This is a postprint version of the following published document:


© Intellect

Review by Josetxo Cerdán, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid

Three films and two filmmakers are evoked at the beginning of the ‘Introduction’ to this book by its editors, Vinicius Navarro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez, in an attempt to frame the changes of Latin American documentary in the past three decades. The filmmakers are the Brazilian Eduardo Coutinho and the Chilean Patricio Guzmán; the films are Coutinho’s Cabra marcado para morrer/Twenty Years Later (1984) and Guzmán’s La batalla de Chile/The Battle of Chile (1975–79) and Chile, la memoria obstinada/Chile, Obstinate Memory (1997). The international title for Coutinho’s documentary makes clear the lapse of time between the first moment he tried to make it and when he finished it. In Chile, la memoria obstinada, Guzmán goes back to Chile to meet with some of the people appearing in La batalla de Chile and to show the film banned during Pinochet’s dictatorship to new generations of Chileans. Obviously, in two decades not only did the political regime in both Brazil and Chile change, but Coutinho and Guzmán’s strategies and ideas on documentary filmmaking shifted. For the editors of New Documentaries in Latin America, these films and filmmakers are key to understanding not only the changes in Latin American documentary of the last few decades, but also ‘the reconstruction of the region’s public sphere […] Films like Twenty Years After and Chile, Obstinate Memory participate in this project as they invite viewers to rethink the representation of politics as well as the politics of representation’ (2). The efforts by the editors to reframe Latin American documentaries under these new cultural, social and political scenarios are reinforced by the volume’s authors and their articles.

New Documentaries in Latin America is structured in three parts: ‘Aesthetics and Politics’, ‘Community and Indigenous Media’ and ‘Local, National and Transnational Dialogues’. While all the articles in the book are excellent, it is clear that this first section is the strongest. This strength is not only because it is the longest section (including almost half of the chapters of the book, with 100 pages out of 230) but also because its structure and organization provide historical and theoretical ideas on new documentary practices in Latin America that go beyond the contents of each chapter. For instance, if we take the opening chapter by Ana M. López, ‘A poetics of the trace’, we see how she outlines the ‘shift to the personal, local, and domestic in Latin American documentary practice, with specific focus on issues of subjectivity, affect, emotion, and indeterminacy’ (26) while also analysing three films by filmmakers of different generations (Eduardo Coutinho, born in 1933; Joao Moreira Salles in 1962 and Pedro González-Rubio in 1976). By doing this, she points out how such a shift is a collective, intergenerational effort.

Another great contribution that this volume makes is in its dialogue with different theoretical traditions and how seriously its authors take the historical position of the documentary. A number of chapters are very conscious of their cultural, political and historical contexts: Amalia Córdova’s ‘Reenact, reimagine: Performative indigenous documentaries of Bolivia and Brazil’; Antonio Traveso and Germán Liñero’s ‘Chilean political documentary video of the 1980s’; and Juan Carlos Rodríguez’s ‘Documentary on wheels: Car culture in Karen Rossi’s Isla Chatarra’. On the theoretical side, we see how Ana M. López takes a phenomenological approach to the three documentaries quoted above, while Freya Schiwy blends cognitive theory (Noël Carrol) with Rancière’s notion of the political. Both approaches, although they may appear to be
contradictory, are perfectly integrated into the continuity of this edited volume. Framed in the tradition of documentary studies, Antonio Gómez, in ‘First-person documentary and the new political subject: Enunciation, recent history and the present new Argentine documentary’, takes Michael Renov’s seminal book, The Subject of Documentary (Renov 2004), to ‘explain the subjective turn in Latin American documentary, particularly Argentina’ (46). In ‘Bolivia in view’, Michael Chanan offers a very political look at the transnational relationships in the region, analysing three Latin American documentaries whose only common ground is their subject: Bolivia and its people. Those three films are Argentinean Martin Rejman’s Copacabana (2006); Venezuelan Carlos Azpúrua’s América tiene alma/America Has Soul (2009); and the Cuban film Volveré y seré millones/I Will Return and I Will Be Millions (2009) by Jorge Fuentes. In this inspiring article, Chanan underscores just how ‘film culture is strongly moulded by the position of the viewer’ (187), and even if he quotes Pierre Bourdieu’s La distinction (1979) at the beginning of his chapter, we cannot stop thinking of Jonathan Crary’s Techniques of the Observer (1990) when reading it. Beyond the multiple approaches in the book, what remains clear is the constant will of the authors to build bridges with Latin American cultural and film studies. Towards the end of the introduction, the editors of the volume frame this intent in the following way:

“In 1990 Julianne Burton edited The Social Documentary in Latin America, a collection of essays that offered the first broad critical evaluation of Latin American documentaries to English-speaking readers. That book opened doors for more investigations exploring issues at the crossroads of Latin American and documentary studies, and contributed to a growing interest in the subject, shared by scholars in different parts of the world. Two of the authors who participated in Burton’s project, Ana López and Michael Chanan, now join other voices in our collection and continue to build bridges between these fields of inquiry” (Navarro and Rodriguez 2014: 19)

Ana M. López also remarks on the centrality of Burton’s book in configuring the idea of social documentary in Latin America during the last 25 years. Chanan’s Politics of Documentary (2007) is also extensively quoted in the ‘Introduction’ and in Juan Carlos Rodriguez’s chapter on Isla Chatarra (Rossi and Millán, 2007). Without doubts, New Documentaries in Latin America is a new and relevant step in the tradition of Latin American documentary studies. When reviewing collective volumes about a region, such as this one, there is always the temptation to draw a map of what the book itself understands as Latin America. Not because it is a question of representation (collective volumes are never representational), but of geopolitics, that is, knowing which countries are part of the book and which are not can shed some light on the relationship between the countries of the region and, in this case, the international academy. The index of a book is not necessarily representative of a geopolitical situation, but it can give us clues about what is going on, and I mean the book, not the editors, because they are not completely responsible for the presences or absences of different national filmographies in the book’s chapters. Although knowing it could be taken as a useless effort (I insist, in representational terms it is), I have done that cartography of New Documentaries in Latin America. If we attend to the nationality of the films analysed in the thirteen chapters, we see that Brazilian cinema is a central subject in five chapters (three of which also portray other countries, two of which exclusively deal with Brazil); Chile and Cuba appear in up to three chapters each (in both cases, two of the chapters are solely about their national film production); México, Argentina and Bolivia are central in two chapters each (in the cases of México and Argentina, one chapter is about their national cinematic production, while Bolivia appears in both, and shares space with other countries); and finally, Puerto Rico,
‘a nation without a state’ (219), as Rodriguez reminds us at the very beginning of his chapter, has a chapter of its own, and Venezuela shares its appearance in Michael Chanan’s ‘Bolivia in view’ with Bolivia, Cuba and Argentina. Obviously there is no relationship between this map and the new geography of Latin America documentary production. Still, we see how Brazil is a key country for this volume while other countries with film industry traditions, such as Argentina or México, are behind those like Cuba (a key country, but a very singular case, in the region since the revolution) or Chile. Furthermore, contributions on the emergent cinema from countries such as Colombia or Peru are missing from the volume.

Beyond these national considerations, the last chapter of the book, ‘Rasquache Mockumentary: Alex Rivera’s Why Cybraceros?’, by Debra A. Castillo, is dedicated to the fake documentary cited in the title of the chapter and the work of Alex Rivera as a whole. More than a closing chapter, we can consider it an invitation to transgress at least two frontiers. The first one is that of territory: Alex Rivera is a Latino born in New York, and if his artistic work is committed to the Latino community in the United States, there is open discussion of its consideration as Latin American. Second, Castillo’s chapter challenges and destabilizes not only the territorial concept of Latin America but also its documentary and film. As we see in the title of her article, she analyses Rivera’s mockumentary, Why Cybraceros? (1997), even as she opens her essay to Rivera’s other fiction films and documentaries (The Sixth Section 2004 and Sleep Dealer 2008, which is in some way a continuation of Why Cybraceros?). She additionally jumps to a wider concept of the cinematic when she dedicates part of her analysis to the website cybracero.com. Such an analysis highlights the fact that the cybracero project is itself multimedia and multiplatform, and that Rivera is not only a filmmaker but, as we can read in his personal website (alexrivera.com), a ‘filmmaker and digital media artist’. Therefore, to close the book with Castillo’s chapter is to open the field to (at east) two important questions for the near future: what is Latin America in cinematographic terms? Can we still talk about documentary (or film) as a field separate from digital media?

I do not want to finish this review without applying Michael Chanan’s position on viewer analysis to the list of contributors. The result is that out of the fifteen authors writing in the book, only one (Germán Liñero) works in a Latin American institution. The other fourteen carry out their work in English-speaking countries (mostly the United States, but also the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia). Beyond obvious conclusions, this constellation should serve us all, in the future, to work so that the collections of articles take into account academics working in the region. After all, books in English are not useful only for the Anglo-Saxon market, but globally, including, obviously, Latin American countries.

In summary, New Documentaries in Latin America is a book that will greatly satisfy the expectations of its editors: ‘[w]e hope that our anthology will honor the vitality of nonfiction cinema in the region, instigate new debates, and invite different audiences to enjoy the rich constellation of stories and images presented by contemporary documentaries in Latin America’ (19). Certainly it is a new and refreshing step forward in the trail blazed in 1990 by Julianne Burton’s anthology, and as with that one, in 25 years, it will become a necessary reference.

References:
