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How does a film remember? Cinematic memory as a living constellation in *El escarabajo de oro o Victorias Hämnd*

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ABSTRACT

The film *El escarabajo de oro o Victorias Hämnd* (2014), directed by the Argentinean-Swedish duo Alejo Moguillansky and Fia-Stina Sandlund, presents clashing storylines, histories, merged film genres and conflicting aspirations within a transnational film production set in Argentina. It stages a performance founded on real circumstances, where two filmmakers (Moguillansky and Sandlund) begin working on a biopic based on the life of Victoria Benedictsson, a 19th-century Swedish feminist writer, but then, partly in secrecy, the main character changes to her contemporary, Leandro N. Alem, an Argentinean revolutionary politician, while all gets tangled up in a fictional story of a treasure hunt. The film crosses boundaries between documentary and fiction with its maze of rogues, tricksters, and unreliable narrators, opening up stories within stories. In the performance of the documentary filmmaking process, there is a constant struggle over memory: whose (hi)story gets to be told and from what angle.

In this article, cinematic memory in *El escarabajo de oro o Victorias Hämnd* is delineated through the performative gestures of *reenactment* and *voice-over narration* as aesthetic strategies that promote a non-linear, multidirectional perception of remembering. I suggest that the film offers an alternative way to approach cinematic memory, not attaching the act of remembering to an individual, a group or a nation, but to the film form itself. The film engenders *cinematic memory as a living constellation*, where diverse historical temporalities exist simultaneously and interact freely. In the film, cinematic memory is constantly being created and recreated in the here and now.

KEYWORDS

Cinematic memory; reenactment; voice-over narration; documentary storytelling

Intercut with the opening titles, dramatic orchestral music¹ leads to the frenetic atmosphere of the first scene in *El escarabajo de oro o Victorias hämnd* (2014): a room full of people, a man handing a child to a woman in a stream of people moving around—this is the Argentinian film crew. The initial drive for the filmmaking, performed in the film, is introduced by the Argentinian actor Rafa—that is, Rafael Spregelburd, a theatre writer-actor-director, playing himself. He has acquired an old Jesuit map revealing where 17th-century gold is hidden in the small town of Leandro N. Alem, the region of Misiones, known for the early Roman Catholic missionary station. Therefore, a group consisting of the crew men headed by Rafa need to put on a front—they pretend to shoot a film while seeking for the treasure. But the problem is that the crew have already agreed on making a film on some peculiar Swedish writer, called Victoria Benedictsson. The town of Alem has apparently nothing to do with the historical person of Leandro N. Alem, an Argentinian revolutionary, but he offers a good excuse to proceed filming while the fictional treasure hunt goes on behind the curtains. And so, appealing to the colonial guilt of the European producers,² the main character is

switched from Benedictsson to Alem, though Sandlund is not yet aware of this. The swindles begin.

The film stages multiple conflicts, first of them between the two historical figures: Victoria Benedictsson (1850–1888), a Swedish author and precursor of feminism, who lived in Copenhagen for the last passage of her life, and Leandro N. Alem (1841–1896), an Argentinian politician, founder of the Radical Civic Union, who battle over narrative power in their voice-overs. They struggle in the film (i.e. the film-within-a-film) on who tells the story, who is remembered and how, under what conditions, what is the underlying motive for filmmaking, and upon which ideology the story should be based upon (is it feminism, socialism or anti-colonialism?). Reenacted events from Benedictsson's and Alem's lives then coincide with contemporary struggles in the transnational film production set between the European producers, the directors, and the Argentinian film crew, to mention a few.

The full title, *El escarabajo de oro o Victorias hämnd* (in English: *The Gold Bug, or Victoria's Revenge*), combining Spanish and Swedish, depicts the film's eclectic nature—there is a reference to Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Gold Bug"

(1843) and to Victoria Benedictsson's revenge, combined with the word "or", implicating that the film could be many things at once. It is a *mélange* of homages, cultural tropes, storylines, narrators, authors, ideologies, languages, histories (fictional and factual) and genres. The polyphony of inspirations is laid out openly in the opening titles—besides Poe's short story they include Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* (1882) "from the point of view of the pirates", as well as the lives and texts of Benedictsson and Alem.

The Nordic–Latin American collaboration was co-directed by Argentinian Alejo Moguillansky and Swedish Fia-Stina Sandlund, who also play themselves in the film, like most of the film crew.³ The film was commissioned by the Danish CPH:DOX (Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival), in charge of pairing the two directors. The Argentinian film crew, including Moguillansky, are members of El Pampero Cine collective, who produced the film with CPH:DOX and the Swedish Film Foundation.

When Moguillansky and Sandlund were matched by CPH:DOX as filmmakers from the so-called Global North and Global South, they struggled on how to make a film in "this absurd situation", as Moguillansky describes it in an interview (Walsh 2015); where a Scandinavian feminist contemporary artist and an Argentinian independent filmmaker try to work together. According to Moguillansky, the result is a satirical, humoristic treatment of a real situation: "we have this group of Latin American 'pirates', prepared to do anything we have to do to shoot a film, on the one side, and this sort of European political correctness, on the other side". (Ibid.) In the film, all parties are treated with equal and brutal ridicule.

Moguillansky is a filmmaker attracted to mixing documentary and fictional modes in his works, as well as "rapid-fire dialogue, theatrical tropes, and elaborate narratives" (Delgado and Sosa 2017, 244). His production company, El Pampero Cine, is a Buenos Aires-based, independent film company known for low-budget films and making use of meta-narratives that advocate playfulness and digression in works that operate across dance, farce, and documentary (Delgado and Sosa 2017). Their films often include the circumstances of the production, as in the case of *El escarabajo de oro* (see Campos 2019).⁴ Sandlund again, is a contemporary artist, known for her feminist and anti-racist works in performance art, documentary film, and installation, balancing between fact, performance, and fiction. She also uses "social reenactment" as a means of rewriting history and allowing people to improvise based on their social roles (see Nordic Women in Film).⁵ Thus, Sandlund and Moguillansky form a pair that moves

freely between different artistic practices of performance art, theatre, and film, while crossing boundaries between fiction and documentary.

I suggest that approaching documentary form from these murky borderlands could prove to be an exciting endeavor, especially as it offers new perspectives into thinking about cinematic memory. In this analysis, it is the film itself that arises as a mnemonic agent, putting forward the underlying question: how does a film remember? The aim here is to map out the ways in which *El escarabajo de oro* itself as an aesthetico-political entity becomes the remembering agent through the performative gestures of reenactment and voice-over narration. By enlacing practices of documentary and fiction, it also presents a possibility to undo and reformulate conventional ties between memory and documentary.

Undoing the documentary form

In the context granted by its commissioner, producer, and distributor, the documentary film festival CPH:DOX, *El escarabajo de oro* could be categorized as documentary, plain, and simple. The label of "meta film" (CPH:DOX 2014), given on the CPH:DOX website is also well-founded, as the film reflects on the conditions of its making while exposing wider power structures of transnational filmmaking. More relevant for the focus of this article is to note that filmmaker-twinning⁶ and other talent development programs conducted by film festivals may often result in films that test documentary/fictional storytelling conventions. In this context, CPH:LAB program encourages transnational collaboration between young filmmakers across artistic practices and supports "visionaries to push the existing boundaries of documentary filmmaking" (CPH:DOX 2021). As such, *El escarabajo de oro*, can be considered as a documentary based on its production genealogy, and yet, it is a documentary that challenges the very definition of documentary⁷—in short, what should be thought of as documentary.

In his analysis, David Oubiña (2019) interprets *El escarabajo de oro* as a satirical critique of the neocolonialist forms in transnational film production system, its new type of "cultural imperialism" (ibid., 532), and offers a critical postcolonial reading of the film's discourses (i.e. dialogue) and the production conditions. He contends that in *El escarabajo de oro*, including the filmmaking process into the film itself is not only "a plot device" but here the actual conditions of production are turned into the work's "basic narrative engine" (Oubiña 2019, 530). Thus, the film does not present itself as "a fictional situation but as the fictionalisation of a real situation" (ibid.).⁸ He describes the film as a "kind of a fake documentary aimed at exploring the tension that lies at its origin"

(Oubiña 2019, 529). Oubiña thus emphasizes the real situation that generates everything we see in the film as a performance, or “fictionalisation”, as he puts it, where the fictional layers are put to work, to expose the contradictions at the heart of documentary: how documentary can operate within real and imagined (or “fake”), at the same time.

Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (2006, 2, 28) describe “fake documentary”⁹ as a complex phenomenon including an array of formally abundant films that “do and undo the documentary form, the film’s subject (theme, topic, storyline, characters), and the moral and social orders” while challenging the “traditional forms of truth telling” attached to documentary. Juhasz and Lerner (2006, 2) place what they call the “revelatory action” at the core of fake documentaries’ storytelling, emphasizing “the formative and visible lies” through which these films draw attention to the artifice and “dishonesty” of all documentaries. This understanding reverberates with *El escarabajo de oro*, a film which undoes conventional understandings of documentary (as a form of “truth telling”) form and draws attention to the artifice in documentary filmmaking process with “lies” that are present in the film on the formal level, as a film-within-a-film, as well as in its cinematic narration—in what is heard and what is shown.

Furthermore, the film makes use of both parodic and satiric elements, which Juhasz and Lerner (2006, 2) also mention in their wide-ranging conceptualization of fake documentary—in their view, “parodies look first to texts, satires towards the world”. *El escarabajo de oro* is abundant in its cross-cultural textual references, such as in adapting very loosely the stories of Poe and Stevenson. Simultaneously, the film makes satiric references to the world, such as the ethical and social aspects of transnational film productions, or contemporary Argentinian politics. In addition, it offers an array of humorous, exaggerated character dispositions based on stereotypes from the “angry Swedish feminist” (Sandlund) and her robust, solemn fellow countrywoman Birgid, living at the old Swedish colony in Misiones, to the slightly naive European producers and the “passionate, life-affirming, yet melancholic Latin Americans” (the Argentinian film crew).¹⁰

The reflective meta practices and performance of actual historical events and people realign in the film into a form of cinematic memory that is constantly being re-arranged, remediated, and recreated. The film thus adopts an active, performative take on cinematic memory: it approaches the fictional and documentary sources as raw material, dealt with equal satire, while evolving a film world that complicates documentary film’s relationship with memory. In the film, the mnemonic agents—the filmmakers and the historical figures—are all implicated in the

power struggles involved in creating memory. Specifically, the aesthetic practices of reenactment and voice-over narration both encapsulate how the film merges modes of documentary and fiction, and furthermore, how different historical temporalities are arranged into constellations of memory, where historical figures and events influence the present and the contemporary film crew also meddles with the past.

Evoking constellational cinematic memory

The film approaches cinematic remembering¹¹ from a fresh angle—it does not present memory in relation to an individual or a group, or even to a specific event or process in history. Here, it is the film’s aesthetic form itself that evokes the act of remembering, reflects on the past. With the embodied performances, manifested in the mischievous reenactments and voice-over narration delivered by Alem and Benedictsson, the film gives form to a meandering cinematic memory that traverses geographical and temporal boundaries effortlessly. It presents no coherent narrative of the past, but a *constellation of overlapping pasts*, where layers of history are visible simultaneously in the present. This formation reminds constellations of stars that the viewer observes as patterns, though the objects themselves are temporally distant and located far from each other.

Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, and Jay Winter (2010, 7) suggested that remembering is performative, an activity in itself that requires an effort and a will. In their view, particularly reenactment as an act of remembering includes both affirmation and renewal of what is reenacted; it addresses the old but also engenders something new—“Herein lies the excitement of performance, as well as its surprises and its distortions.” Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (2013, 3–4) also accentuate that the notion of performing memory involves active agency, as memory practices are “intimately connected with making, with narrating, telling, and writing—in short, with the act of creation”.

El escarabajo de oro detaches memory from a linear understanding with clearly demarcated paths. Remembering is not attached here to an individual life, to a family history, or that of a group, a nation, or a specific event, as often is the case in documentaries. Instead, the film forms a constellation of memory, where many lives, pasts, and presents exist simultaneously, feeding on each other transculturally, transnationally, “transhistorically”. In this aspect, the film resonates with recent developments in memory studies (see Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg 2011; Bond, Craps, and Vermeulen 2017), as the field has witnessed a move towards thinking

cultural memory as a travelling (Errll 2011a), trans-cultural (Errll 2011b; Brunow 2015), and transnational (Cesari, Chiara, and Rigney 2014) phenomenon. Memory as a concept has been deterritorialized and set free to attach to the multiple and polymorphic forms of remembering taking place in societies.

Memory scholars working with film have described the performative aspect of memory as “prosthetic” (Landsberg 2004), “palimpsestic” (Silverman 2013) and “multidirectional” (Rothberg 2009). From these, Michael Rothberg’s (2009) concept of *multidirectional memory* resonates readily with the form of constellational memory in *El escarabajo de oro*. Multidirectional memory is subject to constant cross-referencing and borrowing, and it is “productive, and not privative” (Rothberg 2009, 3)—allowing dynamic interaction between different spaces and times, solidarities across ethno-cultural divides, new possibilities for negotiation of justice and active working through “difficult” historical memory, related to phenomena such as colonialism or racism. Rothberg (2010) states: “Recognizing memory as multidirectional entails understanding how all acts of remembering involve relays and ricochets between places and times that prevent the kind of arbitrary closure that would canonize events as unique or sacred.” In *El escarabajo de oro*, the past is an ongoing endeavor, material for a constellation in the midst of its creation where Nordic and Latin American pasts and presents collide—though history’s battles transform through different times, they are still tangible in the present and ready to be decomposed and recomposed.

In the context of Argentinian film industry, the film is situated in a specific moment in history when performative remediations of the past were supported. In what has been called the New Argentine Cinema (*Nuevo Cine Argentino*, see e.g. Allouche 2018 s.l.), a self-reflexive atmosphere has given rise to works that fade boundaries between documentary and fiction film (see e.g. Kratje and Dagatti 2017). Maria M. Delgado and Cecilia Sosa (2017, 238) note that films such as *El escarabajo de oro* can also be situated into a new culture of memory in Argentina, produced during the Kirchnerist years (2003–2015), when Néstor Kirchner and later Cristina Fernández Kirchner served as presidents. During this period, critical reflection of the past and historicizing of the present were encouraged. According to Delgado and Sosa (ibid.), during these years the past became “the material of tantalizing fictions”, presenting “playful, volatile, and endlessly performative” filmmaking (see also Garibotto 2019, chapter 3). However, they also remind that *El escarabajo de oro* problematizes the issue of a “national” narrative

of shared suffering, related to the new culture of mourning, that the Kirchners wanted to promote, as in the film “the past is remembered in a series of brutally opportunistic ways” (Delgado and Sosa 2017, 245). In the film’s reenactments of the past, processes of remediating memory are emphasized, and the medium itself—the filmmaking process with its inherent problematic with representation, misrepresentation and the power struggles behind these—is brought to the center of storytelling.

The operations of remembering in the film are based on pirate strategies of stealing, hijacking, pillaging, and acting to the detriment of others, such as trying to manipulate history or downplay other agents, but with a “good cause” (be it feminism, socialism, or decolonialization). In its essence, cinematic memory in *El escarabajo de oro* is open for business, re-assembled and reproduced in whatever ways that amuse the filmmakers.¹² In the film, the historical figures and voice-over narrators Alem and Benedictsson are struggling on who gets to tell their side of the story, or to be remembered. They cheat and ridicule the crew, ideologies are used as smokescreen for other pursuits, the end justifies the means. Though the film affords space for critique of the Nordic and European neocolonialist position in the transnational film industry, it does not convey a clear-cut (political or ideological) mission, rather, the film makes its commentary through its form.

Hence, remediation of memory is presented in the film as an ongoing, evocative process, which is not transparent, or fair. This becomes very evident in a deal that the film crew makes in *El escarabajo de oro*: in exchange for traducing the writing of the cryptogram that the crew needs for interpreting the original map (echoing the cryptogram in Poe’s *The Gold Bug*), the Franciscans want them to make a documentary where they would shift the current historical emphasis of seeing the Jesuits as victims, as they were expelled from the country, to justifying this expulsion. To this the crew agrees, as they have no choice. One historical truth decomposes another.

In the film, the practices of summoning historical events and people, of *creating memory* are unrestrained by conventions, ethics, “political correctness” or rules of decency—the filmmakers do not take themselves, or anything else for that matter (including their own history), too seriously. Though the film utilizes certain established elements from the tradition of historical documentary, such as reenactments of past events or voice-over narration, they are used in non-established ways that emphasize cinematic memory’s treacherous, remediated nature, and memory as a *performance* instead of trying to find out what “really happened”.

Embodied performance of the past

In *El escarabajo de oro* the subject/characters play themselves in a real setting, while the performance of the treasure hunt, the reenactments, as well as the misbehaving voice-over narrators Benedictsson and Alem bring fictional layers to the scheme, injecting reality with fiction. Though the film subjects play somewhat fictionalized versions of themselves, performing here is not a question of role-playing, but about expanding the limits of what is thinkable and imaginable through fictive freedom. Here, the film subjects perform in order to shed light on aspects of reality that might be hard to notice without the act of filmmaking.

Documentary filmmaking practices oscillating between fiction and fact, or construction and authenticity, have been discussed in documentary film studies under the notions of performativity and performance.¹³ *El escarabajo de oro*, however, does not coincide effortlessly with the definitions given by Bill Nichols (1991, 42), who delineates performance in documentary as a form of subjectivity, where individuals appearing in films represent themselves to others as “social actors”. With his later term, the loosely defined “performative mode” Nichols (2010 [2001], 202) emphasizes “subjective and affective dimensions” in the knowledge of the world that a documentary projects. Nichols thus diverges from the notions of performative documentary that Stella Bruzzi (2000) develops, based on J.L. Austin’s speech act theory and Judith Butler’s gender theory, because he does not apprehend performativity in documentary as doing tangible things (following Austin’s theory)—describing and realizing an action simultaneously (Bruzzi 2000, 154)—but helping the audience to “sense what a certain situation or experience feels like” (Nichols 2010 [2001], 203). Bruzzi’s (2000, 154–155) also rather wide-ranging conceptualization on performative documentary emphasizes the negotiations between filmmaker and reality, and in her examples, the filmmaking process is often revealed to the audience in the film itself. This last aspect of performativity could also describe *El escarabajo de oro*, though the filmmaking act here does not strive for “honesty” or transparency, as in Bruzzi’s (2000, 155) definition, but is presented as part of the performance.

In the film, rather than making the audience feel what the subject/characters are feeling or trying to do things by filmmaking, there is a sense of distanciation from the events on screen. In the film, real people and real circumstances are set inside a performance, which unfolds to the viewer in a string of histories, literary adaptations, and cultural citations. Performing in the film appears as a method that brings in front of the camera,

that is, makes visible and audible the power struggles behind contemporary transnational film industry and creation of transnational memory.

Thus, inspired by Diana Taylor’s (2003, 3, 12) permissive thinking on performance, the practice of filmmaking in *El escarabajo de oro* can be considered as a performance—a way of knowing and remembering, simultaneously “real” and “constructed” (quotes in the original). Taylor (2003, 16) focuses on how the notion of performance allows us to expand what is considered as knowledge into the realm of the embodied expression. This becomes tangible in how the film gives an aesthetic form to the past events and historical lives—in the reenactments and voice-over narration, both denoting embodied, enlivened forms of remembering. More importantly, the performances in voice-over narration and reenactment also give the historical figures of Benedictsson and Alem bodies through which to speak and act in the present. This perception relates to discussions within the emerging, interdisciplinary field of reenactment studies, focusing on the embodied practices that aim for knowledge of the past. Katherine Johnson (2020, 172) highlights the “capacity of performance to function historiographically—to record and relate aspects of the past in, on, and through the body” while carrying significance for and beyond reenactment.

In the film’s self-reflexive meta-strategies, memory is often separated from its original, historical context, such as when Victoria Benedictsson as the narrator voice detaches from her own historical time, the 19th century, to comment on the events of the film shoot. Consequently, connection to the historical figure of Benedictsson grows thinner, and her voice becomes yet another element of the performance which participates in the narrative and material struggles of the film, partly fictional, partly real, partly historical, and partly contemporary. Simultaneously though, her uncanny, embodied presence intensifies, her voice participates in the situation at hand, she becomes one of the film’s subject/characters, as real and fleshy and full of passion and goals as any member of the film crew.

The embodied performances of memory in *El escarabajo de oro* accentuate how cinematic remembering takes place *in the present moment, in the flesh*. This becomes evident particularly in the reenactments and the voice-over narration, that exemplify embodied performance of remembering in practice. Through them, the film devises its own form of cinematic memory dissociated from its subjective or collective expressions and attached to the film’s aesthetic strategies. It reformulates cinematic memory as a living constellation, constantly evolving and changing in the here and now.

Reenactment: “It’s more documentary style”

The film settles into the long tradition in documentary and fiction of using reenactments to convey events from the past.¹⁴ However, in *El escarabajo de oro*, the use of reenactments emphasizes their constructed and remediated nature.

The reenactments are played out by the film crew inside the filmmaking/treasure hunt story, but also in flashbacks, when part of the story is repeated from another point of view. Most of the reenacted historical or fictional stories are full of twists, such as the one that one of the crew members, Lu, tells on a gas station. This reenactment involves an 18th-century secret society The Knights of the Moon, colonial gold treasure collected as taxes by the Portuguese crown, a villain called João Bandeirante, a Jesuit monk who gives him the treasure map, and a waterfall, where Bandeirante hides the treasure. The viewer is left dubious on whether any of these supposedly historical stories is true or not.

The original plan of the directors is to film the life of Benedictsson in Buenos Aires, posing as Copenhagen of the 19th century, but the location changes when the treasure map is found, pointing that the treasure could be found near the town on Leandro N. Alem, in the province of Misiones. Rafa manages to persuade the European producers to change the main character as Alem and relocate filming to the town named after him (though Alem himself had no historical connection to this town, as he explains later in voice-over). Large part of the filming takes place on the road, where for example the reenactment of the suicide of Alem is shot by a small river. It seems thus, that any location will do as a location of historical events, the contemporary world is not erased from the reenactment scene, but accentuated.

The dancer and actress Agustina is dressed to perform Alem in his suicide scene, and she puts on a white shirt, top hat and a fake beard, yet leaves her jeans on. A red scarf is wrapped around her body acts as a vein of blood as s/he rolls to a river (in real life, Alem shot himself inside a carriage). Resemblance to the historical figure of Alem, hijacked here by Agustina, remains thus only referential, emphasizing the parodic approach, drawing attention to the scene’s set-up—the film medium itself. The scene also draws attention to the multiple layers through which we interpret history, suggesting that the mediation of the past is always performed and crafted, presented in a certain way and not in other. Thus, the nature of the reenactments in *El escarabajo de oro* resembles what Bill Nichols (2008) refers as Brechtian distanciation. Here, reenactment does not aim for a realist representation, but serves as a “social gest”, increasing the separation between the original

event and its reenactment. It gestures towards the historical, rather than “illusionistically” representing it (ibid.). The present is not eluded from the reenactment but serves as the crucial vantage point from which the past is presented.

The reenactments such as this one are executed with parodic and satiric attitude—they are often purposefully amateurish, ridiculing the documentary practice itself as a form of remediating history. Similarly, as Nichols (2008) contends, “reenactments adopt a parodic tone that may call the convention of the reenactment itself into question”. Furthermore, “the parodic edge” mobilizes “a more complex form of understanding” of the historic event—“to bare the device of reenactment itself rather than rely upon this peculiar form to present any final answer to the question of what really happened” (Nichols 2008, 87). The reenactments in *El escarabajo de oro* do not invite emotional attachment or empathizing with the reenacted characters but offer the viewer a distanced position from which to observe the multidirectional movement of cinematic memory in the reenacted scene, not trying to separate different temporal layers, but leaving them visible.

The appearance given to Alem keeps transforming in the film’s (re)enactments—he does not have a fixed reenactor/ess, as the body of the performer changes from scene to scene. When he is introduced, walking through an empty village square in the first part of the film, he is shot from afar, as a figure in distance and played by an unidentified person, seemingly not anyone of the film crew. Later on, Alem is performed by Agustina in the suicide scene, as Sandlund has demanded in one of her numerous phone calls to Moguillansky that though the film’s subject will be Alem, not Benedictsson (a decision that Benedictsson herself does not submit to in her voice-over), at least he should be played by a woman (as this is supposed to be a feminist film). In the last reenactment towards the end of the film, Alem’s role goes to Rafa, haphazardly, as Agustina is nowhere to be found. Alem’s figure appears thus fluid, translatable—a historic gesture, emphasizing the transmutable nature of historical remediations. Not a fixed, individualized memory, but a constellation, formed out of the acts of remembering.

To distract the European producers from the treasure hunt going on in the background, the Argentinian crew agrees that Moguillansky has to shoot a “long and complex scene”. This scene occurs in the jungle, at the ruins of an old Jesuit monastery in Santa María, tangibly in the middle of history. As the crew rationalizes it, “it’s more documentary style”, reminding how documentary conventions form a style among others. We see the ruins, traces of the past, and the men and women trailing the treasure according to their versions of the

cryptogram's instructions. The camera pans very slowly from Rafa playing Alem, reading his *Testamento Político* (from 1896, the day he ended his life) to the boom operator and the rest of the film crew, who move around in the ruins, sit on grass, sip mate from the same cup, listening to him. The camera eye sweeps the ruins, passing the people while they walk by, and in the end, there are only ruins in the images, nothing but the ruins and the words of Alem. The historical speech of Alem is the illusion served to the European producers on the scene, to distract them from the treasure hunt and perhaps also, to "seduce audiences at art film festivals", as David Oubiña (2019, 535) interprets the scene, adding another layer to the performance.

Here again, multiple layers of history meet in one cinematic space, the 17th-century monastery's remains nibbled by time, 19th-century Alem and his audience, in this time, a film crew from the 21st century. Here, the reenactment scene destabilizes the conventional, clear differentiation between past and present, reminding what Stella Bruzzi (2020, 51) describes as "a re-opening, a re-visiting or a re-interrogation of an event", where the past and the present are not "distinct domains", but positioned in constant dialogue, as part of a living constellation. The reenactment scene performs a remediation between historical temporalities, iterating the original event into new paths. In the voice-over narration, however, the past is grabbed with both arms, and twisted without mercy.

Voice-over narration: "Hasta la Victoria, siempre!"

The voice-over narration is a central component of storytelling and creating memory in the film, since in them, the historical figures of Victoria Benedictsson and Leandro N. Alem exercise their power over memory. This aesthetic strategy problematizes the convention of voice-over narration in documentary by bending it towards the fictional end of the scale, and more importantly, makes tangible the battles behind memory creation within the filmmaking process.

Besides the subjects of filmmaking, Alem and Benedictsson are also the God-like narrators of the film, who see everything and know everything about the film crew—their past, the present and future lives. They resemble Virginia Woolf's Orlando¹⁵ as figures transgressing time, and in Benedictsson's case, also space, as she transfers from 19th-century Copenhagen first to contemporary Buenos Aires, then to the jungle in Misiones.

While in fiction films, voice-over (or voice-off) belongs usually to a character in the film, in the documentary tradition, voice-over is often given to

"a disembodied and omniscient narrator", as Stella Bruzzi (2000, 40) describes it. Traditionally this "voice of God" appears as an "objective", "solid male narrator" (ibid.), who sees everything and knows everything, offering the viewer guidance on how to interpret the events of screen. This type of narration in documentary film practice has been later judged as distortive and imposing, and an instrument of narrative power that should be used with caution.¹⁶

El escarabajo de oro takes a playful attitude towards the voice-over tradition, here also combining traits from fiction and documentary film tradition. Firstly, instead of a centralizing voice of God or purely subjective narration, the film offers a decentralized, dialectical solution: two narrators, Alem and Benedictsson, who contest each other, speak past each other, try to overcome each other, and sometimes just ramble on, digressing to all sorts of sidetracks, confusing what the "main storyline" is (if it even exists). They flood into each other's territories, they deviate and insult each other, their own contemporaries (as an example, Alem seems to hold a grudge against Urquiza, his contemporary politician) and the crew members. In one of his voice-over rants, Alem talks about his contemporary political opponent as "the traitor". In other occasion, Benedictsson is not at all happy about the film crew replacing her as the main character to Alem, calling him a "narcissistic, self-pitying poor excuse for a man", later also giving the entire male gender a full load.

Essentially, Benedictsson and Alem are entirely unreliable and biased narrator-gods, twisting the facts and giving highly contested interpretations as they both have strong political agendas. With dramatic vocabulary and a sarcastic tone, these anarchic narrators comment the events of the film while they unfold on screen, such as the film crew members' various schemes. They also comment on the interpretations that are given to their own lives in the filming process. With this gesture, the film appears to satirize the misuse of historical figures in documentaries and fiction films, who rarely get the chance to protest the symbolic violence against their characters exercised by later generations. This becomes evident also in the last phrase of the film, uttered by Victoria Benedictsson as the narrator who revels on the treasure captured by the Swedish ladies, Sandlund and Birgid: "Hasta la Victoria, siempre!", derailing Che Guevara's famous quote (meaning: "always towards victory") into an ovation for herself ("always towards Victoria").

In the first part of the film, Benedictsson seizes the voice-over narration from a typical voice-off-God-type male narrator with a low voice (who does not appear again in the film). Speaking in

Swedish, Benedictsson comments sourly, how the fact she was a woman was not of any interest to the filmmakers, who were hired more than hundred years after her to make a film about her life “in a country far from Sweden and Denmark”. Benedictsson explains about this “new way of producing art”—where a Danish Film Festival hires a Scandinavian and a “non-European” film director, “preferably from the ex-colonies, exotic places like Africa, Asia, or maybe South America to work together in a film that lies between experimentation and charity”. She talks of Sandlund, “a radical feminist” from Stockholm who makes films in New York and is “obsessed with me” and the Argentinian director, a man who tries to manage his job and being a father to a one-year-old named Cléo, “named after a famous film from the 1960s, a period which was important to filmmaking—the art devoted to steal beauty from the world”, here, perhaps, directing a critical comment towards the film medium itself. Simultaneously, the black and white images of the reenactment in her apartment in the 1890’s Copenhagen recede to give way for the contemporary scene in Buenos Aires office (year 2013), where the film crew men are plotting.

As the voice-over narrators, Benedictsson and Alem take part in the mischievous memory operations in the film, when they begin to comment on the filmmaking process and its events in the present time (of the film), trying to rearrange the storyline to their advantage—Benedictsson into a feminist film and Alem to a political, socialist manifesto. It becomes clear, that the narrator possesses the power to decide which version of history gets told, where our eyes are directed, what remains in the shadows. This actualizes in a scene towards the end of the film, when Alem acts as the voice-over narrator. When Rafa makes up a scheme to explain why he cannot perform in a play in Buenos Aires on a certain day (due to the treasure hunt), he blames it on the roadblocks, which have become a popular way of protesting in contemporary Argentina. Explaining this in voice-over, Alem jumps to the opportunity to launch a snappy critique towards the roadblocks as a way of protesting that he does not understand, and towards the 21st-century politics and the deputies of the Chamber in Buenos Aires. Using his narrative power, he thus draws the attention of the viewer from the twists of the (fictional) treasure hunt into critique of contemporary politics (factual).

The voice-over narrations in the film form a dialectical arena where the struggles over memory become tangible. Alem and Benedictsson are biased, controversial, passionate narrators, who deliver their judgements on every-thing and every-body resembling two angry Greek Gods.

Memory work in the neocolonial present

This article outlines how approaching documentary form from its fuzzy borders can be useful in thinking about its potential as a form of cinematic remembering. In the film, one storyline invades another, then another, and in the end, multiple historical and fictional narratives live side by side. They are inundated by each other very literally in shifts where new (his) stories are introduced, and old ones die out in dissolved images. As an example when the image of Lu recounts to Agustina the history behind the gold treasure from colonial Brazil, the image of the women sitting around a table dissolves into an image of the historical reenactment, placed in a jungle by night.

Annette Kuhn (2002, 157) notes that “memory work is a conscious and purposeful performance of memory; it involves an active staging of memory; it takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and its (re)construction through memory”. Memory work thus requires a performative attitude towards the past, an active doing and reprocessing the past. Memory work in *El escarabajo de oro* is self-reflexive and polyphonic. The film brings forth biases in recollecting the past, tainted by practices of (neo) colonialism,¹⁷ and directs self-reflexive critique on certain practices of narrating history—such as the documentary conventions of reenactments and voice-over narration—but it does not convey any clear stance on how we should think about these specific pasts, projected on the film screen.

Instead, *El escarabajo de oro* satirizes on people’s inclination to make ideologies or histories serve their own purposes. The film crew’s attitude towards the facts of history in general is not too fussy. Gradually it becomes evident, that they are especially careless on the facts concerning “faraway countries”, as Benedictsson describes it in her voice-over. On several occasions, the Argentinians demonstrate the ignorance of Europeans on the history of Latin America—their “colonial agnosia” (term from Vimalassery, Hu Pegues, and Goldstein 2016). Aptly, this ignorance goes both ways, as on the other hand, the film crew is rather indifferent on the facts concerning, for instance, Benedictsson’s life. The film critiques thus, subtly, the structures and hierarchies of remediating memory, not specific memories or interpretations on the past.

Transnational productions, such as *El escarabajo de oro*, are rarely “transequal”—the old colonial power structures persist, and some have more resources than others. This pattern the film intends to shake, in the way only pirates can: by taking over other people’s ships, or in this case, histories. Oubiña (2019, 532) writes, how “The Gold Bug is in search of

a permanent decentring: it is suspicious of all fidelities and immutable identities". He also notes that the act of taking other's memories, into one's own hands is not condemned in the film. On the contrary, in the film world, pillaging is simply "a response to the unequal distribution of globalized cultural goods". (Oubiña 2019, 528.) But as the ending of the film demonstrates, it is the privileged, resourceful Swedish director, acting behind the scenes, who eventually catches the gold, despite all the hard work and effort carried out by the Argentinians who are left with trinkets.

The film is ruthless in how it makes use and misuse of historical figures, events, cultural tropes, and ideologies. It treats all this as raw material that circulates in the transcultural media memory cycles. The ideologies of feminism, socialism, and (neo)colonialism are presented in the film in a sustained rivalry, principally as the voices of Benedictsson, Alem, and Rafa, conducting a quarrelsome dialogue that raises more questions than answers—on how historical ideologies are used to serve different purposes and how people cherry-pick historical details which serve them. The form of the film presents historical figures, events, and narratives as a dissonant polyphony, and the film as a whole sets itself against a linear way of remembering, where "messages" would be "transmitted" from the past to the present. Memory in *El escarabajo de oro* consists of a group of voices, each with their own goals, a constellation of multidirectional historical layers.

Though the film presents itself as a form of puzzle, it does not expect to be solved or deciphered. More important than trying to place the film on the continuum between documentary or fiction or to figure out what the film is about, to get an answer, is to keep questioning, keep wondering. The reenactments and feisty narrators surpassing the limits of time and space, and the limits of coherent storytelling in their meta-narratives, do not celebrate accuracy or verisimilitude, but the freedom of association, the creation of a generous pattern from traces of memory presented in the film: from the colonial history of Argentina, the Jesuits and the Swedish colony in Misiones, the lives of two historical figures from the 19th century to the contemporary struggles in transnational filmmaking industry and the fictional stories of Poe and Stevenson. The historical events, such as the story of João Bandeirante, who hid the colonial gold riches in the first place, impact the lives of the contemporaries, as they embark on the treasure hunt. History is present everywhere, though it is not always clear which parts of it is an invention and which part real. The film thus accentuates the fragmentary, discontinuous and unstable nature of memory, always comprised of both fact and fiction, real and imagined.

As Claire Allouche (2018, s.l.) beautifully puts it, "*El escarabajo de oro* chooses cinema as its homeland". It confirms illusions as the home ground of filmmaking, be they fiction or documentary.

El escarabajo de oro makes tangible how films dealing with the past can contest dominant historical narratives and subvert the urge to draw causal and linear narratives from the past to the present and future. Instead, it presents a constellation of pasts, (hi)stories adapted to the film medium, where the meaning of the work never settles into a neat plot. It shows openly, how history is heavily interpreted by the contemporary agents and how today's power relations, attitudes, experiences and valuations mold memory, making it part of contemporary political and cultural struggles. In short, the film decolonizes memory to reveal processes of colonization that expand from the past to the present. It presents cinematic memory as a constellation where new relations between historical periods, figures, and fictions can emerge.

Notes

1. For the most part, the soundtrack of the film consists of *bandoneon* (accordion) music performed by popular musicians, who also appear frequently in the "visual track".
2. In the first scene of the film, Rafa explains in a long monologue to the European producers how the Latin Americans have had to study the lives of famous Europeans from very young age and asks them to name three famous Latin Americans in three minutes, a test in which they fail.
3. Sandlund is present in the film only as a voice, in the phone calls between her and Moguillansky.
4. Another example is offered by *El loro y el cisne* (2013, *The parrot and the swan*), a fiction film on the production of a documentary within a dance company, moving between a lucid dream, dance performance, and documentary (see Tambutti and Amado 2016; Kratje and Dagatti 2017).
5. Through Sandlund, *El escarabajo de oro* could also be placed into the context of contemporary art, where documentary practices, especially reenactments, have become popular in recent decades (see Kahana 2009, 47; Lind and Steyerl 2008). Michael Renov (2013) views this merging of documentary and contemporary art as a tending towards "a greater rhetorical *obliquity*, *partiality* and textual *openness*" (italics in the original), which could describe also the free-wheeling nature of *El escarabajo de oro*. In this article, however, I will focus on the mnemonic aspects of the film.
6. The practice of twinning filmmakers has thought to counteract certain parochialisms that might develop especially in small nations, such as the Nordic countries. (See more on filmmaker-twinning in Denmark, Hjort 2016.)
7. This is an intricate matter, as recent documentary theorists have become more and more cautious in giving documentary a definitive definition, although

- the totemic phrasing by John Grierson (1976 [1932–34]), as “creative treatment of actuality” is still used frequently. As an example, Jonathan Kahana (2016) describes documentary as a “notoriously slippery eel”, that in the course of film history has “refused to mean something consistent”. Mario Sluga and Enrico Terrone (2021, 107) formulate what they call the current consensus in documentary studies on the fiction/documentary divide as “a matter of degree rather than that of a firm boundary”. This approach could be useful in thinking of forms of so-called creative documentary, though the deep-rooted divide between the two still persists in this formulation.
8. In her thorough analysis on El Pampero Cine’s productions, Minerva Campos (2019) describes the film as “a fiction based on real circumstances” (author’s translation), thus placing it more clearly in the realm of fiction.
 9. A similar description affirming both documentary and fictional aspects of the film is given by Julia Kratje and Mariano Dagatti (2017, 213), who state: “*El escarabajo de oro* seems like a fake documentary on the production of a film on a Swedish writer that veers into a documentary on Leandro N. Alem while closing, like a Chinese box, other fictionalizations” (author’s translation).
 10. Susanna Helke (2019, 212) notes, that during the 2000s there has been a rising trend in the Nordic creative documentary to use hybrid strategies that blur the line between fiction and documentary, and tackle political content through satirical play. *El escarabajo de oro* fits perfectly into this trend, as it expresses dissent with the prevailing power structures: the forms of neocolonialism that still prevail in the relations between the North and the South, while it also aligns with recent developments in Argentinian New Cinema, as described later on.
 11. The deliberations on cinematic memory connect with what Dagmar Brunow (2015, 1) calls “media memory studies”, exploring the mediations of cultural memory. As Brunow (2015, 41) notes, cultural memory is constantly mediated and remediated from one medium to another, recycling memories, historical events and stories in novels, films, photography, and so on, while certain narratives stabilize and others fall into oblivion, only to be picked up again in another remediation (see also Errll 2008, 392–393).
 12. Here, one should remember piracy’s reference point in the contemporary culture: the illegal use of copyrighted works, which means reproducing, distributing, performing or making derivative works, making use of the original material without permission. The memory pirates of today spread memory archives, but in ways that do not pay respect to the ones who “own the memory”. In many aspects, the strategies of the film’s pirates approach this ideology more than piracy in a more traditional sense, as the work of sea criminals who rob vessels.
 13. Mieke Bal (2002, 175–176) formulates the different conceptual roots of *performativity* and *performance* as a temporal question—simply put, performativity, deriving from J.L. Austin and the philosophy of language, refers to an ongoing action; doing something by saying/enacting it, and performance, as a concept of aesthetics based in artistic practice, to an action that is completed, an “art event”. She suggests they should be dealt with together, as two facets of memory. Here, performativity, remembering as an ongoing event, happens in the framework of performance (of memory), as unique event.
 14. The film could thus be located into the “spectrum of reenactment-based screen art”, as Jonathan Kahana (2009) describes it in his overview to this cinematic practice.
 15. Referring to the main character in Woolf’s novel *Orlando* (1928) who lives through several centuries in different continents and changes her/his sex somewhere in between. Although, Alem and Benedictsson are not quite as flexible as this.
 16. The renunciation from voice-over narration was an important part of the North American Direct Cinema movement’s principles, as the filmmakers tried to capture life “as it is”, without obstructing or interpreting it in any way. This point of view was turned upside down in the French Cinéma Vérité, where the presence of the filmmakers in the film was seen as crucial to documentary’s transparency.
 17. These histories are connected to the Argentinian and European past, but also to the contemporary situation within transnational film industry. In the film making process, the colonial history of Argentina intertwine and constantly compare with the colonial structures of transnational film industry today, ruled by the wealthy Global North. The Argentinian crew members state in several scenes how the film’s set-up is hierarchical, as the European producers, a French man and a German, referred in the film simply as the “Europeans”, are the ones who “bring the money to the table”. Sandlund also defends her power over the film narrative with the fact that the Swedish Film Foundation is one of the producers of the film. *El escarabajo de oro* itself as a film product is the victim of European neocolonialism, as Sandlund owns 51% of the film and Moguillansky 49% (Walsh 2015).

Notes on contributor

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