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The Essay Film as an Archival Practice for Self-representation

Abstract: The essay film as a form of expression allows filmmakers to delve into soul searching to elaborate autobiographical representations using experimental devices without the constraints of conventional narrative structures. By placing themselves in the foreground, experimental filmmakers can interrogate the world through the self, creating an opportunity to construct alternative temporalities, whether by questioning the dynamics within their private sphere or connecting them to the historical circumstances in which they lived. In doing so, the role archival materials may play in triggering such explorations is critical and raises several important questions: How can this footage be dislocated from its original context? How could its meaning change after it is re-signified into new texts? What new stories could emerge from such exploration? In addition, this material can open up discursive spaces in which cultural memory could be reworked beyond its evidentiary value. Most importantly, this sets up how the essay film, as a cinematic genre, can impact the representation of a life narrative, particularly through self-reflexive strategies related with the archive. For this, I analyze two Chilean essay films: *Tales from my Childhood* (*Cuentos de mi niñez*, Francisca Durán, 1991), and *Evil Eye* (*Mal de ojo*, María Paula Díaz, 2019), addressing their archival film practice in terms of Catherine Russell's definition of "archiveology" (2018). In addition, I propose that these essay films may be emancipatory or liberating through the filmmaker's self-examination by activating the archival record and circulating it in the public sphere. Here, it is essential to bear in mind that both films were made by Chilean filmmakers; therefore, the historical context is crucial in these explorations.

Keywords: Essay film, autobiography, archive, self-reflexivity, home movies, Chilean cinema, *Tales from my Childhood*, *Evil Eye*.

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Introduction

Domestic image-making technologies (whether film, video, or digital formats) have permitted families to produce memories of their holidays, birthdays, graduation ceremonies, and other conceivable solemnities and festivities. Across cultures and times, these memories from family settings made in the form of moving images have commonly represented (more often than not) a celebratory memorialization of the family institution. Audiovisual media is a technology of memory, where affections (and individual memorial agency) play a significant role. In this regard, José van Dijck, acknowledging the mutual shaping of media and memory, notes that memory produces media. In other words, media function as a way to retain and archive those memories: “Many people nurture a shoebox in which they store a variety of items signalling their pasts: photos, albums, letters, diaries, clippings, notes, and so forth. Add audio and videotape recordings to this collection as well as all digital counterparts of these cherished items, and you have what I call ‘mediated memories’.” (1). These mediated memories are produced within what American anthropologist Richard Chalfen (1987) calls the “home mode,” which functions as symbolic forms of communication, revealing intentions and desires for kinship and community already embedded in one’s particular culture. Here, Chalfen identifies “patterned eliminations” in documents made within the home mode (93). That is, selective represented stories seeking to preserve an idealized construction of family life and reinforce cultural values by including positive family moments while excluding negative ones. Consequently, one could ask, what happens when these images, made in a private space to be seen with family and friends, are repurposed into new texts meant for public circulation? What new meanings might this change in the dialectics involved in their production from private to public entail? Moreover, how blurred is the difference between the private and the public?

Here, I am interested in the repurposing of images in essay films and how this process could be both self-reflexive in formal terms and emancipatory for the filmmaker as an exploration of autobiographical aspects. First, as Jim Lane explains, a family portrait documentary (as he regards autobiographical documentary) is one in which “private worlds and the stories of family members are formed, contested and publicly reformed.” (95). This appears to be a reductive definition, assuming that all autobiographical documentaries should call the family into question, ignoring the fact that many autobiographical documentaries pursue, as Rebecca Swender notes, strategies of “naturalization,” meaning that the archival footage “is naturalized when the capacity for instability of meaning is deemphasized” (6). This technique is often used, for instance, in autobiographical documentaries that uncritically draw on the history of a specific family that impacted the history of a country somehow, such as Alfredo Anzola’s *The Mystery of the Scarlet Eyes / El misterio de los ojos escarlata* (1993), about Anzola’s father, Edgar J. Anzola, an automobile pioneer in Venezuela. Nevertheless, Lane’s definition

perceives autobiographical documentary filmmaking both as an act of remembrance and an act of empowering agency for the filmmaker (Brunow 59), which allows them to explore and, most importantly, challenge the filmmaker's so-constructed family narrative.

I am keen to explore this conceptualization, as I propose that when the filmmaking process involves the (re)examination by the filmmaker of mediated memories representing happy events, counter-narratives could be elaborated in order to scrutinize some aspect of the filmmaker's (or their family's) past. Therefore, these mediated memories could shed light on overlooked stories in light of the essay film director's questioning aims. For instance, the autobiographical documentaries *52 Birch Street* (Doug Block, 2005) and *The Marina Experiment* (Marina Lutz, 2009), both made by American filmmakers, recontextualize domestic recordings, but do so in a conventional and often chronological order. They use their respective archival footage to demystify the fixed family storytelling of happiness and re-signify power relations with the directors' fathers (in other words, the dynamics of patriarchal dominance). These re-examinations do not necessarily have to come to terms with the filmmaker's past, but they allow them to interrogate the world through the self in a sort of therapeutic way, often related to a traumatic event from the past.

Moreover, in this article, I will study how the essay film as a filmmaking strategy could help the artist examine themselves regarding their past. For this, I will analyze *Tales from my Childhood / Cuentos de mi niñez* (Francisca Durán, 1991) and *Evil Eye / Mal de ojo* (María Paula Díaz, 2019), both made by Chilean film directors. In order to elaborate my argument, I will mainly engage with Catherine Russell's notion of "archiveology" as pertinent for the repurposing of footage in experimental films. I will also draw on the role Roger Odin assigns to the home movie made within family settings and benefit from Dagmar Brunow's understanding of self-reflexivity in relation to cultural memory, as well as Laura Rascaroli's appreciation of the function of personal filmmaking. Thus, in this article I will argue that the essay film as a filmmaking practice could be emancipatory for the said filmmakers, given they deal with personal trauma. Ultimately, this article does not aim to map out the various extensions of autobiographical essay film in Chile but to focus on two audiovisual projects from different times and scrutinize their self-reflexive elements.

Archival Practices in Essay Film

Self-reflexivity is a style often used in film which, in formal terms, makes the cinematic apparatus manifest, both in fiction and non-fiction. It could be deployed by a number of devices, having to do with performance (such as looking at the camera and addressing the film viewers) and experimenting with the cinematic form through editing. However, self-reflexivity does not only aim to evince the possibilities of cinematic expression. More

importantly, it raises awareness of (a particular) film's discussion on social, political, or cultural issues. One of the first theorists to conceptualize such devices was German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1984 [1949]), who coined the notion of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the distancing effect, referring to strategies conceived to grant the viewer a range of reflection and agency with respect to a play. Bill Nichols provides a straightforward definition of the distancing effect and what it entails: it is "the strategy of distancing viewers from emotional identification and heightening engagement with a broader social perspective" (198). Subsequently, distancing devices have been incorporated into cinema to trigger the film viewer's critical engagement and commitment with the issues raised by (certain types of) films. Here, essay films make a special case for self-reflexive practices in filmmaking.

As Michael Chanan points out, "the essay film is loosely defined—because there is no tighter way to define it" (17). However, one key characteristic he argues is present in the essay film, especially in those exploring the filmmaker's own worldview, is that it is "likely to be highly individual but without speaking in the grammatical first person" (26), suggesting that essay films are inclined to be elaborated by using less clear, more experimental narrative strategies. This might clarify the difference in relation to more conventional autobiographical documentaries such as Alan Berliner's *The Family Album* (1986) or Ross McElwee's *Time Indefinite* (1993), whose stories, albeit benefiting from distancing devices at specific points, are told in a more straightforward, structured manner. Moreover, such a feature is not univocal to all essay films, as they can go beyond the 'I'.

Nevertheless, my focus here is to pursue how the film essayist interested in exploring the self elaborates a self-reflexive work by recontextualizing private documents that transcend the barrier of personal memory, or even by creating new images that trigger memories not recorded in media (hence, elaborating on the affective role of creating contemporary mementoes for non-documented memories, so to speak). For this, I embrace Laura Rascaroli's claim regarding subjective and personal filmmaking: "[...] to speak 'I' is, after all, firstly a political act of self-awareness and self-affirmation." (5). That is, how the authors willingly inscribe themselves in the artwork and with what purpose (which may not be apparent to the viewers at first sight). This is relevant as I propose that, by working through a self-reflexive process in which the filmmaker assembles their own family puzzle, they can criticize and reinterpret their past. More importantly, it can also delve into what the author's context may entail. Regarding this, Dagmar Brunow provides an illuminating path in understanding what takes place in this elaboration: "[...] the self-reflexivity of the essay films allows for such an examination of the workings of representation, but it also provides insights into several other aspects related to cultural memory. Essay films [...] are here understood as an intervention into the audiovisual archive, which I have defined as the circulation of images, narratives and sounds in a specific society at a specific historical moment." (194). Brunow's notion linking cultural memory with the process of remediation had been explored previously (Erl

and Rigney 2009), highlighting the importance of this type of image activation in unveiling overlooked stories.

I suggest that archival intervention as a self-reflective creative process is vital in endowing footage with (a new) meaning; more crucially, it promotes thinking about the archive as a practice rather than an institution holding collections of (audiovisual) documents. The self-reflective creative process mentioned above is found in filmmaking, where mediated memories are curated, selected, edited, and juxtaposed so that new narratives may be elaborated. The subsequent meaning this ‘patchwork’ unveils would hardly be present if we isolated each home movie ignoring their context, and most importantly, the hidden clues they might have, which could be relevant for the filmmaker’s purpose of making an essay film. Here, I borrow Catherine Russell’s notion of “archiveology,” a filmmaking (or, more precisely, an archival) practice defined as “a means of returning to the images of the past that were produced to entertain, or produced for more severe purposes of documentary recording, and reviewing them for new ways of making history come alive in new forms” (5).¹ More specifically, she elaborates this concept of reuse, recycling, appropriation, and borrowing of archival material as a critical method with media art practice in mind, taking a slight detour from more conventional reworkings found in documentaries with more Aristotelian narratives, as Alan Berliner’s and Rose McAlwee’s mentioned above.

Moreover, Russell’s understanding of archiveology comes from Walter Benjamin’s central ideas on intentionally fragmented, nonlinear narratives. For Russell, “Benjamin’s dialectical and nonlinear concept of history is particularly appropriate to archiveology as a critical mode of image recycling because his theory of the image links technologies of reproduction to a concept of historical imagination.” (36). In his essay “On the Concept of History” (“Über den Begriff der Geschichte” 1940), Benjamin drives a critical redemption of history based on the liquidation of the epic element of historiography. In other words, the rejection of teleological narratives, hence challenging the idea of history being written from the victor’s standpoint and proposing to consider the perspective of those vanquished (Mayer 2011). Benjamin’s notions of nonlinear narrative structures are found in his *Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*), an unfinished collection of writings about nineteenth-century Paris where seemingly superfluous images provide clues to a historical construction. An example of nonlinear strategies used to convey a visual world that precedes *Arcades Project* is Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, an also unfinished visual study of a series of panels that influenced Benjamin’s work. While this type of fragmentary narrative has been strongly linked to Jean-Luc Godard’s films, I suggest that it is closer to Chris Marker’s multimedia

1 Russell acknowledges that the term “archiveology” was initially coined by Joel Katz (1991) to refer to the ways filmmakers were making archive useful and engaging with it on its own terms (Russell 11).

project *Immemory* (1997), harnessing multimedia's capacity of making rhizomatic trajectories. Nevertheless, the point of this article is the essay film, which, as a filmmaking practice, borrows from Benjamin's propositions and calls to resist linearity through the use of different film devices.

A good example of where the editing helps expand the filmmaker's authorial voice, especially where the documentary mode overlaps the essayistic, is Agnès Varda's *The Beaches of Agnès / Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008), where the renowned French filmmaker builds a sort of artistic autobiography recontextualizing some of her films. For Rascaroli, the editing process is precisely how the non-verbal authorial voice finds expression (7), much in line with Chanan's suggestion that the essay film does not speak using the grammatical first person, as cited above. In this regard, self-reflexivity in the sense of the artwork's composition is the way the artists inscribe themselves as authors, or *auteurs*, into film historiography (Brunow 147). For the purpose of this research, film essayists offer an exploration of the self by interrogating their own family films and pictures, along with old clips of various kinds not related directly with their families but re-appropriated into a new work by experimenting with symbolic strategic combinations. By doing this, artists do not seek to reinforce an already known narrative but question what has been taken for granted (in their family constructions), demonstrating that the "potential of the essay film as a critical mode of enquiry and vehicle for resistance rests with its form" (Hollweg and Krstić 1). This brings the already accepted biography into question, facilitating a bottom-up perspective that breaks with notions of patriarchal dominance within the family by moving the film's focal point to the filmmaker's authorial voice, a feature present in both essay films addressed here.

Tales from my Childhood (*Cuentos de mi niñez*, Francisca Durán, 1991)

Centred, as the title indicates, on Durán's childhood memories, this film follows a series of events from the time she and her family were exiled from Chile to Canada in 1973. That year, General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically-elected Socialist President Salvador Allende, leading to a ruthless 17-year-long dictatorship where thousands were killed, tortured, imprisoned and exiled. Thus, the majority of events Durán recollects in this 12-minute-long essay film are from a 6-year-old girl's point of view but narrated with her 1991 voice-over. These mementoes navigate some memories from her life in Chile, such as being afraid of a dog on her road to school when she was 6. They also include earlier memories of her holidays in a small village on the coast; later memories such as her experience at the Canadian embassy in Chile after the 1973 coup; and her brother's recollection of the family fleeing to Canada in class in a Canadian school. Finally, she recalls a family trip back

to Chile after democracy was established in 1990 and how there she met Vanessa, a woman investigating her father's disappearance. These personal memories intertwine with some well-known, saturated, black and white images of the actual coup d'état on 11th September 1973, superimposed over sounds of shootings in the street. These images, as well as still film negatives of newspaper clippings in English about Pinochet's dictatorship (basically, images distorted from their original form) constitute external footage that not only provides context to Durán's personal story but helps us understand the imbalance of the small story in relation to the bigger structure. Ultimately, this is a personal story that connects to the large one.

Like many families who left Chile after the coup, the Duráns had to travel lightly, resulting in a lack of mediated memories Francisca Durán could access to illustrate and shape these childhood stories. Thus, the filmmaker overcomes this absence by creating new images to encapsulate her memories visually. Instead of filming dramatic performances as a faithful re-enactment of her memories, she leans towards filming domestic visual experiences that seem to be produced in (or mimicking) Chalfen's home mode, endowing these images with a sense of domesticity and privateness often found in home movies. In his essay "Rhétorique du film de famille" (1979), French sociologist Roger Odin points out that the role of home movies is that they "give the family a mythic anchoring, it shelters it from temporal contingencies and the trials of the world, it fixes a perpetual image, always reiterated" (cited in Czach, 20), reinforcing the idea of familiar intimacy aimed at by Durán. The 'new' images produced by the filmmaker not only fill the 'visual evidence' gap in her memories, but they aim to recreate what the home moviemaking experience produces, a "cinema of happiness" (Lagos-Labbé and Figueroa Günther 106). It is possible to identify indexical traces that indicate some images were made in Canada (in scenes where Durán films a little girl—not her daughter, but a friend's—walking in an alley surrounded by snow, in winter clothing) and others in Chile (La Moneda Presidential Palace, or the small village of Pichidangui, where she used to spend her holidays as a child). This exercise is interesting, as these 'visually coded archival images' play a role in providing a complement to Durán's voice-over: they are eminently about herself and the images she does not have. Partially contradicting Marita Sturken's description of media as "technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides" (9), Durán's creation of images provides visuality to trivial moments that resided in her memory but were not recorded at the time. These isolated memories (and images), when assembled, seem to unveil her own self-exploration as a woman living (and growing up) in exile, with all the identity instabilities that it implies.

As a Chilean artist living in Canada, Durán's memories go back and forth between countries and languages, making transnationality a fundamental aspect of this exploration of the self. Visually, Durán's soul-searching around this is constructed not only through the images she created for this specific discursive framework, as mentioned before. She also stresses how far apart Chile and Canada are by didactically using maps with arrows,

thus illustrating the (emotional) distance that this relocation implies. This is done to mimic geography classes at elementary school level, resuming the 6-year-old point of view of Durán's childhood memories. Situating most of these memories from a child's perspective, two moments encapsulate this diasporic struggle both in terms of Durán's narration and visual construction. Firstly, her recollection of her brother's experience in an aircraft bound to Canada. During a school class in Canada about trips students had taken, Durán's brother (a child then) remembers a flight from Chile with many women crying, and the Chilean flag spread along the aisle (0:03:10–0:03:30). However, he is unaware of the meaning of this flight, taken when the family had to leave Chile after the coup d'état. This scene is composed by reiterating blurry and saturated images of an aircraft tray table, and a second image of a pouring teapot from the same point of view, also using repetitive, circular shots in a rhythmic movement. This repetition device makes the formal remediating operation visible and seems to explore the notion of recurring memories (a topic that permeates Durán's narrative). In addition, it looks at the transnational nature of her forced migration, unveiling the traumatic impact the flight had on her as a child, triggering awareness of one's national dislocation and unstable national identity—as mediated by Durán. Secondly, we have Durán's interaction with Durán's child self as she learns some phrases in Spanish. This scene (0:05:34–0:06:30) comprises an introductory image of the girl and explores Durán's house in low key lighting, with overlapping audio tracks, in English, from an elementary school. Durán explains how 'the girl' (without pronouns) successfully learns phrases and communicates them to other class peers by introducing the sentence "*la pelota es roja – the ball is red*" in child's handwriting. Thus, the girl on screen, who is about the same age Durán was when she was forced to leave Chile in 1973, sheds light on the identity struggles experienced by Chileans in exile at an early age. It reflects the lack of political awareness of children who go through this migrating process—as in her brother's memories addressed above. In this regard, the girl, as a token for diasporic children, self-consciously sees herself as a post-generational victim of Pinochet's dictatorship, an experience closely related with Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory (2008), defined as "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (103). This transmission is a crucial element of *Tales from my Childhood's* suggestive narrative, as it takes form in spatial terms through the construction of a very localized private space in Durán's house, showing a room with family pictures, with shelves full of books, and a Chilean flag, making the transnational character of her (and her future family's) life in Canada present. Situating the girl's growth and development process within the context of Chile's transition to democracy in a way anticipates Hirsch's argument that the disconnectedness of the second generation from the traumatic events endows them with a new agency for contemporary notions of the past. Finally, the figure of the girl both embodies Durán's own

childhood memories and opens up a way to think about the unforeseen future, linking her story to the country's own path to liberation from dictatorship, which in 1991 was still very recent. As mentioned before, the lack of amateur footage from Durán's own childhood precipitates the construction of contemporary images to reflect upon her own past, and the girl takes a privileged place in those images.

As a transnational filmmaker, Durán harnesses these flows, linking them strongly to historical moments; the 1973 coup and the return to democracy in 1990 are two milestones in her film, a story that, in a way, begins and ends in Chile. This path was not unique to Durán. Many Chileans saw the end of Pinochet's dictatorship as an opportunity to return to Chile and resume their domestic lives at home (bear in mind this film was made just as democracy returned in 1990, and the migrating phenomena of returning home were still potential). Issues around Chileans in exile and their road back home, often portrayed under challenging circumstances, are recurrent tropes in Chilean conventional cinema, especially from the late 1990s onwards, for example, *Gringuito / El gringuito*, Sergio Castilla (1998) or *Bastards in Paradise / Bastardos en el paraíso*, Luis Vera (2000), to name a couple. Nevertheless, *Tales from my Childhood* harnesses the formal experimentation of the essay film format to draw on an autobiographical narrative that relates much more with actual personal experience. On this topic, from a personal perspective, Durán's connection to Vanessa (the woman she met once in Chile in 1990) is very relevant. Durán decides to present this moment not by creating new footage, but by using white handwriting on a black screen. Film viewers do not know if the filmmaker was able to photograph Vanessa or just talked to her, but she integrates Vanessa's experience into her own personal path. By doing so, she delves into how the individual connects with the collective memory of those who opposed Pinochet in exile and how many of them tried to solve the puzzle of their relatives' disappearance. Distancing devices such as handwriting are certainly pertinent and suitable in the formal elaboration of self-reflexive essay films, especially those like this one that explore the questioning of memories and endow the viewers with agency to decode what the filmmaker aims to convey. Moreover, the use of handwriting and the manner in which the text is written (this time in adult handwriting, unlike the previously mentioned one related to the girl) seems to reinforce the idea of a personal diary that inscribes herself in the artwork.

The discussion of how personal memory and collective memory intermingle is relevant in demonstrating how such explorations allow new perspectives to emerge, primarily related to a country's traumatic past. In this regard, Pierre Nora has argued that a "democratization of history" can occur if emancipatory versions of the past surface: "Unlike history, which has always been in the hands of the public authorities, of scholars and specialized peer groups, memory has acquired all the new privileges and prestige of a popular protest movement" (6). The necessity to remember acts from the past that fluctuate between private and public

becomes pivotal in reconstructing the memory from a subaltern perspective, this includes “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 67). Durán’s formal exploration not only searches through the self to elaborate on her childhood and adolescence, but it also enriches her vision by elaborating on the social context in which this exploration took place in order to understand where she comes from and where she is going.

Evil Eye (Mal de ojo, María Paula Díaz, 2019)

While the process of self-inscription in Durán’s film might be more straightforward in terms of the use of images, María Paula Díaz chooses to explore the possibilities of archival intervention more deeply. Here, Díaz repurposes a childhood picture of herself, using her own voice-over to guide the narrative (albeit not chronologically), through her obsession with scenes from the past that inhabit her memories. Díaz re-contextualizes different edited versions of the same personal photograph, along with short scenes from films such as *At Land* (Maya Deren, 1944) or *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966), and archival footage from Santiago, Chile, in the 1970s taken by Chilean filmmaker Raul Ruíz. Díaz includes a stylized picture of Plaza Bulnes, a square in front of La Moneda Presidential Palace in Santiago, and a heavily pixelated picture of a well-known image of people detained after Pinochet’s coup in 1973 which covers the whole screen. Using these images, Díaz leaves visual breadcrumbs throughout her film as traces of her own conflicting self in terms of what is reality and what are dreams, and how grappling with conflict impacted her adulthood.

The film starts with an inscription that says: “This is not the story of a man marked by a childhood image, but the story of a woman’s childhood marked by a gaze” (originally in Spanish, as with the following on-screen texts cited here).² This establishes her self-inscription not only from a female perspective and experience but in opposition to hegemonic narratives encoded in patriarchal points of view, perhaps anticipating experimental strategies that overcome linearity and the Aristotelian narrative structure. The following on-screen text states: “The first thing I was told was that a woman cast an Evil Eye spell on me when I was three months old.” Most of the guiding in *Evil Eye* is conducted by Díaz’s voice-over. However, at some crucial points, such as the two above-mentioned phrases, these messages are also visible through a font type mimicking that of a typewriter. The visual structure resembles a poem, reinforcing the dreamlike character of the story and how it intends to stitch together a patchwork from her recollections of the past. As Díaz states later in the

2 All translations from Spanish are my own.

essay film, “the Evil Eye is a spell caught in a gaze. The gaze is a metaphor for possession. It captures the soul [...] the victim becomes an image, a trapped scene”, playing with the idea of cinema and photography as technologies that capture an essence, much in line with André Bazin’s phenomenologically-inflected essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1960). Here Bazin suggests photography automatically produces a representation of a past reality: “For the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were. Those categories of resemblance which determine the species photographic image likewise, then, determine the character of its aesthetic as distinct from that of painting” (8), a diagnosis that also suggests the link between the photographic device and the drive for preservation.

Preserving images might well be the first step to gain control over how to assess their representation, as Díaz explores. Such conflict is shaped in audio-visual means by the reworking of different archival fragments that pinpoint the idea of the self and the construction of identity. Thus, the filmmaker crops, resizes and slows down both her own picture (used again and again) and archival footage, overlapping them at some points, merging the personal (the private) and the public. The films she repurposes do not address her life directly, but they—and their images—say something about her own self-exploration. In this regard, Russell reminds us that the role of archiveology as an artistic archival practice is “exploring the potential of audiovisual fragments to construct new ways of accessing and framing histories that might otherwise have been forgotten and neglected—and to make these histories relevant to contemporary concerns.” (12). The question here is, what do these images (or rather, their recontextualization) give us access to? What does the result of this construct aim to represent? *Evil Eye* does not provide a concrete answer, a feature often present in essay films exploring the autobiographical. However, it suggests that exploring the filmmaker’s state of mind through such reappropriated images is enlightening for understanding her own projections of them based on her personal experience at a psychological level, especially those characteristics not evident on the surface. Michael Renov, when talking about self-inscription in autobiographical films, explains that it is “the process of judgement (instead of the verdict) that counts” (87), highlighting that some form of experimental assessment on oneself is present, which offers a more elaborated perspective on how Díaz remixes the archival footage. As an essayistic filmmaker, Díaz repurposes these images to express emotions in a non-straightforward manner, recalling the non-linearity of dreams present in the beginning of the film when she states that this story will be hers and no one else’s. In short, it questions who has the prerogative to interpret these images and how they express notions around her memories. Díaz’s experimentation partially contravenes the idea of the image as visual evidence, or more precisely, as a source of actuality, especially in the remixing of archival footage of old Santiago, images whose original purpose was to document everyday life in the city at that time. Transforming the factual into a device

to express the dreamlike situations Díaz as the authorial voice that builds up her story from apparently isolated fragments.

After the introduction providing her point of view, Díaz divides her film into two sections about the consequences of this evil eye curse: somnambulism and insomnia. Regarding the former, Díaz resumes an on-screen text device (with no voice-over) which says, “Morning of July 18th, 1984. I was told I got up at night and walked down the stairs. I did not remember anything. Later that day, I remembered what I dreamed about.” This idea permeates the narrative at large and forms the film’s backbone, anticipating the psychological aspects of how somnambulism relates (from her perspective) to the spell cast on her. Later on in this section, Díaz presents a slowed-down moving image of an encephalogram superimposed over a stylized version of Diego Velázquez’s painting *Las Meninas*, accompanied by the filmmaker’s voice-over, stating that “I was sleepwalking during my puberty [...] ungrateful time in which one is only a passing phase. During that time, I was like a ghost, undefined and lacking flesh, like cinema’s virtual reality.” The generic encephalogram, used here to represent an indexical record of (her) state of mind, addresses the idea of deep (self)examination of one’s thoughts, especially when looking back at past experiences (or phases) in life, as Durán states in retrospect. Scrutinizing one’s mind is also supported by the repurposing of a Rorschach test mimicking the shape of a butterfly, placed behind Díaz’s picture. Neither device, nevertheless, intends to evoke the scientific nature of this examination, rather to make one bear in mind the subjective perspective present in the self-reflective process of configuring one’s identity and what memories inform such an exercise.

The final section on insomnia opens up with a scene from Lars von Trier’s short film *Nocturne* (1980), about a young woman who wakes from a nightmare in the middle of the night. Díaz uses this fragment to say that “I am a voyeur, to see is fascinating [...] being a voyeur turned me into a zombie,” mixing it with the stereoscopic mode of virtual reality headsets (two circular-shaped, almost identical images over a black background). Here, I repurpose Jaimie Baron’s notion of archival voyeurism (81–107). This notion was originally meant for the appropriation of documents recorded within the home mode, to delve into a private space. It can be extended to Díaz’s self-definition as a voyeur, situating her gaze upon images as a fundamental feature of her own personality. Díaz’s repurposing of movie scenes, along with their original narrative and artistic meaning (and significance) in relation to her own experience, gives us a sense of the way she sees the world. This idea is also reinforced by the use of the virtual reality headset’s viewfinder. This perspective suggests personal (and solitary forms of) spectatorship, relocating virtually to a wholly immersive different world and thus excluding all other perceptible elements from their visual field. This might reveal a high level of engagement in the ‘experienced’ situation (what the subject sees), albeit here I argue that this device carries the idea of subjectivity and the importance of one’s gaze and perspective. Thus, Díaz’s voyeurism is placed at the forefront of her own

self-exploration, both in terms of what she sees and how she sees it, defining its archival use not only as a formal strategy to elaborate her story, but also as a representation of how her memory functions.

The reusing of images also interacts with the creation (and editing) of new ones. Towards the end, Díaz shows what seems to be, judging by its visual resolution, a digital recording of a house façade, immediately repeated both as a polaroid still and as an old 8mm home movie. This image is superimposed with pictures of herself, some films, and the voice-over saying “My name is Paula. I have been sleeping badly for a long time, and I suffer from certain confusions [...] my confusions refer to scenes [...].” Díaz’s decision to introduce herself by name only in the third section of her film points to the non-linearity of memory and the close link existing between the person and her home as a familiar place, and also how this construction might be challenged. This intervention explores the idea of the mnemonic value of images and how pictorial manipulation might well impact one’s memories (or the representation of such memories). Memory is fallible, and its organization depends on how events are recollected by the interested person, aided mainly by images, but also by oral sources transmitting experiences (always mediated and often biased). Thus, the reliance on images is presented as non-factual then, triggering a recollection, upon which the filmmaker reconstructs the non-linearity of her own emotional experiences. Russell reinforces this by observing: “This is where the audiovisual archive is fundamentally different from any other archival practice. It produces an excess of temporalities and an excess of meaning and affects that the filmmaker as archiveologist can harness and explore for new effects of history” (18). In this respect, all overlapping temporalities explored by Díaz help her to decipher (albeit not entirely) the encrypted nature of her memories in relation to the curse of the evil eye, where she wonders at one point whether or not an image that she recollects is a memory from the past, a dream, or a film.

Conclusion

The self-exploration the artist pursues in elaborating a story (or expressing a personal and emotional moment in their life) could be conveyed within the possibilities a medium permits. Such is the case in painting, literature, multimedia installations, and in this article, through the essay film. In this regard, the essay film, as an audio-visual archival practice that uses self-reflexivity through the application of various distancing devices, allows the filmmaker to harness fragments of footage for such autobiographical explorations in an experimental, non-linear manner that precisely calls on its viewers to actively participate and involve themselves in the artist’s experience. The experimental nature of this practice facilitates the emergence of a new meaning, different from the one originally intended,

that often challenges preconceived stories and non-linear narrative strategies that help the artist understand their own history as a patchwork, only connecting the dots retrospectively concerning such past.

As I have assessed both in *Tales from my Childhood* and *Evil Eye*, the filmmakers benefited from the essay film's fluid strategies to explore the self. Whether by digging into old films or by creating images for non-recorded memories, the use of pre-existing images in these films helps the narrative express a personal worldview in regard to their own experiences in life, different from conventional points of view addressing the intertwining between the private and the public. Thus, I argue that enacting a self-reflexive practice which explores the self and challenges notions of it, pursues an illustrative purpose of the footage (following Swender's notion of "naturalization" mentioned in the introduction). In addition, it is in itself emancipatory in that a personal story could be treated in a therapeutic process when the dialectics change from private to public. Without intending to establish a filmic correspondence between filmmakers, both *Tales from my Childhood* and *Evil Eye* set their personal takes within the bigger historical structure, endowing them with agency to reassess their past experiences, bearing in mind in which cultural determinants the protagonists live.

Dagmar Brunow's understanding of the archival intervention as filmmaking practice in the essay film is illuminating. She states that it "shows the capacity of self-reflexive filmmaking to foreground the politics and history of representation, and to address gaps and absences in the master narrative of the nation" (Brunow 100). While challenging the narrative of the nation is at the core of *Tales from my Childhood*, *Evil Eye* is more elusive in that regard, deciding to play with issues of representation instead. Moreover, said view on the self cannot be isolated from Díaz's contingencies and is situated within a historical narrative, which is challenged through the personal too. Both films remind us of the role ordinary people play in creating their own records portraying their perspectives about life experiences, such as photography, private diaries, or home movies, but most importantly, they give significantly more consideration to the reassessment (and potential questioning) of experiences people thought they already knew. The filmmaker's agency in executing a creative project to explore the self is critical in that realization. In this respect, these specific essay films suggest the use (and elaboration) of moving images filmed in the home mode (in the case of Durán), or of a picture of herself as a child (in the case of Díaz) as triggers for such personal explorations. To conclude, I sustain these essay films invite the film viewer not to take the filmmaker's proposed interventions as conclusive answers to their own stories but to empathize with the personal process the filmmakers go through and imagine how their emancipatory exercises could trigger more explorations at a subjective level.

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