This article explores how the feature films Gasolina/Gasoline (2008), Las marimbas del infierno/The Marimbas of Hell (2010) and Polvo/Dust (2012), directed by Julio Hernández Cordón, approach Guatemalan post-war realities using minimalist plots that subvert the principles of mainstream fictional film and in which an experimental impetus plays a key role. I propose a reading of the discursive ambivalence between the experimental, the documentary and traditional fictional cinema that characterizes these three films. They will be seen in relation to their significant contribution to the space of memory cinema, which is directly linked to their indeterminate positions and the oscillation between these differing genres.
INTRODUCTION

The extreme cruelty that characterized the violent acts committed against the indigenous population by the Guatemalan State between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s undoubtedly exacerbated the collective trauma provoked by the war, a trauma whose dimensions and repercussions are difficult to determine given its profound impact. In his testimony for the Recovery of Historical Memory Project, one of the survivors of the Panzós Massacre (29 May 1978) captures the singular way in which this violence damaged his psyche, highlighting how post-traumatic disturbances interrupt his thoughts:

I do not feel good even today, I feel like I am sick, I no longer have complete thoughts, sometimes my thoughts escape me. I am not complete in the mind. [...] I don’t know what it is that they’ve done to us, what’s happened to us, and all the suffering that we’ve gone through from the place we came from. Case 5106 (Assassination and violent kidnapping), Panzós, Alta Verapaz, 1980.

(Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala [ODHAG] 1998, emphasis added, my translation)

The reader may recognize the italicized phrase in the testimony cited above, which is the opening of the novel Insensatez (Senselessness) by Horacio Castellanos Moya (2004: 14) and alludes directly to the alienating character of the war trauma by highlighting one of its most disturbing aspects: how the massive violence against the dignity and integrity of Guatemala’s indigenous population led to the collapse of the unstable foundations upon which the democratic delusion rested (and I say delusion because I am aware that indigenous citizenship was no more than a promise the government never intended to keep). This shocking democrash – to borrow the neologism coined by Dante Liano in his short story with the same name ([1978] 2008) – implies a suspension of the social, political and cultural categories that lent meaning and coherence to the indigenous/non-indigenous coexistence within the framework of the nation state: words like democracy, freedom, citizenship, rights and justice have lost all meaning in post-war society. Giorgio Agamben has broadly speculated on this issue, proposing that ‘[t]he state of exception [that characterizes modern totalitarianism] is an anomic space in which the subject is a force of law without law’ (2003: 61). Notably, Agamben points out that this anomie inherent to the state of exception is what in turn makes it possible to perform ‘a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens’ (2003: 58), as was the case in Guatemala.

What interests me about this theory are the implications of the effects of this anomie in the Guatemalan context, keeping in mind the double meaning of the term according to the Real Academia Española: as an ‘absence of law’ and a ‘language disorder that prevents a person from calling objects by their name’ (2017, my translation). This second definition will allow us to understand the suspension of the forms of meaning alluded to in the testimony from the survivor of the Panzós Massacre cited above. It is not my intention to focus on anomie as a post-war psychosocial pathology, but rather – to the contrary – to think about the effects of anomie in relation to the possibilities of narrating not only the war, but also life. In other words, I aim to reflect on the effects of anomie on the enunciative and explanatory capacity of language in its relationship to
the world and experience as a legacy of the war and genocide. The great challenge of post-war cinema and literature is finding ways to indicate the void produced by this anomie and, at the same time, restore the significant power of language, as the problem is not so much that there are no words, but that words – like justice or democracy – and by extension narrations have ceased to have meaning. Julio Hernández Cordón’s cinematographic project on the post-war era – encompassing the three films Gasolina/Gasoline (2008), Las marimbas del infierno/The Marimbas of Hell (2010), and Polvo/Dust (2012) – deals with this situation, inspiring considerations of the meaning of life or the lack thereof in a Guatemala affected by the continuation of violence from the war. Through his post-war trilogy, the director questions himself and spectators about the effects of anomie, while experimenting with unconventional audio-visual, narrative and dramatic forms, as well as ways of redefining both the past and the present.

GASOLINA OR MAKING NECROPOLITICS VISIBLE

Gasolina depicts 24 hours in the life of three young friends, Gerardo, Nano and Raymundo, in their constant wandering through Guatemala City some day in the year 2004 (or after). Their primary form of entertainment is stealing gasoline to go cruising around the city’s outskirts. As the day wears on, the level of violence increases, reaching its climax when they run over an indigenous man walking on the side of the road. As the man’s woman companion desperately begs for help in keqchi, he seems to die. To erase the evidence of their crime, Nano and Raymundo have no better idea than to use the gasoline in the trunk to burn the cadaver. Although Gerardo does not want to take part in the burning of the body, he also fails to prevent it. The young men’s wandering and the impossibility of becoming socially integrated or constructing a viable life plan acceptable to their elders (for it would be incorrect to say that they have no dreams or desires or plans; the issue is that they do not line up with familial and societal expectations) articulate the senselessness, i.e., the suspension of the modern identity narrative for these children of the war. Burning the body of their crime demonstrates the persistence of the necropolitics that made the indigenous genocide possible. Ana Yolanda Contreras’ analysis focuses on precisely how this scene of Gasolina exposes the racism prevalent in Guatemala:

This way of erasing the three’s responsibility for the accident and of destroying the ‘other’ who appears as an obstacle (the defenseless and possibly dying indigenous man), is a sign of the racism and dehumanization of the indigenous otherness that still persists in Guatemala and that unfortunately continues to be reproduced in parts of the new generations. (2014: 9–10, my translation)

Her reading of Gasolina thus emphasizes how the film brings to light the persistence of the racist presumptions that govern life and death in Guatemala and that, anchored in the coloniality of being, made the genocide of the Ixil population in the 1980s possible, thinkable and feasible. Laura Reyes points out that this scene also establishes a connection between the crimes against humanity committed against the indigenous population during the war and the current acts of violence they endure, due to the impunity ‘that exists today for many of those who committed these crimes, a fact which stands in the way of rebuilding a more peaceful country in this post-war era’ (2017: 6, my translation). The synthesis of this rampant historical racism with the
lack of a stable and reliable legal system is the Guatemalan version of what Achille Mbembé defines as the politics of cruelty characteristic of the relationship between life and death on slave plantations, in the colonies and under Apartheid. In these states of terror, biopower – which, according to Foucault, determines who deserves to live and die – is linked to a state of exception and a state of siege in which race plays a fundamental role (2003: 22). Indeed, these elements can be found in the logic of the Guatemalan State during the civil war and they persist in the various forms of systematic and symbolic violence against the indigenous population in the post-war era. Mbembé’s concept of necropolitics is more than pertinent to critically consider the status of indigenous people in Guatemala: it refers to contemporary forms of cruelty that lead to the emergence of ‘death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead’ (2003: 40, original emphasis).

The scene in which the keqchi man is run over and his body later burned perfectly exhibits the new post-war generations’ internalization of necropolitics. Hernández Cordón invites viewers to confront that moment of horror, even though it is barely perceived as such by the three adolescents, exercising what I have elsewhere referred to as confrontational memory as a point of departure to break the anomie. Beyond a shadow of a doubt this is his most notable cinematic contribution to the redefinition of concepts like dignity, citizenship, justice and coexistence. Formally, the almost complete lack of illumination except for the car headlights and – later – the burning gasoline flames makes the scene literally difficult to watch. The difficulty of actually seeing what is going on visually embodies the moral difficulty of watching a person pouring gasoline on another human and setting him on fire. It also avoids turning the burning of a human into spectacle. The framing contributes to this

Figure 1: Collage of stills from the car burning sequence in Hernandez Cordón’s Gasolina/Gasoline, 2008. Guatemala © Melindrosa Films.
effect, since the first shot after the crash is an extreme high-angle view of the car sideways on the left of the screen, with the headlights barely illuminating a man on the right lying on the side of the road with a woman bending over him talking in an agitated manner. Nando, Gerardo and Raymundo get off the car and walk towards them, and begin to circle them. In sharp contrast with the previous close-up shots of their expressions while in the car up to the moment of the accident, from now on we will glimpse how the story unfolds from afar, through sideways long shots and backlit shots as the camera moves around the crime scene in a motion similar to how the boys walk around in their anxiety. As we hear the anguished keqchi voice, we realize that the three friends are panicking: their exchanges are heated and their movements erratic until one finally reaches for the gasoline can. Thinking in terms of the moral imperatives for a new cinematic post-war language, I would argue with Adorno (1969) that one cannot – and should not – write or film well about genocide; that is, that an accomplished, polished and in this sense beautiful literary or cinematic form is not fit to convey the horrors of genocide. It is in this sense that the blurred, dimly-lit scenes of Gasolina are ethically and aesthetically significant.

NEW LANGUAGES AND METAMEMORY: LAS MARIMBAS DEL INFIERO AND POLVO

After exposing the cruel topography of necropolitics in Gasolina, Hernández Cordón’s two subsequent films test new narrative forms for post-war cinematography while questioning the cinema’s ability to speak about the pain of others. Las marimbas del infierno portrays the seemingly unlikely friendship among three very different male characters. Alfonso Tunche plays the marimba for a living but is forced into hiding by a gang trying to blackmail him. Roberto González, known as El Blacko, is a doctor by day and a musician in the heavy metal group Los Guerreros del Metal by night. Finally, Chiquilín is a homeless teenage drug user unable to earn a living. The three decide to start a band combining heavy metal and marimba, demonstrating a strategy to deal with the exhaustion of modern life narratives and the creation of new languages as a form of survival and solidarity in post-war Guatemala.

Polvo also takes place in post-war Guatemala and features two protagonists who live in very different realities, to some extent determined by their ethnic differences: on the one hand is Juan, an indigenous man who suffers from the trauma of his father’s kidnapping and disappearance during the war, and, on the other, is Ignacio, an urban Ladino man making a documentary about the effects of the war who wishes to film Juan telling his story. The film travels through the living spaces of the two protagonists as it considers the possibilities of a friendship between these two, thus exploring the difficulties and challenges of interethnic communication. Through this *mise en abyme*, Polvo reflects on the ethics of the documentary as an instrument of memory, specifically using the strategy of reflexive memory or metamemory. The film explicitly cites Hernández Cordón’s earlier documentary *Sí hubo genocidio/Yes, There Was a Genocide* (2005) depicting the search for the remains of family members who have disappeared in the indigenous community of San Juan Comalapa the community relies on the expert help of the Instituto de Antropología Forense de Guatemala, which was in charge of excavating the mass graves. As Laura Reyes explains,
in the documentary, Jaime Paz [one of the survivors of the war] speaks to the camera about how the loss of his father has affected him […]. While speaking, he cries a great deal and the viewer can feel his despair and his profound sadness as he tells the story of his life without a father and the difficulties that this loss has caused him, even in the present, as a husband and the father of a son. His mother, Margarita Paz, also takes part in the documentary and says that she was left with her son when he was only nine months old when his father was kidnapped […]. A person who has seen this story in Sí hubo genocidio and who then sees Polvo cannot help but notice the similarities between the real person, Jaime Paz, and the character of Juan.

(2017: 25, my translation)

Furthermore, the fact that Polvo stages the tension aroused between the needs of the indigenous survivor and the Ladino interested in filming and making his story public is a self-critical and meta-reflective act through which the director makes his own dilemma over his right to recount the trauma of the direct victims public. Triggered by the mise en abyme, he also seems to be inviting a public discussion of the ethically and aesthetically correct ways to bring the victims’ stories to the screen. Thus Polvo participates in the important discussions over who can legitimately speak about the trauma and violence of the war and how they can do so, a discussion that goes far beyond the scope of cinema.

In this context, the documentary/fictional ambivalence is translated into an exercise of metamemory, but it also opens the door to alternative methods of representation explored by the trilogy as a whole in response to the anomy brought about by the caesura of the war. Almost parallel to the unexpected marimba-heavy metal fusion in Las marimbas del infierno, Hernández Córdón avoids the mainstream representational strategies and tests new forms such as the argumentative minimalism discussed below.

ARGUMENTATIVE MINIMALISM AND EXPERIMENTATION

One of the most frequent criticisms levelled against these three films is that they suffer from allegedly weak scripts. According to this perspective, the story told in each film lacks unity and coherence and the story is not sufficiently clear or cohesive. For example, Jay Weissberg maintains that Polvo is made up of ‘tenuously connected scenes’ (2012), while Mario Abner Colina points out that Gasolina ‘was unsuccessful with the idea of the story’ or more specifically with the narrative (2010). To my mind, more than a weak story or a defective script, in their own way these films resist organizing their stories according to the parameters of traditional Aristotelian narratives. Instead, the multiple intertwined stories that appear intermittently develop through random episodes and dialogues, without a clear beginning, middle or end.

The lack of linearity, not to mention the teleological and causal reticence, is an experimental gesture reminiscent of the nouvelle vague, evidenced by the low production costs, improvisation and a certain messiness, but also by the feeble narrative formulas of these films, that are overturned in argumentative experimentation or even in an anti-narrative gesture, as a result of which the films clearly deviate from mainstream or industrial cinema. As was the case with the French New Wave according to Eduardo Russo ([1998] 2005: 185), Julio Hernández Córdón’s interest in a renewal of film language is
linked to his search for sociopolitical transformation. Thus, in the Guatemalan context, Hernández Cordón’s resistance against the production of an organized and coherent account of the war and its ongoing post-war era effects, is a way of assuming and confronting the anomie produced by the violent and traumatic interruption of the meanings of identity, community and nation produced by the genocide.

According to Julio Ramos,

an approximation to the aesthetic, frequently precarious and ephemeral practices of experimental cinema can diacritically contribute to the elucidation of the limits or borders of the militant cinema of the sixties, insofar as we can read the overflow of aesthetic radicalism not only as a notable record of the tensors, symptoms, reductions and disposals that have made the institutionalism of revolutionary cinema and its normative documentary forms possible.

(2016: 2, my translation)

Ramos’ reflections on 1960s’ US-Latinx and Latin American cinema illustrate the relationship between art cinema and political cinema today. This relationship is notably complicated by the impact of new digital formats and the possibilities they offer both in the context of activism and of experimentation and how they dispel many issues of economic accessibility. I propose that Hernández Cordón’s minimalist aesthetic, which turns to an argumentative precariousness to articulate the social, legal and political precariousness of the Guatemalan population as a consequence of the war, is what makes his films difficult to read as political cinema within the dominant paradigms of the documentary cinema of memory. Without an understanding of his search for a new post-war cinematographic language, his films seem incomprehensible (or even absurd or ridiculous). This experimental impulse positions the post as a caesura; it breaks away from previous narrative strategies in more than just a temporal sense. In fact, understanding the experimental impetus underlying Gasolina, Las marimbas del infierno and Polvo and the anomie produced by the state of exception as two sides of the same coin gives an aesthetic and political sense to the docufictional ambivalence that characterizes these three films, despite their inclusion as fiction films. This ambivalence asks viewers to see the films in relation to their continuity and contiguity with the reality they signify.

DOCUFICTONAL AMBITENCE

How is this generic indeterminacy articulated? Essentially through recourse to a documentary aesthetic that resorts to nonprofessional actors, foregoes sound effects, uses natural lighting and exploits fixed full shots and handheld cameras, thereby creating an effect of naturalness emphasized by the ordinariness of the dialogues and short narrative snippets that appear in no apparent order. Moreover, the plots always advance in a particularly slow way. Hernández Cordón’s film aesthetics seem to articulate what Dominique Chateau (2010) calls an ‘ontological aesthetics’, as his post-war trilogy only makes sense when seen as an answer to the question of how film may produce an authentic depiction of life (2010: 95). This is best exemplified by the off-camera displacement of action in fixed long shots, such as in Las marimbas del infierno, when El Blacko and another man start a fight and move out of
the shot to the right, while the camera remains fixed on the pool tables and the other men watching the off-camera fight. Similarly, a fixed shot showing a couple of storefronts shows Alfonso Tunche entering the frame from the right, pushing his marimba and leaving the frame to the left. Hernández Cordón makes apparent that what happens in the film goes beyond the actual film frame by positioning his subjects in the corners, using a camera angle that often cuts off the face (or body) of the characters, especially in close-ups. These camera techniques give visual form to the art/life continuity that spans Julio Hernández Cordón’s trilogy, constituting the other pillar of its docufictional ambivalence.

This is particularly evident at the beginning of Las marimbas del infierno as noted by Laura Reyes, for the film starts with Don Alfonso in his room, speaking directly to the person who is filming him (perhaps the director?) with a handheld camera.

This scene, in which Don Alfonso tells us that he is being blackmailed by a gang, is followed by a text inviting us to read Las marimbas del infierno in a documentary key:

I met Alfonso Tunche in 2007 while I was shooting my first film. He asked me to eliminate his sequence because he was being blackmailed at that time. Three years later, we decided to tell his story and that of two other friends.

However, ‘after this interview, neither Don Alfonso nor any of the other characters speak to the camera or the people behind them again’ and the issue of filming and its implications for the characters is not revisited (Reyes 2017: 16).

It is not by chance that José Gordon calls this film a ‘false documentary’ (2010). This continuity, aesthetically articulated through the abundance of fixed shots, on location filming and the use of unprofessional actors, is further accentuated by the appearance of characters from Guatemalan cultural life (nearly) playing themselves in the plot. This happens with writer Javier Payeras, who ‘plays’ the role of the secretary of culture, refusing to finance the heavy metal and marimba band that El Blacko, Chiquilín and Alfonso Tunche want to start. Furthermore, Víctor Hugo Monterroso Girón, the actor who

Figure 2: Don Alfonso Tunche is at the edge of the frame, talking to a lady who is off-camera in Hernández Cordón’s Las marimbas del infierno/ The Marimbas from Hell, 2010. Guatemala © Melindrosa Films, Les Films du Requin, Axolote Cine y Códice Cinema.

Figure 3: Don Alfonso Tunche filmed in vérité style in his home at the beginning of Las marimbas del infierno. Guatemala © Melindrosa Films, Les Films du Requin, Axolote Cine y Códice Cinema.
plays the role of Chiquilín, was brutally assassinated in 2014: his body was found dismembered, which leads to assume that this was in retaliation to his project to produce a documentary about a trash collector from Guatemala City. This is particularly shocking when considering that Chiquilín says in the film that he had been made the prisoner of a gang but managed to escape. It is then understandable that the narrative of Las marimbas del infierno has an open ending, given that the difficulties of the subjects represented continue beyond the film.

The mise en abyme in Polvo, on the other hand, raises the question of the complex relationship experimental cinema has with political cinema in its most paradigmatic documentary form. In this context, it is important to mention that the scene in Polvo in which Ignacio and Alejandra are filming the excavation of tomb XX (in hopes of finding the remains of Juan’s father) uses Freddy Peccereli, the director of the Instituto de Antropología Forense de Guatemala, acting as himself, that is, as one of the forensic anthropologists working at the scene. The handheld camera focuses on him chatting with another forensic anthropologist while they are at work in one of the trenches. The very first image in this sequence shows Pecereli’s head in the foreground, surrounded by several indigenous people witnessing the excavations. Since the shot is taken from within the trench, and the camera is level with the forensic experts, we see the witnesses from a low angle, who in turn look intently down into the trench. This difference in both position and perspective, and the fact the cameraman is together with the forensic anthropologists, not the people who are waiting to see if the remains of their family members are found, accentuates the divide between the indigenous community of survivors and the outside experts.

Despite their position in the background of the shot, two indigenous women are central to the image (one of them is María Telón, the actress playing Juan’s mother), because of their silent, grave gaze, which contrasts with

![Image of two indigenous women with a caption: - Parker’s Nightmare! - The Nightmare was awesome...]

*Figure 4: This shot at the excavation of a tomb visually highlights the vast divide between the ‘outside experts’ and the indigenous community of survivors in Hernández Cordero’s Polvo/Dust, 2012. Guatemala © Melandrosa Films, Tic TacProducciones and Autentika Films.*
the smiling face of Pecerelli and his cheerful chatter with his colleague. Their serious gaze calls attention to the obvious disparity in the experiences of survivors and professional helpers. The camera then focuses on the forensic finding itself, as the contour of a human skull is freed from the earth with a brush. Then the camera changes position to be level with the indigenous women, capturing their reactions to the surfacing of human remains: they are visibly agitated and a sense of urgency transpires from the non-translated dialogue that ensues among them. Later on we see, in the background, how the filmmakers Alejandra and Ignacio witness the scene. In short, the excavation scenes in Polvo invite us to pay more attention to the power dynamics that shape the labours of memory and how they may reenact unequal access to resources and technologies such as filmmaking and forensic anthropology, and to participate in a broader discussion within memory studies of the irreducible difference between victims and well-meaning outsiders. This is mainly achieved by the mise en abyme in the film, that is, through a typical art cinema narrative device, but used in the service of a depiction of the labours of memory in Guatemala in all their complexity. In other words, art cinema in general, and docufictional ambivalence in particular, act here as tools for asking questions about how documentary filmmaking may be able to provide an ethical, just record of the fight for justice and truth in the aftermath of the genocide, not for an exploration of film as an art form in a sociopolitical vacuum.

That Polvo was filmed in the same location, with similar characters, and with similar aesthetic choices in terms of colours, light and camera angles to the 2005 documentary Sí hubo genocidio is significant. While Sí hubo genocidio follows the kachiquel survivors in San Juan Comalapa in their battle to have access to the area in which many community members were anonymously buried by the military and the forensic anthropologist who explains the progress they have made in the areas where they were allowed to excavate, this documentary does not incorporate any metacinematic flourishes, except for very brief exchanges between the camera man and his interviewees. Thus, filmmaking as a political and artistic intervention in social reality is not an issue. Sí hubo genocidio is, in this sense, a ‘traditional’ documentary. Here is where Polvo comes into play, as both the kitchen and the discussion of documentary filmmaking. To put it in Julio Ramos’ words, Polvo registers ‘the tensions, symptoms, reductions, and disposals’ that Sí hubo genocidio has left out in order to be effective within the dominant norms for documentary filmmaking (2016, my translation). As a result, Polvo adds density and complexity to the issues at stake in Sí hubo genocidio via an almost cinéma vérité approach – making the camera visible and embracing the idea that (documentary) filmmaking is nothing more and nothing less than ‘an encounter between those who are making a film and those who are being filmed’ (Di Tella 2011: 60).

Julio Hernández Cordón’s exploration of an ontological film aesthetics may be linked both to the nouvelle vague and to Italian neorealism, and, in fact, as Dominique Chateau points out, both these styles are ideologically grounded in the quest to explore film’s ability to reproduce reality (2010: 95). But Hernández Cordón post-war trilogy is first and foremost an heir of the work of Argentine directors Bruno Stagnaro and Israel Adrián Caetano in Pizza, birra, faso/Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes (1998) and French producer Medhi Charef in Le Thé au Harem d’Archimède/Tea in the Harem (1985). In both cases, these films started a movement that renewed cinematographic language in their respective contexts: so-called banlieu cinema and Argentine New Cinema. Beyond the differences between the French and Argentine films and Hernández Cordón’s,
there are significant thematic parallels and an important aesthetic-political similarity through the use of docufictional language. For example, we can hear echoes of Pizza, birra, faso in the way that Gasolina invites us to accompany three young men through their day. Le Thé au Harem d’Archimède echoes with both Gasolina and Polvo: with Gasolina due to its portrayal of the lives and dreams of young friends in a situation of marginalization, and, with Polvo, due to its focus on the possibilities of an interethnic friendship between the two protagonists. The tension between the French film and Gasolina results from the fact that its protagonists’ desire to escape their ordinariness is similar and yet different from the desire expressed by the protagonists of Le Thé au Harem d’Archimède to escape their poor and marginal neighbourhood to see the sea: the former is only realized in the realm of the imagination, while the latter is a real trip, which speaks to the lack of possibilities of a true escape for the post-war Guatemalan youth. Likewise, the impunity with which the protagonists of Gasolina take refuge after running over and burning the body of the indigenous man on the highway is in visible contrast to how the protagonists of both Pizza, birra y faso and Le Thé au Harem d’Archimède are arrested by the police at the end of each film, alluding to a functioning system. Once again, the difference and originality of Gasolina articulates the anomie of the post-war era, emphasizing that anomie is understood as a lack of law.

Besides their thematic similarities, Pizza, birra, faso and Gasolina are also aesthetically connected. They both depart from the dominant trend in Latin American cinema to provide a grand narrative explaining national identity, as Gonzalo Aguilar (2006) has argued for Argentine New Cinema, and is exemplified by Luis Puenzo’s La historia oficial/The Official Story (1985) in Argentina and Luis Argueta’s El silencio de Neto/The Silence of Neto (1994) in Guatemala. In a nutshell, RalucaIacob describes the cinematic turn articulated in Pizza, birra, faso in terms which could also perfectly describe Gasolina: a ‘predilection towards realism, small (at times non-existent) budget, and a concentration on the social and psychological aspects of a character’s life’, therefore ‘depicting everyday episodes, in a drive to eschew analogies, allegories, or symbolist readings of a film’ (2017: 2). The commonalities between these two films go even further, as they both work with natural and poor light, with a predomiance of badly lit night scenes and shots that allow us to observe how the protagonists deal with their reality from different angles, but in a seemingly disconnected way that resists constructing a totality and therefore troubles the construction of a grand narrative.

By using handheld cameras, synchronous sound and natural lighting for their films, Hernández Cordón, and Stagnaro and Caetano put into practice documentary techniques typical of direct cinema, provoking the illusion of a reality captured as if there had been no intervention by the filmmaker; except they make clear that they are working with (mostly nonprofessional) actors who perform a role in a fictional plot. This docufictional ambivalence distinguishes their innovation in terms of a cinematic language.

**IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION**

The fundamental counterpart of the narrative minimalism found in Hernández Cordón’s post-war trilogy is a new language through which to intervene in the social and in which oscillation and generic indeterminacy give rise to a docufictional form for the stories represented. At the level of the plot, Hernández Cordón’s belief in the need for new languages is articulated in
Las marimbas del infierno; it is no coincidence that the film depicts the formation of a band that fuses the marimba with heavy metal, two clearly different languages, one associated with national identity and the other with the countercultural. Similarly, the search for interethnic forms of communication, that is, a common language between indigenous Juan and the Ladino Ignacio, is at the heart of Polvo. The final scenes, in which the two young men take turns riding a bicycle, doubtlessly indicate the possibility of reconciliation.

I do not wish to force the image by proposing that the bicycle is a trope for memory, because it seems to me that the argumentative minimalism of Hernández Cordón’s cinema resists allegorical readings that lead towards the construction of a national grand narrative. If anything, the bicycle as a means of experimentation with communication between the two and as a tool for transport, in its modest functionality, seems to also speak of an unpretentious artisanal cinema, that may serve as a tool for research and creation. Gasolina, Las marimbas del infierno and Polvo take on and question the anomie caused by the state of exception in Guatemala through an aesthetic that seeks to create a significant audio-visual language using new coordinates that lend meaning to the reality of the post-war era.

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Against anomie


SUGGESTED CITATION

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS
Valeria Grinberg Pla is professor of Latin American literature and cultural studies at Bowling Green State University, Ohio, USA. She is the author of Eva Perón: Cuerpo-género-nación (2013) and coeditor of Narrativas del crimen en América Latina: Transformaciones y transculturaciones del policial (2012, with Brigitte Adriaensen). Her most recent publications on Latin American film are ‘Filming responsibly: Ethnicity, community, and the nation in Ana Lucía Cuevas’s El eco del dolor de mucha gente’ (Latin American Documentary in the New Millenium, 2016) and ‘Interpelaciones al sandinismo desde el cine nicaragüense contemporáneo: Palabras mágicas de Mercedes Moncada’ (Revista Iberoamericana, 2015). She is on the editorial board of Istmo. Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos (http://istmo.denison.edu/) and she coordinated, with Ricardo Roque Baldovinos, the second volume of the series ‘Towards a history of the central American literatures’, Tensiones de la modernidad: Del modernismo al realismo (2009).

Contact: 211 Shatzel Hall, World Languages and Cultures, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403, USA.
E-mail: vgrinb@bgsu.edu

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