time to understand Chiapas, explaining soon after that he has been there for twelve years and "only now is beginning to understand the place better." We can read the inversion of roles as a way of inverting the positions of interviewed and interviewer, revealing once more that Nettie democratically accepts Marcos's criticism as it

places her in the position of an external observer whose understanding of Chiapas is rather restricted, a position that undermines the very authority of the director/author of documentaries.

A Place Called Chiapas presents the juxtaposition of two aesthetic forms: the realist photography which shows the real Chiapas, as a geographic place within a political conflict between Zapatists and the Mexican government, and a self-reflexive narrative which constantly calls attention to its own act of narrativizing this "other" place called Chiapas.¹⁰ There is, thus, a certain distancing between the realistic photography and its seducing images of beauty and war and the subjective and self-reflexive narrative of Nettie Wild, as the film is always being filtered by Nettie's conscious position as a foreigner. The film could be seen as metadiscursive, as it questions the alleged neutrality of the documentary to represent reality; that is, the documentary is a cultural product inserted in a correct political posture since Indians and Zapatists have a place to speak as subjects of their own history. Parallel to the metalanguage that reveals the processes of mediation in any representation, there is a realist photography, which is invisible, seductive, and poetic.

There is a sequence which illustrates the conjunction of seduction and poverty in a significant way. In medium shot the camera shows us a Maia woman and two kids carrying heavy loads of wood. The dialogue that accompanies the sequence tells us that the mother accepts to be shown in front of the camera under the condition that each of them, mother and kids, will receive twenty pesos each. The regime of hard work to which they are being subjected is replaced by the beauty of the photography, with its almost ethereal effect, specially the close-up on one of the kids as emblematic of the beauty of the Indian's face. There is in this sequence a symbioses between beauty and poverty, as something peculiar, that can be explored as spectacle through the photography. The dialogue, however, reveals the act of appropriation of the camera, and the documentary once more reveals its self-reflexiveness, its open form, its multilayered voices as the mother

negotiates her own position in front of the camera with the documentary crew members.

The films analyzed present self-reflexive elements which insert them in a “politically correct” discourse conscious of their own act of representing the other. In the specific case of *The World is Watching*, the concern with the very act of narrating, documenting, representing the reality of the Nicaraguan war is tuned with the complexity of the Nicaraguan historical reality, to the point of revealing the edges, fissures, and contradictions among the various discourses shaping Nicaraguan history. Going beyond the maniqueist vision of editors of great television networks, the documentary reveals the inadequacy between the North-American media’s stereotypes and the preconceived ideas of the reporters in face of the Nicaraguan historical complexity. In *A Place Called Chiapas*, we perceive the gaps between the documentarist’s perception of the Zapata territory and its history and the Chiapas territory and all other discourses that have helped to shape the image of the conflict. The audience becomes aware of the coexistence of the various discourses permeating these films without a resolution or denouement. Their form allows for a problematization of the language used in both documentaries, the repositioning of the documentarists’ subjectiveness and their changing perception of the other Latin American.

Notes

1. Data available at <http://www.ridm.qc.ca/archives/observatoire/eridm-1/chap-0.e/1.0.0.html>, accessed in November 29, 2009.
2. Fredric Jameson discusses the relationship between the national and the global in postmodern cinema in *Espaço e Imagem: teorias do pós-moderno e outros ensaios de Fredric Jameson*. 3. Transl. Ana Lucia Almeida Gazzola (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 2004). For a discussion on the aesthetization of hunger see Ivana Bentes “Da Estética à Cosmética da Fome”. *Jornal do Brasil*, 08 July 2001.
3. These films were analyzed by Anelise R. Corseuil in “Estudos Culturais e a Hibridização da Paródia e do Alegórico no Filme Histórico Contemporâneo:

- Confrontos e Transbordamentos." In *Palco, Página e Tela*. Ed. Anelise R. Corseuil and John Caughie. (Florianópolis: Insular, 2000): 127-39.
4. In the essay "Literatura Comparada e Globalização", Tânia Franco Carvalho presents an elaborate discussion about globalization and literary production. Tânia Franco Carvalho, *O Próprio e o Alheio: Ensaios de Literatura Comparada* (São Leopoldo: Editora Unisinos, 2003).
 5. Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
 6. For an analysis of Anglo-American fictional historical movies and representations of Latin-American History, see Anelise R. Corseuil, "Reconstructing Latin American History in *Walker* and *The Mission*". *Revista Ilha do Desterro: A Journal of English Language, Literatures in English and Cultural Studies* 32 (1997): 177-88.
 7. For a discussion on Canada and multiculturalism see *Ethnicity and Culture in Canada*, ed J.W. Berry and J.A. Laponce (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1994).
 8. Stam and Shohat present a discussion on multiculturalism in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).
 9. See Barabara Godard's "Notes from the cultural field: Canadian literature from identity to hybridity". *Essays on Canadian Writing* Toronto: (Winter 2000): 209-247.
 10. Part of this analysis of "A Place Called Chiapas" was published in "Representações do evento histórico no documentário e no filme histórico ficcional: *Um Lugar Chamado Chiapase Carlota Joaquina*" by Anelise R. Corseuil. In *O Neo-Realismo no Contexto da Crise da Representação: Série Estudos Culturais*. Ed. Dilvo Ristoff (Florianópolis: Editora Insular, 2003): 61-74.

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