

HISTORY, VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL ACTIVATION: ANTES DEL FUEGO AS A CINEMATIC SITE FOR RECONFIGURING THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN COLOMBIA

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary mass media, characterised by constant expansion and the accelerated circulation of images, cinema constitutes a privileged space for the revision and reconstruction of collective memory. In contexts such as Colombia, where narratives of the past have been fragmented by decades of conflict and polarisation, cinematic depictions take on a crucial ethical and political significance. The film image is not limited to reproducing history; it has the capacity to intervene in it, interpret it and resignify it. This ties in with the work of Gómez-Barris (2017) on the role played by cultural industries in the reconfiguration of memory in societies pursuing truth and reconciliation processes. In this way, images dispute political and historical interpretations in the public sphere.

Positioned at this intersection of art, archive and memory is *Antes del fuego* [Before the Fire] (Laura Mora, 2015), a film that revisits the siege of

Colombia's Palace of Justice in 1985, and the army operation to retake the building, by incorporating it into a fictional narrative that challenges official versions of the past. The objective of this article is to analyse *Antes del fuego* from aesthetic, political and historical perspectives, in an effort to answer the following research questions:

What are the aesthetic, political and historical implications of *Antes del fuego*, particularly in relation to its insertion of archival footage into a fiction narrative?

Can the use of this archival material in the film operate as a *dispositif* of political resistance capable of activating the spectator's perception of history?

This analysis focuses on three key concepts: the archive as a site of symbolic dispute; *pseudomorphosis* as the displacement of forms across historical periods; and sensory realism as a strategy that combines documentary and affective forms in order to trigger our perception of history. As Didi-Huber-

man (2008) points out, images of the past survive in the present as anachronisms that interrupt temporal linearity. In *Antes del fuego*, these lingering images remind us that the conflict does not belong to the past alone; it persists in bodies, in institutions and in the collective gaze. Mora's film combines elements of the political thriller and romantic drama genres to explore the boundaries between documented history and cinematic imagination.

This article considers certain formal decisions in the film (shot composition, editing, sound design, mise-en-scène and the use of the archive) to examine how it engages historical memory and political narrative. The objective is not merely to analyse a film but to situate it in the critical tradition of Latin American memory films, which use excerpts of archival footage and the reconstruction of trauma to construct a poetics and an ethics of remembrance.

An underlying assumption of this study is that the relationship between fiction and archive is not merely complementary but essential to an audiovisual epistemology constructed through the tension between showing and concealing, between what the camera allows us to see and what we are required to reconstruct. In *Antes del fuego*, this epistemology takes the form of an economy of signs: excerpts from television and radio reports, voice-overs announcing news headlines and archival images of the event that disrupt the story to produce a cognitive dissonance aimed at activating historical memory as a problem rather than an established list of facts. Latin American memory films are thus assumed to operate with aesthetic *dispositifs* that exceed the logic of verification of the documentary genre without giving up their truthfulness by doing so. Their authenticity relies not on the accuracy of the information but on the ethical consistency of their perspective, and on their capacity to create a mise-en-scène capable of opening up a space for unresolved grief, erased individuals and latent conflicts that continue to shape Colombian public life.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT: THE POLITICISATION OF MEMORY IN COLOMBIA

The Colombian armed conflict, one of the longest-running in the Americas, has left more than eight million victims of death, displacement or disappearance in its wake. The complexity of the conflict is due to the multiplicity of actors involved, including guerrilla movements, paramilitary groups, drug cartels and government forces. As Martín-Barbero (2002) suggests, the Colombian media have served as vehicles both for exposing and for oversimplifying the conflict, consolidating polarising narratives in relation to the violence.

One of the most painful episodes in this prolonged conflict occurred on 6 and 7 November 1985. Over the course of twenty-eight hours, a battle unfolded between the Colombian armed forces and the M-19 guerrilla group, after the guerrillas stormed the Palace of Justice (the seat of the Colombian judiciary) and took control of the building. More than ninety people died in the siege and retaking of the building—including twelve Supreme Court justices—and eleven disappeared. Media coverage, consisting mainly of exterior shots of the building in flames, produced a partial audiovisual archive of vast symbolic power, reinforced for decades in news reports and documentaries. Narratives related to this event continue to be politicised and polarised: for some, the military action constituted a legitimate response; for others, it was a state crime that was subsequently covered up (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018). Jiménez Pallares (2025) highlights the fractured nature of such memories, where personal testimonies, news archives and official versions are brought into tension amid the efforts to construct a single unifying account of these historical events.

This polarisation in relation to historical memory persists in Colombia. Following the Peace Ac-



Image 1. Arturo and Milena, protagonists of the film. *Antes del fuego* (Laura Mora, 2015)

cords signed with the FARC in 2016, the Truth Commission confirmed that the manipulation of information had hindered the reconciliation process (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2022). Uribe de Hincapié (2020) notes that when the elite make pacts of silence and self-amnesty, public memory is distorted, depriving the community of their right to grieve. Similarly, Orozco (2022) observes that power struggles determine which voices enter the national narrative. As Campo and Rival (2007) argue, the issue is not just factual but regulatory as well: who authorises the narrative of the past, and according to what regime of visibility. The persistence of competing official and unofficial versions of the past has resulted in a polarisation in which public memory has become an artefact of negotiation. In this respect, the archives of television coverage of the 1985 siege ultimately consolidated an iconography of fire: the façade of the Palace of Justice enveloped in flames and smoke. This iconography, however, encapsulates a blind spot, as it includes neither the handling of the corpses nor the bureaucratic administration of the damage afterwards. The problem lies not only in the partial nature of the

record, but in its performative capacity to establish exactly what the events are deemed to be.

This performativity helps explain why, despite institutional advances, collective closure in relation to the tragedy has yet to be achieved. The regime of the visible has been insufficient to convey the agency of victims and witnesses within the public sphere. From this perspective, *Antes del fuego* serves as a mechanism for appropriating the archive. By inserting excerpts from the footage into a fictional fabric, the film re-politicises the gaze and contests the hegemonic reading of the event. Fiction does not replace documentation; it makes it speak in a different way, revealing interstitial spaces—elements unfilmed, swept aside or half-spoken—that constitute the traumatic heart of the event.

In this context, *Antes del fuego* constitutes an aesthetic and political response to the need to rearticulate a shared narrative and revisit questions about the responsibility of the government and the silencing of discussion about the case. Set in Bogotá nineteen days before the attack, it tells the story of Arturo, a lawyer who has taken up journalism, and Milena, a student intern, as they

investigate a death linked to networks of political and media power.

The story unfolds on the margins of recorded history, in the moments leading up to a tragic event. The choice to situate the narrative in a nineteen-day time window is significant, as it turns time itself into dramatic material and facilitates a historical representation of the eve of an inescapable disaster. This approach shifts the interest from the event itself to the circumstances that led to it, while reassessing a critical perspective that lays the foundations for a counter-narrative. At the same time, the dynamic between Arturo and Milena symbolises a generational transmission of the task of memory construction: the journalistic method, the ethical doubts and the personal costs of investigating the truth in a politically hostile environment.

Orcasitas Pacheco et al. (2024) argue that recent Colombian films articulate historical uncertainty and hope, challenging institutional versions of violent episodes. In this sense, Mora's film functions as a fiction narrative that defies institutional efforts to silence the truth. By integrating archival footage from 1985 into its story, the film reactivates a visual imaginary shared between the public and private realms. As Gil Pulgarín and López Carmona (2023) point out, cinema has the power to transform historical events into shared sensory and emotional experiences; in *Antes del fuego*, the archive does not merely document the events; it triggers public reflection on violence and impunity.

The affective and critical reactivation of the archive does not constitute an idealising of the historical image. On the contrary, the film exposes the insufficiency of the footage: the smoke, the cropped framing and the low definition operate as symptoms of a partialised history. The political statement lies in presenting the archive as it is without restoring or enhancing it, laying bare its unstable nature as a mark of the era. This ethics of intermittence, of seeing and not seeing, is consistent with a nation in which omissions and

silences have been as central to the social order as documented history.

THE ARCHIVE: A SITE OF SYMBOLIC DISPUTE

From Foucault (1970) to Derrida (1997), the archive has been defined as a *dispositif* of power that regulates what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten. In cinema, the film archive preserves traces of the past and reactivates them with each narrative reinscription. Didi-Huberman (2008) proposes a conception of images as anachronisms that survive and return, breaking the linear nature of progress, while Elsaesser (2019) describes a materialised time in the memory film, composed of multiple layers.

In *Antes del fuego*, archive images constitute an anachronism that reminds us of the persistence of trauma. Their insertion into the film superimposes one time over another and activates a stratified memory. Catelli (1991) and Carri and Salamanca (2021) point to the return of traumatic images from Latin American history into the public sphere as signs of unresolved grief. Amaral de Aguiar (2017) stresses that such images are resignified through their circulation and use in contemporary contexts, operating more as active records than as static repositories of information, while Campo and Rival (2007) show that the regimes of visibility of the archive can contribute to the organisation of what can be viewed and remembered.

Mora transforms the archive into a form of contemporary resistance against the official discourses that attempt to shut down the meaning of the siege of 1985. According to Abril (2022), cinema can operate as an affective archive that resists disappearance and silencing. In *Antes del fuego*, this idea is expressed in images that return as traces in tension, activating a bodily and emotional memory. Ortega (2007) argues that archival work in Latin American memory cinema has been conceptualised as a space for processing collective grief and testing out forms of symbolic justice, while Vásquez (2015) ex-

plores artistic practices of mourning as procedures for giving a place to memory. In *Antes del fuego*, the archive is aesthetic matter that generates narrative, empathy and critical thought.

Numerous contemporary Latin American fiction and documentary films explore the power of the archive to render visible what has been erased, as pointed out by critics such as Durán Castro and Salamanca (2016) and Campo and Rival (2007). This trend can be observed in *The Blonds* (Los rubios, Albertina Carri, 2003), *Papá Iván* (María Inés Roqué, 2004), *The Tiniest Place* (El lugar más pequeño, Tatiana Huezo, 2011), *The Echo* (El eco, Tatiana Huezo, 2023) and *I'm Still Here* (Ainda estou aqui, Walter Salles, 2024). However, *Antes del fuego* takes a unique approach in this respect, as rather than being external to the narrative, the archive serves as its internal engine and its horizon of meaning. The real images of 1985 interrupt the fiction to remind us that what is represented is not merely a metaphor but lived history, establishing cinema as a space for symbolic reparation. If the archive is a *dispositif*, its integration into a new film is curatorial. Selecting, cutting, decontextualising and recontextualising are actions that define a political grammar of editing. In *Antes del fuego*, the selection criteria are not merely informational but ethical and aesthetic: each excerpt from 1985 footage appears as a kind of wounded object. The wound must not be closed, as its function is to maintain the conflict of interpretation, where truth is found not in the narrative continuity but in the tension produced within it. Mora's film is thus in line with Elsaesser's (2019) notion of materialised time, in which the sedimentation of temporal layers produces knowledge through friction rather than transparency.

PSEUDOMORPHOSIS: INHERITED FORMS, TRANSFORMED MEANINGS

The notion of *pseudomorphosis* (Panofsky, 1982) refers to the survival of past forms that acquire different meanings in new contexts without losing

their formal configuration. Applied to cinema, *pseudomorphosis* explains how genres and narrative structures can be reactivated as vehicles for other discourses. In *Antes del fuego*, Mora appropriates the political thriller and romantic drama genres but subverts their objectives, as the ultimate aim of the tension is not to resolve the conflict but to expose a permanent instability that reflects the impossible nature of healing historical wounds. The film's ambiguous ending reaffirms this critical perspective.

Pseudomorphosis also involves an economy of expectations. The spectator recognises different genre markers—investigation, crime, chases, thwarted romance—and thus activates a horizon of anticipation that the film deliberately frustrates. The culmination of the suspense is not a spectacular revelation, punishment or reparation, but narrative ambiguity. This deviation functions as a semantic shift, as the genre ceases to be a vehicle of entertainment and instead becomes a problematising mechanism that exposes the limits of knowledge. The film reproduces pre-existing codes in order to alter them, in an aesthetic *pseudomorphosis* that produces hermeneutic instability, consistent with the persistence of trauma.

Lapera (2018) suggests that aesthetics of contemporary Latin American cinema engages in dialogue with earlier visual traditions, vesting them with new meaning in contemporary contexts. This argument is reflected in the *pseudomorphic* approach in Mora's film, which questions the logic of representation by means of an aesthetic *pseudomorphosis*, apparently reproducing forms of classical cinema but subverting them with a contemporary sensibility. Aguilar (2006) and De los Ríos and Donoso (2016) have shown how the reactivation of genres can be used to critique power; Mora reinterprets these codes through an affective sensibility that connects memory and intimacy as resistance strategies.

Restrained performances and the use of natural lighting reinforce the defamiliarisation of the genre. The actors' faces are shown in sustained

medium shots, and the expressiveness of their bodies is restrained. The settings are designed to contain rather than enhance the action, a *mise-en-scène* that encourages reflection. As Aguilar (2006) and De los Ríos and Donoso (2016) suggest, the recycling of genres in Latin American cinema takes on political meaning when it vests these forms with historicity, i.e., when the code is transformed from a template into a mechanism for critiquing a specific time and place.

SENSORY REALISM

Sensory realism (Marsh, 2015) combines documentary, fiction and perceptual experience to produce an affective memory. Venkatesh and Jiménez (2016) have expanded this notion by pointing out the inscription of an aesthetic dimension on the bodies and the emotions. *Antes del fuego* elicits a critical empathy from its audience, conveying the protagonists' emotional tension through ambient sound, silences, slow pacing and a formalism that prioritises sensory elements over exposition.

In *Antes del fuego*, sensory realism operates through a choreography of micro-perceptions: breathing, the hum of a television or radio, echoing footsteps. This low-frequency soundscape generates a tactile attentiveness similar to a sonic haptics, so that the spectator *feels* the sound. The use of a hand-held camera introduces shaking movements that emulate the trembling of someone witnessing an event up close, the memory of which is inscribed on the body.

Suárez (2010) identifies a cinema of feeling in Colombian filmmaking whereby memory is activated by the body rather than by the discourse. In this sense, Mora's approach engages in a dialogue with films such as *Nuestra voz de tierra, memoria y futuro* [Our Voice of Earth, Memory and Future] (Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva, 1981), *L'Étreinte du fleuve* [The Embrace of the River] (Nicolás Rincón Gille, 2010), *Señorita María: la falda de la*

montaña [Miss Maria: Skirting the Mountain] (Rubén Mendoza, 2017), *Valley of Souls* (Tantas almas, Nicolás Rincón Gille, 2019) and *Malta* (Natalia Santa, 2024), which articulate an affective realism at the intersection of corporeality, identity, territory and grief. *Antes del fuego* aligns with these narrative quests, embodying what Kishore (2013) refers to as an aesthetic and material intervention, a form of sensory truth that anchors a historical question in a space that precedes the conceptual.

The ethical consequence of this approach is that sentimental identification is replaced with critical empathy as a dominant mechanism in the film. The audience accompanies the characters without becoming engrossed in them, maintaining a sensitive distance that allows the spectator to think while feeling. Angelucci (2019) describes this as an illusion of presence: not a replica of reality, but a condition of access to it through aesthetic and sensory intensification.

TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL INTEGRATION

Archive, pseudomorphosis and sensory realism all support the premise that cinema can act as a *dispositif* of resistance that activates historical perception. *Antes del fuego* proposes an aesthetics of survival and resonance: images of the past as agents in the present; inherited forms reactivated to expose the persistence of trauma; sensory perception as a mode of historical knowledge. Rather than adopting fragmented approaches, the film articulates theory and experience, archive and emotion, opening up possibilities for symbolic justice and collective reparation through its aesthetics.

This theoretical convergence helps explain why the film proposes *dispositifs* rather than theses. The archive introduces a wounding temporality; pseudomorphosis reorganises the economy of expectations; and sensory realism shifts cognition towards the body. Political resistance thus be-

comes perceptual resistance, obstructing comfortable interpretations in order to force the gaze to work actively. It is in this work that the reparative potential of the aesthetic experience in *Antes del fuego* lies. Rather than presenting the truth, the film offers a way of searching for it.

THE ARCHIVE AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE AND HISTORICAL FORESHADOWING

The narrative of *Antes del fuego* is structured around the idea of foreshadowing: the spectator knows more than the characters and reads each scene as a countdown to the tragedy of the siege. Mora eschews suspense in order to construct a gloomy sense of expectancy, in which everyday events are charged with historical gravity. The focus of the story alternates between the journalistic investigation and the development of the emotional bond between Arturo and Milena, interspersed with timely insertions of archival footage that establish the tragic horizon from the outset.

The cinematography prioritises stifling indoor settings, tight framings and handheld camera work; Bogotá is depicted as an oppressive organism made up of dimly lit corridors, offices and apartments, intensifying the sense of impending doom. On the other hand, the approach to time is in keeping with Deleuze's notion of the time-image (Deleuze, 1987): prolonged shots and silences disrupt the linear causality, as our cognitive activity focuses not on anticipating what will happen but on experiencing the prelude to what we already know will occur. Small diegetic cues—headlines, background voices, incidental remarks—anchor the action on the eve of the tragedy, transforming the anticipation into a form of historical knowledge.

A recurring strategy in the film is the counterpoint established between routine actions—drinking coffee, driv-

ing, talking briefly on the phone—and archival excerpts that signal an atmosphere of pervasive insecurity. This montage of habitual activities underscores the idea that violence does not burst in from the outside but seeps into ordinary life until it becomes naturalised. The dramatic progression is marked by successive tweaks of perception, as the film teaches the spectator to view the historical event in a different way.

THE CLIMACTIC SEQUENCE: MILENA AND THE PALACE OF JUSTICE

The climax, when Milena tries to flee the burning Palace of Justice, encapsulates the poetics of the film. A medium shot with a handheld camera follows her through the building amidst clouds of smoke and subtle vibrations; gunfire and screams mingle with barely perceptible extradiegetic music that heightens the anxiety.

The sequence alternates between the action of the fictional story and television archive footage from 1985. Pixelated and saturated images disrupt the visual continuity and force the spectator to

Image 2. The protagonist Milena fleeing from the Palace of Justice. *Antes del fuego* (Laura Mora, 2015)



recognise the reality on which the fiction is based. Mora emphasises the textural fracture rather than trying to smooth it down. The roughness of the archival footage contrasts with the digital clarity of the newly filmed scenes, generating a dialectic between past and present.

At a decisive moment, when a close-up shows Milena's face framed by smoke, she glances for a second at the camera, destabilising the fictional pact. In line with Nichols's (2013) reflections on the reciprocal relationship in film archives between viewer and viewed, the sequence ethically addresses the spectator and shifts the focus from compassion to the responsibility of memory. This idea also engages with Veiga's (2010) description of critical aesthetics in the work of Latin American women filmmakers who challenge hegemonic representations of the female body, transformed in this case into a memory-body.

The sound design fosters disorientation: the gunfire becomes almost abstract, creating a soundscape that eliminates all points of reference. As Chion (1993) explains, sound does not merely accompany the image; it transforms it. Echoes, off-screen noises and diegetic variations suspend perceptual time and turn the climax into a spasm of memory. When the camera pans upwards to show the burning building, Mora reframes the television coverage of 1985; it is not spectacle, but mourning; not closure, but resistance. The spectator sees more yet knows less; the image shows but does not explain. Here, the lack of explanation constitutes an ethical stance.

EDITING AS THINKING

The editing in this film serves an epistemological function. In keeping with the essay-film approach, Mora edits in order to think; cuts and transitions do not seek transparency but rather expose fissures. Velloso and Berenstein (2023) call this "dissensual editing", which does not pursue any kind of unity or consensus and is realised through the arrangement of sometimes contradictory or anachronistic



Image 3. Archive image inserted into the film. A Colombian army tank tries to enter the Palace of Justice during the siege. *Antes del fuego* (Laura Mora, 2015)

fragments. The alternation between archive and fiction, between diegetic sound and extradiegetic layers, creates a rhythm that renews Walter Benjamin's dialectic of the "now of knowability" (Benjamin, 2009); the past bursts into the present as a demand for the redemption of silenced memories.

Mora eschews classical Hollywood editing in favour of memory practices in other Latin American films, such as *The Headless Woman* (*La mujer sin cabeza*, Lucrecia Martel, 2008), *Nostalgia for the Light* (*Nostalgia de la luz*, Patricio Guzmán, 2010) and *Portraits of a Search* (*Retratos de una búsqueda*, Alicia Calderón, 2014), which use fragmentation and dramatic distancing to resist a moralising conclusion. *Antes del fuego* opts for suggestion over explanation, and its ethical force lies in this economy of meaning.

The film activates what Velloso and Berenstein (2023) refer to as rhythmic dissent, with changes in tempo, silences and unnoticeable yet unsettling micro-cuts. The result is a process of thinking at intervals: the historical question, rather than being found in the shots, is present between them, in the tension that connects them. It is in this interstice—rather than in any verbal lesson—that the spectator experiences history and the historical event.

THE SPATIALITY OF TRAUMA

The emotional geography of Bogotá functions as an extension of the collective grief: grey architecture, squalid streets and dimly lit interiors serve as an affective cartography. Arturo's home and office reflect enclosure and informational saturation, while Milena offers a vital counterpoint that embodies the possibility of intergenerational transmission of memory—a possibility cut short in the end with the suggestion of her forced disappearance.

The film also explores the spatiality of the archive, as every intrusion of archival footage reminds the spectator of the mediation of the narrative, while signalling, through the *dispositif* itself, the power offered by visibility. The documentary images function as intermittent signs of a past that refuses to be laid to rest.

Similarly, Plaza de Bolívar, the main square in Bogotá where the Palace of Justice is located, operates as a scenic palimpsest during the siege, with a republican layer (the country's institutions), a mod-

ern layer (media coverage) and a contemporary layer (chaos, gunshots, fire, tragedy). This demystification of Colombia's political centre emphasises that memory depends not on official narratives but on how it is used and circulated. The space of Plaza de Bolívar ceases to be a postcard and instead becomes a *dispositif* that reorganises practices and discourses.

ARCHIVE, BODY AND SPECTATOR

In contrast to documentary, which identifies the archive as external material, Mora inscribes it into the physical texture of her film. The graininess, the noise and the uneven resolution operate as physical traces of the trauma. As Steyerl (2009) suggests, the "poor image" acquires political power; its fragility testifies to the violence of disappearance and the unequal circulation of memory. The editing transforms these contrasts in the resolution into a source of meaning: in the leap between one texture and another, viewers become aware of their own work in interpreting the film.

In this way, the film viewing experience demands active sensory participation. Each insertion of archival footage requires a recalibration of the gaze and the adoption of an ethical stance towards what we see. The final montage, which weaves archive and fiction together, condenses this dialectic and allows us to view the tragedy without having it turned into spectacle; it is an ethics of viewing for unresolved grief.

HISTORICAL FORESHADOWING AND SYMBOLIC JUSTICE

Historical foreshadowing is the essence of the film's aesthet-

Image 4. Plaza de Bolívar in Bogotá. In the background, the Palace of Justice today.
Source: Wikimedia Commons



ic approach. Set just days before the events of the siege, the film is shrouded in its looming shadow. The loop of anticipations reflects how memory operates in Colombia: not as a straight line towards reconciliation, but as a traumatic repetition. This design not only structures the plot but also acts as a form of symbolic justice. By reconstructing the days leading up to the attack, Mora restores agency and a face to anonymous individuals reduced to collateral damage by the official history. The film engages with Jelin's (2002) claim regarding fiction as a vehicle for a form of truth. *Antes del fuego* intervenes in the dispute between memory and silence through the imagination, transcending mere representation of trauma to become an exercise in audiovisual thinking; no moral to the story, no closure is offered—only lingering images that call on us to revisit them. The film belongs to the testimonial tradition but expands it into a sensory realm that fuses aesthetics and the politics of memory.

Not only does this foreshadowing organise intrigue; it also defines an affective regime in which the present is inhabited by the future. In terms of memory, this means that history operates in the present as an anticipatory force: we know the “fuego” of the siege is imminent, but we do not know how it will affect the protagonists. This indeterminacy politicises our sensibility, compelling us to pay close attention to what would normally go unnoticed. Symbolic justice is thus expressed not so much in messages as in forms: in the cadence of a prolonged shot, a faltering breath or an incomplete image.

CONCLUSIONS

From the perspective of film studies and memory studies, the case of *Antes del fuego* has three methodological implications. First, it invites us to read the archive not as a source to be consulted but as an agent acting upon the diegesis and the viewer, which means that any analysis of the archive must consider its method of insertion into the film. Second, it suggests a need to evaluate genres

as flexible heuristic frameworks that reveal local conditions of historicity through the implementation of pseudomorphosis, and that therefore, our interpretation should compare both generic similarities and changes in function. And third, it points to the importance of incorporating sensory indicators into any critical analysis, avoiding the reduction of the aesthetic to mere decoration of the political, as here, the political is present precisely in the modulation of perception.

This article has examined the aesthetic, political, and historical dimensions of *Antes del fuego*, addressing two key issues: the implications of using archival footage in fiction, and its power as a *dispositif* of resistance that can activate the spectator's historical perception. Aesthetically, the film articulates a regime of perception that combines restrained suspense, affective realism and dissensual editing. The film shifts the logic of political thrillers and romantic dramas towards a bodily experience of memory; the silences, the texture of the smoke, the shaking camera and the sound design constitute a sensory truth that precedes any conceptual explanation.

On the political level, the archive is turned into an act of resistance against official narratives. By recontextualising the 1985 television footage, Mora exposes its unstable residue and reignites the debate over historical truth, calling upon the spectator to take an active ethical stance. In historical terms, the film demonstrates that the siege of the Palace of Justice continues to operate in the present as an unresolved trauma in the circular temporality of the Colombian conflict.

This analysis reveals that the archive transcends referential illustration in *Antes del fuego* to become a narrative operator that disrupts the fiction, dislocates our temporal perception, and calls upon us to engage in a critical reading of the violence. The film proposes symbolic justice and audiovisual thinking, in line with research by Longmate (2024), who identifies projects of “moral imagination” in Mora's filmography that challenge superficial narratives of reconciliation.

Formally, the film constructs a visual language of absence, eschewing the spectacularisation of the horror and prioritising consequences over explosions, slowing time down in an accelerated media ecosystem and showing us that remembering is an act of resistance. In the film's climax, archive and fiction are intertwined by means of an editing technique which, instead of reconstructing memory, symbolically restores it as a political and affective experience in each viewing. *Antes del fuego* is thus offered as a form of cinematic thought, rendering visible the tension between testimony-image and simulation-image, between the need to remember and the risk of trivialising violence. In this ambiguity lies its critical power. The film engages in a dialogue with the Latin American tradition of archive and memory while offering a unique contribution to Colombian cinema that integrates the archive as an internal engine of the fictional narrative.

In terms of its contribution to the field, this article proposes an analytical model for exploring fiction films that engage with historical traumas using archival materials. This model is useful for examining how cinema challenges the frameworks of intelligibility of the past and enables counter-narratives against institutional versions of history. In short, it provides tools for exploring cinema as an agent of collective memory and symbolic justice in societies scarred by structural violence.

Mora's film demonstrates that the defence of memory is a matter not only of form but also of content. In its articulation of archive, pseudomorphosis and sensory realism, *Antes del fuego* offers a model of intervention in the public sphere that cannot substitute the work that must be done by institutions and the judiciary, but that can complement their work with a pedagogy of perception: looking from other angles, embracing the fragility of images, and upholding within that fragility the possibility of an ethics of memory that does not relinquish its complexity. ■

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HISTORY, VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL ACTIVATION: ANTES DEL FUEGO AS A CINEMATOGRAPHIC SITE OF RECONFIGURATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN COLOMBIA

Abstract

This article analyses *Antes del fuego* (Laura Mora, 2015) as a film that problematises the collective memory of conflict in Colombia through an articulation of film archive and fiction. The film revisits the siege and retaking of the Palace of Justice in Colombia in 1985, not to reconstruct the events, but to interrogate their political, aesthetic and historical meaning. The film's narrative functions as a foreshadowing: set just days before the attack, it emphasises the imminence of the tragedy and exposes how violence seeps into everyday life. This analysis develops three theoretical concepts: the archive, understood as a site of symbolic dispute capable of resisting official versions of the past and activating a critical memory; pseudomorphosis, which explains the reconfiguration of genres, particularly the political thriller and the romantic drama—which, instead of offering narrative closure, produce a hermeneutic instability in keeping with the unresolved grief surrounding the event; and sensory realism, which articulates sound, camera and temporality to offer a perceptual experience where the body becomes an operator of historical knowledge. Mora proposes an ethics of the gaze that eschews the spectacularisation of the horror and prioritises traces, silences and signs. In this way, the film stands as a *dispositif* of aesthetic resistance, capable of challenging regimes of visibility of the past and contributing to processes of symbolic justice and collective memory.

Key words

Historical memory; Public sphere; Audiovisual archive; Siege and retaking of the Palace of Justice; Cinema and Colombian armed conflict; Pseudomorphosis; *Antes del fuego*; Laura Mora.

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HISTORIA, VIOLENCIA Y ACTIVACIÓN POLÍTICA: ANTES DEL FUEGO COMO LUGAR CINEMATográfico DE RECONFIGURACIÓN DE LA ESFERA PÚBLICA Y LA MEMORIA COLECTIVA EN COLOMBIA

Resumen

El artículo analiza *Antes del fuego* (Laura Mora, 2015) como una obra que problematiza la memoria colectiva del conflicto colombiano mediante la articulación entre archivo audiovisual y ficción. La película reactiva la toma y retoma del Palacio de Justicia de 1985, no para reconstruir los hechos, sino para interrogar su sentido político, estético e histórico. Su narrativa funciona como premonición: situada días antes del ataque, enfatiza la inminencia del trauma y evidencia cómo la violencia se infiltra en la vida cotidiana. El texto desarrolla tres núcleos teóricos. Primero, el archivo es entendido como un campo de disputa simbólica, capaz de resistir versiones oficiales y activar una memoria crítica. Segundo, la *pseudomorfosis* explica la reconfiguración de géneros, particularmente del thriller político y el drama romántico, que, en lugar de ofrecer cierre narrativo, producen inestabilidad hermenéutica acorde al duelo inconcluso. Tercero, el realismo sensorial articula sonido, cámara y temporalidad para generar una experiencia perceptiva donde el cuerpo deviene operador de conocimiento histórico. Mora propone una ética de la mirada que evita la espectacularización del horror y privilegia huellas, silencios e indicios. Así, el film se afirma como dispositivo de resistencia estética, capaz de disputar los regímenes de visibilidad del pasado y aportar a procesos de justicia simbólica y memoria colectiva.

Palabras clave

Memoria histórica; Esfera pública; Archivo audiovisual; Toma y retoma del Palacio de Justicia; Cine y conflicto armado colombiano; *Pseudomorfosis*; *Antes del fuego*; Laura Mora.

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