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Films of Moral Struggle
Mon 17 December 2018

Senorita Extraviada

Senorita Extraviada takes the typical documentary approach of finding a problem in the world, carefully researching the facts behind the issue, and then presenting them for the viewer to respond to and absorb. Yet, Lourdes Portillo diverges from the typical documentary structure when she inserts her own voice and emotions into the story. With family roots in Mexico, the femicide in Ciudad Juarez is something that Portillo can identify with to some extent. By inserting herself into the narrative, through offering her reactions to both official statements from investigators and personal stories from the families, Portillo brings the audience closer to the story by imbuing the film with the raw hurt of the bereaved families and the constant fear that all of the women in the city live with every day.

While Portillo uses an educated tone when approaching the subject of femicide in Ciudad Juarez, she by no means takes on the expected objective position with which most documentaries regard their subject. Lourdes Portillo comes from California, not Mexico, but her Mexican roots do draw a close line between her identity and that of the victims. This connection gives her film a tone that mimics Bill Nichols's "I Speak about Them to You" model. Nichols places a lot of emphasis on how the documentarian treats their subjects (45). By aligning herself with her subjects, Portillo gives them and their pain the attention deserved because her focus on the devastation of the murders contrasts greatly with the cold neglect with which the officials have treated the femicide. For example, Portillo includes the story of a girl who went missing whose family immediately reported her. In the documentary her father laments, "If she died ten days ago, that means we had fourteen days to find her" (Portillo) when the girl's mutilated body is

found on the twenty-fourth day since she went missing. Though the family immediately reported the girl, the police neglected to look into her case. Portillo also takes a lot of responsibility for how her film will affect the lives of the people she interviews (Nichols 49), because that is exactly her end goal. She wants this film to affect their lives. The entire purpose of *Senorita Extraviada* is to give those hurting a voice; thus, giving them the publicity that may help them find support and resources that can comfort the families, protect the women, and one day end the femicide in Juarez. In order to achieve this, she opens the film with a well-researched introduction, and continues to weave in important statistics, facts, and maps throughout the text of her film, letting us know that an informed, reliable narrator tells this story (Enriquez 127). She makes the shrewd choice to back these facts up with emotionally ravaging stories, so when we learn at the end of the film that over fifty women died in the eighteen months it took to make the film alone, the viewer feels a personal connection and understands the true devastation this femicide causes. Portillo's investment in this story and her decision to share her reactions with her audience give more emotional depth to the film and helps the viewer become more connected with the victims and their families. This connection furthers Portillo's intention of publicizing the crimes and garnering a sympathetic response in favor of these victims. It also heightens the intellect of the film by using emotion to give the viewer a visceral experience in addition to informing the audience. This personal tone is extremely ethical because it respects the memories of the women and highlights the importance of their lives without exploiting their deaths. By using her own emotions as a motivation to treat the deaths of the women reverently, Portillo emphasizes the worth of these women, and how the mass murder has bereaved not only the families, but the world.

Portillo's use of first person is a very effective technique because she forms a link between the viewer and the subject. While most documentaries take on a detached tone, alienation from the subject would destroy the purpose of this film. Instead, Portillo uses her own voice to narrate the film, which makes it much more personal. This technique adds her own opinion to the film, coloring how we view the facts, as at one point Portillo laments "I find myself mistrusting everything I am told and everything I read." Portillo serves as the bridge between the viewer and the subject, symbolically showing our own involvement in the crimes, even if only due to our national identity. Portillo as a Mexican-American connects the American audience to the Mexican victims, and these women are made victims due to the United States thirst for illegal drugs and cheap products made in Mexican factories. As Enriquez points out in his review of the film, "everything said about Juarez (location, drug trade, and the maquiladora industry) connects to the United States" (127). There is a direct link between the drug trade and the murderers, and Portillo suggests that a corrupt government, somehow involved in this drug trade, allows the femicide to continue. Enriquez points out, "They are essentially untouchable, not in the sense that the murders are being planned or committed in or by the maquiladora industry, but at least in the sense that investigators are unwilling or unable to enter the factories to investigate and interview potential witnesses" (133). In essence, the Mexican government's interest in keeping business with the United States has a greater priority than its interest in protecting its own people.

Portillo edits the interviews and found footage very intentionally, so the government official's excuses and cover-ups are critiqued by juxtaposing one lie against another, and then cuts to the families to show the lives these lies destroy. With this careful editing, the corruption and murder onscreen upset the viewer, making us even more sympathetic to the victims. We

begin to understand that whether the government is passively or actively involved in the murders, they in some way allow these deaths to occur because for them, the factories are essential. The maquiladora industry allows Mexico to sell cheap products to the United States, boosting the economy, so the government will continue to protect the factories and drug trade that run through Ciudad Juarez, a major transit point between the United States and Mexico, even at the expense of the lives of poor working-class women. As Enriquez notes, "...the film links at various levels the killings of women in Juarez not only to patriarchy, sexism, and machismo, but also to the dynamics of transnational capitalism and to the role of the United States in the perpetuation of the violence" (125). Portillo intends to not only make the audience aware of the crimes they might otherwise be able to ignore, but to have compassion. She tailors this film to an American audience, so she must continually emphasize that though these crimes involve Mexican women on Mexican soil, the American identity plays a part. If we did not consume products that allowed factories to exploit the poor, if we did not have an insatiable hunger for drugs coming in illegally through the El Paso-Juarez border, the government would have no need to protect the criminals in Juarez because the corrupt industry would not exist there. Due to our national identity, we are complicit as well. By educating us about our involvement, Portillo hopes that we will not act as coldly as the Mexican government, but instead feel for those suffering and understand a call to action that inspires us to work for change so that these murders end. Besides making Americans aware of their involvement though, Portillo knows she must implicate the apathetic government officials, who lie at the root of the problem.

With this documentary, Portillo argues that history does not fully represent all events accurately. She makes this clear by showing us how the government officials lie about facts,

apprehend men wrongly so that they can quash speculation about the murders without actually doing the work, and wring their hands helplessly, neither making a concerted effort to recover the girls alive, nor ending the violence completely. If Portillo had not made this film, there would be almost no documentation of who these women really were and what happened to them. In many cases, the officials could not even properly identify the girls or accurately mark their graves. This intention of Portillo's makes the convincing point that the official documents surrounding an event are not the be all end all. One sleight of hand can easily compromise the truth. Instead, the emotional connection Portillo sews between the audience and the girls makes the effective point that there are more sides to consider in order to truly know what occurred. Portillo effectively represents these women by asking for stories from their families, friends, and neighbors and using photographs of them when they were at the height of their lives. For instance, the film opens with the testimony of Eva Arce, a woman who men kidnapped in her youth but was able to escape. We found out that her daughter, Silvia Garza was also kidnapped and raped twenty-something years later, but she did not survive. Enriquez point out that this "...complements the factual information given about Juarez later on in the film by reminding the viewer that these crimes are also symptomatic of the long-standing historical violence against women" (129). She shows great respect for them by not showing grotesque images of their dead bodies, but instead fills in those moments with symbolic shots, such as her repeated use of shoes to show one of the few factors that can identify the bodies more readily, which also symbolically represent the disembodied souls of the lost girls (Enriquez 126). Portillo also understands that she cannot speak for the dead, so she weaves news reels from the officials with personal interviews from the families to paint a picture of the events, but she never suggests what the victims might think.

Of course, this personal take also leads us to question the accuracy of the stories. Portillo says that she can believe only the families. She makes a sound argument for the viewer to not believe the government, and the documentation she provides gives us a pretty strong reason to align ourselves with that doubt. We cannot be sure though that the families speak the whole truth, or that their memories are wholly accurate. The truth is, none of this documentation is completely, scientifically unbiased. Everything is written, spoken, photographed, and filmed with someone's particular agenda in mind. Portillo does not necessarily depict the truth objectively, she just shows contrasting versions of the truth, then filters in her own hypothesis based on the evidence collected. Significantly though, Portillo wishes to impart one overarching truth: that these women's lives mattered and to ignore that, as the government does, only adds another crime to an unnecessarily long list of grievances with which the people of Ciudad Juarez can file against the systems oppressing them. Memories may have holes in them, the investigation team may have made mistakes, and as a result of human nature, imperfections are inevitable. The problem lies in the fact that the government is disregarding the importance of life for the sake of protection and money and the fact that murderers and rapists have risen to such a level of control that they continue to unleash horror upon this city unchecked. Quite simply, Portillo demands justice for the women both alive and dead in Ciudad Juarez. She cannot give us a conclusion to the story because the crimes have not been solved, but perhaps now that the audience has seen the film and understands the beauty of the lives being destroyed, our compassion will lead us to demand justice for these women and one day, hopefully soon, peace will be restored to the city.

In all honesty, I do not think it is possible to make a truly unbiased representation of untold history. The failures of memory destroy that possibility no matter how true the intentions

of the person retelling the event. I do think, though, that while Portillo artfully edits the government interviews to further her point, she shows us all different theories for why this femicide continues. She contrasts the families' statements with those of the government, the hard facts and her own emotional response, and the scientific data with symbolic imagery, thus, presenting a more well-rounded version of the trauma. Then, after speaking up for those who cannot, she leaves the audience to take all this information and decide which story they would like to believe, or even come up with their own ideas based on what they saw. This compilation of many different sources, techniques, and perspectives helps the audience to fill in the gaps of history, and if more documentaries followed this example and took it even further, documentaries may have a greater ability to share never before told stories with the public.

Works Cited

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