

# A SENSE OF PLACE: PAZ ENCINA'S RADICAL POETICS

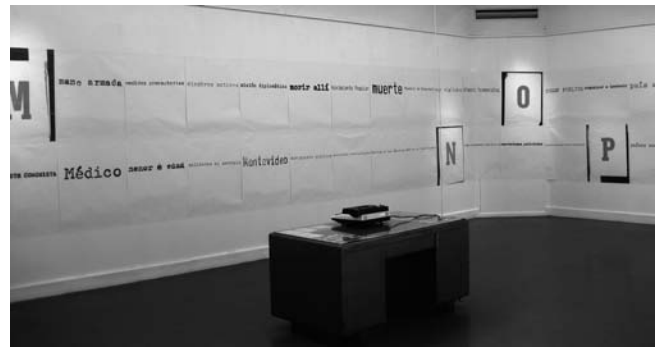
Natalia Brizuela

## Making Something with the Archives

During 2011–12, Paraguayan filmmaker Paz Encina spent over a year delving into the materials that dictator Alfredo Stroessner's police had amassed. In a stash of documents they had left footprints that detailed their own human rights violations, outlining their methods and techniques of surveillance and torture, during his thirty-five-year rule (1954–89). The documents constitute an Archives of Terror (the name by which they are commonly known) as well as a collection of all the Paraguayan citizens who, according to the multipronged government control system, needed to be surveilled, followed, and/or disappeared in those years: a registry of the “dangerous” and unwanted.<sup>1</sup>

Paz Encina became a public figure in Paraguay after her first film, *Hamaca paraguaya* (*Paraguayan Hammock*, 2006), made it into the top echelons of the film festival circuit, winning major awards and putting Paraguayan cinema back on the international map for the first time in many decades. In 2012, she was invited to “do something” visual with these materials to mark the twentieth anniversary of the discovery of the heinous archives.

Encina is not the only artist to make use of the Archives of Terror. Argentine Carlos Trilnick's *Proyecto Archivos del Terror: Apuntes sobre el Plan Cóndor* (*Archives of Terror Project: Notes on the Condor Plan*, 2013) is another recent use of the archival documents. Trilnick's installation, mounted in 2013 in the Argentine city of Rosario and again in 2014 in Buenos Aires, consists of 288 black and white copies of words and phrases extracted from original documents in the *Archivos del Terror*, organized alphabetically and covering the totality of the white walls of the space—the Museo Macro in Rosario, the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires—in a dizzying montage that reveals both the absurdity and the horror of the language used by the State to describe “subversion.” There is also a metal desk with a typewriter placed on



Carlos Trilnick's Argentine installation also makes use of the Archives of Terror.

a map of South America, drawn with vinyl tape on the floor, measuring approximately 16 x 20 meters. The typewriter writes on its own, only one word, over and over again, for the duration of the exhibit: *sospechoso*, meaning both suspect and suspicious. Trilnick's installation suggests that every situation and every body is potentially a suspect, making the very term *sospechoso* into an empty signifier.

As Encina made her way through the Archives, carefully studying all the files, she discovered to her shock that she knew many of the people registered by the Stroessner police, for she had “experienced what the dictatorship was like up close.” Her father was an opposition lawyer and she remembers “people desperately ringing our doorbell at dawn” asking for help because a child or husband or friend had been taken to the detention centers mere blocks away from police stations #3 and #12, the most brutal centers for clandestine detention and torture. The center of the repressive and abusive apparatus was right downtown, and everyone knew people were detained and tortured there, for it was an open secret that was used by the regime to configure its power and control over the population.<sup>2</sup>

So it's no surprise that when Paz Encina accepted the invitation, in 2012, she discovered that the files kept showing her people she knew, had seen, or at the very least had heard of, mostly in her family home: a horrific form of homecoming, twenty-three years after the end of the dictatorship. But this uncanny and sinister familiarity with the names, photographs, and stories could not prepare her for the boxes that

Film Quarterly, Vol. 70, Number 4, pp. 49–64, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.  
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Alejo Flores	Hno.
Petrona Flores	Hna.
Perfecto Flores	Hno.
María Rosa Flores	Hna.
María Elsa Flores	Hna.
Pelagia Flores	Hna.

Documents with lists of names and families are part of the Archives of Terror that Paz Encina accessed for her video *Familiar*.

she found, filled with cassette tapes containing audio recordings of interrogations, informant snitches, and even tortures, in which the expected screaming and yelling had been covered over by Bach or Mozart.<sup>3</sup> These sound recordings had something that the paper files did not have, despite their neatly typed information, transcriptions of interrogations, and endless photographs documenting even the most banal moves of an entire family under surveillance, such as children entering and leaving the household of a political opponent during a child's birthday party. This "something else" that the audiotapes had, I would suggest, are the feral frenzies of the body, the affect of the senses, making present not the ghostly sign of a photographic image nor the symbolic sign of a written name, but that of a breathing, pulsating, moving, live body.

Paz Encina's use of the archival material from the Archives of Terror is different from Trilnick's: first, because her pieces are site-specific, demarcating specific spaces and insisting on location, in contrast to Trilnick's work that is made to be packed up and reset in any space; and second, because Encina's installations insist on disjointed forms of reenactment to establish a tension between the embodiment of the spectator and the disembodiment of the tortured bodies.

The fully embodied subject that emerged through the sound recordings became the motor for the work Encina

produced on and around the Archives of Terror and the lengthy state-of-exception government that structured her country's life in the longest dictatorship to date in Latin America. Her year of study in the Archives of Terror has led to a series of projects: a three-part installation in 2012; three shorts grouped under the title *Tristezas de la lucha* (*Sorrows of the Struggle*, 2014); and a recent feature-length experimental documentary, *Ejercicios de memoria* (*Memory Exercises*, 2016) which, like her first feature, has gone on to international festivals and acclaim.<sup>4</sup> In all these works emerging from her encounter with the Archive, Encina further developed, in proximity to her documentary praxis, a political aesthetic of nonmimetic, nonrepresentational approaches to the events of the past of the kind that she had initially used in her fiction film *Hamaca paraguaya*. Her interest in the archival material, then, never sought to generate a new archive but rather to engineer the spectatorial conditions for a site-specific experience.

Encina's first intervention into the Archives of Terror was shown to the public on December 22, 2012, twenty years to the date after their discovery. The exhibition consisted of three video installations in public spaces in Asunción that Encina titled *Notas de memoria* (*Memory Notes*). The first, *Marcha del silencio* (*March of Silence*), was set up in front of the cathedral. That video projection consisted of photographs of



The files of children's faces, labeled in the Archives of Terror with the specific dates and locations of their detention, reverberate in Encina's site-specific work.

the August 1988 protest against the Stroessner dictatorship, which had ended in a bloody massacre on the footsteps of the very cathedral where the video was now being projected. The images were accompanied by original sound recordings from the march and the ensuing police and military repression, all recorded by television channels and amateur videomakers. The protest was the largest to take place during the entire thirty-five-year dictatorship. The second installation, *Pyragües*—a word used during and after the dictatorship as a name for the thousands of civilian informants that the Stroessner regime had working for it—was a video composed of mug shots from the *Archivos del Terror* of people detained and tortured during the dictatorship. The video was projected outside the building that had housed the Centro de Investigaciones Policiales [Center of Police Investigations] where many of these detentions, examinations, and tortures took place. The sound for this video came from the boxes of tape recordings of surveillance, detentions, questioning, and torture that Encina had rediscovered. The third installation, *Desaparecidos (Disappeared)*, was a video composed of photographic portraits of people disappeared during the Stroessner dictatorship, also found in the Archives. These images were projected onto the surface of the Paraguayan River, the river

in which hundreds of bodies were disposed by the forces of repression during the dictatorship, as well as the river that many attempted to cross to find refuge in Argentina.

These three site-specific installations, made in the phenomenological physical style of this type of art, establish an indivisible relationship between the artist's work, the site, and the viewing body that is forced into a lived bodily experience.<sup>5</sup> The installations are bound to those three places for a particular reason, thus manifesting a characteristic of site-specific art focused on institutional critique. In Encina's *Notas de Memoria* a reflection is also mobilized on the surfaces of projection: the cathedral steps, the former Center of Police Investigations building, the river." Encina's work thus activated specific places as part of a multisensorial experience.

Further, the videos were fashioned out of still images. Originally analog photographs, these still images were placed into a continuum, the ever-present-ness of the video medium, a form of moving-image technology that makes the photograph instantly available, with no time required for development between the moment of image capture and image viewing. The photographs, like all the images in the Archives of Terror, were hinged to their referents through their indexicality, in what Roland Barthes refers to as the impossibility of separation, the "stubbornness of the referent" and

the essence of photography.<sup>6</sup> By making present, in their ghostlike quality, what had once been, these historical photographs capture the ongoing play of forces between two temporalities, the past is made present as an imprinted ghost: a dialectical image for Walter Benjamin, a surviving image for Georges Didi-Huberman. Moving them into a digital video format alters their temporalities, as the video medium has a live character which the original photographic film did not. The analog photographs collected in the Archives of Terror are pushed through video from the past into the present, and toward liveness, a temporal move reinforced through Encina's use of the sonic archive she had found.

Each installation lasted some fifteen minutes, after which the spectators would process together to the next stop. Despite invoking a pilgrimage by stopping at the stations of the terror, Encina's first work with the Archives of Terror offered little in terms of explanations or knowledge about the events and places, only obliquely referencing the past being made present again in the multisensorial sites. Was there to be a reparation for the sufferings of so many Paraguayan people through the pilgrimage? What reparation could be possible with the continued absence of exhumed bodies or their identities, twenty-three years after the end of the dictatorship and twenty after the unearthing of the archives? Instead of offering answers, data, or certainty, Encina's installations insisted on the need to ground the documents, photographs, and sound recordings, the need to take the material out of the confines of the Archives and back to the locations where the horror happened, to push it back into the realm of experience. Instead of producing a counter-narrative of the hidden history of the dictatorship, the installations offered, even forced, a grounding for an experience of the past horror, still living today, in many bodies, houses, and streets, in a continuation of the Stroessner regime in other forms under the rubric of a return to "democracy."

The second set of works that Encina produced as a result of her time spent in the Archives is the trilogy of short films *Tristezas de la lucha*. As with the installations of 2012, the sites where (and the time at which) these films were screened is central to Encina's overall audiovisual project, which insists on a nonnaturalist, nonhistoricist experiential and affective form for a Paraguayan reality that must be reconstituted in the absence of bodily evidence.

On December 22, 2014, Encina first screened two of the shorts, *Arribo* (*Arrival*) and *Familiar* (*Familiar*), in the Paraguayan Building of the Supreme Court Justice in Asunción where the Archives of Terror are kept. *Familiar* works with the sound recordings of interrogations that took place after the shooting and detention of twelve-year-old Apolonia

Flores on March 1980 because of her suspected participation in the guerrilla assault on a transportation company. *Arribo* works with the sound recordings of the interrogation of Benigno Perrota, a leading member of the underground opposition group, who arrived in Paraguay after two decades in exile in Argentina. After these public screenings, Encina uploaded both videos to Vimeo for unrestricted viewing on February 2, 2015, the date of the 1989 military coup led by Stroessner's closest ally, which finally overthrew the dictator.

This was Encina's second attempt at giving life to the Archives and using them not to represent historical facts but to grant embodiment to the closed-off, cut-off, interrupted lives of the many who suffered and disappeared under the dictatorial regime. While working through the materials in the Archives of Terror Encina had realized that despite being open to the public and housed in a public building, the Archives were not being used as extensively as she had expected. They remained set apart from society. Encina resolved to take the archival technologies of the State apparatus—including but not limited to the dictatorship—and use the raw materials for the cinematic apparatus. But since cinema is also, as Mary Ann Doane has eloquently argued, one of the modern forms of archiving experiences, Encina's deliberate creation of a disjointed object, in which the audio and visual components do not match up, leaves the spectator adrift in a sensual experience that offers little in terms of rational knowledge. They should be read, I suggest, as a creative use of the cinematic archive against its own cinematic impulses.<sup>7</sup>

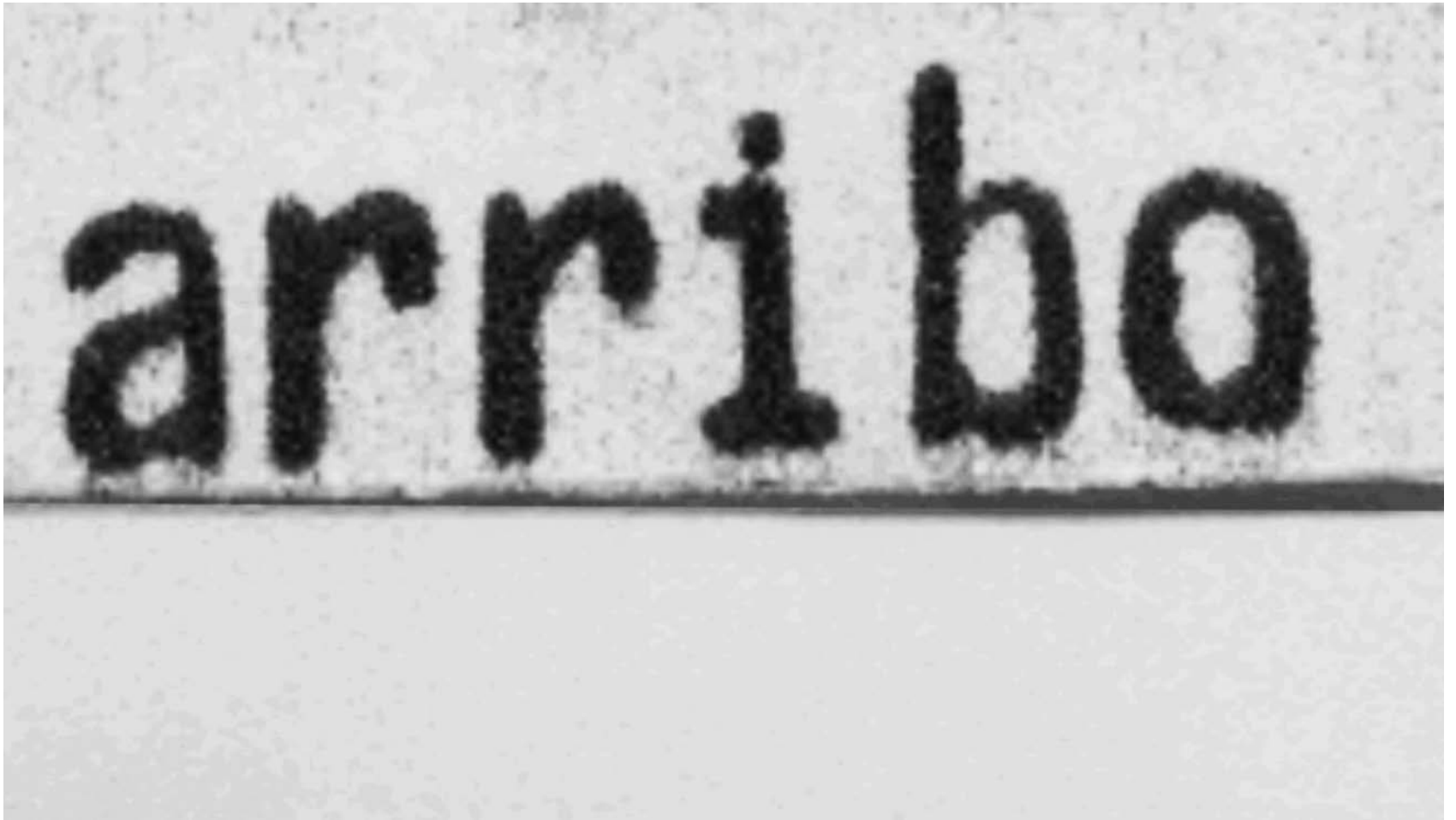
*Arribo* and *Familiar* are made up entirely of printed and audio materials from the Archives of Terror. In both, but particularly in *Arribo*, extreme close-ups of the archival materials prevent the spectator from seeing the documents. Yet this use of the close-up almost forces the spectator to feel the documents: the graininess of a printed color photograph, a corner of a black and white ID-type photograph, a number or letter typewritten on a paper whose fibers can be seen, almost touched. As the camera zooms in on documents in *Arribo*, the offscreen interrogation of Benigno Perrota, as he enters Paraguay, begins. Airport security questions him and gives him instructions regarding the permit he has been given to enter the country, so that he will not give any "false declaration" or engage in any "illegal activity" because if not "justice will fall [on you] with the full weight of the law," as the "competent authorities" have asked that Perrota be informed. "You will be controlled. You are going to be controlled. Your activities will be known," he is told upon entry, and warned that "if any transgression to the law takes place, the necessary measures will be taken."



Images from Encina's video *Familiar*.

As this interrogation takes place, the screen continues to show extreme close-ups that reveal nothing that appears to align with the soundtrack, as huge numbers keep appearing, blown up to occupy the entire frame. Halfway through its

nine-minute duration, the film's image shifts from close-ups of numbers to close-ups of a color photograph. In two different framings of the image, the spectator can make out a group—perhaps a family—on a runway or street of sorts.



An extreme close-up of a document from the Archives of Terror forms the title for Encina's video *Arribo*.

The image is out of focus, not allowing for recognition or knowledge of who those people might be. Are they suspects? Is one of them Benigno Perrota? Are they arriving? Are they being deported? Is it a scene of homecoming? Or of exile? As the recorded interrogation with Perrota continues, the spectator inevitably imagines the interrogation taking place, visualizes it, perhaps imagines the room where it actually took place, imagines a physical correspondence for the two male voices. Thus is the spectator immersed in multiple images: the unclear images shown onscreen and the visual counterparts to the voices being heard. With so little seen and so much imagined, the film's only clarity is offered in its sound.

Paz Encina's work displays a certain way of relating knowing to feeling, seeing, and affect. For any viewer, not already knowledgeable about the Stroessner dictatorship and the human rights abuses that took place in Paraguay under that regime, especially in the 1970s, she offers very little in terms of explanations and clarifications. There is no explanatory history in the 2012 installations, nor in the 2014 shorts,

nor in her most recent film *Memory Exercises*, her third use of the Archives of Terror.

Instead, the films are haptic, appealing to touch; they are sonic, as Encina's use of the unsynced sound creates a space for images to be unconsciously called forth by each spectator listening to the film. Encina again questions the ability of the hard data contained in the Archives to transmit and move, the fraught possibility that historical documents can come to life, into reflection, into affective knowledge. At the end of *Arribo*, a text appears onscreen: *Las fotografías y el interrogatorio forman parte del Centro de Documentación para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Archivos del Terror) situado en Asunción, Paraguay* [The photographs and interrogation are part of the Documentation Center for the Defense of Human Rights (Archives of Terror), located in Asunción, Paraguay], but carries no further details.

Paz Encina's audiovisual production delivers very little in the way of information or knowledge about Paraguay and its history. Certainly, films or installations do not necessarily have to make rational sense of the world for the spectator,

nor aid in the learning about the many events that have taken place in it. Yet film from places where people have suffered unimaginable atrocities at the hands of other human beings has always been expected to offer narratives of reparation rather than provide entertainment, to participate in the processes of both State and more community-based projects of memorialization. Because Paz Encina's audiovisual work establishes points of contact with the events that have most marked the history of Paraguay during the twentieth century—the Chaco War, fought between Paraguay and Bolivia from 1932–35, and the military dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner—the tactic raises the question of what exactly it is doing, and saying, about the relationship between aesthetics and the matter of history. In Encina's work with the Archive, the reference and referents of history are expressed, rather than symbolized or shown, through the constant disruption of registers and disarticulation of the medium known as cinema.

### Against Representation

For those familiar with the global circulation of noncommercial films through the festival circuit—Berlin, Buenos Aires, Cannes, Locarno, Venice, Rio, Toronto—the story of Paraguayan filmmaker Paz Encina's emergence will not be unknown. For those who might not be as familiar with it, her story goes something like this: in 2006, *Hamaca paraguaya*, a Paraguayan film made in the Guaraní language by one Paz Encina, an unknown director from a country about which very few spectators at those kinds of festivals knew anything, won the prestigious FIPRESCI award at Cannes.<sup>8</sup>

A number of facts on the status of film production and film culture in Paraguay, as well as about Paraguay as a country, immediately began to circulate through the media during the Cannes Film Festival. *Hamaca paraguaya* was the first feature-length film made in Paraguay by a Paraguayan director since 1978, when *Cerro Corá*, an historical film financed by the secretary of information of General Alfredo Stroessner's military government, had been released.<sup>9</sup> *Cerro Corá* was set during the days leading up to the end of the War of the Triple Alliance fought by Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay against Paraguay in 1864–70; the film, which took its name from the Battle of Cerro Corá that ended the war on March 1, 1870, is full of talk of war and scenes of battle.<sup>10</sup>

In 2006, the return of Paraguayan cinema after a twenty-eight-year hiatus with *Hamaca paraguaya* was also a return to some of the problems and topics raised by that film: war, representation, the form and language of history, the place of writing in the symbolic structuring of the nation-state, time.



Paz Encina on the set of *Hamaca paraguaya*.

In all of these aspects, *Hamaca paraguaya* differed quite drastically from *Cerro Corá*: in *Hamaca* war is never shown, only barely mentioned; except for a passing comment, the film tries to remain unmoored from specific temporal markers that would allude to a singular moment within a chronological succession; the couple's dialogue is spoken in Guaraní, not Spanish; finally, the one moment when a written document from the State makes an appearance to announce a son's death, it is rejected as a valid form of truth.

Film technology, with a forward-moving temporality that is a seemingly natural and inevitable result of its technological specifications (the unspooling of a film reel, among others), here is employed to present quite other kinds of movement, rendered via stasis and repetition. During the film's seventy-three minutes, a man and woman return to their hammock three times, and thus return to their waiting, to a barking dog, to the expectation of rain, to the return of the one who has left. The film, in this sense, does not represent the war at all, but rather, a place. Paraguay: an overwhelmingly rural country that has spent the last 160 years in extreme isolation, with a Guaraní-speaking population that has been marked, due to wars, dictatorship, and isolation, by absence and silence.

The film runs on two parallel tracks—one visual and the other sonic—and the two never merge, instead coexisting in an unnerving tension. For the film's entire duration, the voices that are heard remain offscreen. Even though the characters can be seen in the frame, the voices on the soundtrack may or may not belong to those bodies or be spoken at that time. There is a female voice and a male voice, in conversation with each other most of the film, but the film in no way suggests that they belong to the bodies visible onscreen. The spectator wants to conflate the two—sound and



The elderly woman marks time and place in *Hamaca paraguaya*.

image—being accustomed to the synchronicity needed for a reality effect, but the film resists granting this conflation or providing any assurance of its accuracy.

Furthermore, besides the female and male voice of the elderly couple, there are three other offscreen voices that are heard: a young male voice who says his goodbyes to his father and mother before leaving for the war; the voice of a veterinarian who checks on the dog and tells the male voice that the war has ended; the voice of a messenger who addresses the female voice, bringing news in the form of a written document about her son's death, which she refuses to accept. The bodies that generate these three other voices—the son, the veterinarian, the messenger—never become visible onscreen. Their voices remain acousmatic. Further, the film's total refusal of synchronization between sound and image ensures that the bodies shown onscreen, the bodies that seem to be only waiting—for it to rain, for the dog to stop barking, for the heat to recede, for their son to return—are forced into a spectral disembodiment, along with the spectator.

This refusal to synchronize becomes a force that further dislocates the already disembodied bodies—like those that appear on any screen—stressing the ghostliness of the medium, instead of delivering the fiction of a represented subject.<sup>11</sup> This insistence on disembodied voices denaturalizes the film's otherwise perfectly “naturalistic” look and plot, pushing the spectator into 73 minutes of estrangement. The film experience—its illusion, its naturalism, its ideology—disintegrates and fractures, offering a critique of modern subjectivity and, ultimately, a meditation on anti-totality.<sup>12</sup>

### Guaraní

The fact that the only two films made by Paraguayans in Paraguay between 1978 and 2006 deal with events of Paraguay's past raises questions about the relationship between

history and cinema, the types of film narratives used for working with and on history, and the types of histories that are thereby constructed. Film has faced the weight of history since its inception, ingrained into the functioning of the material conditions of the technology itself: the reel that must turn at a specific speed to simulate movement by transforming still photograms into movement; the inevitable moving-forward of the reel as it unfolds; the light shining through the film material making visible an otherwise invisible code, representing what the camera captured. Speed, progress, teleology, and representation are all condensed into one medium, always already-present in the moment, in a medium that is forever erasing its own past.

The very obliqueness of the mention of the Chaco War makes it difficult to place *Hamaca paraguaya* as a film related to history. Neither a war film nor a historical drama, *Hamaca* seems to be about reflection, about meditation, about suspension, about narrative open-endedness and enclosure, about the imagination and creation at the heart of any experience of the past.<sup>13</sup> This lack of specificity and opening up to emotion form a gesture shared with several contemporary artists and filmmakers. Some critics have even suggested a historical turn in contemporary art practice during the last couple of decades, as a wider concept that would include the more narrowly and materially specific archival turn.<sup>14</sup>

Paz Encina's *Hamaca* is nondiscursive and nonmimetic in relation to events of the past, unlike *Cerro Corá*. It not only avoids monumentalizing past events but also refuses to name them with any kind of systematic totality, withholding the teleological temporality that is characteristic of historical film dramas trading in the structures of modernity and history. As the narrative that sustains modernity and all that it entails—secularization, teleology, progress, the State—history is kept at bay in Paz Encina's work. And yet, this film—and all Encina's audiovisual work since—deals with the matter of that unified, homogenous singularity of the post-Enlightenment discipline of modern history.

Can history not be about representation? So asks postcolonial critic José Rabasa, to which he responds that “one does not need to be a representational historian . . . to think historically, and even less to make history.”<sup>15</sup> As postcolonial scholars over the past few decades have pointed out, there have been many forms of accounting for the past that lie outside of the disciplinary and scientific narrative form that has been called History since the Enlightenment period. In this sense, then, Encina's nonnarrative, nonrealist, nonhistoricist films that steer away from the supposed scientific rigor and truth-bearing quality of documents, clear knowledge, and revelations of “truths” can be recognized as forms of making



History. But more crucially, Encina's work insists on marking place—the interior, rural, sugar-cane-producing areas of Paraguay, remote from the movement of “progress” and time, from the war, the dictatorship—in a wholly original manner that is both particular and universal. What is exceptional about Encina's first film is how her refusal of predictable representation is expressed through the development of a radically new Paraguayan aesthetic based on the oral structure of Paraguay's popular culture.

All the offscreen voices (the only voices that exist) in *Hamaca* speak in Guaraní, one of the two official languages of Paraguay. In 1992, a census revealed that over 90 percent of the population in Paraguay spoke Guaraní in the private sphere and were orally bilingual, generating an educational reform that made Guaraní into a language to be taught in schools alongside Spanish.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that only two percent of the population is indigenous today: the only Latin American nation with an indigenous language as its official language is a country without a large indigenous population, one in fact that does not see fit to grant any participation to its indigenous populations.

This use of Paraguayan Guaraní situates Encina's film in a distinct region and underlines its location, turning it into something of a site-specific project. Yet at the same time, through its use of minimalist aesthetics, spare plot line, and high modernist film language and style, the film belongs to a lineage of non-Paraguayan filmmakers—Jasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Victor Erice among others—who are clear influences on *Hamaca paraguaya*. This transnational lineage shares certain uses of cinematic language, while at the same time insisting on specific places and histories, through the distinct deployment of film grammar and technology adapted to its location. For example, consider Ozu's famous lowering of the camera to the level of the tatami, beginning with *Tokyo Story* (1953), realizing that with that minimal shift he was presenting Japanese society through a type of gaze unique to that place and society.

Like her medium's modernist masters, Paz Encina is insisting on place, even though she shies away from specifics. There are no grand or visible gestures of nationalism and other identity markers, there are only the disembodied offscreen voices as the film's markers. The official status of Paraguayan Guaraní binds these offscreen voices to a place, yet the speech itself is unhinged from any image that would represent Paraguay. The strategy seems to underscore two fundamental issues—for Paraguayans, the film becomes fundamentally theirs; for non-Paraguayan spectators, it automatically places the film in an elsewhere that most viewers cannot situate with any precision. Site is constructed, then,

through an orality that becomes deictic, not because of what is said, but because of its sounds: a form of Guaraní spoken in Paraguay.

Site is fundamental to Paz Encina, and she is very particular about the places she chooses: sites in which terror has occurred, sites on which war has inflicted its horrors and left its mark on the civilian population, sites far removed from the urban centers of Paraguay that have sustained forms of worlding that are either thoroughly disconnected or on the verge of extinction, sites that have led an existence almost completely ignored and forgotten by the ever-growing connectivity of late capitalism, sites that most global audiences do not even know, sites that have existed in a temporal suspension for the last two centuries, sites that barely matter. At a moment when a growing number of films—*Solaris* (Steven Soderbergh, 2002), *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013), *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, 2014), *The Martian* (Ridley Scott, 2015)—are invested in exploring outer space to begin to grasp the possibility of survival and of life itself beyond planetary disaster, as well as to test the limits of the vertiginous hyper-connectivity into which the digital age has thrown humanity, Paz Encina's work insists on the opposite: the minutiae of sites on this planet that remain invisible.

### A Sense of Place

The most dramatic invisibility that plagues Paraguay today is the unknown number of people—its disappeared—who were taken by the military government during the long dictatorship and never seen again. Despite the existence of the horrendous detailed documentation in the Archives of Terror that should have helped find every single missing person, less than forty bodies belonging to disappeared persons have been found and little over a dozen identified. When compared to the numbers of identifications that have been made of the disappeared that occurred in Argentina during the last dictatorship, for example, or the number of recent forensic findings and identifications in mass graves in Mexico despite a corrupt and delinquent government, it is shocking that the bodies of most disappeared persons in Paraguay have not been found or identified. Encina's most recent film, *Ejercicios de memoria*, speaks to this contradiction and to the dramatic invisibility at the heart of it.

The film concerns Agustín Goiburú, the most important opposition militant, who was disappeared in February 1977, as he is remembered by his children and wife. Yet, as with all Encina's films and other moving-image projects, the relationship to historical facts is elusive: their memories offer only fragments of Agustín Goiburú, snippets of a life. The



A scene from Encina's latest film *Ejercicios de memoria* (2016).

film deals with the family's recollections about the time before Goiburú was abducted and disappeared, and these are, as in all memory work, always already unstable, shifting, changing, diffuse.

The opening prologue of *Ejercicios* sets the stage in the form of a family tale: a boy's offscreen voice tells how his great-grandfather had been a very devout man and had honored God by daily climbing a mountain close to his house and reciting a secret prayer. As this ritual was passed down from generation to generation, it began to fall apart, as each generation kept some elements and forgot others, in a landscape of changing belief systems. The great-grandfather's son was less devoted to God and had asthma, and therefore he only partially climbed the mountain and delivered the memorized prayer he had learned but did not believe in quite the same way. Then the narrator's great-grandfather's granddaughter—the narrator's mother—did not believe in God, although she had memorized the prayer, and would only sometimes say it, without ever climbing the mountain, but instead in her garden, in front of a tree that had been planted by her own mother. The narrator tells us that he

never even visited the mountain, never learned the prayer, and repeated none of the aspects of the ritual, but did honor God by going to the river, which he loved, and in this way felt that he honored and kept alive what had been passed down as something that kept his great-grandfather alive. This family tale operates as a parable, and points to the film's structure which in turn is the film's position on memory: nothing remains intact, for the passing of time is the movement and transformation of life cycles.

Following this prologue, *Ejercicios* begins with a series of quasi-static shots of details of a house: a close-up of a door handle; a close-up of some oranges; a close-up of a bowl with a leftover piece of bread; a medium shot of a dining table with leftovers on it; a close-up of a black and white photograph pinned up on the side of a dresser; a medium shot of a doorway through which a sewing machine and chair can be seen. These quasi-still shots appear as a sequence of still lifes. Encina's choice to film this sequence using a steadycam makes each still life take on the movement of the cameraman's breathing and body, as the prosthetic device gives life, literally, to the deadness of the still life and the static shot.

The house thus appears in a fragmented way through the use of moving still lifes. Each shot is experienced as a breathing, pulsating, live shot, taking the spectator into a sensorial experience akin to the effects produced by 3D and IMAX. So even though the experience is visually similar to flipping through a family photo album with snapshots of a family home, sensually it is closer to being in the rooms, to being in the house, even in the snapshots, not looking at them but actually living in them, in an immersive experience. The offscreen voice—this time it is Encina's own—speaks:

A woman in a train escaping with her children. A dictatorship. Thirty-five years. The control. Exile. Those were the first images that they gave me. They spoke of leaving the house. Of leaving their country. Of looking from afar. They spoke to me about leaving their things behind. They told me about moving around in foreign lands. They spoke about endless houses. They told me about a father and a son walking along a river's bank. They told me they sang. They spoke of laughter and of embraces. And of a pink scarf with which they tied together firearms.

Each one of these phrases is slowly spoken, and between each phrase is an extended silence. Movement always includes stasis, sound always includes silence: these are the lessons that Paz Encina probably learned from music, her first language (when she was barely four years old) and the only language she knew how to read or write until she was seven. In musical language, silence has a time of its own, and it takes up time. The silence between each image, each memory, is not a vacuum, not dead time, but a time filled with absence. The memories are handed over as bundles, as images, as the offscreen voice states. In by-now classic Encina style, the images offered by each spoken phrase do not coincide with the moving still images that the spectator sees.

This choice of having the opening shots of *Ejercicios* be at the same time still and moving sets up the film's take on memory. Further along in the film, it twice showcases documents, files, and photographs. The first time around, these pertain to numerous people whose lives were surveilled and in some instances brutally ended by the military regime. The second time these evidentiary documents occupy the frame, they are testaments to the life of Agustín Goiburú: intimate moments of family life, and also, surveillance of his every move by the police. These documents appear in completely static shots. This scientific evidence of things that happened and of people's lives, documented and kept by both the State's agents of surveillance and repression and by their family members, appears in the film as a roadblock of sorts, lifeless, interrupting the flow of the recollections by the

family members. The documents that safeguard the "truth" of what happened during the dictatorship have not produced any reparation, not helped in the unearthing of bodies, nor served to suture the open wounds left by a right-wing, nondemocratic government that continues ruling Paraguay today through other means, despite Stroessner being overthrown in 1989. The photographs that attest to a wedding, a family gathering, an afternoon in the river, working as a doctor, all signposts of happiness, are zoomed into extreme close-ups, as the camera searches for something there that will deliver Agustín Goiburú.

Can life be revealed in these documents? Can they offer any solace? The truthful knowledge available in the documents—the vacation happened, he was photographed leaving the hospital—offer very little in terms of life, only signs of absence and death. In counterpoint to those static, lifeless documents, the film offers a stunningly beautiful flow of sequence shots while Goiburú's wife and children can be heard offscreen, remembering life under surveillance, their last conversations with Goiburú, his unique smell. The voices overlap, coexisting, offering a choral experience of echoing and divergent recollections, making the film experience into a multisensorial, multiple sound score landscape. The memories that are heard in the soundtrack were recorded by Encina during a two-week trip she took with the family to visit all the houses they had lived in during their years in exile before and after Agustín Goiburú was disappeared. These home visits functioned both as Proustian madeleines to trigger the flow of remembrance and as archives into which the memories could be deposited, as sites or holding grounds for the journey down memory lane.

As Goiburú's children's and wife's voices can be heard offscreen, the steadycam follows a group of children while they play and wander aimlessly and directionless through a forest. The children meander, stop to eat fruit they pick, sit in the shade, play on the riverbank, take a nap. The children whom the camera follows are unrelated to the recollections that can be heard. The children are children from the area who Encina happened to meet while scouting locations, and who were doing just what we see them doing: passing time in that place. That is what the steadycam journeys into: their aimless wandering on a day with no worries.

As in her previous films, this insistence on unhinging sound and image allows each to exist independently while sharing the time-space onscreen. This disjuncture in turn leads the spectator to develop her own images to accompany what is being listened to through the offscreen voices. The imaginary images that the sound conjures up—different, of

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**DATOS PERSONALES**

DPTO. DE INVESTIGACIONES  
Direc. de Política y Afines  
Sección Técnica

De FLORES ROTELA, Apolonia Apodo: .....

Hijo de Viviano Flores y de Genara Rotela

Seudónimo ..... Lugar y fecha de nac. S. Gerónimo (Mnes.) 18-IV-67

Edad 12 años Est. Civil soltera Profesión ..... Domicilio Zona Alta

Acaray II Ideología Política ..... Entró al país .....

Nacionalidad Paraguaya Entró al país .....

OBSERVACIONES .....

**DATOS DE IDENTIFICACION**

Céd. de Identidad ..... Prio. ....

Raza Blanca Talla 1,59 Cuerpo delgado Cutis trigueño Cabello castaño

Barba ..... Bigote ..... Frente recta Cejas arqueadas Ojos color marr.

Párpados hundidos Nariz Dor. ondulado Base levant. Boca med. Labios reg. Mentón sal.

Orejas regulares Lóbulos separados SEÑAS PARTICULARES: .....

NOMBRES DE PARIENTES

Foto	Alejo Flores	Hno.
	Petrona Flores	Hna.
	Perfecto Flores	Hno.
	María Rosa Flores	Hna.
	María Elsa Flores	Hna.
	Pelagia Flores	Hna.

Mano Derecha					Mano Izquierda				
PULGAR	INDICE	MEDIO	ANULAR	MENIQUE	PULGAR	INDICE	MEDIO	ANULAR	MENIQUE

Pulling back from the close-ups Encina employs in her work, this photo reveals the full content of a file from the Archives of Terror that has appeared abstracted in her videos.

course, for each spectator, and potentially different in each viewing for each spectator—become the ghostlike third track of the film, further dispersing any attempt at a cohesive film structure.<sup>17</sup>

Agustín Goiburú's remains have not yet been found, and the family members speak of the continued search for his body, of the frustration and difficulty of not finding the site where Goiburú's body was left. Toward the end of the film, one of the sons says, "The only thing we don't know is where he was buried," and another one echoes, "The one thing one can't give up is needing to know where he was

buried." Thus Encina's film becomes both the search for the site and the potential site for memory.

**Experience, Affect, Place: The New Coordinates of Today's Political Cinema**

Paz Encina's body of work marks the opening of a renewed political cinema, one that in almost every aspect is different from the twentieth-century instances of political cinema. In Encina's work, what matters is not what can happen, but what has happened as it relates to the present: what to do



A local girl at play in *Ejercicios de memoria* (2016).

with it, how to engage it in ways that are nonmimetic, through a refusal of any strong narrative form, by use of obliqueness, de-synchronization, conjoining regimes of expression, fracturing the homogeneity of a regime, creating a kind of film whose core is a poetics of affect and experience.

There is a new modality of political cinema today that sets itself apart from the use that was made of the medium in the twentieth century. This new form of political cinema today is concerned with the pensive potential of the medium, with what has already happened but has never had a part in the practice, discipline, and narrative construction of History. After the supposed “end of History,” the act of imagining and making experience—pushing the spectator into the realm of the senses, insisting on the past not as a tightly woven narrative but as an open-ended formless structure of elements that can and must be combined and recombined—is a political one.

Paz Encina’s titles for her most recent works—*Notas* and *Ejercicios*—point at the open-ended, unfinished attempt as the only possibility for insisting on the making of experience while remaining within the mediums and technologies

specific to modernity. In this way, her work is part of the tradition of the essay-film. There is no single rendition of events. These projects force their publics to think and experience, time and again, in a never-ending loop, that which has been left outside of hegemonic history’s narration.<sup>18</sup> I would suggest that contemporary creative practices like Encina’s should be considered political precisely because they engage with experiences of the past that have no history, because they are engaging the matter of the past instead through experiments in the poetic. Practices like Encina’s are also political because they insist on life—on making film a visual form that is alive, not just the repository or archive of a register of the past made present in the screening, and that is placed in opposition to what is under perpetual attack in today’s world after centuries of biopolitical control, of planetary destruction, of ever more powerful forms of capitalist economic structures that care only for the life of a very few.”

This current iteration of political cinema continues to share with earlier moments a radical experimentation with form, but the Brechtian strategies of the past are now in the service of inhabiting and conjuring the past in its stillness

and depth, not paving the way for a transformation of the future. In this shift—from looking to the future to instead inhabiting the past—the new political cinema insists not on any of the temporal forms that the holy trio of History-Progress-Modernity articulated for previous generations, but on a temporality that is not about historical time, that rejects the very idea. The future exists only so long as the intervention into a future can make a past present.

Encina's work "creates new figures" in order to open up a form of the medium that "has not yet existed."<sup>19</sup> This offering of experience and of the past through affect is radical because of its refusal to represent—the past, the face—and because that which it rejects—mimetic representation (itself a continuation of representation, and vice versa)—instrumentalizes the past for nation-building narratives that are themselves based on structures of exclusion, differentiation, and value of particular kinds of ideological identification that are enacted through language and the pathos of the face. Encina's work fundamentally refuses to impose an order on events or to isolate those facts that are meaningful from others.

This poetics, in the Greek etymology of the term *poiesis*, is about making and about feeling. As making, it is about the transformation of the world. In today's anaesthetized societies, few other things, in aesthetic terms, could be more political. Paz Encina offers a political cinema that wants to return the promise of cinema to cinema. She insists on the possibility of cinema's offering an entry into experience and the senses, a treasure smuggled into the desensitized and alienated life of the twenty-first century.

## Epilogue

As *Ejercicios de memoria* is circulating in the world, Encina has begun work on a project with a Ayoreo-Totobiesgode ("people from the place of the wild pigs") indigenous community in the remote region of the Paraguayan Chaco, which, until recently, was a dense forest. Currently, 25,000 hectares are deforested monthly in Paraguay, that is, roughly 841 hectares per day, or thirty-five hectares an hour. These numbers matter because they speak to the planetary destruction that is now an undeniable fact—except, of course, for some perverse politicians whose rhetoric and agenda continue to promote the devastation—and speak as well to the destruction of habitats for communities like the one with which Encina is now collaborating. In the face of the merciless and shameless deforestation that will annihilate their form of life, Encina is preparing a 3D film with the surviving members of the tribe that will, through its immersive quality, build an archive that both testifies to a life destroyed

and offers the experience of a world where there were many forms of life, and where many, distinct places were once possible, preserved now only in its three-dimensionality.

## Notes

1. Despite the existence of a Truth and Justice Commission in Paraguay since 2004, thus far less than forty bodies have been found; and just over twelve have been positively identified as disappeared during the dictatorship. However, Paraguay does have a unique Archives of Terror, amassed by the military government during the dictatorship. On December 22, 1992, nearly two tons of documents revealing the intricate details of the strategies and activities of Paraguay's Departamento de Investigaciones de la Capital, one of the epicenters of state repression during the Stroessner military regime, was discovered, stashed in an unmarked apartment in the Lambaré suburb of Asunción, where the "Dirección de Producción" of the Stroessner police had kept them. A month later, in early January 1993, two more raids uncovered two further documentation centers belonging to the period of Stroessner's military regime: the "Departamento Judicial" of the police headquarters, where detailed documentation of the repression against the Ligas Agrarias Cristianas was kept, along with the case referring to Napoleón Ortigoza, the political prisoner who served a 25-year sentence for alleged involvement in an attempt to overthrow Stroessner; and the "Departamento Técnico para la Represión del Comunismo" of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, established in the early 1960s with the help of the U.S. government in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. The totality of the documentation uncovered during the course of these raids is held in Asunción's Palacio de Justicia and is referred to, by all, as the *Archivos del Terror*.
2. Paz Encina, "Personal Thoughts on My Days in the Archives," *Film Quarterly*, Summer 2017, Vol. 70 No. 4: 47–48.
3. Paz Encina and a friend organized and catalogued the audio material after this finding. These materials, like all other materials in the Archives of Terror, are open to the general public for consultation.
4. At the time of writing, it had just won Best Documentary as well as Best Documentary Director for Paz at the Cartagena Film Festival, 2017.
5. See Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 85–110 for an analysis of the changing nature of site-specific art, from a form of institutional critique in the 1960s and 1970s to a reified characteristic of global art in the 1990s.
6. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 6.
7. See Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
8. The FIPRESCI award is granted by film critics and journalists to "promote film-art and encourage new and young cinema"; [www.fipresci.org/about-us/jury-regulations/](http://www.fipresci.org/about-us/jury-regulations/)

9. Many of the well-known Argentine soft-porn films of Armando Bó, starring Isabel “Coca” Sarli, were shot in Paraguay, starting with *La burrerita de Ypacaraí* in 1962.
10. The numbers speak for themselves: during the *Guerra de la Triple Alianza* (1864–70), when Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay fought against Paraguay, an estimated 65 percent of the country’s population died, with the surviving 35 percent composed mainly of women, elders, and children. Sixty years after the end of the Triple Alliance War, a war that had it happened in the twentieth century would have entered historical accounts as a project of genocide, Paraguay entered another war, the Chaco War, which devastated its population again; the *Guerra del Chaco* (1932–35), fought between Bolivia and Paraguay, left Paraguay with fifty thousand casualties. Then, soon after, Paraguay would enter a long military dictatorship. See Peter Lambert and Andrew Nickson, *The Paraguay Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). The 1978 film took its title from the Triple Alliance War’s last battle, fought on March 1, 1870, in Cerro Corá, in the northern region of the country, into which the remaining population—at that point composed mainly of women and children, and soldiers—among them the country’s president, Francisco Solano López—had been pushed by the Brazilian and Argentine armies. *Cerro Corá*, made two-thirds of the way into Augusto Stroessner’s 35-year military dictatorship, managed, despite these facts, to exalt the bravery of the Paraguayan people in an excessive, melodramatic narrative and in particular to highlight the figure of the then-president. The film had been understood, both at the time and in the aftermath of the military dictatorship, as one that made Stroessner and Solano López analogues. It also was spoken in Spanish, which made sense, given that in 1870—the end of that war—Guaraní, the indigenous language spoken in the region, had been banned from any official use, whether political, educational, or cultural. At the end of the Stroessner regime in 1989, a census revealed that 90 percent of the population spoke Guaraní and over 70 percent of them were bilingual. In 1992, the constitution declared Paraguay a bilingual state, with both Guaraní and Spanish as its official languages.
11. For Cynthia Tomkins, these characteristics allow her to read Encina’s film as a use of observational cinema, with the intent of subverting it. This subversion of an established and well-defined genre is why she places it within a history of experimental films. See Tomkins, *Experimental Latin American Cinema: History and Aesthetics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 232–44.
12. The subject of enunciation is a body that is held accountable for its words and actions, the freely acting individual. The bodies do not own their words and actions, but, on the other hand, when the letter comes with the information that Juan Caballero is dead, Candida refuses the letter. She enacts the refusal of the interpellation by the State, as posited by Althusser.
13. It is this metaphysical force at the heart of the film that places it in relationship to one of Encina’s most important influences—video art, especially the work of Bill Viola.

When viewed side by side, for example, with Viola’s *The Passing* (1991), a 54-minute meditation on life and death, the filiation between the two works is evident. As Viola wrote in a note from 1980, there are images that do not have any connection to the phenomenal world nor to real events. “I am interested not so much in the image whose source lies in the phenomenal world, but rather the image as artifact, or result, or imprint, or even wholly determined by some inner realization. It is the image of that inner state. . . eye images are not important. . . . Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks of the contemporary artist is not to become swamped by the number of techno-tools capable of precision rendering of the visible world (photo, film, video) and to create with these systems the ‘pure’ images of the symbolic”; Bill Viola, “The Nature of Images,” *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973–1994* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 85. From the detached sound—a heavy breathing throughout *The Passing*—that leaves the images unsettled and cut off from any cogent narrative structure to the opening from and closing off of darkness as light slowly emerges or leaves the screen, and the strong presentation of the body as spectral, intersections between cinema and video art abound. From Encina’s earliest video short in 2000 to video installations, 8mm films, other video shorts during this fifteen-year arc, and her most recent feature-length 35mm film, what is constant is that historical events are presented through a poetic metaphysics.

14. See, for the historical turn, Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, *Materializar el pasado: El artista como historiador (benjaminiano)* (Murcia: Micromegas, 2012). See, for the archival turn, Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Gottingen / New York: Steidl / International Center of Photography, 2008), the catalogue for the exhibition of the same name held at New York’s International Center of Photography (ICP) that year. Besides Encina, there are a few other filmmakers making outstanding work through strategies linked to their shared refusal of verisimilitude. Susana de Sousa Dias is one key figure in this movement, using photographs of Portuguese political prisoners taken by the Political Police (PIDE) during the Salazar dictatorship of 1926–74 for her film *48* (2010), as well as for several installations made with that same material, as well as war reports, official propaganda, newsreel footage, and political prison records that offer an archaeology of the Portuguese dictatorship in her *Natureza morta* (*Still Life*, 2005). Another is Pedro Costa: his creation of “poetic archives” with the inhabitants of the now-destroyed neighborhood of Estrela de Africa on the outskirts of Lisbon, where their own physical presence in the frame and their own stories—on displacement, on home, on life and death, on destruction, on the value of life, on being African living in Portugal, on being Portuguese of African descent, on being poor in one of the poorest countries in Europe—build archives for those who have never had a part in the political structures that have determined their lives.
15. José Rabasa, *Without History: Subaltern Studies, the Zapatista Insurgency and the Specter of History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 278.

16. Guaraní is part of the Tupí-Guaraní family that includes many of the indigenous languages south of the Amazon. As with other indigenous languages from the Americas, during the colonial period—in the case of the territories that are today Paraguay, during the seventeenth century—Guaraní was forced into the Latin alphabet to produce a Western written form of it. After the expulsion of the Jesuits in the eighteenth century, the colonial apparatus attempted a full elimination of Guaraní, but after two centuries of coexistence—not a peaceful one by any means—this just created higher degrees of bilingualism.
17. The steadycam was operated by Argentine cameraman Matías Mesa, whom Paz Encina chose because of the extraordinary dexterity with which he had filmed the sequence shots in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003).
18. If today's political cinema is concerned with lives and bodies that have not had History, that are without History, they are clearly linked to current thinking by, among others, Dipesh Chakrabarty, José Rabasa, and Reinhart Koselleck. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Time of History and the Times of Gods," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 35–60; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Rabasa, *Without History*.
19. Jacques Ranciere, "The Pensive Image," in *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2009), 130.