

Considerations on the Appearance of the First Person in Contemporary Argentine

Documentary

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An inscription of the *self* in the documentary-like introduction of Ana Poliak's second film, *La fe del volcán* [*The Faith of the Volcano*] (2001), is used to tell the story of the main character who is on the edge of a precipice, facing the dilemma of whether or not to jump –much like the filmmaker herself, who was on the verge of suicide in her adolescence. Poliak contemplated the direction towards which this jump should be made: outside or inside? The autobiographical prelude of this film gives way to a fictional story that serves as placement into the abyss (*mise en abyme*) through which the filmmaker can exorcize the ghosts and anguish of a traumatic, open and still distressing past. Thus, the response of Ana Poliak's forerunning film to this initial question was, indeed, to make a jump, but towards the depths of her inner world. It is tempting to think that, based on the metaphorical initial sequence of *La fe del volcán*, documentary cinema in Argentina has made this announced jump towards the interior. Indeed, Poliak's film uses the different forms of first person and the spectacularization of the maker's body as its main narrative resource. However, it also turns the question of subjectivity into the object or topic of its narrations.¹ This narrative order variation in the constructive processes of documentary film affects the ways in which filmmakers approach a collective, generational or hegemonic truth, based on an essential experience that places them in the center of the story. According to Jean Breschand:

Filmmakers stage themselves as part of the investigation. In their own way, each one of them assumes the world disorder and exposes his or her body to the camera. It is a moral question: the filmmaker is not external to what it

films; it is involved in body and soul with its search and becomes the revealer of fissures and conflicts undergone by the world and human beings. (88)

The purpose of this work is to define the theoretical context in which the progressive subjectivization of documentary cinema is inserted within the sphere of studies on non-fiction cinema. The purpose is also to locate the specific problems—the multiplication of first-person forms in contemporary Argentine documentary film—in the historical development of documentary practices in the country, and to propose a series of typological guidelines in order to begin a relevant analysis of a corpus of films from the last decade. Furthermore, a preliminary analysis will examine how first-person forms are articulated in two films (*Los rubios*, Albertina Carri, 2003 and *M*, Nicolás Prividera, 2006) that share the autobiographical nature registered in the first modality of presentations of the first person that I will define below.

The first person and modes of documentary representation

In the field of non-fiction cinema studies, it is surely American scholar Bill Nichols who has designed —through a systematic analysis of documentary cinema— the most widespread typology of this genre. In his own words, such typology is aimed at generating “basic ways of organizing texts in relation to certain recurrent features or conventions” (32). Throughout his studies, Nichols proposes the existence of six modes of representation in documentary cinema: expository, observational, interactive or participatory, reflexive, performative and poetic.² According to the author, these modes do not have an evolving nature in the history of non-fiction cinema, but they coexist in time, and (at the same time, they may also do so) inside the film itself. The inscriptions of the *self* in documentary discourse comprise the spheres of two of the modes defined by Nichols: the participatory and the performative.

In the participatory mode, the director's intervention is observed in the form of a "mentor, participant, prosecutor, or provocateur in relation to the social actors" represented (Idem: 32). We could say that the filmmaker acts as a "catalytic agent", to use here Erik Barnouw's words, within the narration, since its explicit intervention carries transformative processes in the persons and social agents analyzed, but it does not necessarily recognize that the interactivity may have a direct impact on its subjective experience and affections.³

On the other hand, in the performative mode, a disruption may be observed in the director's experience —his or her body, psychological characteristics and attitudes, etc.—, which deviates our attention from the referential nature of the documentary film. The purpose of this deviation would be to "underline the subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse" and to give more emphasis to "the affective dimensions of the experience for the filmmaker" (Weinrichter 49). In this sense, the different level with respect to what this documentary mode affirms in its statements is essential. Following the Spanish theoretician Antonio Weinrichter, "the performative documentary film is deviated from the old problems of objectivity/veracity that have accompanied the genre to a large extent and, at the same time, it puts the fact of communication in the first place" (Idem: 50). Performative statements would not be verifiable, unlike descriptive statements; "applying analogy to the discourse of documentary films: saying 'the world is like this' may be true or not, but saying 'I say that the world is like this' is beyond this type of verification" (Idem: 51). Furthermore, unlike the reflexive mode —which has a basically modern construction— the inscription of the documentary filmmaker's subjectivity prevails over the displaying of processes and mechanisms through which the film is made. The director literally "acts", thus being a first person that is materialized on screen, whether participating with his or her own body or through an omnipresent narrator. This procedure may be tracked in the works of contemporary documentary filmmakers from different cultures and with different styles, such

as Chantal Ackerman, Agnès Varda, Ross McElwee, Lourdes Portillo, Alan Berliner and Michael Moore, among many others.⁴

About the history of documentary cinema in Argentina

In order to locate historical problems of Argentine cinema, first of all we will point out that in our country, documentary film began to be developed systematically only in the mid-fifties. Thus, Fernando Birri, founder of the Documentary Cinema School of Santa Fe [*Escuela de Cine Documental de Santa Fe*], is one of the pioneers in formulating a national, popular, realistic and critical documentary cinema that defines the period from 1956 through 1966. The appearance of *La hora de los hornos* [The Hour of the Furnaces, The Liberation Film Group] (1966-1968) reflects the epitome of a transformation in testimonial and accusatory documentary film with respect to more active documentary practices regarding political⁵ or militant intervention, the declared goals of which include promoting ideological awareness and the active struggle for revolutionary purposes in line with the actions of left-wing military-political organizations.

This political-cinematographic project was brutally interrupted by the military coup d'état that took place on March 24, 1976, and found certain continuity in the documentary cinema that began to be developed with the return of democracy in 1983. In the period from 1983 to 1994, a documentary cinema characterized by its testimonial and accusatory features began to be developed. Whether in cooperative or individual productions, the topics analyzed include memory and oblivion after State terrorism, the identity of Latin American native peoples and marginality in large urban centers. The most outstanding exponents include Cine Ojo Group, led by Marcelo Céspedes and Carmen Guarini, and the extraordinary film *Juan, como si nada hubiera sucedido* (Juan, As if Nothing Had Happened, Carlos Echeverría, 1987).

Towards the end of the nineties, documentary film began to achieve more relevance and visibility in the cinema field. In association with the huge number of works produced as part of the so-called New Argentine Cinema of the nineties and the abundance of militant cinema about *piquetes*,⁶ the new documentary films dealt with miscellaneous topics, such as the social and economic crisis, the military dictatorship, the recovery of memory for the disappeared, the Malvinas War, the guerrilla organizations of the seventies and the biographies of notable people from the national culture. Within this context, the first person began to appear as a recurrent narrational form in documentary practices. The works that have adopted this modality, which arose mainly in the mid-nineties, deal with the topics previously mentioned, by means of a subjectivity that goes through them. Thus, the inquiry into memory and individual identity gives rise to a questioning and the creation of new collective and social constructions made with respect to them. Furthermore, new modes of perception are observed, which form part of contemporaneous subjectivity, through which it is intended to go beyond the traditional modes of representation that have historically characterized documentary films.

In view of the exponential growth of a narrational modality that had been scarcely explored in previous documentary cinema, it is worth examining the reasons that lead filmmakers to appropriate this methodology and, at the same time, to analyze the different forms adopted by this first person. Which types of narrations make the adoption of the first person relevant, necessary or justifiable? From which epistemological perspective do filmmakers become the subject and matter of their own narrations? Which narrational continuities exist in this corpus of films that is still growing and developing? These questions form the core of the analysis and the initial proposal of categorization that will be dealt with in the following paragraphs.

Starting point of analysis on the appearance of the first person in documentary cinema

Although it is possible to interpret the abundance of subjective documentary films aligned with the New Argentine Cinema as a result of the economic stimulus given by Law No. 24,377 —enacted in 1994— the relationship of that phenomenon with the benefits, incentives and promotion granted by the newly-formed regulation is more conflictive and indirect. Even though the new law implied a radical change in the relationship between the government and cinematographic production —as it provided a rearranged system of subsidies and credits— the majority of the support created in Law No. 24,377 was aimed at stimulating fictional cinema, since there was an exclusive requirement to produce and finish the work in a 35 mm format (standard for fictional films, but not documentaries). The documentary films that would have had access to this type of funding were required to employ certain industrial and commercial features that would enable their distribution and exhibition in the conventional theater circuit. An intermediate solution found by certain documentary filmmakers consisted of materializing their projects independently in digital video and requesting subsequent support from INCAA (the National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts) and other private institutions to transfer it to the 35 mm film format. The most recent solution derives from the implementation of Resolution No. 632⁷ of 2007 which established a new system of subsidies for non-commercial documentary films, recognizing the documentary filmmaker as an “Integral Maker” who is ultimately in charge of film production, performance and control.⁸

And yet, it would be misleading to say that the reappearance of documentary cinema in Argentina is related to the appearance of the new cinema law. Since the mid-nineties, documentary cinema has been produced almost exclusively in analogical and digital video formats, and only in very few occasions in 35 mm format. The low cost, the creative autonomy, the relatively simple accessibility to equipment and the greater possibilities of

personal expression are some of the reasons that instead explain the resurgence of this genre. In addition, the abovementioned democratization of production media is closely related to the creation of subjective documentary film in the first person. Due to the characteristics of self-expression and creative freedom that documentary requires, we may conclude that there is a series of aesthetic, discursive, social and technological factors that enable and explain the decisive transformations that led to the increasing subjectivization of documentary practices in the last few decades, which is observed in both the national and international spheres (in relation to the relative universality and productivity thereof). In order to analyze those factors, we will get back to the proposals of certain experts on this issue.

First, following cinema theoretician and historian María Luisa Ortega, it is necessary to recognize the influence of two movements: Direct Cinema and *Cinéma Vérité*. Both of these arose in the late fifties, in the United States and France, respectively, and both helped to release documentary cinema from its rigid structures, promoting formal experimentation and a closer relationship between the filmmaker and his or her surrounding reality:

The observational minimalism that was favored by the first movement and the tune-up of the camera as a provoking and catalytic device at the service of the social survey of the second movement caused the audience to face –as it occurred with contemporaneous vanguard– new temporalities of the occurrence of events, with capacities that revealed random and uncontrolled register [...] and with the pleasure of non-narrative oral exchange. (Ortega 196)

Another trigger is the development of videographic technologies at the end of the fifties. Video —which arose as a necessary evolution for mass television broadcasting— imposed significant changes in the hegemonic traditions of the documentary film of that time, and although these changes have a technological root, they end up facilitating aesthetic

transformations as well. Those modifications, which are pointed out by Spanish historian Manuel Palacio, can be summarized in two elements:

- a) At the time of its creation, the video tape lasted 30 minutes, as compared to the 11 minutes of the 16 mm coil. This difference is the key for the production of filming plans and, at the same time, it enables a less media-related approach between the filmmaker and his or her object. (Palacio 163).
- b) In addition, video allows one to visualize the images recorded instantly, while there is an unavoidable hiatus in earlier cinematographic technology between the instance of recording and that of exhibition. Thus, the documentary filmmaker has more control over the material and more possibilities of manipulating it. (Idem: 164)

In close relationship with the previous factor, a significant element to think about when considering the first person in documentary cinema is the development, in the early sixties, of the so-called “New Journalism” in the television field in the United States, since this movement promoted “the double operation of introducing the first-person narrator in non-fiction genres and, on the other hand, of building stories that were as entertaining as in fiction” (Idem: 177).

According to María Luisa Ortega, there was a trend —as documentary film was removed from its primary role in the sixties by the television, becoming instead a referential practice— to consider documentary cinema as a discursive practice and no longer a mimetic practice, which would relate it to the experimentation work on narration done by vanguards. Within this framework, films like *Berlin, Die Symphonie der Großstadt* (Berlin, Symphony of a Big City, Walter Ruttmann, 1927) and *À propos de Nice* (Nizza, Jean Vigo, 1930) would be part of the background of this non-mimetic experimental trend that would have been domesticated by a social and political turn of documentary film carried out in the thirties in

order to “create more direct and effective messages as an instrument of action” (Ortega *Op. cit.*: 188).

Moreover, French critic Jean-Louis Comolli considers the abundance of the first person in documentary cinema as a kind of antidote or reaction to the discourse of mass communication media and, specifically, television. Comolli indicates that communication media build a world that becomes a show, where the events seem to occur first in television and then in reality, and the real part of representation takes the place of the representation of what is real (46). The response of subjective documentary film would be to reconcile with the register of the document by creating a “body-word-subject-experience-life link guaranteeing that the experience of filming will have impact on the body filmed.” Thus, “the filmmaker’s body filmed imposes one more piece of evidence of the documentary essence of the film that is capable of producing an effect of truth that cannot be argued” (Idem: 48).

Finally, as a hypothesis, it is possible to think that the repeated use of the first person in Argentine documentary film in the last decade is based on the impossibility of classic documentary film to tell a historic truth about the traumatic events of recent history. Giving a new meaning to the reading of the past through the filmmaker’s own subjectivity, subjective documentary film has partial, tentative and provisional truths that are deeply ingrown and operative for the construction of a close memory that passes from the individual to the collective sphere, thus reversing the parabola of the militant political cinema of the seventies.⁹

Towards an initial categorization of first person modalities

A debate published by the magazine *Punto de Vista* (AA. VV. 2005) analyzed, from different points of view, the issue that we are considering. As part of the discussion regarding the relevance of the first person, Argentine film director Rafael Filippelli points out that it could never be stated that the third-person narration is abusive, “that it is misappropriating a

place, that it should disappear to let us see another thing” (AA. VV. 35); however, these comments could indeed be applied to the first person as well. The response given by Beatriz Sarlo in this regard is restrictive as it indicates that “the use of the first person is a violence and a right that must be won” (Idem: 35), thus posing discursive, ethical and ideological problems. In Argentine documentary film, I have distinguished three ways in which the subjectivity of the filmmaker is materialized on the screen, taking into account the proximity between the purpose of the statement and the subject that appropriates such statement explicitly.

In the first place, there are strictly biographical narratives in which an extreme closeness is established between the subject of the statement and the object thereof. As already known, autobiography has a full history as a literary genre and has generated intense debates about the configuration of its narrational regime. Autobiography, as a “mirror-like structure in which someone, who calls itself ‘I’, is taken as the object of the narration” (Sarlo 38), will be severely questioned by a deconstructionist critic like Paul de Man, who placed it within the sphere of the *prosopopeia*, a trope through which the word is given to a dead or absent person.¹⁰ What is complex about this word is that it is a trope that serves as subject of the narrative but is unable to guarantee the identity between subject and trope (Idem: 39). In this sense, de Man concludes that there is no truth, but a mask that claims to tell its truth. Although de Man’s considerations are significant with respect to the general validity of autobiographical statements in narrative arts, we should acknowledge—following Elizabeth Bruss—that:

the specificity of the cinematographic language transgresses the self-reflexive discourse until there is no filmic equivalent of the literary autobiography in the ambivalent space that exists between the fictional statement and the true

statement, and in the space in which the truth is questioned as a product of linguistic and visual construction. (45)

Then, it should be pointed out that autobiography as such presents an indexical relationship with the historical world because it intends to recover the life experience of the autobiographer, a similar connection to that presented by the documentary register with respect to the historical or empirical world due to a strong predominance of the referential function (Cuevas 222). This modality includes certain documentary films, such as *Los rubios* (The Blondes, Albertina Carri, 2003), *M* (Nicolás Prividera, 2006), *Papá Iván* (Father Iván, María Inés Pérez Roqué, 2000), *Hacer patria* (Nation-building, David Blaustein, 2006) and *Fotografías* (Photographs, Andrés Di Tella, 2006). The common denominator in these films is the presence of a filmmaker who, in front of the camera, organizes his or her materials and directs the investigation by inquiring about the past and the present of family and friends. The discursive strategies in these types of narrations, far from being homogeneous, are characterized by diversity, thus showing a paradoxical equation: in order to narrate personal stories restricted to the sphere of the *self*, the filmmakers seem to need the most complex and varied narrative devices. The experimentation is then the formal correlate required whenever experience is the narrative matter. One of the most extreme cases of this trend is *Los rubios*. Albertina Carri resorts to a series of devices, such as the delegation of the first person to an actress, the narration of traumatic situations through the use of *Playmobil* toys and the conscious, explicit and critical manipulation of testimonies that traditionally serve as the structure of narratives in documentary cinema. By means of these devices and other specific strategies of fiction cinema, Carri seems to sustain that the only possibility of representing and exercising memory is by taking distance and employing different layers of mediation between the subject and his or her experience.

Something different occurs in *M*, *Papá Iván* and *Fotografías*. Being post-memory exercises, *M*¹¹ and *Papá Iván*¹² share with *Fotografías*—a film that inquires into the social and cultural roots of its filmmaker, Andrés Di Tella—the sensation that there is a truth, a knowledge to which the film could allow access to, even though this attempt becomes eventually frustrated or unsatisfactory. The dramatic and formal solution of *M* and *Papá Iván* consists in adding multiple testimonies to the narrative, relying on them, but making a dialectic intervention in them either through the alternate montage or the direct confrontation of the interviewee by the filmmaker/character. With respect to this first-person modality, it could be concluded that in this type of documentary film, “the dichotomy between the investigating subject and the human group that is the object of the investigation is broken because they are both involved personally in that investigation, which is generally presented as a process of self-knowledge” (Idem: 237).

Secondly, there is a modality that I call *experience and otherness*. In these narrations, there is feedback between the personal experience of the filmmaker and the object of the statement, as well as a kind of contamination of both levels, causing the experience and perception of the subject to be deeply moved, and the object of the narration receives a whole new meaning as it is subject to a strongly subjectivized look. Thus, in *Por la vuelta* (For the Return, Cristian Pauls, 2002), the exceptional character of tango bandonion player Leopoldo Federico is sketched and delimited by the amazed look of Cristian Pauls and, at the same time, the evolution, music, disease and teaching of Federico modify the subjectivity and experience of the filmmaker. The key to this type of documentary film is that, from its first images, a discursive operation takes place, which is characterized by a certain degree of arbitrariness that consists of an agreement or pact that the work makes with the audience. Thus, it could be considered that there is a correspondence with the agreement between the author and the reader that Philippe Lejeune describes in his classic essay about the

*autobiographical pact*¹³ in the field of literature (1975). In the cinematic field, this operation implies inking something that is absolutely related to the personal experience of the filmmaker/documentarist with the evolution of *another person*, of an instance that is beyond the subject that makes the statements; however, due to different reasons, the filmmaker builds and determines it, even though it is exceeded by that instance. The inclusion of the first person in this modality is then supported by a convention whereby the subject of the statement requests the audience to grant the condition of truth to certain propositions that cannot be contrasted by reference outside the diegesis of the work. This is how Cristian Pauls asks us to believe that the music of Leopoldo Federico modified his perception of the world dramatically while Andrés Di Tella, in *La televisión y yo (notas en una libreta)* (Television and Me [Notes on a Pad], 2002),¹⁴ asks us to believe that the loss of fifteen years of Argentine television was significant for him to understand his personal history and the history of the country itself.

In the third place, there is a modality that I call *epidermal*. These are documentary films in which the director's *self* is only a disembodied presence or one that is weakly related, from the biographical and emotional point of view, to the object of the statement. In these cases, it is difficult to distinguish whether the selection of the story told is a mere excuse to show the personality of the filmmaker or whether the first person is actually essential to telling a specific story and not some other story. It should be mentioned that, in certain occasions, the precedent of this form of first person is found in television's investigation journalism model, not in the documentary film of the author. Unlike the autobiographical modality and the experience and otherness modality, the epidermal modality would seem to share the characteristics of documentary's participatory mode, in contrast to the performative mode, always following Nichols' terminology.

What is the basic connection between Ada Falcón and the experience of Sergio Wolf? Why does a film like *Yo no sé qué me han hecho tus ojos*¹⁵ (I Don't Know What Your Eyes Have Done to Me, Sergio Wolf and Lorena Muñoz, 2003) deal with Ada Falcón and not with any other tango singer out of the many that moved along the stages of Buenos Aires? Why does Sergio Iglesias decide, in his film *Bialet Massé, un siglo después*¹⁶ (Bialet Massé, A Century Later, 2006), to follow the trace of the homonymous Spanish physician and thinker? What is explained by José Luis García's sudden interest in Cándido López and the War of the Triple Alliance in his film *Cándido López – Los campos de batalla*¹⁷ (Cándido López – The Battlefields, 2005)? In order to justify the intervention of the first person, the three documentary films need to provide the reasons for their interest in or relationship with their topic, and they do so: synthetically in the case of Sergio Wolf¹⁸ and José Luis García¹⁹ and with more details in the case of *Bialet Massé*.²⁰ The issue raises the following question: what is the relevance or need of the first person inscriptions in these documentary films, resuming the statements made by Sarlo and Filippelli? We can think of two tentative answers to this question. On the one hand, it is reasonable to think of the consolidation of a narrative mode that has slowly become dominant through the mimetic adoption of forms deriving from European and American non-fiction cinema, but also through the adoption of a television model in which the figure of the journalist, investigator or reporter has progressively occupied a hierarchical place with respect to the topic or structure of the narration. On the other hand, in this first-person modality, the purpose of showing the body and the exacerbated subjectivity is to disclose the narrative device, taking into account the forms in which a film is built in front of the eyes of the audience, proposing itself, at the same time, as a personal and subjective version.

As a provisional conclusion, it should be mentioned that, in its different modalities, the first person is a stylistic, thematic and formal feature shared by a group of fundamental

works in the field of contemporary Argentine documentary film.²¹ With respect to the profusion of this representative and narrative modality, we can reiterate the concept articulated by Emilio Bernini that the current generation is a generation of authors without works, in which the notion of author has become a heritage more than a construction. Thus, “the contemporaneous documentary film seems to base its truth on the experience of the filmmaker itself as an author [...] who shows itself in the image, before than in the historical world, in the others or in the way in which they are represented” (Bernini 43). In other words, we are facing, after all, the display of new ways of interpreting, constructing and reinventing the symbolic image of something collective based on a subjective, individual and non-transferable image.

Two documentary films of the last decade constitute paradigmatic examples that characterize the forms of representation of the autobiographical modality and that pose certain dilemmas and aspects in its inner sphere. *Los rubios* and *M* have several characteristics in common. Both of them are exercises of memory and identity, the reconstruction of a family past undertaken by its directors, sons of revolutionary Peronist militants who disappeared during the last dictatorship.²² The hypothesis led by the present analysis is that although both documentary films share a strong inscription of subjectivity based on showing the own bodies of the authors in front of the camera, they support conflicting visions with respect to the possibility or impossibility of stating a truth about Argentine political and social history. The impossibility, in the film of Albertina Carri, and the possibility, in the film of Nicolás Prividera, are articulated through certain narrative strategies.

Subjectivity and ethics in documentary film

Los rubios uses different resources from fiction cinema to build its narration. In this regard, the animation with *Playmobil* toys and the inclusion of an actress stand out, and, as

explained in the diegesis, this actress interprets the role of Albertina Carri. We could then state that the author makes a first-person delegation, and this decision has different narrative and semantic implications, but this would not be completely accurate. Carri's delegation is partial and closer to a splitting that, as stated in Kohan's article (2004), exacerbates subjectivity, duplicating the presence of the *self* in the image. From the spatial point of view, Analía Couceyro, the actress representing the director, will generally occupy a position of centrality and frontality in the shot, while the real Carri will remain in the periphery of the shot. This novel strategy allows the filmmaker to participate in the dramatic action without abandoning the distance and the privileged place behind the camera that is usually occupied by the film director. In a way, the splitting technique is the constructive principle of the film, since it goes through all of the narration and provides Carri with the tools to reflect, act, state and build significant complex propositions in front of the audience. This narrative strategy becomes problematic when it encounters the real reference. This reference is none other than a society that has been modeled for decades by fear, ignorance and social prejudice. When interrogated, what the society has to say causes rage, pain and fright in Albertina Carri, and she cannot avoid returning the blow by participating directly with her body and voice in the representation. From an ethical point of view, problems arise in the staging of indignation—subsequently, in front of the camera and in private—by the director and the production team after the testimonies of several persons who have long lived in the neighborhood. It is worth remembering that these testimonies were obtained from people who said to be someone that they were not, a similar operation to that of Carri's splitting in the actress Analía Couceyro.

In the film of Nicolás Prividera, the bodily inscription of the director in the shot is registered in three different levels. The travels of Prividera throughout the significant spaces of his history consist of shots in which the body of the director is always fragmented and showing his back, thus producing a partial transfer that places the audience in that vacant

place. The audience investigates together with the filmmaker, without forgetting that it is accompanied by the filmmaker's body and, therefore, this audience participation acquires a conscious and critical nature. In a second instance, during the interviews, Prividera's body shares the shot with the witness in a balanced manner. (We will see the implications of remaining in the shot in the next analysis of the treatment given by testimonies.) Finally, the body of Prividera is positioned in a frontal and central manner only in the key moments of the documentary film. In those passages, the high degree of the exposure of subjectivity is justified as a direct interrogation of the audience, a request for joint consideration, in which the director tries to take his personal history beyond the private sphere, activating debates that go through the whole social sphere.

Forms and uses of testimonies

Albertina Carri intends to break a tradition of documentary cinema that gives a strong value of truth to testimonies. In canonical documentary practices, testimonies occupy a central space. A new attitude of distrust towards testimonies is in line with the theoretical proposals of Beatriz Sarlo in her recent essay *Tiempo pasado* [Past Time] (2005), where she develops a critical approach with respect to considering the personal experience as an argument of truth to build historical narratives and collective memory. Albertina Carri cannot avoid recording the testimonies of her father's fellow militants, but places them in the periphery of the narration through their offscreen auricularization, the intervention of her double in the tapes of the interviews and the resourceful display and concealment of testimonies that become related to the media by a monitor screen. The testimonies seem to be the substance with which the desolate main character frames her discourse. The voice of Albertina Carri, a presence that is purely characterized by statements, needs all these denied voices that are rooted in the past to be heard. Thus, the expression of this subjectivity implies a relegation of the collective, but never its complete disappearance from the sphere of

representation, and this is the strategy used by the director to break up, according to her own statements, a generational discourse that does not cease to be formed politically.

Although Priverera also makes a transfer with respect to the traditional ways of using testimonies in documentary cinema, the transfer is inclusive, not exclusive, as in the case of Carri. The testimonies are placed at the center of the narration, but there is an intervention in them through the word and body of the director. The intellectual intervention is displayed through his ability to position himself as interviewer/psychologist, but it is also emotional because it updates with his physical presence as son the absence of the body of his mother.²³ As stated by Priverera himself, “whenever the absence of a person is investigated, the presence of one’s own body replaces that absence,²⁴” thus becoming a kind of “medium”. Therefore, there is a double operation that tends to denature the testimonies and provide them with a significant richness that is not very common. First of all, the operation takes place within the interview, using the resources of a journalist who does not abandon his role as the main character of the action and handles the timing of questions, tones, interstices of communication with the interviewee, but also the look and body proxemics. Secondly, the operation takes place outside the interview through a dialectic montage of the different voices, capturing dissonances, contradictions, disputes and discords.

To conclude, we can state that, in the field of first-person documentary in its autobiographical modality, there are at least two opposing positions with respect to the interpretation of Argentina’s political past. The critical but inclusive treatment of testimonies in *M* shows the interest in building a collective social memory in which the voices of the main characters of the story need to be heard and understood within a complex framework of social discourse. There is a disclosure of the intention to state a truth about the social body that runs parallel to a personal and non-transferable memory analyzed from the performative mode of documentary film. In the case of *Los rubios*, although Carri —as stated by Gonzalo

Aguilar— finds in her production pals a new group of belonging that, at the end of the film, will allow her to carry out her postponed mourning, the operation aimed at taking the voices of the past away prevents the film from being detached from the private and subjective field towards a public, collective and politically transforming dimension.

Conclusion

The previous analysis dealt with one of the most expressive and stylistic trends of contemporary Argentine documentary film. There is no doubt that the appearance of subjectivity is one of the phenomena with great aesthetic and political productivity within the process of the transformation of documentary cinema that is still unfinished. The inclusion of first-person forms in documentary practices that were traditionally defined with respect to “sobriety discourses²⁵” promotes the appearance of new communication pacts between the work and the audience. At the same time, it generates an epistemological turn that is discerned in the breakage of traditional explanatory systems whereby classic documentary film explained and pointed out different historical, political and social phenomena. Although these transformations were not driven exclusively by first-person documentary film and were related to other contemporaneous expressive variables—which include the hybridations between documentary film and fiction and *fakes* (fictional documentary-like films)— they were particularly significant in Argentina due to their intersection with more important historical and social problems, such as the emergency of public memory policies after the traumatic events that occurred during the last dictatorship, the institutional crisis in 2001 and the subsequent configuration of new cultural and political identities.

Notes

¹Note that, even though Ana Poliak's film is one of the pioneers in introducing the first person in the field of a hybrid narration that moves from the documentary register to the fictional register, certain films in the documentary field had already shown the inclusion of narrative modulations of the maker's *self*. Among them, we may mention *Juan, como si nada hubiera sucedido* (Juan, As If Nothing Had Happened, Carlos Echeverría, 1987), *Jaime de Nevares, último viaje* (Jaime de Nevares, Last Trip, Marcelo Céspedes and Carmen Guarini, 1995) and *Prohibido* (Forbidden, Andrés Di Tella, 1996). The forerunning work of Edgardo Cozarinsky, the Argentine director who settled in France, entitled *Boulevards du crépuscule: Sur Falconetti, Le Vigan et quelques autres en Argentine* (Sunset Boulevards, 1992), is a story in which the director assumes, in front of the camera, the role of an investigator. Although it is problematic to classify it as an Argentine documentary film, the early experience of Cozarinsky left a track that may be detected in certain subsequent documentary proposals like *Yo no sé qué han hecho tus ojos* (I Don't Know What Your Eyes Have Done To Me, Sergio Wolf and Lorena Muñoz, 2003).

²To the first four modes of documentary representation—expository, observational, participatory and reflexive—mentioned in his book *Representing Reality* (1991), the author adds two other modes in his later book *Introduction to documentary* (2001): performative and poetic, which are defined based on their detachment from the participatory and expository modes, respectively.

³We could say that one of the first films to articulate the discourse on accurate forms of the first person within the participatory mode of representation is *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a Summer, Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch, 1960). In this paradigmatic documentary film, the filmmakers place their bodies in front of the camera and wonder about the modes with which they will show a particular social reality and the subjects that interact

in it. The negotiation protocols between filmmakers and witnesses are put in the first place, and the first ones are the “catalytic agents” of the personal stories told by the film. However, the internal transformation that filmmakers themselves undergo in the film is restricted. This is an essential feature that differentiates the participatory mode from the performative mode, as we will see below.

⁴As we will see below, the characteristics of intervention in the participatory mode will be quite similar to those of the *epidermal* category of the first person appearance, while the *autobiographical* and the *experience and otherness* categories will have a close relationship with the performative mode.

⁵For a definition of Latin American political intervention cinema in the seventies, see Getino and Velleggia, 2002.

⁶*Piquete* (picketing) is an active form of protest developed in Argentina during the nineties, in constant struggle against the neoliberal policies of the Carlos Saúl Menem administration (1989-1999). The *piquete* consists in obstructing roads, avenues, streets and paths in order to provoke public, political and social reaction.

⁷An important clause of the new regulation referred to the funding granted by INCAA after pre-acquisition of television rights for audiovisual projects in termination formats other than 35 mm.

⁸This new regulation was certainly due to the pressure exercised by a large group of independent documentary filmmakers since the 2001 economic crisis, as well as the corporate claims made by two associations of independent documentary filmmakers since 2005: DOCA (Argentine Documentary Filmmakers) and ADN (the Association of Argentine Independent Documentary Cinema Producers and Directors).

⁹The review of a group of films that deal with narratives about the political-military group known as “Montoneros” supports this hypothesis. The construction of a great narrative

lacking contradictions and ambiguities about the history of the group—in documentary films such as *Montoneros, una historia* (Andrés Di Tella, 1994) and *Cazadores de utopías* (David Blaustein, 1995)—shows a clear contrast with productions made a decade later, such as *Papá Iván* (María Inés Pérez Roqué, 2000), *Los rubios* (2003) and *M* (2006). In these last documentary films, the doubts, questions and tentative propositions about Argentine history replace the speeches of certainty displayed by documentary films of the nineties.

¹⁰By definition, prosopopeia is a broader device; the concept is restricted for the purposes of our disclosure.

¹¹In his documentary film, Nicolás Prividera, the son of a disappeared militant of the Peronist Youth, Marta Sierra, inquires into the causes and deviations of his mother's kidnapping, but he also deals with problems such as the state policies aimed at keeping at bay the memory of genocide, the trial and imprisonment of the guilty, and the political repositioning of his mother's generation.

¹²María Inés Pérez Roqué embarks on an interrogation in her film in order to understand the reasons that led her father, Juan Julio Roqué, a.k.a. "Iván Lino", founder of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), to follow the path of political and military affiliation and neglect his family. The series of testimonies provided by fellow members of her father's political affiliation, her relatives and her own mother are preceded by a phrase pronounced offscreen in the film's prologue by the filmmaker which comprises her articulation between the private/personal sphere and the public/political sphere: "I would rather have a living father than a dead hero."

¹³According to Lejeune, the reader (the audience, in our case) enters into a pact whereby the author truthfully and reliably represents the narrator and main character in an autobiographical work.

¹⁴ As pointed out by María Luisa Ortega, Andrés Di Tella's film is organized based on an absence: "the remembrance of the television programs that the director's peers shared as children and that he lacks as he was forced to live in exile with his family. Based on that absence and, therefore, a self-defining reference that history deprived him of, he struggles with his father to rebuild the family past [...]." Ortega, María Luisa, "*Las modulaciones del 'yo' en el documental contemporáneo*" ("Self" Modulations in Contemporary Documentary) in Martín Gutiérrez, Gregorio (ed.), *Cineastas frente al espejo*, (Filmmakers in Front of the Mirror) Madrid, T & B Editores, 2008: 77.

¹⁵ The documentary film of Wolf and Muñoz introduces the figure of one of its directors, Sergio Wolf, as the guide and participant of a (forged) investigation whose (lost) object is the popular tango singer Ada Falcón, who retired prematurely in 1942, at the height of her fame, to become a Franciscan nun, completely abandoning the public scene from that moment on. Following the traces of Ada Falcón, the investigator Wolf—tirelessly wearing an overcoat, an iconic imitation of the classic cinematographical figure of the detective—visits the spaces and the people that symbolize a city and a culture that have already disappeared. Throughout the film, Wolf and Muñoz (re)present with nostalgia the myth of Ada Falcón by enlarging it and generating an intrigue of predestination around the possible encounter of the person who was once the diva of songs in Buenos Aires, and who is now retired at the age of 96 in a home for the elderly in Córdoba. It should be mentioned that the film is problematic from an ethical point of view—as long as we continue to think about this work as a documentary practice—since the construction of the myth based on the auratic display of archived images of a young body and an exceptional voice conclude in an unquestionable act of revealing (and profaning) the actual, aged and unrecognizable body of an old Ada Falcón that is hardly in a position to decide on the right to reveal her image. However, this theory would only be one possible analysis since, as stated by critic Emilio Bernini, "there is no

doubt that the film marks the limits of an idea of a documentary film based on deliberate reconstruction, and that forms part of its self-consciousness, but here there is no intention to pose any problems related to the way in which the reality can be noticed, but to exhibit an elaborate love of cinema” (2004:50).

¹⁶In this documentary film, its director travels from the north to the south of the country, visiting 14 provinces, following the itinerary drawn by Juan Bialet Massé (Catalan physician, lawyer, engineer and writer) in his critical work *Informe sobre la situación de las clases obreras en el interior de la República* (Report on the Working Classes in the Provinces of the Republic, 1904). One hundred years later, the film of Sergio Iglesias shows that the abuses and injustices suffered by the working classes have hardly changed. Although the film premiered in 2006, it is not by chance that the production began in 2001, since the echoes of economic, political and social crisis resound in its images, establishing an urgent dialogue between the reports of Bialet Massé and the present Argentine circumstances.

¹⁷In agreement with the *travelog* format somehow used in the films of Wolf and Muñoz and Iglesias, José Luis García undertakes a trip in his documentary film through the region between the Paraná and Uruguay rivers in order to find (and photograph) the landscapes—the battlefields of the War of the Triple Alliance—that were represented in due time by the painter and soldier Cándido López. Thus, the purpose of the trip is twofold: the recovery of the historical memory of a war that was frequently concealed or distorted by the dominating historical narratives in South America and, following the reason of the “elusive object”, the fruitless intention to capture, through photographic shots, the amazing and unrepeatable pans represented in the canvas of the Argentine painter.

¹⁸In the film’s prologue, writer and investigator Aníbal Ford introduces Sergio Wolf to the world of tango singers: Rosita Quiroga, Mercedes Simone, Libertad Lamarque, Tita Merello, Amanda Ledesma and Ada Falcón. The fascinating figure of the latter—according

to Ford, “she sang as if things had actually happened to her”—and her sudden disappearance from the show world are the factors that trigger Wolf’s curiosity and the search process in the documentary film.

¹⁹The justification in this case is presented during the first minutes of the film after a random encounter between the director and the grandson of the Argentine painter Cándido López.

²⁰In an elusive manner, using a postcard dated 1974, the director suggests that his childhood vacations with his father in Córdoba and the visits to the city Bialet Massé made an indelible impression on his consciousness that justifies and facilitates the ride of the documentary film.

²¹Some other works not mentioned in this text are *Ciudad de María* (City of María, Enrique Bellande, 2001), *Río arriba* (Upstream, Ulises de la Orden, 2004), *Opus* (Mariano Donoso, 2005), *Madres con ruedas* (Mothers with Wheels, Mario Piazza and Mónica Chirife, 2006) and *Un pogrom en Buenos Aires* (An Attack in Buenos Aires, Herman Szwarcbart, 2007).

²²I do not intend to speak at length in this section about the ways in which both films deal with the topics of memory and mourning. Excellent essays have been written in the last few years about this issue during the controversy that was generated after the premiere of *Los rubios*, spurred on thanks to the lucid critique by Martín Kohan in the magazine *Punto de vista* (Point of View, 2004) and the subsequent defense of Gonzalo Aguilar in his essay *Otros mundos* (Other Worlds, 2006). Apart from these articles, there are analyses about the representations of post-memory made by Ana Amado in the magazine *Pensamiento de los confines* (Thoughts from the Farthest Ends, 2005).

²³Inevitably, the testimonies of the parents’ peers obtained by the sons of the disappeared differ, with respect to their emotional and informative burden, from those

collected from the same people by other interviewers. *Papá Iván*, by María Inés Pérez Roqué, is a privileged indicator of this situation because the filmmaker faces in the interviews those who possibly turned in and murdered her father, thus causing a strong disruption in the coherence and credibility of the discourse of witnesses.

²⁴ Interview done by Mariano Kairuz in the “Radar” supplement, *Página 12*, Sunday, March 18, 2007.

²⁵ According to Bill Nichols (1997), they include the discourses of science, economics, politics and history, which claim to describe what is real, with aspirations of truth with respect to their references.

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