EXPOSING MECHANISMS OF TRUTH AND MEMORY IN 21ST-CENTURY LATIN AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY FILM: AUTOBIOGRAPHY, TESTIMONIAL LANGUAGE, AND THE POLITICS OF PRODUCTION

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This piece explores the notion of Foucauldian ‘regimes of truth’ within 21st-century Latin American documentary production. Focusing on the treatment and representation of testimonial accounts, we may trace a history of the political and aesthetic valence that testimony has maintained within documentary production since the emergence of New Latin American Cinema. The specific analysis here of three films—Argentine Albertina Carri’s Los rubios, Franco-Chilean Raúl Ruiz’s Cofralandes, and Brazilian João Moreira Salles’s Santiago—traces a new trend within documentary production in the new millennium that blurs the lines between truth and fiction through an unconventional use of testimonial language. Carri, Ruiz, and Moreira Salles thus elucidate the operative regime of truth that has come to determine what and how stories can be told within documentary production. Central to this analysis are the political and historical situations that each of these directors is attempting to represent (or not represent, as the case may be) as well as the politics of production and reception of documentary film in their respective countries. The analysis engages film criticism from around the world as well as Latin America specifically. Ultimately, this intervention traces a new mode of conceptualizing the points of contact between personal expression and political culture through these films’ problematizing approaches to their directors’ individual pasts as well as to their country’s present-day political culture.

Albertina Carri’s 2002 documentary Los rubios includes footage of its director’s on-screen portrayal of herself listening halfheartedly to the testimonial account of her disappeared parents’ close friends—displayed on a television screen over her shoulder—as she writes in black marker on a large sheet of paper, “exponer la memoria en su propio mecanismo.” Her endeavor to expose the mechanisms of memory comes to the fore as the primary purpose of her filmic creation, while the content and truth status of the testimonial language included in her film—as in this scene—is relegated to the background. In a similar fashion, Franco-Chilean
director Raúl Ruiz’s 2002 documentary *Cofralandes, Rapsodia chilena* (referred to as *Cofralandes* from here on) opens with audio tracks of the September 11, 1973 bombing of the presidential palace (La Moneda) in Santiago superimposed onto a shot of Santa Claus statues in a courtyard that then cuts immediately to people dressed in Santa suits mimicking the maneuvers of the military men who would come to take over the country. Finally, João Moreira Salles’s 2007 film *Santiago* consists primarily of interview footage of its subject, the aging butler Santiago, as he, at times, recounts opera performances and movie scenes and, at others, is muted due to the director’s loss of the accompanying audio tracks. These three directors’ incorporation of silences and fantasy into testimonial accounts of their respective families’ and/or countries’ pasts evokes questions of the role and the efficacy of testimonial approaches to the recounting of past events within twenty-first century Latin American documentary. As I explore here, the questioning of testimonial accounts is inexorable from the content of each of these three documentaries as well as from broader concerns of the politics of production and the relationship between film and politics.

We may understand these directors’ approaches to testimonial language as an aesthetic that serves to undermine the truth value of documentary film. If we accept that testimonial language functions as a mechanism that legitimizes the truth status of documentary, then a playful scrutiny of testimony serves to question such truth. Apropos of mechanisms of truth, Foucault has posited:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth—that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (131)

Indeed, testimony may be understood as a discourse that serves to sanction stories that most societies have come to accept and allow to function as true, as I will further analyze. Within the context of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile’s documentary production and the policies of state-sponsored filmmaking, we discern such ‘regimes of truth’ that inform—and even determine—
what functions as true or false within the stories and histories presented by documentary filmmakers, including and even especially (auto)biographical stories. As my analysis will elucidate, each of these filmmakers has a particular and telling relationship to the existing documentary production of his/her own country as well as global cinematic conventions. Moreover, each of these filmmakers explicitly alludes to these conventions as well as to these ‘regimes of truth’ of documentary filmmaking and storytelling through their approach to their subject matter, most notably through their unconventional use of testimonial language in their filmic production.

Carri, Ruiz, and Moreira Salles create narratives that might be categorized as “docufables” (to borrow Jo Labanyi’s term) or “postdocumentaries” (in the words of film critic Geoff Pevere) due to their innovative blending of modes of representation in such a manner that questions the status as true or fictional of their respective films’ content. The audiovisual elements of Los rubios, Cofralandes, and Santiago create testimonies that undermine their own validity within the context in which they are produced and will be received by audiences. The circumstances of these three films’ production and their intended audiences’ receptions underscore the functioning of a regime of truth within cultural production and specifically within documentary production that allows individuals’ stories—in this case, the respective directors’ own autobiographical stories—to be received as true or false within the specific context of their countries’ political culture. Crucial to all three of these films’ figuring of memory is the intertextuality that each director uses to reconstruct their subjects’ memory through testimonial accounts. These references to literary texts reveal the functioning of memory and of testimony used to recreate memory as yet another text, a veritable mise-en-abîme of narrative that, at face value, is presented and accepted (or not) as a testimonial account within the regime of truth of documentary filmmaking. It is thus that these directors evince the complicated points of contact between personal expression and political culture.¹

**Testimony and Autobiography in Latin American Documentary**

In her seminal 1990 work on Latin American documentary, *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, Julianne Burton described a so-called “documentary impulse” that had
characterized New Latin American Cinema from its beginnings in the 1960s: “This documentary impulse, and the frequent aesthetic preference for a raw realism that replicated the compelling immediacy of certain techniques of reportage, has marked much of the fictional production throughout the region during the last three decades” (6). If, in Burton’s terms, a documentary impulse was to be observed in fictional film production in the early 1990s, a mutual imbrication between documentary and fiction has continued to be a common element of film production in the two and a half decades since Burton’s analysis.

Returning to the roots of New Latin American Cinema to which Burton refers above, we may trace the use of testimonial accounts within documentary. In their seminal 1967 manifesto “Hacia un tercer cine,” Fernando ‘Pino’ Solanas and Octavio Getino enumerate forms of cinema appropriate for their “cine-acción:” “cine panfleto, cine didáctico, cine informe, cine ensayo, cine testimonial, toda forma militante de expresión es válida y sería absurdo dictaminar normas estéticas de trabajo” (47). Despite their suggestion here that aesthetic forms be at the discretion of individual filmmakers, their manifesto’s list of forms of militant expression does undoubtedly privilege militant content over formalistic preoccupations of filmmaking, as Raúl Ruiz objected in a 1969 film festival that screened Solanas and Getino’s ars poetica for this manifesto, La hora de los hornos. Moreover, the film’s subtitle, “Notas y testimonios sobre el neocolonialismo, la violencia y la liberación,” is relevant for its inclusion of the term “testimonio.”

Through these forms of militant filmmaking, Solanas and Getino’s “third cinema” sought to spark a liberation-oriented film and political movement that was global in scope rather than limited to Latin America. Likewise, as film critic Thomas Waugh has observed, “the seventies revived the interview in the documentary, thanks largely to the feminists [and] the New Left” (81). In Waugh’s assertion, the use of the first-person interview within documentary film is inextricable from 1970s leftist cultures, just as Solanas and Getino privilege testimonial cinema as a form of militant filmmaking. Therefore, a scrutinizing approach to testimony within documentary cinema questions the tenets and conventions of leftist revolutionary culture.

The use of unconventional and provocative testimonial strategies within documentary is effective as a means of blurring the boundaries between what viewers understand as fictional
and as real due to the mechanisms of testimony itself that may readily subvert its own truth status. As Derrida has posited regarding testimony, “if the testimonial is by law irreducible to the fictional, there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury—that is to say, the possibility of literature, of the innocent or perverse literature that innocently plays at perverting all of these distinctions” (29). By Derrida’s account, testimony always functions on some level to “pervert” the boundaries between the fictional and the non-fictional. The particular ways in which testimony functions in the documentaries I analyze here, however, serve further to scrutinize the truth status conventionally accorded to documentary film production and specifically to the testimonial accounts included in these films. It is important to take into account Derrida’s notions of testimony as containing a trace of fiction, however, within the broader context of regimes of truth of documentary film. If documentary film’s functioning as truth does indeed operate on the basis of testimonial accounts, then Derrida’s assertion that the testimony’s implications as fiction connote a mutual permeability between the realms of fiction and non-fiction within documentary. Rancière, taking up the issue of testimony and fiction, views the binary in terms of a regime of meaning and understanding: “The aesthetic revolution drastically disrupts things: testimony and fiction come under the same regime of meaning. The poetic ‘story’ or ‘history’ henceforth links the realism that shows us the poetic traces inscribed directly in reality with the artificialism that assembles complex machines of understanding” (37-38).

Apropos of testimonial accounts within Latin American documentary, Lorena Moriconi has maintained that, through her examination of one hundred Argentine documentaries produced between 1983 and 2002 (that is, the nearly two decades leading up to the release of Los rubios and Cofralandes), “una abrumadora mayoría funcionan como vehículos para la expresión de testimonios” (“Primera Parte” ¶ 7). While testimony as such has not been widely studied within Latin American documentary film, Moriconi describes the conventional configuration of testimonial interviews in documentary: “una cámara fija y un encuadre equilibrado, situado a una distancia intermedia, discreta, respecto al sujeto filmado [...] la información espacial es así encauzada para servir de marco, orientación y cualificación argumental. Tal instrumentalización del espacio, trabaja a favor de la economía narrativa del
relato, con el fin de evitar y contener la dispersión” (“Segunda Parte” ¶ 8). For Bill Nichols, the problem that arises from films that rely heavily on the voices of interviewees is that in this type of approach to documentary, “the text disappears behind characters who speak to us” and testimony “becomes a rubber stamp” (265-266). In contrast, the films I analyze relegate testimonial interviews to the background in order to bring to the fore the question of representation itself.

A key element to the use of testimony in these films is the autobiographical component each director incorporates into his/her work: Carri’s return to her childhood and her parents’ disappearance, Ruiz’s return to his homeland of Chile and the years leading up to his exile, and Moreira Salles’s return to his family home and the character of Santiago. Given the complexities and contradictions inherent to the subjectivity of autobiography, a questioning of truth and representation is to be expected. In reference to his own autobiographical film, Fotografías, Argentine filmmaker Andrés Di Tella posits:

What is interesting about the autobiographical mechanism is, precisely, that it allows you to see yourself as other: the one who tells the life is telling the story of the other who lived it. And in contemporary autobiography, of course, the identity of the author is no longer the point of departure, but rather, the autobiography becomes the experience that allows you to sketch an identity joining the dots.² (35)

As I show in my analyses of the three individual films, autobiography and the testimonial articulation of individuals’ life stories come under scrutiny to question the politics of truth within present-day Latin American documentary production.

**Los rubios**

Albertina Carri has solidified her stance as a controversial filmmaker within Argentina. With such films as the 2001 Barbie también puede estar triste—which can only be described as claymation Barbie doll pornography—and her critically-acclaimed yet disquieting 2005 film Géminis, dealing with an incestuous pair of twin brother and sister, Carri’s oeuvre is more than a little provocative. In keeping with this reputation for inciting polemics and significantly
disrupting the status quo, her film Los rubios has garnered a significant amount of critical attention—negative and positive alike—since its release in 2003. Los rubios revisits 1970’s Argentina and the director’s early childhood, marked by her parents’ political activity and subsequent disappearance. Carri’s film constitutes a drastic departure from previous documentaries that, like hers, treat the guerrilla group Montoneros, including Andrés Di Tella’s 1995 Montoneros: una historia and David Blaustein’s 1996 Cazadores de utopías. While both Blaustein and Di Tella’s documentaries received production support from Argentina’s Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (INCAA), Los rubios was denied support from the institute. Although the film was ultimately supported by INCAA, as is made explicit through the director’s on-screen reading aloud of INCAA’s initial rejection letter, the project is denied funding because INCAA believes that it requires “una búsqueda más exigente de testimonios.” The institute’s rejection of the project on the basis of its lack of testimony, I contend, suggests that Carri’s own story—more precisely, the way in which she has chosen to tell her story—lacks validity as a documentary. In this way, INCAA’s decline to support Los rubios highlights the ‘regime of truth’ within contemporary Argentine cultural production wherein testimony functions as one of the “mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish between false and true statements, the means by which each is sanctioned” (Foucault 131). Carri’s film explicitly proposes, in the director’s own words: “exponer la memoria en su propio mecanismo.” Predominantly through Carri’s self-referential, on-screen scrutiny of testimonial footage, Carri effectively exposes the mechanisms of film that make stories of 1970’s militancy function as true within the context of contemporary Argentine documentary filmmaking and introduces conflicting—at times, mutually exclusive—histories.

Most immediately striking about Carri’s film is her choice to outsource the representation of herself to an actress, Analía Couceyro, who performs the role of Carri as she interviews her parents’ acquaintances, edits taped footage, and revisits the neighborhood where she lived as a child. Thomas Waugh focuses on the question of performance within documentary in his book The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film, concluding his analysis of performance, “Walter Benjamin spoke of ‘modern man’s legitimate claim to be reproduced; might we not add that the individual has now established the claim
also to construct that reproduction, the right to play oneself?” (92). That another should be playing the role of Carri as she interviews family friends and acquaintances in an attempt to learn more about her family’s past alters significantly the role that individual subjectivity plays in the film at the same time that it detracts from the truth value of testimonial accounts by having interviewees offer their testimonial accounts to a fictionalized representation of the director. What is crucial about her choice to have another portray her is that it is her choice, and that she has agency over the representation of herself.

Echoing Carri’s aforementioned aesthetic and formal treatment of testimonial accounts of her family’s past, the content of the information that she discovers through her interviews of her parents’ friends and neighbors from the popular neighborhood of Buenos Aires to which her family moved “into clandestininess” is filled with contradictions and falsehoods. Thus, Carri presents testimony that functions in a very different way from Blaustein’s use of testimony; while Blaustein uses a polyphony of testimonial voices to corroborate each other, Carri uses multiple points of view to highlight the unreliability of memory that is a central problem within any testimonial account of the past. Carri mistrusts the veracity of testimony so much that she takes the title of her documentary from a neighbor’s assertion that the family who lived in the house down the street (that is, her family) consisted of blonds. That they should be remembered as a family of blonds signals the unreliability of memory as well as the failure of her sociologist father’s attempt to assimilate within a working-class neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Insofar as being blond is a class marker in Argentine society, this contrary-to-fact element of the former neighbor’s testimony highlights the failure of Carri’s parents’ politicized endeavor to assimilate into a working-class neighborhood of Buenos Aires.

It is under this sign of contradictory information that Carri introduces all of the testimonial accounts included in the film. Toward the beginning of her film, Carri’s on-screen representative, Analía Couceyro, goes to visit her parents’ old friend, sociologist and politician Alcira Argumedo. From this meeting she includes a clip of Argumedo telling Carri, “lo que yo te puedo contar son anécdotas,” highlighting the anecdotal and only sometimes relevant nature of documentary testimonies. It is Argumedo whom we see relegated to the background as Carri fast-forwards taped footage and writes “exponer la memoria en sus propios mecanismos.” The
juxtaposition of visuals and the silencing of Argumedo’s testimony in this scene thus scrutinizes the effectiveness of testimonial accounts in creating a history of one’s own family as well as of Argentina’s recent past and the political movements in which her parents were involved.

We might posit Carri’s film as a canonical representation of skepticism towards testimony within recent Argentine documentary, as Moriconi asserts in her analysis of *Botín de Guerra* that Blaustein’s documentary serves as a canonical model with respect function of testimonies for the film’s plot. Whereas Carri seeks, in her own words, “to expose memory in its own mechanism,” Moriconi suggests that, through conventional use of testimonial accounts, documentary (as seen in her example of Blaustein’s *Botín de guerra*) loses sight of the work of memory, particularly its lacunae and its insecurities. Moriconi’s article on the use of testimony within Argentine documentary, it must be noted, came out in 2002, before the release of Carri’s film and therefore makes no mention to *Los rubios*. As she suggests, Blaustein’s *Botín de guerra* exemplifies the crystallization of testimonial accounts and all of the conventions therein within documentary production. For its part, Carri’s film’s use of testimony serves as a means to question such conventions within testimony as well as within existing understandings of the functioning of memory. Nowhere is memory more visible or more laden with political and historical significance within twenty-first century Argentine cultural production than within accounts of political violence during the last military dictatorship, the immediate focus of *Botín de guerra* and the backdrop for *Los rubios*.

In addition to Carri’s distancing herself from Blaustein and Di Tella’s approaches to documentary production about 1970’s politics, her personal account of her family is strikingly different from Nicolás Prividera’s *M* and María Inés Roque’s *Papá Iván*, both of which have been shown to espouse the belief that a central or underlying truth exists (Piedras). In addition to the differences from its contemporaries, the film’s treatment of testimony contests the very foundation of 1960’s revolutionary “third cinema,” which comes as little surprise if we consider that Andrés di Tella has affirmed that he has borrowed stylistically from Solanas and Getino (Piedras and Zylberman) and that Blaustein’s *Cazadores de utopías* includes clips from Solanas and Getino’s *La hora de los hornos*. Gabriela Nouzeilles has noted Carri’s rejection of “the identification of the popular as a primary theme and motive of filmmaking, and the political
alliance among artists, intellectuals, and popular classes that [revolutionary filmmaking] entails” (273). As part of her refusal to mimic third cinema’s militant forms, Carri’s film explicitly alludes to Solanas and Getino’s *La hora de los hornos* through her use of bovine imagery as well as to Humberto Ríos, three giants of Latin American third cinema in the 1960s. Solanas and Getino’s film famously includes footage of slaughterhouses borrowed from Ríos’s 1961 *Faena* featuring the slain carcasses of cows, conjuring images of violence and brutality at the same time that viewers are reminded of the primacy of the cattle industry in Argentina’s history. Carri, in contrast, affirms, “No me gustan las vacas muertas; prefiero las arquitecturas bonitas,” an utterance which she juxtaposes with bucolic images of cattle ranches. Ana Amado begins one of her analyses of *Los rubios*, “¿Qué decir de una película que muestra una manada de vacas con mayor frecuencia y nitidez que la que concede a la figura de unos padres, cuya desaparición y ausencia se mencionan como núcleo de la propuesta?” (70), highlighting the prevalence of bovine imagery in the film as part of the ludic approach that Carri takes to her ostensible search for her parents’ past.

In addition to her use of allusion to other filmmakers, Carri also uses intertextuality to question her familial identifications. The film includes verses from Olga Orozco’s *También la luz es un abismo*: “no creo que mi familia sepa nada / y lo más probable es que seas hija de tus padres / yo también creí ser hijo del rey Salomón / de Rasputín / de Mata Hari / y nada / ya lo ves / resultó que soy hijo de mis padres.” Like her relation to other documentary filmmakers within her country, her identification with her parents is the precarious outcome of a reconciliation process imbued with fantasy. Moreover, her reference to Orozco’s mention of Rasputin resonates with Alcira Argumedo’s aforementioned testimony wherein one of the few “anecdotes” that Argumedo is able to offer Carri is that her father was “un poco Rasputín.” The film thus implicitly equates the testimonial account that Argumedo offers of her parents with poetry written by a person she never knew, bringing the two discourses—the familial testimony and the public poetry—“under the same regime of meaning,” in Rancière’s terms.
Cofralandes, Rapsodia chilena

The late Chilean director Raúl Ruiz had already reached a significant level of renown as a director before the country’s 1973 coup that prompted his exile to France. In particular, his 1968 film *Tres tristes tigres* put him on the map as a prominent filmmaker of his generation. Nonetheless, even at an early stage in his career he demonstrated reluctance towards the conventions and conceits of political filmmaking and particularly documentary production within Latin America at the time. As previously mentioned, at a film festival that screened Solanas and Getino’s *La hora de los hornos* in Viña del Mar in 1969, Ruiz spoke on behalf of filmmakers and critics opposed to the film’s political dogmatism as well as the entire film festival’s eschewing of cinematic form in favor of political militancy.³ During his time of exile in France, he would produce films that, while unmistakably political in their subject matter, take a drastically different approach to politics and film from Solanas and Getino. His 2002 *Cofralandes*—winner of the Glauber Rocha prize and Chile’s Altazor prize for documentary—would, like his earlier works, “demonstrate the wealth of documentary’s ludic possibilities” (Pick 124). Glossed as “surrealist documentary” (Marinescu) or “false documentary” (Vera), the name “Cofralandes” is taken from a Violeta Parra song and refers to a fantasy-land where riches and happiness abound. The very title of the film thus constitutes an intertextual reference.

In 1983, Ruiz released *Letter from a Library Lover*, an autobiographical short film that prefigures cinematic aesthetics to which he would return nearly three decades later to make *Cofralandes*. Andreea Marinescu has observed the following in *Letter from a Library Lover*:

In another example of the mimicking of traditional documentary form, the interview format is used in two scenes with former acquaintances—static camera, interviewees speak directly to the camera, medium close-up shots—but their statements do not help elucidate anything about the narrator’s missing memory. The set-up matches our formal expectations of documentary form, but challenges them through image and speech. Their interviews are testimony-like, but they do not testimony directly.” (64)

Indeed, like in *Letter from a Library Lover*, Ruiz’s interviews of individuals do little to fill in lacunae in individual or collective memory, but rather are strung together metonymically in
such a way that seeks to reveal how memory works rather than what it contains. As I will show in my analysis of Cofralandes, the 2002 film would expand upon this earlier endeavor to destabilize the aesthetic and political conventions of documentary film production by playing on viewers’ expectations of testimonial accounts of recent history. Insofar as this “mimicking of traditional documentary form” is largely absent from Cofralandes, whose treatment of testimony is much more provocative and innovative, Ruiz pushes the limits of documentary even further in Cofralandes than he had previously in Letter from a Library Lover. Critic Sebastian Thies notes: “With constant oscillations between embodiment and disembodiment, presence and absence, Cofralandes deconstructs the narrative subject of documentary discourse which remains suspended somewhere between testimony, an actor’s performance, and a mere discourse effect” (286).

Cofralandes presents the partially exogenous gaze of its exiled filmmaker who feels a strong connection to his homeland yet who, throughout the film, mixes French in with his Spanish and identifies with two other men—one German and the other North American—who, like Ruiz positions himself to be, are outsiders to Chilean culture. The film’s four parts seem more like a travelogue than any other genre of documentary. As part of this travelogue-type approach to his subject matter, Ruiz weaves into his lengthy narrative analyses of Chilean customs and folklore, including Chilean speech, literary history, and cuisine. Ruiz’s use of folklore in Cofralandes evinces “an idea that different cultures, for different reasons, come up with related narratives, as if the human brain keeps generating similar stories, even if these are situated in very different contexts” (Goddard 159); the film’s exploration of folklore is thus inexorable from its exploration of the functions of memory. Goddard goes on, “it is as if Ruiz was attempting to devise a type of folklore adequate to the recent traumatic past of Chile, a cinematic fabulation able to perform for contemporary Chile what traditional story telling did in earlier times” (159-160). Ruiz’s storytelling is anything but traditional.

Ruiz filmed Cofralandes using a handheld digital camera rather than expensive professional equipment. The entire film project was commissioned by Chile’s Ministerio de Educación (Mineduc) and aired on public television in Chile in four parts in 2002. As Chilean film critic Pablo Corro has posited, 2003 was a watershed year in Chile for films focusing on themes
of memory and the country’s recent history and particularly for cultural production dealing with the country’s military coup exactly thirty years prior. However, as Corro goes on to state, *Cofralandes* was likely not what the *Ministerio de Educación* had in mind when it commissioned Ruiz for the project. The final product is not a political, historical review of Chile. It is not, in Corro’s words, Patricio Guzmán’s *El caso Pinochet*.

The aesthetic and thematic differences between Patricio Guzmán’s documentary production and that of Raul Ruiz have been treated by some critics (Blaine 2010, Marinescu 2010). Guzmán’s documentaries focusing on Chile’s recent history constitute a cultural paradigm of social and political documentary within Chile, as seen by the plethora of critical attention afforded to Guzmán. While Guzmán’s films are not quite as dogmatic as Solanas and Getino’s, we may nonetheless posit a largely analogous relationship between Guzmán and Ruiz’s documentary production of Chile’s recent history, on the one hand, and Carri’s relationship to Solanas and Getino’s documentary depictions of Argentina, on the other. Ruiz, like Carri, distances his narrative about his own country’s past from the tropes and conventions that existing political documentary has used to recount the same historical moment. Ruiz thus establishes a different relationship between filmmaking and politics from that proposed by existing documentary production. When asked in an interview about documentary production, Guzmán exhibits discomfort with his work being categorized as “cine comprometido,” but nonetheless offers a generic description of documentary as necessarily being “subversivo y marginal,” whereby the documentary genre is posited as a cultural production to be deployed as a form of resistance against dominant cultural norms. Whereas Guzmán describes the events of Allende’s Chile and the military coup as his country’s “extraordinary spring,” proclaiming that he never again experienced such equality and potential in any society since the days of Allende’s rule (“Entrevista a Patricio Guzmán”), Ruiz revisits and recounts the years leading up to Pinochet’s takeover in such a way that does not romanticize Allende’s days. Rather, Ruiz’s return to his country and to his own past questions the language and the filmic modalities used to capture any reality as he attempts to return and remember, suggesting a failure of language to transmit memory, history, or any coherent political project.
In a similar mode to Carri’s film, Ruiz creates a narrative that is constantly interrupted and brought into question by its own forms of mediation, to such a degree that mediation, artifice, and mechanisms of memory come to constitute the majority of the narrative itself. As Alejandra Rodríguez-Remedi has reflected on Ruiz’s filmmaking and *Cofralandes* in particular, “Memory, then, consists of a plurality of contents captured by our senses, giving it an aesthetic dimension charged with symbolic meanings and potential: the poetry where the resources to understand life reside” (90). She goes on to posit: “*Cofralandes* explores the processes of *forgetting* the cultural referents that anchor memory and the implication of this forgetfulness for the identity construction” (93). Rodríguez-Remedi’s emphasis on “resources to understand” and “processes of forgetting” underscores the film’s preoccupation with mechanisms of memory itself.

For purposes of my analysis here, I will focus on the function that testimonial accounts play within Ruiz’s film. Throughout the four installments of the project, individuals’ descriptions of Chile’s history, politics, linguistics, and cuisine are often interrupted by Ruiz’s use of a loud crashing sound after which he abruptly cuts to the next scene. In some instances, he returns to the testimonial accounts that were previously interrupted, yet never ultimately creates a cohesive account out of the snippets of these individuals’ testimonies included. The unexpected and aurally jarring shattering sounds shock the viewer out of the experience of listening to the voice-over and taking the accounts offered therein at face value. While Ruiz uses this interrupted testimony much more frequently in the first film than in the later installments of *Cofralandes*, he does use this approach repeatedly within a short time frame in the third installment (subtitled “Museos y clubes de la región”), juxtaposing a constantly interrupted voice-over onto the visual take of Ruiz himself contemplating a picturesque landscape in rural Chile.

Within other scenes that offer individuals’ testimonies, he incorporates surrealist elements of filmmaking and storytelling that serve to unhinge any notion of narrative of psychological unity within memory. Within the scenes offering testimonial accounts, Ruiz often superimposes voice-overs narrating individuals’ experiences over visual representations of people or objects closely associated but that could not possibly be the subjects whose stories...
are being represented. For example, in the last installment of the documentary, Ruiz offers an account of a couple who married in the 1950s paired with a shot of a young boy and girl standing next to each other against a wall, as if they were the couple to whom he is referring, although this fact would be impossible. His voice-over then states, “y fue así cómo se hicieron varios matrimonios” as if mise-en-scene he has just offered made sense. Ruiz also includes interview-like footage of individuals offering trivial information. In one instance, he shows a woman talking but her audio track is muted as his voice-over tells us of a trip that she took to Santiago as a child as she recalls the different animals she saw at the Santiago zoo. It is thus that Ruiz uses the folklore of his native country, the memories of quotidian moments of Chileans’ childhoods, in order to explore the functions of memory as represented within documentary filmmakings’ conventions.

In other instances, he juxtaposes the audio track of a voice-over of a testimonial account with something entirely different; in one such case we are shown a sleeping dog while Ruiz’s voice-over tells us of a dream that he had involving a dog. As Marinescu has pointed out regarding Ruiz’s use of voice-overs with images that do not correspond to them, “the lack of an explicit image-sound relationship deconstructs the normative realism of chronologic historical narrative. Through the layering of non-synchronous sounds, the past asserts itself in the present” (71). In addition to Marinescu’s assertion that Ruiz’s juxtaposition serve as an irruption of the past within the present, these jarring clashes between the audio and visual elements of the mise-en-scene also bring into question the validity and centrality of testimonial accounts, insofar as the audio testimonies are relegated to the realm of the absurd as they are undermined by the nonsensical visual representations that accompany them.

Ruiz incorporates these clashes within the film’s last installment. Here we observe the greatest amount of intertextuality in the film: Ruiz’s staging out Alberto Blest Gana’s Martín Rivas, the “foundational fiction” (in Doris Sommer’s terms) of Chile. Highlighting the problems of memory and of national myth, Ruiz’s reenactment of Martín Rivas confuses the characters and relations between them. As Marinescu has pointed out, “the film’s act of reworking the Martín Rivas by reinventing names and relationships destabilizes the story’s reading as a national allegory” (78). As we have seen elsewhere, Ruiz equates various registers of discourse
by destabilizing their referents, suggesting that Chile’s foundational story, like memory and history, is but another form of textuality.

Santiago

João Moreira Salles, like Albertina Carri, has well-known familial connections in his country: as brother of filmmaker Walter Salles and son of the influential Walter Moreira Salles’s, founder of the Instituto Moreira Salles, João has a great deal of visibility within Brazilian society as well as on the international film scene. Walter Moreira Salles’s founded the Instituto in 1990 in response to the grave political and cultural climate created by then-President Collor de Melo’s suspension of laws for the state sponsorship of filmmaking. As João Moreira Salles has indicated in several interviews, this lack of state funding was his motivation to film the footage that would ultimately make up his film Santiago: Uma reflexão sobre o material bruto. Due to the lack of state sponsorship for filmmaking in the late 1980s, both Salles brothers—João and Walter—were relegated to directing commercial advertisements and their joint production company, Video Filmes, became one of the leading advertisement companies in Brazil. One weekend he took the film left over from shooting advertisements to film his family’s butler, Santiago. The circumstances of Santiago’s filming and production are thus inexorable from the politics and economics of production writ large of 1980s and 1990s Brazil.

Like Carri’s decision to outsource the depiction of herself to an actress, Moreira Salles enlist his brother, Fernando, to narrate his film. These narrations consist of João Moreira Salles’s childhood memories as well as his meditations on the filming and editing processes. As Gonzalo Aguilar has noted in his analysis of Santiago, “The personal pronoun ‘I’ seals the inscription with a testimonial pact, which does not make all that is being said to be true or at least trustworthy [...] but rather forces us to read those indices under the force of testimony—in this case, that of the director who places himself between the spectator and the object that is being shown” (205). The director’s choice to have his brother provide the narrations rather than voicing his memories and thoughts himself has the simultaneous effect of fictionalizing these accounts—insofar as they are now a performance by an actor—and of reminding us that, as Moreira Salles’s voice-over indicates, Santiago’s story is also João Moreira Salles’s story and
is also his brother’s story. The film thus evinces of the complex interplay between individual, familial, and collective memory.

João Moreira Salles, like Ruiz and Carri, creates a film that depicts memory as story and as narrative, as a psychological and aesthetic function that serves to upset traditional distinctions between fact and fiction. That he should use a documentary approach to capture the impossibly fictitious and necessarily fictional testimony of Santiago blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. Dieleke and Nouzeilles describe the film as “an extended meditation on the relationship between memory, loss, and filmmaking” (139). Toward the film’s beginning, Moreira Salles shows copies of the original film’s script and, in his voice-over, informs us of the opposing themes that he envisioned his film conveying: life and death, memory and forgetting, which, according to him, “seemed like an original idea at one moment.”

Like Cofralandes’s dissonance between visual frames and audio tracks during testimonial accounts, Santiago includes several scenes of muted interviews with Santiago. These silences, as Moreira Salles has addressed in interviews, were due to the audio tracks having been misplaced over the thirteen years between his filming Santiago and his production of the film. The director celebrates this loss as yet another example of the passing of time and of what happens to memory and, we may venture, to the archive over the passing of time: “So in the scene that you can’t hear the noises of the house; the sonority of that house doesn’t exist. Any attempt to create sound for it would be, in fact, violent in relation to what I was trying to say with this film” (“João Moreira Salles Talks about Santiago” Part IV). The silence of his family’s home is indicative both of his parents’ deaths and the changing political landscape of Brazil over the decades, in which, as Santiago’s own words attest, the grandeur and opulence of the Moreira Salles’s families political receptions and celebrations faded into silence and absence.

Silence and elisions thus come to the fore of the film’s diegesis, highlighting the lacunae that exist within memory and within storytelling. As Ana M. López signals in her analysis of Santiago, “the Gávea mansion is, in Pierre Nora’s terms, a lieu de mémoire, a site of memory, but an imperfect one, pointing to emptiness rather than a plentitude of symbolic meaning for the ‘I’ of the film. The house remains, but it has lost its history (and its place in History)” (28-29).
Indeed, Moreira Salles has stated in his own terms that, after the country moved its capital to Brasilia, “Rio de Janeiro was the memory of something that didn’t exist anymore [...] and that house represented all of that, for me, a drifting place, without history’s courage, as if it had been ditched by history and it was adrift in the sea [...] the empty place was to be filled by Santiago’s memory” (‘João Moreira Salles Talks about Santiago’ Part III).

As a means of elucidating these gaps within memory and narrative, Santiago incorporates many elements of “making-of” footage into its diegesis. One of the beginning scenes includes a blank screen over which we hear the conversations between the director and his assistant, who asks Santiago to tell of his memory of cemeteries as he is sitting in his kitchen. Santiago then begins to talk about his childhood memories of music, which has nothing to do with the question that was posed to him. Several minutes later, after Moreira Salles has briefly explained the genesis of the film we are seeing, he incorporates an almost identical account of Santiago’s childhood memories, this time with edited footage rather than raw and without the prompt. Later in the film, Moreira Salles shows some of the footage from thirteen years earlier, and tells us what he and his crew did in each of the takes to manipulate the scene: a shot of a boxer whose sweat was perhaps exaggerated, an interior scene with props added and removed. In these instances, Santiago’s memories are introduced within a framework of directorial manipulation that, according to our director himself, are to be mistrusted. The testimonial account that Santiago offers seems logical and would function as a narrative of truth—that is, as a conventional documentary interview—were it not for Moreira Salles’s constant scrutiny of his own footage’s validity. He then reflects, “it was clear that everything must be seen with a certain mistrust” (my translation) and immediately follows this utterance with more footage of Santiago sitting in his kitchen offering his memories.

Another scene begins with the director and crew prompting Santiago, telling him where to look and how to pose himself just before he begins speaking about his own memory, which, in his own words, could be called “memoria prodigiosa.” At the end of the film, Moreira Salles reflects that of all of the leftover takes, most revealing was the footage of what is said to a character just before the action and that would always be the film’s secret. The film’s divulging of these “secrets” evinces the mechanisms that sustain testimonial accounts within
documentary and that suggest that to capture memory function without somehow manipulating the testimony is impossible.

As Moreira Salles’s voice-overs make explicit throughout the film, the crucial differences between the film that he had originally sought to make and the film that he finally made stem from his realization that the story of Santiago was an autobiographical story; that is, anecdotes that he might not have previously included in the original film now seemed relevant to him. Because they were about Santiago, they were also about the director himself. Following this realization, Moreira Salles re-edited the footage he had and included in the final film’s diegesis beautiful shots of Santiago’s “hand exercises” that he does every day, minutes of his hands dancing juxtaposed against a black backdrop. As the voice-over explains, it was Santiago who asked for these shots to be filmed, and in this sense Moreira Salles has come to realize that in order for Santiago’s story to be told, it must be approached through Santiago’s own notions of how best to represent himself. Waugh’s suggestion of “the right to play oneself” mentioned in the analysis of Carri is again relevant. What changes between Moreira Salles’s earlier version of the film and the final product is that he has allowed his subject to choose his own modes of representation. He also includes clarifications regarding Santiago’s decisions as part of his story and as part of Santiago’s testimony. In this sense, Moreira Salles suggests that an individual’s story of him/herself is not complete without reflections on how to approach said storytelling.

Akin to Carri’s use of Orozco’s poetry and Ruiz’s intertextual references throughout his film’s four parts, Moreira Salles incorporates textual forms of memory in addition to (and within) his interviews of Santiago: Santiago’s thirty-thousand pages of historical accounts of aristocratic families on both sides of the Atlantic that he has amassed over the past three decades of his life held in different collections across multiple countries. He affirms that, for him, the people whose lives are represented in these accounts are not dead, but live on in the pages housed in his libraries. Later in the film, Santiago informs us that his memory of nobility (to which he refers to as a gift of “la divina providencia”) came to him after the age of forty and that he writes down these memories to preserve them. The former butler wonders why he is compelled to concern himself with these noble families, again revealing the mechanisms and functions of memory as much as the memory himself. These memories of nobility also evince
Santiago’s understanding of his identity and familial connections, insofar as he dreams of belonging to these noble families whose memories came to him after age forty, recalling Carri’s citation of Orozco’s verses about dreaming of noble familial connections. Moreover, that Santiago’s accounts should frequently—indeed, almost always—return to his memories of opera performances that he has seen throughout his life creates a prevalence of intertextuality in the film similar to that of both Los rubios and Cofralandes. Here again, we see that memory is mediated through other discourses and representations. Moreira Salles, like Carri and Ruiz, reminds us that memory—along with the discursive representation of memory, returning to Derrida’s notions of testimony—is always imbued with elements of fiction.

Conclusions

As I have shown here, these directors’ particular approaches to testimony and to modes of recounting memory serve to scrutinize the politics of truth operative within documentary film as well as within the broader setting in which cultural production is received. Through their use of allusions to other texts and discourses within their testimonial accounts, coupled with their incorporation of autobiography, these films question the regime of truth that has conventionally sanctioned what stories individuals may tell about themselves and how those stories must be told. Ultimately, these films articulate a new model for the relationship between subjectivity and political culture marked by a ludic approach to the tensions between the two. These films may be understood as ushering in a new era of documentary expression in the twentieth century.

Carri’s film was released the same year that Néstor Kirchner was elected President, inaugurating a new era of politics and culture highly pervaded by discussions on memory. INCAA’s final decision to support the film—after its initial rejection—signals a shift in the ways in which historical memory may be performed. Moreira Salles’s film is released during Lula’s presidency, which, like the government of his predecessor, Cardoso, supported more arthouse and documentary filmmaking than previous administrations that had favored advertising and commercial filmmaking. At the same time, Lula’s presidency also invigorated the recuperation of historical memory in Brazil, making Moreira Salles’s contemplation of the mutual imbrication of

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between individual and collective memory a timely intervention. Ruiz’s film, for its part, not only marks its director’s return to Chile from Europe; its production and release took place during a moment of acute shifts within Chile’s political landscape: Pinochet’s detention in London for human rights violations in 1998 and subsequent trials in Chile between 2000 and 2002, all of which evoked emotionally and politically charged discussions on the recent past and on historical memory throughout the country.

Throughout the early twenty-first century in Latin America, memory has come to the fore as a central theme of historical and political inquiry as well as of cultural production. Within this proliferation of cultural discourse surrounding memory, the truth status of individuals’ testimonial accounts of their own memories has come under constant scrutiny and contention. These three documentary film projects may thus be understood as audiovisual manifestations of the mechanisms that produce, maintain, and articulate memory.

**Works Cited**


Notes

1 Michael Renov has posited, “current documentary self-inscription enacts identities—fluid, multiple, even contradictory—while remaining fully embroiled within public discourses” (178). Renov is referring here mainly to North American documentary and makes no specific mention of Latin American documentary.

2 In my particular analysis of Carri’s film, I figure Los rubios as diametrically opposed to Di Tella’s film, Montoneros: Una historia in both form and content. I would venture to posit here that Fotografías, insofar as its individual story—Di Tella’s search for his maternal family’s roots in India—does not create as much tension for national and political stories as Carri’s family’s past that is marked by her family’s disappearance. Therefore, while Di Tella is able to create a more ludic exploration of his personal narrative, he cleaves to a more dogmatic approach in his treatment of 1970s political culture.

3 See Aldo Francia’s Nuevo cine latinoamericano. Ruiz’s reluctance to embrace New Latin American Cinema’s political dogmatism in the 1960s posits him in opposition to film production and critical models of cultural production well into the 1990s, as Rothman notes in his reaction to Zuzana Pick’s study of New Latin American Cinema (345).

4 Critical characterizations of the differences between Ruiz’s and Guzmán’s films (specifically those cited above) predate Guzmán’s most recent films, beginning with Nostalgia de la luz (2010) which have been understood as a stark departure in Guzmán’s oeuvre from his previous more dogmatic, earnest approaches to Chile’s recent history and politics.

5 It should be noted, too, that in all of the above-mentioned critical analyses contrasting Ruiz and Guzmán, the documentary production of Miguel Littin is posited as an intermediate point between Ruiz and Guzmán as far as the formal elements of his production as well as the political model that his films articulate and/or perpetuate.