Camera Obscura
Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies

IN THIS ISSUE

Pink Technology: Mediamaking Gear for Girls
Mary Celeste Kearney

Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies
Hsuan L. Hsu

“Would you like to sin with Elior Glyn?” Film as a Vehicle of Sensual Education
Laura Horak

The Front Lawn of Heaven: Landscape in Hollywood Melodrama circa 1945
Jennifer Peterson

In Practice: Activist Video

Documenting Modern-Day Slavery in the Dominican Republic: An Interview with Amy Serrano
Michael T. Martin

Maquilapolis: An Interview with Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre
Rosa-Linda Fregoso

Why Isn’t Michelle Lopez on Judge Judy? Citizenship and Televisuality in Hima B.’s And I Do Survive
Ani Maitra

Call for Submissions

Cover photo: From Maquilapolis, directed by Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre. David Maung for Maquilapolis
Maquiolapis: An Interview with Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre

Rosa-Linda Fregoso

Within lefty and liberal progressive filmmaking there's all this language about "giving people voice," "empowerment," but I don't like those ways of talking because... they don't question the very real power dynamics that exist right between the filmmaker and the subject. You can't remove the power dynamics, because something is going to raise the issues, some both relating to have the camera and somebody getting to be the decision-maker in the film. I think there's no trying to find ways to create a collaboration that acknowledges that this dynamic is present and works with it. I want my films to embark the power of telling and not telling stories, not the power of knowing it.

— Vicky Funari

Maquiolapis (Mexico/US, 2006) is an inventive documentary, directed and produced by Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre in partnership with the Chipingano Collective for Environmental Justice, set in the "maquiladora" city in the American (Tijuana, Baja California). Maquiolapis chronicles the lives of maquila workers who experience firsthand the debilitating effects of development driven by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) along the Mexico-US border. The making of the film coincides with the global economic crisis of 2008, when factories along the Mexico-US border began relocating to China, leaving behind thousands of unemployable workers and a classic urban miles devastated by fastidio infrastructure and toxic industrial waste. The story is told from the perspective of resilient workers-activists, daring women like Carmen Durón and Lucero Luján who challenge the power of corporate globalization as they struggle to ameliorate in its effects and rebuild their lives and their communities.

From the beginning, Funari and de la Torre decided to collaborate with local based organizations like Grupo Factor X to reach women factory workers how to tell their stories. In Tijuana, Factor X already had a presence in place for training workers to be community advocates (promotores) through a series of workshops on labor, environment, and human rights. Building on Factor X's experience, Funari and de la Torre designed a training module that in the course of six weeks would teach promotores how to use a digital camera, make stories, and develop writing skills for telling their stories. The workshop was well worth the effort. The result is an intimate collaboration between filmmakers and promotores, a documentary told in the voice and through the point of view of its subjects rather than through the gaze of the filmmakers.

Funari and de la Torre believe that film can be a powerful tool for creating cross-cultural dialogue about social change and justice led to even further collaborations. After the release of Maquiolapis, Funari and de la Torre continued to work with the promotores and other organizations on a national outreach campaign. As part of the campaign, they developed a discussion guide designed to accompany the screening of Maquiolapis in diverse activist and educational contexts. The guide is an activist tool that promotes discussions on social justice issues such as environmental justice, fair trade, and neoliberal globalization.

Although Maquiolapis is a powerful tool for supporting cross-border activism, to call it an "activist film" or even a standard documentarian would be an oversimplification. What makes Maquiolapis so compelling is how it imaginatively blends a collaborative process with an aesthetic style, one that personalizes visual devices, documentarian, poetic set pieces, and choreographed performances.

Maquiolapis is an emerging form, more akin to what Patrick Zimmerman calls the "open space documentary," a dynamic exercise of collaboration, interactivity, aesthetic subversion, and hard-hitting social critique. In the interviews below, Funari and de la Torre refer to Maquiolapis as "a social art practice," a term I first heard being because it captures both their social justice ethics and art form sensibility.

Interview
Rosa-Linda Fregoso: How do you define your professional identity, as a documentarian, an activist, an artist?

Vicky Funari: In the filmmaking world, if you want people to recognize your work, you have to identify as... some particular kind of writer. So I identify as a documentary filmmaker because I believe other people don't know how to see what I am doing. In Sergio's and my conversations about the film, we always discussed the material as artists, certainly not as journalists. The segment of the documentary field that has to do with journalism is not the segment that interests me. I'm not a journalist, so with this film I would say that we are engaged in more of an art practice than a journalistic practice.

Sergio de la Torre: There's a saying in Spanish, Depende del sol que le patales (The sun is what decides the rock throws...). One of the things that I've learned is that there is no longer a discipline that remains pure. You have to approach the foyer to find among different disciplines depending on the topic, or project, or subject that you're working with. What attracted me to Maquiolapis is the fact that we were able to really play with documentary practices. We brought the promotions as an aspect of the process.
of making the documentary. Only cut between them carefully— but also have this thing where you are making a certain amount of your materials. Then, you have to decide what you want to use and how they will be used.

For example, you start by choosing a subject for your documentary. You will need to research and gather materials related to the subject. This might include interviews, footage, and still images. You will also need to decide on a format for your documentary, whether it will be a film, a video, or a digital format.

Once you have your materials, you will need to edit them. This involves selecting which parts of your footage to use and how to arrange them. You will need to decide on a narrative structure and a pacing that will keep your audience engaged.

Finally, you will need to produce your documentary. This involves creating a specific format, such as a film or a video, and then producing it. You will need to work with a team of professionals, including a cinematographer, a sound designer, and a colorist, to bring your documentary to life.

In summary, making a documentary is a complex process that involves research, planning, and production. By following these steps, you can create a compelling documentary that will engage your audience and leave a lasting impression.
really strong examples that if you work for something collectively, you can actually get somewhere.

Funari: It’s the reason I wanted to work with promotoras, who are a very specific group among factory workers. The vast majority of factory workers are not activists, and we wanted to work with this group of women who are. I was interested in women who were aware of their own agency. Everybody has agency, but not everyone is able to talk about it and express what that agency means to them. By working with promotoras, I knew we’d be working with women who would be on a path toward claiming their own agency. So that reveals my bias toward stories that do have the possibility, to use your words, to mobilize hope. I can’t live with the world the way it is unless I have some hope, otherwise, why do anything? The global economy seems an insurmountable behemoth, like there’s just no way we’re going to change the way it operates. But I believe that my responsibility is to be part of questioning it and bringing about a change and telling the stories of people who are working on that front.

Did you know there would be small victories for the women?

Funari: We didn’t know that there would be any victories. When we started, we didn’t know whether Carmen would win or lose the Sanyo labor claim. We didn’t know whether there would ever be a cleanup at the toxic waste site [Metales y Derivados] in Lourdes’s neighborhood.

De la Torre: We didn’t know they were going to be stars.

Funari: We were following in one way or another all the women who took the workshop. We waited for the stories to emerge from the workshop and interview processes. We picked Carmen and Lourdes in part because they were both in the middle of particular events that would eventually have a resolution, so we knew that would provide some of the narrative arc. But we also picked them because each was going through her own personal transformation. But we had no idea that there would actually be a cleanup of Metales. I never expected that to happen. I didn’t think that the story would be as hopeful as it was. I thought that the hope was going to be embodied in the willingness of the women to engage in the struggle. I didn’t realize there would be victories. That was a good surprise.

Notes


Rosa-Linda Tello is a professor and former chair of Latin American and Latino studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her publications include Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas, coedited with Cynthia Bejarano (Duke University Press, forthcoming, 2010); Mexicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands (University of California Press, 2009); and The Devil Never Sleeps and Other Films by Lourdes Portillo (University of Texas Press, 2001). Tello teaches courses on human rights, culture, feminism, and media.