

DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW ESSAY

## “Making-of”: Latin American Cinema Performs Itself

Thomas Matusiak

University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida, US  
Email: [txm2124@miami.edu](mailto:txm2124@miami.edu)

### This essay reviews the following documentaries:

**Años luz.** Dir. Manuel Abramovich. Prod. Rei Cine, El Deseo, Bananeira Filmes. Argentina-Spain-Brazil, 2017. 72 minutes. Distributed by Grasshopper Film.

**Como el cielo después de llover.** Dir. Mercedes Gaviria. Prod. Gentil, Invasión Cine. Colombia-Argentina, 2020. 73 minutes. Distributed by Pragda.

**El Father como sí mismo.** Dir. Mo Scarpelli. Prod. Ardimages, Rake Films, La Faena Films. Venezuela-Italy-United Kingdom-United States, 2020. 105 minutes. Distributed by Grasshopper Film.

**Rodaje.** Dir. Samuel Moreno Álvarez. Prod. Monociclo Cine, Trópico Atómico Films. Colombia, 2023. 42 minutes.

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The four films grouped in this review reclaim the minor genre of the making-of documentary (MO) as an aesthetic form and critical method. Together, they survey the contemporary landscape of Latin American cinema by documenting the collective labor of film productions. In arranging behind-the-scenes material alongside archival and theoretical sources, they craft lyrical essays that meditate on the past, present, and future of Latin American cinema. Despite its long tradition, critics have largely disparaged the aesthetic value of the MO, given its history as a commercial device.<sup>1</sup> Like other examples of cinematic ephemera, such as trailers, posters, pinups, and film stills, the MO most commonly resembles a cheaply produced supplement targeting devoted fans. While the MO is documentary by definition, its popularity does not derive from the evidentiary value of its images. These nonfictions form part of the wider apparatus of spectatorship that markets films by bringing the audience into closer contact with the fleeting enchantment of moving images. Nevertheless, this has not kept the MO from carving out a niche following among critics, cinephiles, and filmmakers. Arthur Paul has praised the genre as “the quintessential pop culture antispectacle.”<sup>2</sup> Manuel Abramovich, Mercedes Gaviria, Mo Scarpelli, and Samuel Moreno Álvarez elevate this mode of documentary beyond its auxiliary role in the cogs of the culture industry to instead interrogate contemporary cinematic praxis.

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<sup>1</sup> The earliest films to have documented the filmmaking process for a viewing public, in the earliest decades of the twentieth century, capitalized on popular interest in cinematic technology to advertise the products of growing film studios. This practice continued throughout the studio era but took on new proportions with the arrival of cable television and home video.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Paul, “(In)dispensable Cinema: Confessions of a Making-Of Addict,” *Film Comment*, July–August 2004, 39.

These young filmmakers embrace the MO at a time when it has all but disappeared as a result of the decline of physical media.<sup>3</sup> Born between 1985 and 1992, they are the children (in the case of Gaviria, literally so) of the generation of filmmakers that reinvigorated Latin American cinema in the 1990s through auteur-driven and internationally coproduced features. In their films, the documentation of narrative filmmaking serves as the point of departure for deeper meditation on topics including the gendered construction of authorship, the nature of creative collaboration, the ethics of representing violence, or the authenticity of performances by nonprofessional actors. These documentaries continue the efforts of the previous generation to push the limits of nonfiction filmmaking. Their films might be more accurately described as essay films that borrow the form of the MO to advance their arguments through documentary images of filmmaking. Challenging the limits of documentary convention, they embrace the liminal space between film theory and praxis.

While meditating on the conditions and limitations of film production throughout the region, these documentaries survey Latin America's position within the transnational landscape of contemporary cinema. Many of these filmmakers have been shaped by the experience of migration and displacement, and all depend on the festival circuit and international funding bodies for financing and exhibition. For example, Abramovich has been active in Europe for years. Based in Berlin, he has held residencies and scholarships at institutions including IDFA Academy (Amsterdam), Berlinale Talents, and the Artists in Berlin program of the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service). Gaviria has resided in Buenos Aires since leaving her native Medellín to study cinema at the Universidad del Cine and Universidad Torcuato Di Tella. She has trained with Andrés Di Tella and collaborated with Albertina Carri as a sound designer on *Las hijas del fuego* (2018). Finally, while Scarpelli is not herself Latin American, I have opted to include *El Father como sí mismo* in this review because its documentation of the production of Jorge Thielen Armand's *La fortaleza* (2020) offers an account of Venezuelan cinema amid this nation's diaspora. The documentary is shot entirely in Spanish and is produced by Thielen Armand's Canadian-Venezuelan company, La Faena. As Thielen Armand's partner, Scarpelli is well-positioned to film a portrait of this exilic filmmaker. *Años luz*, *Como el cielo después de llover*, *El Father como sí mismo*, and *Rodaje* have circulated widely at festivals and maintain an active dialogue with global trends in documentary and the essay film while addressing challenges facing Latin American filmmakers specifically.

Through their incorporation of the MO, these films exhibit the reflexivity that has dominated documentary filmmaking since the turn of the millennium. Filmmakers such as Albertina Carri, Andrés Di Tella, and Nicolás Prividera, among many others, exhibited the production of their own documentaries to meditate on the porous borders between reality and fiction. Nevertheless, this performative turn was by and large limited to filmmakers theorizing their own praxis rather than studying the broader conditions of Latin American filmmaking by documenting the productions of others. An important exception that serves as an antecedent of these documentaries is Carmen Guarini's *Meykinof* (2005), which explores the porous borders between artifice and contingency as it registers the production of Edgardo Cozarinsky's *Ronda nocturna* (2005). Like *Meykinof*, the films reviewed

<sup>3</sup> The MO became a standard feature on home video releases, but its popularity has receded with the decline of physical media. This development that has led some critics to lament the death of the MO. Fabrice Robinet, "Oh for the Days of the Making-Of Featurette—Seriously," *New York Times*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/movies/dvd-extras.html>. Few streaming platforms offer the variety of bonus features, including behind-the-scenes documentaries, that were ubiquitous on DVD. While some studios continue to release such promotional content through YouTube, these materials are greatly reduced in quantity and scope. Robinet cites transformations to marketing budgets as a consequence of the shift from physical media to streaming as a likely explanation for this decline, although this claim remains difficult to prove because such information is not publicly available.

here are independent of the productions they document, and many do not even identify their intertexts explicitly. Abandoning the subordinate status of the conventional MO, their behind-the-scenes documentation serves as a point of departure for broader theoretical reflection on the nature of filmmaking. Federico León's *Estrellas* (2007) marks another point of reference for this trend in contemporary Latin American documentary. León combines the MO with talking head interviews to critique representations of the *villa miseria* in Argentine cinema. Tracing this genealogy back even further, Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo's *Agarrando pueblo* (1977) also stands out as a point of reference for its critique of filmmaking practices through a faux-documentary style. Unlike this classic mockumentary, the films by Abramovich, Gaviria, Scarpelli, and Moreno Álvarez document real productions. Nevertheless, they preserve Ospina and Mayolo's critical spirit through a combination of observational and reflexive modes.

Manuel Abramovich's *Años luz* offers a clever portrait of Lucrecia Martel during the production of her fourth feature, *Zama* (2017). One of the most renowned Latin American filmmakers working today, Martel was launched to international acclaim on the festival circuit upon her debut.<sup>4</sup> Critics were quick to bestow the label of *auteur* upon Martel, associating a signature aesthetic and thematic repertoire to her oeuvre. Martel is also one of the most widely studied living filmmakers from Latin America, evidenced by the fact that book-length studies of her oeuvre have multiplied in recent years. As an openly lesbian filmmaker, Martel represents a radical expansion of cinematic authorship, a category that remains overwhelmingly masculine given the discursive parameters of global art cinema. In her panoramic study of women filmmakers in the festival circuit, Patricia White draws attention to the politics of authorship and interrogates the parameters according to which this male-dominated institution elevates certain women to the level of *auteur*, rewarding them with financing, festival exhibition, and prizes. White suggests that Martel navigates the gendered codes of *auteurism* through her carefully crafted pose, which she summarizes as "intellectual, serious, and publicity-shy ... combining a stereotypically male-coded virtuosity and a female-coded mystery and inaccessibility in a queer kind of reticence."<sup>5</sup> As a filmmaker working in the tradition of queer documentary, Abramovich contributes to this elaboration of Martel's public image in *Años luz*.<sup>6</sup> The film avoids the trap of a romantic homage to artistic genius and instead explores the subtleties of Martel's public persona.<sup>7</sup> In particular, Abramovich dwells on how Martel navigates the gendered construction of authorship through an ambiguous performance.

<sup>4</sup> Martel's profile is so high and her public image so compelling that her return to filmmaking after a nearly decade-long hiatus inspired a second work on the making of *Zama*. The Argentine writer Selva Almada chronicled her observations on set in her short book *El mono en el remolino* (Random House, 2017). As in Abramovich's film, Almada underscores Martel's performance of authorship.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Abramovich's documentaries have studied the production of gender identities through subtle portraits of subjects navigating hegemonic institutions. For example, *La reina* (2013) follows an eleven-year-old girl competing in beauty pageants, while *Soldado* (2017) chronicles the experiences of a young man as he enlists in the Argentine military. The filmmaker's most recent work is a trilogy on male sex workers that includes *Blue Boy* (2019) and *Pornomelancolía* (2022). The third entry in this series is in postproduction at the time of writing.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Marker's portrait films, including *A.K.* (1985) and *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich* (2000), suggest a point of reference for Abramovich's representation of Martel. While neither is aligned with a queer aesthetic, both draw on the MO to study the great masters at work: the former profiles Akira Kurosawa on the set of *Ran* (1985) and the latter Andrei Tarkovsky during the production of *The Sacrifice* (1986). For a deeper analysis of Lucrecia Martel's performance of authorship, see Thomas Matusiak, "La pose cinematográfica: Lucrecia Martel y la performance de la autoría masculina," in *Drag Kings: Genealogía crítica de las masculinidades espectaculares en Latin América*, ed. Javier Guerrero and Nathalie Bouzaglo (Santiago de Chile: Metales Pesados, 2024).

Abramovich's title refers to the film's interpellation of Martel's persona. *Años luz* opens with screenshots of the correspondence in which the filmmaker initially pitches the project to Martel. In Abramovich's words, "I would like to film a documentary during the shooting of *Zama*. A movie in which, somehow, you would be the protagonist." Martel replies in the following image, "I'm light years away from being the protagonist of a film." Though she ultimately acquiesces, Martel insists that Abramovich go completely unnoticed on set so as not to interfere with her production. This requirement shapes the form of the documentary, forcing Abramovich to hide cameras and microphones throughout the set and to attach a lavalier microphone to her body. Abramovich had limited control over these images and could do little to adjust the lighting or camera angles. He was also forced to work independently, as Martel would not permit a separate crew on her set. As a result, the formal composition of *Años luz* is quite straightforward. Dominated by static and tight shots in low-lit interiors, the film achieves an air of intimacy, even secrecy. Given this relation between the material limitations of its production and its intimist aesthetic, the film passes from documentary observation to ironic surveillance, inspired by Abramovich's own voyeurism.<sup>8</sup> Through its montage and skillful use of sound, the film reinforces the gendered codes of Martel's persona. Furthermore, Abramovich's production strategies indirectly amplify certain elements of the filmmaker's performance. Martel's knowledge that she is being constantly recorded provokes a self-consciousness that reinforces the theatricality of her pose. For all these reasons, Martel's performance in *Años luz* takes on the form of a collaboration between the two filmmakers.

*Años luz* underscores Martel's caricature of the serious and demanding *auteur* who must impose creative autonomy by highlighting the tensions that emerge amidst the collaborative labor of filmmaking. For example, Martel chastises Abramovich for interrupting her work when she periodically discovers his equipment on her set. Abramovich splices in a soundbite of Martel after she comes across one of his hidden microphones, reinforcing her austere demeanor by presenting the sound without any accompanying image. Martel's acousmatic voice comes across as intimidating when the audibly annoyed filmmaker warns Abramovich, "Your days and minutes here are numbered." When again he causes disruption on set, Martel playfully taunts Abramovich, whispering, "Manuel, now you're going to hear that they're throwing you off the set with my authorization." *Años luz* emphasizes moments when creative collaboration produces tension, such as when Martel exerts control over the actor's performance and body to realize her creative vision. As in the case of the hidden microphones, these episodes are tongue-in-cheek. Martel exaggerates the stereotypes of the demanding *auteur* to the limits of the absurd in a queer performance of the masculine codes of authorship. For example, in one scene, Abramovich films a rehearsal with Spanish actress Lola Dueñas. Following the directions of Martel, who is visible in the background, a makeup artist applies so much mascara that the actress cannot open her eye. The filmmaker then directs Dueñas's most minuscule movements and forces her to repeat gestures or assume difficult angles with her body. The scene concludes by taking these difficult directions to a humorous extreme. For no apparent reason, Martel demands the actress speak through one side of her mouth until both erupt in laughter. In other words, the performance of such excessive control over the actor's body intensifies until it reaches a breaking point and Martel's parody is apparent. Similarly, when directing dialogue in another scene, Martel expresses her dissatisfaction with the actor's delivery and insists that he repeat his line over and over again, criticizing his intonation on each attempt. As in the example with Dueñas, Martel

<sup>8</sup> Abramovich has affirmed that the documentary is first and foremost the work of a fan. Débora Galia Kantor, "Realidad/ficción, o de los documentales como visiones del artificio: Entrevista con Manuel Abramovich," *Revista Documental* 19 (2019): 156–165.

directs the actor's micromovements, forcing him to repeat the line again without blinking his left eye. Abramovich's camera dwells on the actor in close-up, registering how his expression betrays his annoyance. When Martel finally relents, the audience hears her address her crew in a sarcastic tone: "Fácil, ¿no? Qué fácil es dirigir." Nevertheless, she demands another take, and the actor obeys. In documenting Martel's performance, Abramovich underscores how authorship relies on symbolic forms of domination that reduce the actor to a synthetic body that the filmmaker controls as a vehicle of her expression.

Mercedes Gaviria's *Como el cielo después de llover* similarly explores the gendered codes of authorship but shifts focus to a young woman trying to find her way as a filmmaker. Gaviria opens her debut film with a series of vignettes that document her production of field recordings. The images and sounds register mundane details of daily life in Buenos Aires, when suddenly a policeman approaches Gaviria. Identifying the filmmaker as a foreigner by her accent, he demands she leave the location within five minutes. The brief exchange succinctly introduces a central concern of Gaviria's film by exhibiting the gendered dynamics of power that shape production practices. Throughout *Como el cielo después de llover*, the audience repeatedly sees Gaviria being told by men to stop filming. The scene poses a series of questions that guide the film: how might a young woman position herself as a filmmaker when routinely challenged by masculine authority? Through what strategies might a filmmaker avoid reproducing this very dynamic of mastery while realizing her creative vision? Following this prologue, Gaviria's family history offers a point of departure for a critical reflection on gender and authorship in cinema. Born in Medellín, Colombia, the filmmaker is the daughter of Víctor Gaviria, a founding father of contemporary Colombian cinema who rose to international prominence in the 1990s. As a young adult, Mercedes Gaviria relocated to Buenos Aires to study filmmaking and work as a sound designer. *Como el cielo después de llover* emerged from an invitation by her father to return to Medellín for the production of his fourth feature, *La mujer del animal* (2017). After reading the script, Mercedes Gaviria expresses her unease with the film's controversial treatment of gendered violence.<sup>9</sup> Reluctant to accept her father's offer to serve in the ambiguous role of "personal assistant," she proposes to support the production while responding with a film of her own.

Mercedes Gaviria defines her filmmaking against the model of docudrama developed by her father. Víctor Gaviria has garnered both praise and criticism for his work with nonprofessional actors. His first two features, *Rodrigo D: No futuro* (1990) and *La vendedora de rosas* (1996), featured children who inhabited marginalized neighborhoods of Medellín and lived the experiences of violence, drug addiction, and prostitution represented on screen. Mercedes Gaviria begins her profile of her father by drawing on archival footage from the making of the latter film to emphasize the gendered power dynamics that shape his work as a director.<sup>10</sup> In a brief clip that is introduced without context, we see Víctor Gaviria presiding over the set at night. An argument has emerged between two of the film's young protagonists, Lady Tabares and Marta Correa, both approximately thirteen at the time of the production. Under pressure to finish the scene, Gaviria grows angry and reproaches the girls with increasingly stronger language for not respecting his authority. Following this exchange, Mercedes Gaviria cuts to another scene from the shoot. In her voice-over,

<sup>9</sup> For a critical reading of *La mujer del animal*, see Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky, "Víctor Gaviria's *Mujer del animal* and the Banality of Violence against Women." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 39 (2021): 104–119. For Víctor Gaviria's own opinions on the question of representation of gendered violence, see Javier Guerrero and Thomas Matusiak, "Los dispositivos del mal: Una entrevista con Víctor Gaviria acerca de *La mujer del animal*," *Perifrasis* 18–19 (2018): 134–151.

<sup>10</sup> *Como el cielo después de llover* is not the first MO to document Gaviria at work. Twenty years after the release of *La vendedora de rosas*, the film's executive producer, Colombian filmmaker Erwin Goggel, directed a behind-the-scenes documentary entitled *Poner a actuar a pájaros* (2017).



she recalls that the child actors, who would often rehearse in her home, came to refer to her father as “Papá Víctor.” As her voice trails off, the audience sees Víctor Gaviria address Lady Tabares. “You act so well when you hate me,” he tells her with a smile. The tongue-in-cheek comment frames the filmmaker’s relationship with the actor in terms of patriarchal dominance. Directing the actor takes on the form of paternal discipline, requiring the tough love a father might employ with a child.

Mercedes Gaviria further interrogates the gendered dynamics of narrative filmmaking when she documents the production of *La mujer del animal*. The film follows Animal, a brutish thug from Medellín’s slums who forces a young woman named Amparo to live with him as his wife. For years, Animal holds Amparo against her will by terrorizing her and forcing her to give birth to his children. *La mujer del animal* registers these scenes of rape and domestic violence explicitly. Officially credited as first assistant director on the film, Mercedes Gaviria begins to question her own cinematic praxis as she grows uncomfortable with her father’s position on set. In particular, she observes how the film—despite her father’s best intentions—enters an ethically dubious territory given the masculine codes that organize a narrative film production. Gaviria’s critique becomes most explicit when she registers her father’s work with Tito Alexander Gómez, the nonprofessional actor who plays Animal. As director, Víctor Gaviria must lead Gómez toward a vivid embodiment of his character. Mercedes Gaviria emphasizes how this dynamic reproduces the logic of domination when she registers the production of one of the film’s rape scenes. In a dimly lit shack, Gómez enters and throws Natalia Polo, another nonprofessional actor performing in the role of Amparo, onto a dirty mattress. Polo’s gaze suggests that her terrified reaction is genuine. Off-screen, Víctor Gaviria can be heard instructing his protagonist. “Come on, tear off her shirt,” he tells Gómez. Mercedes Gaviria shifts her camera from Gómez to her father, who can now be seen standing over the two actors with his face barely visible in the darkness. As he guides Gómez through his embodiment of Animal, the authority with which the director takes hold of the actor duplicates the violence with which Animal controls his victim. The director’s function depends on the subjection of the actor’s body to his creative will. Documenting her father at work, Mercedes Gaviria observes how the authoritative function of the director reproduces the masculine violence it seeks to critique.

*Como el cielo después de llover* reinforces this image of the filmmaker as patriarchal authority by weaving these images together with home videos shot by Víctor Gaviria. Drawing on an extensive family archive, Mercedes Gaviria emphasizes the relationship between her father, the camera, and herself. Abandoning the set for the intimacy of his own home, Víctor Gaviria cannot help but take on the role of director when recording his daughter as a child. However, Gaviria’s selection of these archival materials dispels the utopianism of home video.<sup>11</sup> Rather than a spontaneous image of an ideal family, these images portray the extension of the patriarch’s authority to the domain of the image. Nevertheless, Gaviria’s portrait of her father, at times unflattering, is not intended as a personal attack. Critics’ initial reactions have framed *Como el cielo después de llover* in oedipal terms, arguing that the critical portrayal of Víctor Gaviria amounts to a sort of cinematic patricide.<sup>12</sup> Such readings are deeply ironic as they frame Mercedes Gaviria’s essay film in terms of a male-coded transgression that is itself the subject of the film’s critique. Rather than return the patriarch’s symbolic violence like a rebellious child, Mercedes Gaviria searches for a mode of filmmaking that would free her of it. Rejecting the model offered by her father, Gaviria embraces the dialogic qualities of the essay film and imagines a new form of authorship through a deeply personal filmmaking practice. When

<sup>11</sup> James Moran, *There’s No Place Like Home Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Diego Batlle, “Como el cielo después de llover,” *Otros Cines*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.otroscines.com/nota?idnota=17706>.

meditating on the gendered power dynamics of her father's home videos, Gaviria finds inspiration in another source from the family archive: a diary dedicated to her by her mother, Marcela Jaramillo. Written when Jaramillo was pregnant with Mercedes Gaviria, the diary is structured as a dialogue with her future daughter. Like the home videos, this document demystifies any attempts at imagining an ideal domestic life. Mercedes Gaviria explains her inclusion of these materials in the film's final act. Gaviria explains in a voice-over, "In the images of those children growing up, and in the diary of that melancholic woman, I was discovering another way of making films." Through the appropriation of home video, reproduction of the diary, and documentation of her father's production, Mercedes Gaviria embraces the dialogic and deeply personal character of her mother's text. Abandoning the patriarchal model of narrative filmmaking, she enacts a feminist praxis inherited from the matriarch.

The concerns with the politics of nonprofessional performance, the power and limits of authenticity in docudrama, and the problems of collaboration among family also appear in Mo Scarpelli's *El Father como sí mismo*. This film documents the production of Venezuelan filmmaker Jorge Thielen Armand's sophomore feature, *La fortaleza* (2020), shot on location in the Venezuelan state of Bolívar. Though based in Canada, where he migrated as a teenager, Thielen Armand has produced all his work in his home country. He defines himself as an exilic filmmaker, and both his features explore the social and economic hardships plaguing Venezuela as told through the experiences of his family members who have remained.<sup>13</sup> *La fortaleza* focuses specifically on the life story of the filmmaker's father, Jorge Roque Thielen. To escape his alcoholism and the economic crisis that paralyzes Venezuela, Roque abandons Caracas and travels to the Amazon. Once in the jungle, he finds work in an illegal gold mine, and his addiction spirals out of control. Thielen Armand casts his own father in this role, though Roque—referred to in the documentary simply as Father—has no experience in acting or filmmaking. *La fortaleza* draws on the strategy of reenactment that is common in docudrama to privilege authenticity of performance. However, this decision leads to conflicts throughout the production. Roque's ongoing alcohol abuse on- and off-set, which Thielen Armand not only tolerates but even encourages at times for the sake of a realistic performance, causes Father to become belligerent and raise tensions among the crew. Scarpelli registers the hostile atmosphere in a scene charged with metaphorical significance. In between takes, Father drunkenly attacks a hornet's nest and shuts down the set when the insects attack the crew. The image of the hornet's nest captures how the inherently collaborative work of filmmaking leaves the environment of the set vulnerable to hostilities. In registering this series of conflicts, *El Father como sí mismo* recalls Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams* (1982). In what is certainly one of the most famous examples of the MO, Blank documents Werner Herzog's production of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) in the Peruvian Amazon. Yet while Roque's erratic behavior resembles the intense exchanges between Herzog and his lead actor, Klaus Kinski, Scarpelli underscores the complexity of the relationship between Thielen Armand and his father.

*El Father como sí mismo* is not just a documentary about the creative conflicts that arise in the making of *La fortaleza*, but also an exploration of family dynamics shaped by exile. While not addressed explicitly, the inclusion of a telephone conversation between Thielen Armand and his mother implies that she abandons Father and migrates to Canada with their son because he cannot manage his alcoholism. Scarpelli balances Father's tirades with scenes that capture the affection between Roque and his son. Looking through

<sup>13</sup> Thielen Armand frequently addresses his exilic identity in interviews. In the filmmaker's own words: "Hacer cine en Venezuela ha sido la única manera para mí de hacer cine. He intentado inventarme otras historias pero siempre regreso. Es lo que más me motiva. Hacer de las películas un vehículo para volver." "La Fortaleza del venezolano Jorge Thielen Armand, en el festival Biarritz América Latina," *Radio France Internationale España*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiyw3qZwrk4&t=122s>.

photographs and home videos, the two reminisce about Thielen Armand's childhood trips to visit his father in the Amazon. However, as in Gaviria's revision of the family archive, Scarpelli dispels the utopian image of the harmonious family. We see the first cracks in this façade when a video from a hiking expedition shows Father partying around a campfire and releasing a primal scream after taking a long swig from a bottle of rum. These recordings document how Father has crafted an image of himself as a virile adventurer. In another example, he perches himself on the edge of Tepuy Roraima, screaming into the void as his hand-held video camera stares down a sheer cliff that drops hundreds of meters. Despite these displays of tortured masculinity, *El Father como sí mismo* counters the protagonist's self-fashioning by revealing the vulnerability required of nonprofessional performers. For example, Scarpelli records Father working with an acting coach who explains how he might incorporate the intensities previously witnessed into his performance. Father's inner struggles become the raw material of both *La fortaleza* and Scarpelli's documentary. It quickly becomes apparent that the process of filming proves psychologically challenging for Father, and in the next scene, he begins drinking in the production offices with his acting coach. Accessing Father's traumas for the sake of his performance, when combined with his ongoing alcohol abuse, inevitably leads to explosive conflicts on set. With Thielen Armand directing his father, the patriarchal dynamics are inverted, and Father struggles to yield control of his image and life story to his son and the film's producers. During a drunken outburst before the shoot even begins, he accuses them of taking advantage of him. After this incident, a producer expresses his concern that Roque will act belligerently throughout the entire production and pressures the director to consider another actor for Father's role.

Documenting Father's turbulent behavior, Scarpelli probes the ethical concerns that surround the use of nonprofessional actors in docudrama. Like the rest of the crew, the audience is left to question whether Thielen Armand's style of directing crosses the line from documentary authenticity to enabling addiction. When Father shows up drunk to the first day of the shoot to film a scene in which the protagonist of *La fortaleza* crashes his car in a canyon, Thielen Armand explains that Father is simply in character. A crew member subtly expresses concern, asking, "¿Es parte de tu propuesta?" Undeterred, the director replies, "Yo no quisiera que él llegara rascado hoy, pero la película es autobiográfica y en verdad él es así. Toma así." Another crewmember shares his worries about what will happen with Roque after the shoot and how Thielen Armand's representation of his father will affect their relationship. Though other members of the production explicitly caution Thielen Armand against enabling Roque's alcoholism to extract a more authentic performance, the filmmaker gets drunk with Father on set. After wrapping a scene, father and son hold each other in an inebriated embrace. When the director of photography asks Thielen Armand if he wants one more take, the filmmaker defers to Roque for his opinion. The DP replies incredulously, "¿Vas a basar todos tus criterios en lo que él dice ahorita? ¿Por un pedo de 'autenticidad' o un pedo de 'real'?" The incisive remark provokes the wrath of Father, who reacts by screaming and hurling props across the set. In exploring these sensitive family dynamics, *El Father como sí mismo* touches on ethically difficult ground that docudrama treads. While upholding this cinematic mode for its representational potential, Scarpelli asks, what are the ethical limits of blurring the line between fiction and reality? Who gets to tell Father's story? In raising these questions, Scarpelli delicately revives debates on the ethics of representation that have accompanied Latin American cinema for more than half a century.

Like *El Father como sí mismo*, Samuel Moreno Álvarez's medium-length documentary *Rodaje* (2023) draws on the MO to offer a nuanced meditation on docudrama that celebrates this practice for its potential to forge social relations. The most essayistic of the films reviewed here, *Rodaje* combines observational images from the making of Juan Sebastián Mesa's *La roya* (2021) with excerpts from Robert Bresson's *Notes on the Cinematograph* that



Moreno Álvarez imposes over the visuals. Like Gaviria and Scarpelli, *Rodaje* does not glamorize the film set. Though conflicts with actors emerge at times, Moreno Álvarez does not dwell on them. Very little happens in front of the camera over the film's 42-minute running time. The banality of these images and the slow tempo that emerges from the editing allow the spectator to sense how filmmaking can truly be a tedious affair. The documentary begins with Mesa debating how to modify the day's outdoor shooting schedule, given the chance of rain. The director decides to proceed with an alternate scene, but the actor's make-up has already been prepared. The crew decides to tempt fate and wait to make a last-minute decision. Despite the director's best efforts, the carefully planned schedule can unravel with the smallest inconvenience. This dilemma marks the tone of *Rodaje*. Throughout his documentary, Moreno Álvarez meditates on the tensions between artifice and contingency in narrative filmmaking. Despite the best efforts of the sizeable crew and mounds of equipment, reality always finds a way to interfere with fiction. *Rodaje* celebrates the spontaneity that characterizes docudrama, especially its use of nonprofessional actors, and dwells on how these unexpected elements generate new modes of relation on- and off-set.

The logic behind *Rodaje*'s at times unexceptional imagery takes on an additional layer of meaning in dialogue with its theoretical intertext. In *Notes on the Cinematograph*, Bresson condenses his film theory into a series of aphorisms. The spectator is left to form her own associations between these lyrical reflections and Moreno Álvarez's observations. However, the documentary underscores Bresson's concern with directing nonprofessional actors, whom he refers to as models. For example, *Rodaje* juxtaposes the introduction of Mesa's protagonist, a nonprofessional actor from the department of Antioquia, where the film is set and being shot, with the following quote from Bresson: "Lo importante no es lo que me muestran sino lo que me esconden, y sobre todo aquello que no sospechan que está en ellos. Entre ellos y yo: intercambios telepáticos, adivinación." In an improvised interview, Moreno Álvarez captures sentimental elements from the young man's life story that fuel his performance. The audience learns that, as a child, he would work in the coffee fields with his father, before his untimely death from an unspecified illness, and that this death profoundly affected his mother. Following Bresson, *Rodaje* celebrates the power of nonprofessional actors not because this strategy privileges authenticity above all else—as is the case in *La fortaleza*—but rather because of their humanizing capacity and ability to forge new social relations. Moreno Álvarez returns to this point when he documents the transformations of these actors from individuals into characters during rehearsals or as they are fitted with costumes and make-up. *Rodaje* registers their faces in close-up, lingering long enough to allow the spectator to meditate on their features. The ethical theme of the face-to-face encounter is reinforced with another quote from Bresson: "Conducirás a tus modelos a tus reglas, ellos te dejarán obrar sobre ellos y tú los dejarás obrar sobre ti." With these reflections, *Rodaje* implies that the filmmaker must release the impulse to control everything that happens in front of the camera. Indeed, this is the opposite of the model of auteurist filmmaking that we see Martel parody in *Años luz*. Rather than try to control the most minimal detail of the actor's performance, the filmmaker must release control. For Moreno Álvarez, filmmaking is a negotiation between subjectivities and experiences, a truly collaborative effort.

In conclusion, Abramovich, Gaviria, Scarpelli, and Moreno Álvarez elevate the long-dismissed MO to new aesthetic heights. These films surpass the conventions of this genre to convert the behind-the-scenes documentary into a vehicle for thought. As autonomous works free of the limitations of a commercial paratext, they address the material and discursive conditions that Latin American filmmakers face today. *Años luz*, *Como el cielo después de llover*, *El Father como sí mismo*, and *Rodaje* reaffirm the social potential of cinema throughout the region by documenting filmmakers at work. Occupying a space between film theory and praxis, they meditate on the nature of cinematic collaboration and

imagine new modes of production to address pressing political issues, such as the representation of violence against women. For example, while Abramovich and Gaviria commemorate the international success of Latin American auteurs such as Lucrecia Martel and Víctor Gaviria, they also signal the need to expand traditional categories of authorship and embrace dialogic modes of address. Similarly, Scarpelli and Moreno Álvarez celebrate the docudrama, a form that has been critical to the development of independent cinema in Latin America. Yet while *Rodaje* embraces the ethical potential of docudrama's reliance on nonprofessional actors, *El Father como sí mismo* reckons with the blind spots of this tradition. These filmmakers also contribute to the recent trend of intermediality in documentary by opening a dialogue between the moving image and literary forms such as the diary or aphorism.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, while they each reflect the continuing importance of transnationalism in contemporary filmmaking, both Gaviria and Scarpelli reflect specifically on how new forms of migration and exile continue to shape Latin American cinema.<sup>15</sup> The success of these films represents the ongoing development of the essay film throughout the region. A mode always marked by formal hybridity and the blurring of private and public, its evolution continues with this recuperation of the making-of.

**Thomas Matusiak** is Assistant Professor of Latin American cultural studies in the Michele Bowman Underwood Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at the University of Miami. His research on Latin American cinema has appeared in the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, *Romance Quarterly*, and *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas*, among other venues. He is currently revising a book manuscript entitled *The Visual Guillotine: The Cinematic Cut and the Form of Politics in Latin America* (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).

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<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the intermedial expansion of documentary in recent years, see Patricia R. Zimmerman, *Documentary across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place, and Politics* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2019). Latin American filmmakers have been actively participating in this trend by combing cinema with performance, installation, virtual reality, interactive media, and other cultural forms.

<sup>15</sup> The role of documentary film festivals in shaping the transnational aesthetic of Latin American nonfiction cinema cannot be overlooked. The films reviewed here screened at some of the most prestigious international documentary festivals, such as IDFA, Visions du Réel, Cinéma du Réel, Documenta Madrid, Documentary Fortnight at the Museum of Modern Art, and Doc NYC. While film festival studies has expanded rapidly in the twenty-first century, documentary studies has only begun to reckon with how these institutions condition nonfiction through transnational structures of funding and exhibition.