Camera Obscura 74

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 Elinor 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*

Carmen Durán and other factory workers display the products they assemble. From *Maquilapolis*, directed by Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre. David Maung for *Maquilapolis*

Maquilapolis: 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" and "empowerment," but I don't like those ways of talking because . . . they don't question the very real power dynamic that exists between the filmmaker and the subject. You can't remove the power dynamic, because somebody is going to raise the money, somebody is going to have the camera and somebody is going to make the decision to make the film. . . . So I think we're trying to find ways to create a collaboration that acknowledges that this dynamic is present and works with it. I want my films to embody the power of taking and finding voice, not the power of bestowing it.
—Vicky Funari

Maquilapolis (Mexico/US, 2006) is an inventive documentary, directed and produced by Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre in partnership with the Chilpancingo Collective for Environmental

Camera Obscura 74, Volume 25, Number 2
DOI 10.1215/02705346-2010-006 © 2010 by *Camera Obscura*
Published by Duke University Press

Justice. Set in the first "maquilized" city in the Americas (Tijuana, Baja California), *Maquilapolis* chronicles the lives of maquiladora 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 coincided with the global economic crisis of 2001, when factories along the Mexico-US border began relocating to China, leaving behind thousands of unemployed workers and a chaotic urban milieu devastated by faulty infrastructure and toxic industrial waste. The story is told from the perspective of resilient workers-activists, dauntless women like Carmen Durán and Lourdes Luján who challenge the power of corporate globalization as they struggle to ameliorate its effects and rebuild their lives and their communities.

From the beginning, Funari and de la Torre decided to collaborate with locally based groups like Grupo Factor X to teach women factory workers how to film themselves. In Tijuana, Factor X already had a process in place for training workers to be community advocates (*promotoras*) through a series of workshops on labor, environmental, 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 *promotoras* how to use a digital camera, integrate film techniques and sound recording, and develop writing skills for telling their stories. The workshop was well worth the effort. The result is an inventive collaboration between filmmakers and *promotoras*, 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's belief 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 *Maquilapolis*, Funari and de la Torre continued to work with the *promotoras* and other organizations on a binational outreach campaign. As part of the campaign, they developed a discussion guide designed to accompany the screening of *Maquilapolis* 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 *Maquilapolis* is a powerful tool for supporting cross-border activism, to call it an "activist film" or even a standard documentary would be inexact. One noteworthy feature of *Maquilapolis* is how it imaginatively blends a collaborative process with an aesthetic style, incorporating personal video diaries, documentary realism, poetic set pieces, and choreographed performances. *Maquilapolis* is an emerging form, more akin to what Patricia Zimmerman calls the "open space documentary," a dynamic synergy of collaboration, interactivity, aesthetic subtlety, and hard-hitting social critique.[1] In the interview below, Funari and de la Torre refer to *Maquilapolis* as a "social art practice," a term I find quite fitting because it captures both their social justice ethics and artistic sensibility.

Interview

Rosa-Linda Fregoso: *How do you define your professional identity, as a documentarian, an imagemaker, 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 *maker*. So I identify as a documentary filmmaker because otherwise people won'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 sapo la pedrada* (The size of the toad determines the rock thrown). . . . One of the things that I've learned is that there is no longer a discipline that remains pure. You have the chance to move freely around different disciplines depending on the topic, or project, or subject that you're working with. What attracted me to *Maquilapolis* is/was the fact that we were able to really play with documentary practices. We brought the *promotoras* in as part of the process

of making the documentary. Not only by bringing them cameras, but also having them write and read the narration (voice-over), having them perform "factory workers" in front of the camera, having them doing the interviews, et cetera. It is, like Vicky says, more of a social art practice, a direct dialogue with the subjects, and you don't necessarily see this process in most documentary films.

Funari: Or you see scenes like that, but you don't notice because they aren't designed to call attention to themselves. For me, nothing that we did was new in terms of documentary practice. If you take any individual scene in the film, you've seen scenes like that before. The interesting part is trying to use the available language in a way that's appropriate to the content and the goals of the particular project. So if you took out all of the performance scenes, *Maquilapolis* would be a pretty conventional documentary. Each individual scene doesn't do anything particularly challenging stylistically. But it's the combination and the dynamic you get when you combine the elements: the video diaries, the collaborative work, the more standard vérité scenes, and these highly designed performance elements. That's what was always interesting about the project for me: coming up with a vocabulary of images and styles that expressed something about the themes, the characters, and the place, and then working with the juxtaposition of those elements.

Bill Nichols calls this type of documentary the expressive documentary.[2] *What is striking about this one is the choreography. Repetitive movements, cameras revolving around subjects—something about them reminded me of early industrial films. Talk about how you came up with it, the focus; it's brilliant.*

Funari: The scenes that are in the final film evolved fairly slowly and organically. It began with our talking about how to represent factory work. The first images we had were portraits of the women's hands, images of their hands not in motion but holding still. But then we realized that we needed to add the movements of their hands going through the motions of factory work, but without the machines or the materials. Then it slowly developed into this idea that each woman would have her own individual color; she would choose the color, and that would be her backdrop for those shots of moving hands. So it became a series of lists that we choreographed and filmed with them, listing the factories where they have worked, listing the functions they perform at work, repeating the movements of their work. We had them teach us and teach one another certain pieces of each industrial process they had been involved in, and we picked the ones that looked good and could be really precisely broken down into movements for the camera. We weren't interested in showing viewers the factory work itself, because, as you've said, you can see that in industrial films and on the news. Machinery is very seductive, especially industrial machinery with lots of repetition, with rows of women doing all the same thing. . . . We wanted to look instead at the impact of the maquiladora system on the women's daily lives and on their interior lives, so we kept trying to come up with imagery that would be about them and not about the machines, not about the consumer product. Initially, we talked about showing the objects they were making as museum objects, and then we realized we should show the women that way too. That's why in the film you see objects and women rotating and why you see them lit in a sculptural way. We used the same kind of lighting and style of shooting that is used in *National Geographic* specials, where you are looking at archaeological artifacts or at beautiful art objects.

De la Torre: We also want to show how their bodies are conditioned to function as machines—and also somehow something automatic happens with workers no matter where they are. During one of the first interviews we did with Vianey Mijangos (one of the *promotoras*), she started doing these hand movements (what they do at work, but without the machinery) . . . she wasn't talking about work, she was talking about something else . . . so we stopped her and asked what she was doing. In the film, there's this scene where she describes her movements at work, "pucho, saco," and talks about how she's thinking of her kids the whole time she's at work, and you see Vianey and other women performing these movements in front of the camera, in a sort of "work-trance."

In terms of your work process, are you more inclined to work on your own or to work collaboratively? Is this the first time you've all worked together?

De la Torre: For Vicky and me, it's the first time we've worked together. With the *promotoras*, I did work with them before. I did an installation with Coco Fusco and Delfina Rodriguez in 1997. . . . I had a performance group from 1995 to 1997 . . . Los Tricksters . . . based in San Francisco. We did a bunch of things on immigration, on tourism, on surveillance technologies. We always had burro and zebra masks on, in reference to Tijuana. It was performance, it was video, it was installation, photography. It was very promiscuous. Any medium available, we stole everything. Different genres. So I think I learned how to work in collectives before I moved on to doing my own work by myself. I do work both collaboratively and as an individual. I don't favor either. Again, I think *depende del sapo la pedrada* . . .

Funari: For me, collaboration depends on the phase of the project. When I'm editing, that's a very solitary part of the process, and it's the part of the process that most reminds me of painting. You don't really need anyone else, and not only do you not need them, but it's almost impossible to get anything done with someone else there. But the overall process of filmmaking is inevitably collective, and the topics I have chosen have always been ones that, in my mind, require collaboration. If you're going to make a documentary about somebody, they'd better be part of the process and they'd better have agency, otherwise what's the point? One's individual perspective as an artist is important, but it shouldn't be more important than the perspective of the person about whom you're making the movie. . . . The dynamic of the collaboration produces dynamic ideas. When Sergio and I decided to work together, part of what interested me was that he's working in a completely different set of disciplines than I am. By the time we started working together, I'd directed two feature documentaries and done a short experimental piece and produced another documentary. So I was in the film and video world, and he was from the art world. I was interested in what would happen if we combined forces, because I knew we'd each be bringing different sets of skills. . . . The third piece of this collaboration is the group of women with whom we work; they're bringing something radically different from what either of us could bring to it. It was a much bigger project than I thought it would be because of what it takes to work with a group of twelve women and to try to keep everybody feeling engaged and respected. And then there were all the dynamics within the women's group, quite apart from whatever we brought to it. It was complicated and difficult and really rewarding, because we formed wonderful relationships through it, and I think we made a good film.

Vicky, your work has focused on survivors of violence, on maquiladora workers like Paulina. Say more about this emphasis on survivors.

Funari: When I looked at people who were supposedly victims or who were typically portrayed as victims in films and in books, . . . the real people that those stories were supposedly based on, it didn't look to me as though victimization was the story. It looked to me as though survival and coping and creativity *were* the story. Most women who are raped survive. Most women who go through myriad forms of violence survive. And most women in poverty survive, albeit in great struggle. Almost all of us are survivors of one kind or another, and I wanted to explore that survival—in all its complexity—instead of repeating the violence. It seemed to me that films and books and television were repeating a violence—that in the way they told stories of violence against women or against children, they seemed to be repeating it, reinscribing it, teaching it. They weren't offering any way out or any way to look at the reality of how people actually deal with their lives.

This is also a story of hope, thinking about Ronit Avni's concept of mobilizing hope, as opposed to mobilizing shame or shaming capital's injustices.[3]

De la Torre: We've always looked at the workers as some sort of heroes, that no matter how hard their lives are, they are still working, not only for themselves, but also for their communities. And even though *lo que lograron* (their achievements) are pretty miniscule, almost invisible, they are extremely hopeful stories. They are

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

1. Patricia Zimmerman, plenary talk. Patricia Zimmerman and Helen de Michel, "The Open Space Project: Toward a Collaborative and Relational Theory of International Documentary," Fifth International Congress of Cinema Theory and Analysis, SEPACINE/Asociación Mexicana de Teoría y Análisis Cinematográfico, Morelia Michoacán, Mexico.
2. Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
3. Ronit Avni, "Mobilizing Hope: Beyond the Shame-Based Model in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *American Anthropologist* 108 (2006): 205–14.

Rosa-Linda Fregoso 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 Américas*, coedited with Cynthia Bejarano (Duke University Press, forthcoming, 2010); *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (University of California Press, 2003); and *The Devil Never Sleeps and Other Films by Lourdes Portillo* (University of Texas Press, 2001). Fregoso teaches courses on human rights, culture, feminism, and media.