

Hungarian University of Fine Arts
DLA Dissertation Abstract
DLA candidate: Manuel F Contreras

Dissertation title:

Documentary film, the Filmmaker and Representation

Abstract:

In this paper I study the narratives of otherness that have been an essential part of the historical evolution of documentary film: a dominant gaze in a hegemonically Eurocentric film industry. With a focus on cultural studies, film studies and postcolonial studies, I argue that it is possible to discern how documentary follows a pattern that validates and prolongs that same Eurocentrism through paternalistic, exoticizing and redemptive narratives of the other, the observed and filmed.

This has been discussed during the last decades since cinema has permeated culture, cinema reaches peoples and cultures massively. Based on the historical penetration and dominance of American cinema, with now a record concentration of 85% of the world cinema market (Hughey 2014: 19), it is fair to say that film history has to be studied in the frame of the American film industry and its periphery. This asymmetrical relationship, has given as a result the tendency that *one sole type of film production is regarded as universal and disseminated as such, while the others are only local expressions* (Paranaguá 2003: 9). Sociology, Cultural Studies, Political Sciences, Film Studies and Psychology among other disciplines have approached film discourse in the frame of this present hegemonic production to show that there is, if not a political agenda, a point of view that in many cases modifies, distorts or normalizes aspects of history and reality.

Being documentary filmmaking my field of practice, I want to discuss the aforementioned problematics in the documentary film realm with a focus on issues of representation, examining my personal work and other works that relate to it because of their place of origin and/or their role in the current production and distribution system. This paper is divided in five chapters in which I attempt to present in an inductive and comparative approach which

are the elements that define and validate the issues of representation in documentary film. I do it from the perspective of a documentary filmmaker, but also, inevitably, as a Colombian filmmaker and cinema spectator, aware of issues of representation depicting me and Colombian people. In the words of Stuart Hall: *it is worth remembering that all discourse is 'placed', and the heart has its reasons* (1989: 69).

In the first chapter entitled “The Short History of Documentary Cinema” I present a case study on *Nanook of The North* (1922), whose director Robert Flaherty was named father of documentary filmmaking and father of ethnographic cinema, even when the truthfulness of the film and its depiction of the characters are being debated still today. This reveals how the established rules of documentary film practice are connected to issues of representation, then and as a result, now, when we see the validation of Flaherty's observation as the one being repeated in time: a white man that observes the others as exotic, primitive, backwards, etc. The second, third and fourth chapters are respectively entitled “Power”, “Truth” and “Redemption”, as three elements that are related to documentary film practices and consumption. In “Power” I make an analysis of power relations in documentary filmmaking since much of what we have seen in documentary films' history, was born out of the exploration of a distant land or distant community that an explorer filmed, which is what Robert Flaherty did. This type of observation was contended by cinema movements of the second half of the 20th century in Latin America, as a response to how Latin America was being represented by a hegemonic market with an Eurocentric vision: films about poverty. In “Truth” I analyze the evolution of ethnographic cinema in the frame of a constant presence of issues of representation. The ethnographer, as the explorer, creates a representation of the filmed that inevitably follows the preconceptions of the ethnographer's society and education. But ethnographic cinema as a genre, along with anthropology, has been able to express concern about these same issues of representation, creating a discussion around this problematic that has been virtually absent in traditional documentary filmmaking. In “Redemption”, I talk about the current approaches to issues of representation in cinema and how they are connected to cinema as an instrument for the spectator to be redeemed by being a foreign observer, this way the stories being told are tailored to fit this relationship between the spectator and the observed, which is the direct reflection and result of the redemption of the filmmaker when filming the other, ultimately prolonging a type of representation in which the observer, the white, the privileged, the explorer, is not only entitled to observe in othering forms, but also places himself/herself as superior.

Power, truth and redemption are critical elements in the study of documentary film practices, but they are also elements that are part of the conception and creation of documentary films, and can be critically viewed by filmmakers when filming, something that I will also include in all of the chapters. I will also examine my interpretations and conclusions in a last chapter entitled “The Living and the Dead”, in which I trace the theoretical and conceptual connections of this document with the practical work made by me as both result and reflexion of this research: the documentary film *Los Vivos y Los Muertos*.

One of the pillars of this dissertation, treated in all the chapters in different aspects, is the argumentation about the unavoidable role of the filmmaker not only as an observer, but as creator and therefore documentary films being the result of the filmmaker's conception of the world, the filmmaker's point of view, which is not an innocent exercise of filmmaking when we can analyze the politics laying behind it, most evidently when the one observing observes another person, community or culture that is considered inferior. In *Los Vivos y Los Muertos* I film my own life and what happens in it as a way to debate otheristic approaches to filmmaking, following the events brought by the observation of my own drama: the search for my half brother. Through the film I intend to make a reflexion on issues of representation in documentary filmmaking by presenting a filmmaking method that connects with the arguments and concerns presented in this document.

References:

- Hall, Stuart. 1989. “Cultural identity and cinematic representation” in *Framework*, 36: 68-82
- Hughey, Matthew W. 2014. *The white savior film: content, critics and consumption*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Paranaguá. Paulo Antonio. 2003. *Tradición y Modernidad en el Cine de América Latina*. Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica de España.