

Professor-artist *and* professor-researcher

Making the case for experimental filmmaking as research in the academic context of Ecuador's Universidad de las Artes

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Abstract

The foundation of the Universidad de las Artes inaugurated access to a public education in arts in Ecuador in 2015. As three professor-artist-researchers who have worked in different periods in this institution, we propose an article with two objectives in mind. First, we aim to share and examine the film-based artistic work that has formed part of our research practice within the university setting (and the experience of making these films in this particular context), including the experimental ethnographic documentary short *Sour Lake* (Dávila, 2019), the found footage essay film *1922* (Gills, 2023),

and the expansive imagework design *Dispositivo ORG* (Terán Vargas, 2017-2024). Secondly, based on these experiences, we propose to discuss more broadly the entanglements of the professor-artist-researcher role (including how our artistic practice and research interweave with our teaching practice) and to reflect on the potential advantages of experimental filmmaking in the academic context.

Keywords: experimental ethnography, essay film, found footage, image-work, teaching methods

Introduction

Since its establishment in 2015, the Universidad de las Artes in Ecuador has emerged as a center for transdisciplinary artistic education in the region. As three filmmakers and researchers who have taught at this University, we write this article to share the experience of filmmaking in this particular academic environment and the ways in which our filmmaking has intersected other areas of our academic work, including research and teaching.

In this article, we present three case studies: the experimental ethnographic film *Sour Lake* (Andrés Dávila, 2019), the video essay and found footage film *1922* (Libertad Gills, 2023), and the *image-work* film *Dispositivo-Org* (Carlos Terán Vargas, 2017-2024), all developed as research projects at the Universidad de las Artes. These films, through different formal approaches, manage to establish a dialogue with teaching practices and research within the academy. These works share a deep proximity to experimental cinema and challenge in multiple ways the normative paradigms of industrial filmmaking prevalent in film and visual arts schools in our region, through the exploration of a series of plastic, sensorial and critical cinematographic proposals. In sharing these three research-creation projects resulting from our work as scholar-practitioners with a broader audience, we hope to bring attention to possibilities for diverse methodologies of experimental filmmaking in the academic world.

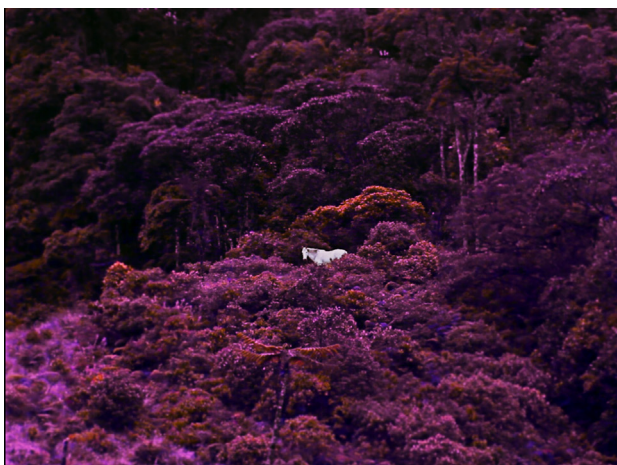
Andrés Dávila **Sour Lake: Experimental Ethnography as Research**

In the 1960s, Texaco named a small town in the Ecuadorian jungle “Lago Agrío”, in reference to Sour Lake, the Texas town where the oil company was born. This name serves as framework for the crea-

tion of *Sour Lake*, an experimental documentary filmed in the surroundings of Lago Agrio in the Ecuadorian Amazon region and in the Sibundoy Valley of the Colombian Andes. Over the centuries, these geographically, culturally, and commercially interconnected places have faced numerous ecological, social, and territorial issues, the origins of which date back to the 16th century, when the Spanish conquistadors explored them in search of El Dorado. At the beginning of the 20th century, the civilizing processes in the Andean and Amazonian territories bordering Colombia and Ecuador, carried out by both the Spanish religious missions and the Peruvian rubber companies, were parallel to the global expansion of capitalism and its exploration of new territories in different latitudes in search of resources and human labor. In 1967, with the discovery of oil in eastern Ecuador, whose production would begin in 1972, the Texaco company moved to Lago Agrio, affecting and displacing the indigenous ethnic groups and local communities of this territory. In 1992, the Texaco-Chevron oil company withdrew from the Amazon, leaving behind one of the most significant ecological disasters in the world. The environmental impacts still persist in the region. These confluences provide the context for *Sour Lake*, which pose questions about complex relationships between these territories and their inhabitants.

Throughout the making of *Sour Lake*, I encountered issues that led me to confront a complex reality and to question preconceived ideas about the representation of the landscape and the indigenous and local communities of these territories in the media and in traditional documentary filmmaking. I was also confronted with issues such as extractivism, social and historical injustice, as well as the ecological consequences of environmental politics. To deal with these issues, my starting point was to adopt an experimental documentary form, utilizing images and sounds from diverse landscapes in lieu of relying on voice-over narration or interviews, as well as opting for a non-linear montage, thus breaking with a traditional causal logic. The objective was to examine the potential of the landscape and its sensorial dimension, whether natural or modified by human action, and its various layers of meaning, encouraging a constant interaction between the different spaces and a certain rhythm that would create alterations, confluences and continuous intertwining. In addition, the complex relations present in these ter-

ritories were to be highlighted, as well as the consequences derived from the expansion of agricultural frontiers and industrial exploitation in the Andean-Amazonian territory. My challenge was to convey various forms of environmental memory and resistance to the massive and industrial exploitation of nature, as well as the persistent colonial violence affecting these areas. To achieve this, I focused mainly on recording the landscapes of these territories, where different relationships and power structures, both visible and invisible, converge. Thus, the experimental documentary was intended to reflect on realities that remain hidden and others that have become evident, such as the environmental disaster of Lago Agrio.



Still from *Sour Lake* (Dávila 2019). Forest of the Sibundoy region, Colombia.



Still from *Sour Lake* (Dávila 2019). Oil installation in Lago Agrio, Ecuador.

While engaged in the processes of filming and editing, I was teaching at the Universidad de las Artes, where I was simultaneously fulfilling the role of professor at The Universidad de las Artes, where I was responsible for instructing students in the domains of experimental filmmaking, editing and film research. Concurrently, I was engaged in the writing of my doctoral thesis on contemporary ethnographic experimental cinema. The integration of these three areas of activity—teaching, research and the supervision of final projects—led me to develop a reflexive approach to my creative process, inspired by the theoretical framework of what Catherine Russell calls “experimental ethnography” (1999). This approach re-

views various forms of experimentation with filmic language in the history of ethnographic cinema and expands this term to include other films belonging to experimental cinema, early cinema, found footage, or film essay. Experimental ethnography revises the conventions and formal resources of positivist modes of scientific research and commercial exploitation cinema, and aims to generate a debate on ethical questions about the representation and objectification of the other (Russell 1990, 10). Thus, I have integrated a series of aesthetic, poetic, reflexive, and critical approaches derived from experimental ethnography into my work as a teacher-researcher. These approaches led me to consider ethical questions related to the objectification of the Other and the division between the filmmaker, the audience, and the subjects of ethnography (Minh-ha 1991, 35). To transcend this paradigm, my approach was based on a more fluid conception in which “speaking nearby”, rather than “speaking about” allows one to approach the Other without appropriating his or her discourse and without objectifying him or her (Chen and Minh-ha 1992, 87). Both the formal treatment close to experimental ethnography, considered by Russell as a way of “[...] rethinking both aesthetics *and* cultural representation” (Russell 1999, xi), and this “speaking nearby” constituted a challenge and a starting point, as well as an attitude of constant approach and reflection in the process of making this film.

My role as a teacher, researcher, and filmmaker during the production of *Sour Lake* allowed me to advocate for the integration of other pedagogical perspectives and establish new dynamics in my role as researcher-teacher. This was accomplished, for instance, through the incorporation of topics such as experiential ethnography, autoethnography and appropriation of institutional archives into my classes, along with the development of practical exercises derived from the discussions that emerged during these classes. A number of these exercises and some of the graduate work around these themes were later published in a magazine issue “Autoetnografías, archivos y apropiaciones” (2022), which I co-edited in collaboration with Alejandra Carvajal, a student of the Film School. On the other hand, *Sour Lake* afforded the opportunity to examine the transition from conceptual to artistic creation in the field of ethnographic experimental cinema and to comprehend cinema beyond a restrictive framework, which is inevitably linked to processes of ob-

jectification and domination. These distinct modes of experimental ethnographic practice were groundbreaking in the context of teaching at the Film School of the Universidad de las Artes, as they enabled students to discern the techniques of representation and discourses utilized to portray their social and political milieu in film. Moreover, they facilitated an examination of identity, cultural and familial memory and the history of oppression and resistance within their own context through a critical lens. In this way, possibilities opened up for me, both in my artistic practice and as a researcher-teacher, to address more diverse aesthetic and political questions and to explore other formal and descriptive approaches.

Libertad Gills 1922: Video Essay and Found Footage Film as Research

On 15 November 1922, after two weeks of the largest worker's strike in the country, hundreds or thousands of workers were killed in Guayaquil, Ecuador, by the military and police, and countless bodies were thrown in the river Guayas. As the centenary of this historical moment was approaching (with conditions that were strangely similar to those in 1922, like a global pandemic and mass uprisings in the main cities of Ecuador), I began to inquire about this event and ask myself how to think cinematically about it. Furthermore, how to make a video essay or essay film about an event for which no moving images exist? This became a video-graphic challenge.

I began collecting audiovisual materials in search of a possible solution to the problem of an absence of images through the constitution of an alternative audiovisual landscape. The main source I turned to was the silent film *Fiestas del centenario*, produced by the Ecuadorian film company *Ambos Mundos* and preserved by the National Film Archive (Cinemateca Nacional del Ecuador), and filmed only a few months before the strike and massacre. The film is Ecuador's only surviving audiovisual archive from 1922 (found only a couple of years ago in France and digitized in 2K) and this in itself became an important inspiration for the project. Secondly, I incorporated images of protests in Ecuador in 2021 and 2022 about many of the same issues that motivated the protests in 1922, principally worker's rights and a decent wage. As I watched and recorded these videos off of my screen, I wondered what would become of these images in one hundred years. Finally, I also decided to in-

clude international films made in 1922 which would be useful for understanding what cinema was in the world in that year: what were the innovations and what were the repeated subject matters across international cinema? As my thoughts moved between the past and the present, between film history and film practice, between National archives found in Europe and images of protests shot on low quality phone cameras and posted to social media, and between what cinema was in Ecuador and what it was in the world, editing became a way to bridge the historical/geographical/technological gap, attributing elements of the present to the past (and vice versa), as well as breaking down national borders.

Rewatching *Fiestas del centenario* from the historical perspective of knowing that only a few months later the massacre would occur allowed me to see the images in a new way. When President Tamayo appeared – the same president who gave the order for the massacre in November – I paused the film on my computer screen and took a closer look. I suspended this shot, reducing its speed eventually to 20%, engaging in what Laura Mulvey calls “delaying cinema” (2006, 144). Suddenly, I could see gestures in his expression that before had been invisible to the eye. The archive slowly began *opening up to me*, allowing me to experience first-hand what I had discovered in the work of Susana de Sousa Dias, whose films made with Portugal’s International and State Defense Police (PIDE) archives explore the very act of looking as research. As I watched this brief shot of Tamayo over and over again, expanding the duration through cinema’s toolkit, ideas began to form in my attention to the “small gestures” (Álvarez-López 2014): How was it that this 100-year-old image was available in a restored 2K digital archive, while images that I was recording off my screen from protests occurring at this moment were already digitally degraded and glitched? Worker’s strikes from 1922 and 2022 for decent wages were suddenly recontextualized within a larger aesthetic question of rich versus poor images. Hito Steyerl’s concept of *poor images* (2009) accompanied my gaze, allowing me to understand the power precisely in their precarity. In placing these images side by side, associations and contrasts began to take place, gaining power in the montage.

Making *1922* allowed me to connect and develop my doctoral research with my artistic practice. This, in turn, also poured into my teaching, as I engaged students in the video essay format as a tool



Still from 1922 (Gills 2023). President Tamayo in *Fiestas del Centenario* (Ambos Mundos, 1922).



Still from 1922 (Gills 2023). Worker's strike in 2022.

for film criticism. One student from my videographic criticism course later reflected on “the discovery of being able to articulate ideas on cinema with images instead of words”, while another commented on how “films are composed of images that attract one another, acting like magnets”, leading her to think “not only on the images that we see, but also on those that we do not see, of what is left out so that the spectator can imagine them”. Observing how students responded to the video essay reinforced my understanding of this mode of production as an example of what Barbara Bolt calls “material thinking” (2006), that is, the way in which the audiovisual materials have “their own intelligence that come[s] into play with the artist’s creative intelligence” (1). By zooming into images, pausing to look at particular frames, and altering the original duration of sequences, for example, artist-researchers are able to open images as sites of knowledge that can challenge, make visible, and respond to neglected archives and other forms of censorship. I was able to experience this firsthand.

The video essay, both in my own practice and in the classroom, allowed for an experience of “listening to images” (Campt 2017) that I had so fortunately observed in the experimental films I studied. This, in turn, made my research and parallel dissertation writing even more persuasive and focused. In other words, my research poured into my artistic and teaching practice and then back into my

writing process, in a mutually beneficial relationship between academic work and filmmaking.

Carlos Terán Vargas

Dispositivo-Org: Image-work as Research

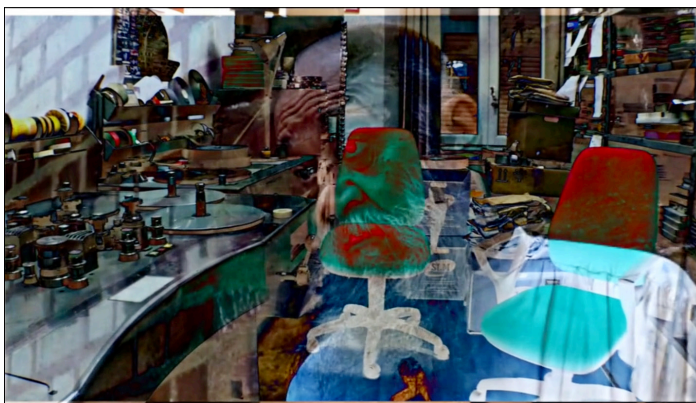
Characterized by experimental cinema conventions, tinged with science fiction and closely linked to the melodramatic elements of Latin American cinema, the extensive three-hour film *ORG* (Fernando Birri 1967-1978) has rarely been screened since its debut. While its narrative is inspired by an ancient Indian myth adapted by Thomas Mann in 1940, its primary importance lies in its experimental nature, with more than 26,000 cuts and around 700 audio channels. There are two existing versions of the film. A first version that meets the director's criteria with a duration of 177 min (which has been the basis for this research) and a shorter second version that arose from the legal demands of the actor-producer Mario Girotti (Terence Hill).

The film *Dispositivo-Org* becomes a tool for studying and researching a film like *ORG*, delving into appropriation, intervention and ethnographic critique of the image. My practice is rooted in visual anthropology and influenced by the 1980s crisis of representation which prompted introspection and the reevaluation of concepts, practices, and representations within the discipline. My research emerges from the reflection on the poetic dimension in ethnography, as proposed in James Clifford and George Marcus' *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), and from the concept of "artwriting" as a visual ethnographic tool for interdisciplinary dynamics between art and anthropology, as proposed in *The Traffic in Art and Culture* (Marcus and Fred R. Mayers, 1995). In this way, *Dispositivo-Org* is a film resulting from research on fieldwork methodologies on the moving image. This pursuit is positioned from the concept of "image work," an "intermedial ethos" (Andrade and Elhaik 2018, 3-11) under which it is considered that researching images involves producing images. Thus, the interaction between *ORG* and the image work film *Dispositivo-Org* is established as a result of this research process, allowing an analysis of the tensions between cinema, ethnographic fieldwork, and image research methodologies.

In *Dispositivo-Org*, I set out to recontextualize image theory and research methodologies to delve deeper into contemporary audio-



Still from *Dispositivo-Org* (Terán Vargas 2024).
Visual intervention on archival film using
Lomokino technique.



Still from *Dispositivo-Org* (Terán Vargas 2024).
Visual intervention on interview with Fernando Birri.

visual techniques and narratives with undergraduate students. This effort aims not only to enrich academic dialogue (between students and professor) but also to catalyze an intergenerational dialogue on the use of cinema as a qualitative research methodology and as a tool for socio-scientific exploration. Guided by the concept of “ethnographic authority,” I develop montages of visual and auditory elements that offer new perspectives on visual narratives. By meticulously exploring image treatment and narrative construction, as a class, we aimed to uncover storytelling techniques that challenge traditional cinematic discourse. This analytical journey adhered to the principles of Fernando Birri and Settimio Presutto, where experimentation is central, stemming from the ideology and politics of filmmaking.

To unravel the structure of image and sound representation in *ORG*, I conducted numerous comparative screenings between the two existing versions. In this process, the concept of image-work gained relevance. During this phase, students were profoundly involved in a playful engagement with *ORG* images (archives) that would culminate in the film project *Dispositivo-Org*. Student participation was not limited to the mere digitization of 35mm materials: it expanded into a meticulous process of systematization and creative intervention within the collected archives. The role of the students was critical in the management of the Lomokino records (a camera that allows the recording of short sequences in 35 mm),

ensuring that their conversion from analog to digital retained the essence of the original work. This rich process allowed the students to immerse themselves in the practice of creating an image-work film that went beyond simple documentation. It evolved into a dynamic methodological instrument within their visual interest. This deep involvement extended beyond digital conversion of archival materials to include creative reinterpretations and systematic analysis, fostering a dynamic environment where students critically engaged with both visual and auditory elements. This process nurtured a space for spontaneous, intersubjective dialogue and moved us away from rigid control, allowing us to explore the authentic unpredictability of artistic creation.

Fieldwork, when grounded in an artistic practice, provides a unique platform to contemplate the inherent power dynamics of imagery, allowing for a profound reflection on ethnographic authority, not merely as a domain of representation but also as a sphere of research and creation. *Dispositivo-Org* epistemically resonates with Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of "speaking nearby", mentioned by Dávila above. Simultaneously, it probes the intricacies of image thought, echoing the sentiments of "listening to images" and "material thinking" mentioned by Gills. Within this framework, the act of montage emerges as a curatorial endeavor, forging an ever-evolving dialogue, shaped by representation, between the researcher and the intermedial ethos of a cinematic *image-work* called *film*.

Conclusions

In this article, we share our experiences as educators, artists, and researchers during the process of creating three experimental films at Universidad de las Artes from 2019 to 2024. Through these works we demonstrate experimental cinema's capacity to merge artistic and academic worlds. The merits of such experimental approaches in academia can be summarized in three core areas: the deconstruction and reinterpretation of history, the innovation of film production methods, and the development of new or alternative pedagogical strategies.

Experimental cinema encourages a re-examination of historical representation, prompting us to view archives as dynamic memories open to reinterpretation. In all three works, historical events and archives were re-envisioned through ethnography, the video

essay, and image-work, thereby enabling students to engage with history and cinema as malleable mediums. This approach demystifies traditional academic perspectives, particularly within film schools, where history and archives are often presented as fixed and unchangeable. Furthermore, our foray into experimental cinema allowed us to critique and deviate from standardized production models. If constrained by the national film funding's rigid guidelines, our films may never have come to fruition. The university environment, however, motivated us to work beyond these confines, liberating us from the conventional pre-production, production, and post-production cycle. For instance, the film *1922*, which is made completely in what would typically be called "post-production", exemplifies the incompatibility of such creative projects with standard industry practices.

Lastly, the application of experimental methods in the academic context has opened doors to innovative teaching methods. Our experiences as filmmakers have enriched our pedagogical approaches, cultivating a reciprocal relationship between teaching, research and creative practice. These approaches—including ethnography, the video essay, and image work—challenge conventional narrative and stylistic norms, thus enhancing film education by promoting critical thinking and reflective learning. This exploration of experimental cinema within the academic context underscores its value as an educational tool, a creative outlet, and a source of methodological innovation. Our findings suggest that the integration of experimental cinema in academic settings can disrupt traditional educational models and offer a refreshing perspective on filmmaking and teaching in the arts.

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