

Analytic Filmmaking as Social Scientific Research: A Response to Roy Germano

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This article engages Germano's film and essay. The author lauds the fundamental thrust of the essay towards achieving scholarly recognition for film projects based on scholarly research. At the same time, the author questions Germano's sharp opposition between analytic and documentary films. He appraises *The Other Side of Immigration* very favorably, while pointing out that the aesthetic choices and the power of the testimonies do not fall neatly within the categories established by Germano. The author then discusses his own experiences in conjoining historical research and documentary filmmaking.

A decade ago, I presented my first documentary film at Indiana University. The film, *Scars of Memory: El Salvador, 1932* was informed by several years of archival and oral historical research.¹ Following the screening, the dean of the College approached me to offer his congratulations. After thanking him, I said, "But it wouldn't get anyone tenure or promotion." He chuckled but then moved on. Apparently, the academy still has not found a way to treat films (whether documentary or analytic) as substantive scholarship. Roy Germano's essay strikes a powerful blow in favor of such a fundamental revision in tenure and promotion policy with respect to the creation of films as a form of scholarship.

Germano's provocative and timely essay makes a strong argument that "analytic films" can be an important complement to social scientific research and analysis. He also sharply differentiates "analytic" from documentary films. For Germano, the analytic film reproduces and illustrates social scientific research. Whereas the documentary film tells stories that focus on specific individuals and groups, the analytic film consciously strives to generalize its "video data"—in short its primary goal is to "advance a series of theory-driven explanations about social or political outcomes" (p. 665). Similarly, "theoretical pillars" structure the film. The author also suggests that the film itself generates new knowledge that the written work cannot.

The Other Side of Immigration is a fine film; It is entirely understandable that Germano desires to push his work forward as a new model that allows scholarship to reach a broad audience. The film creatively expresses his basic

findings, namely that government policies, especially the reduction of social spending in the context of free trade agreements that negatively impact agriculture, are a direct cause of migration. Increased remittances from family members in the U.S. help mitigate poverty and, in turn, serve to pacify people who otherwise would be inclined to protest against ineffective and unresponsive government.

Yet, despite the power of the essay and the quality of the film, I am not fully convinced by Germano's main arguments about analytic film. For Germano, the analytic film generates new knowledge primarily through the ability of the filmmaker/researcher to return to the footage and study it more closely (pp. 669–670). He recognizes that not only does the footage convey data, it also conveys more subtle kinds of contextualization through intonation and facial expressions. The film, however, is primarily illustrative of the basic theses of the study: "When well executed, analytic films communicate general theoretical explanations and present new empirical evidence" (p. 671). The film's expository quality limits the kind of new knowledge that can be produced. At the same time, part of what makes *The Other Side* such a good film are the aesthetic choices that Germano made—decisions I imagine were made largely independently of social scientific criteria. Those choices condition the ending of the film with its relatively optimistic tone about the future. At the same time, Germano does not seem to grant the possibility that scholarship can fully inform and aid in the creation of documentary films, due to their insistence in conveying emotions and telling stories.

My own experience suggests that it is possible to combine scholarly research with filmmaking that potentially allows for new insights. Most significantly, the interviews themselves need to be interrogated and not merely evaluated for bias. Our first film, *The Scars of Memory*, dealt with the 1932 massacre of some ten-thousand

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Salvadorans, mostly Indians. We experimented in vain to avoid the use of an omniscient narrator. Due to different forms of traumatized memory, all but one of over 200 informants suppressed indigenous agency in their accounts of the January 1932 insurrection that preceded the massacres. Indigenous survivors of the massacre and their offspring blamed the insurrection on the ladino (non Indian) *other*, despite overwhelming documentary evidence that thousands of indigenous people did participate in an insurrection against the military and political authorities. To narrate the film directly through the informants therefore would have impeded any reasonable assessment of the historical record. To deconstruct the traumatized memory of the narrator or participants would have made the film overly complex as well as inflict a form of symbolic violence that we wished to avoid. In this sense, the process of filmmaking itself created a tension with direct scholarly research implications, namely the necessity to grasp the immediate and long-term repercussions of the narrative suppression of indigenous agency.

The need to interrogate oral historical sources also became clear in our second film, *La Palabra en el Bosque* (in collaboration with Carlos Henríquez Consalvi), that deals with the impact of Liberation Theology on a group of peasants in Morazán, El Salvador during the early 1970s.² Many of the peasants who had been active in creating communities modeled on the early Christians joined a nascent guerrilla movement in 1974, before the Christian Base Communities had suffered repression. Yet, in their reconstruction of events, all of the informants claimed that state repression was the reason for their enlistment in the guerrilla band. The discrepancy between the testimonies and the archival record compelled us to analyze two dimensions of the historical process. First, the impact of the massive repression on the region's peasants in the latter part of the decade served to accelerate (and therefore confuse) a sense of time. At the same time, we could assess the impact of the ideology of the guerrillas on peasants' memories. That ideology, informed by Marxism-Leninism, conceived of consciousness in stages. Within that framework, the peasants relegated their religiously-informed activities to a primitive stage. These scholarly insights, in turn, informed the filmmaking process. We recognized that we were dealing with a community memory that evolved over time, one that had its basis in fact as well as in certain ideological prejudices that favored a seamless story of popular empowerment and courage through armed struggle. Within the limits that narrative coherence allows, through the expression of ambivalences, we tried to leave open the possibility of alternative interpretations for the transformation of the Christian Base Communities into a base for the guerrillas.

The above examples suggest that the interrogation of the testimonies can allow us to understand forms of historical consciousness, otherwise inaccessible. Collective memory, in turn, has salient historical consequences. Ultimately, as an historian I am interested in the contradictions and the *desencuentros* (over-determined misunderstandings) that make historical interpretation so challenging. Testimonies allow us to grapple with what Gramsci called contradictory consciousness. At the risk of over simplification, social science (with the clear exception of James Scott among others) is more interested in the dominant, explicit expression of that consciousness. And yet, without interrogating the testimonies, *The Other Side of Immigration* allows the viewer to see the emotional and cultural cost of migration. Indeed, what makes it such a fine movie, in my view, is that it allows an intimate glimpse of the family's consciousness and the pain that often informs it. My suggestion then is that Germano's efforts might be even more fruitful if he blurred the lines somewhat between the strictly expository quality of analytic film and the individual and group stories of transformation that characterize documentary film. Part of our problem is disciplinary. In emphasizing the difference between analytical and documentary films he suggests that the former emphasizes causal processes. Here, I would insist that causal processes must include history. And despite *The Other Side of Immigration's* wonderful accessibility, historical context is lacking in the film, including, for example, background on political parties, social movements, NAFTA, and drug trafficking in Michoacán. Of course, the decision about what gets left on the cutting room floor is always painful, but here *The Other Side of Immigration* does seem to neglect history as an integral component of causal explanations.

Despite our disciplinary differences, I recognize and applaud the quality of this creative scholar's work. And we are very much on the same side of an issue that will grow in importance within the academy. As Germano so forcefully argues, filmmaking can be an important component of and supplement to scholarly research. Moreover, it is an absolutely fundamental tool that allows scholarly research to reach the public. It is time tenure and promotion committees recognize those facts.

Notes

- 1 Please find information for this film at <http://icarusfilms.com/new2003/scar.html>.
- 2 Please find information for this film at http://ffh.films.com/id/24426/La_Palabra_en_el_Bosque_The_Word_in_the_Woods%E2%80%94in_Spanish_with_English_Subtitles.htm.