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# **Sounds of absence: Aurality and silence in Chile's *Mi vida con Carlos/My Life with Carlos* (2010) and *El eco de las canciones/The Echo of the Songs* (2010)**

## **ABSTRACT**

*This article analyses the role of silence, sound and voice in two Chilean documentaries, *Mi vida con Carlos/My Life with Carlos* directed in 2010 by Germán Berger-Hertz and *El eco de las canciones/The Echo of Songs* in 2010 by Antonia Rossi, as examples of ethically engaged cinema that move the spectator to contemplate dictatorship and post-dictatorship from the perspective of the children of exile. In particular, natural soundscapes, silences, voice-overs and diegetic sounds and music from official media clips and found footage simultaneously signal presence and absence as related to the violence of the dictatorship and its lingering marks in the present. Building on the previous generation's publication of literary testimonios, the aural features of both films move the audience to question discursive constructions and ultimately create an embodied viewing experience that asks the viewer to recognize the experience of other subjects and to be attune to on-going injustices.*

## **KEYWORDS**

Chilean film  
documentary  
sound studies  
haptic cinema  
exile  
Latin American film

1. The subjective turn is a transnational trend, present in other Latin American documentaries, particularly of the Southern Cone, as discussed by scholars such as Beatriz Sarlo, Pablo Piedras and Jorge Ruffinelli.
2. Aurality is that which relates to the sense of hearing. To date, extensive work on the relationship between visuality and memory already exists, both inside and outside Latin America. Franziska Schroeder writes 'vision itself becomes a dominant sense. Other senses, such as smell and hearing for instance, are being pushed into the background' (2009: 125). It is important to note the visual focus in the particular case of Latin American memory studies. Photographs have been emphasized in this research, largely due to their role in human rights organizations' searches for the disappeared and the family members' use of photos of the disappeared at demonstrations (Hauwere 2012).

The concept of the 1.5 generation – common in US immigration studies – has also been applied to children who lived through the Holocaust but were 'too young to have an adult understanding of what was happening to them' (Suleiman 2002: 277). Drawing on Susan Rubin Suleiman's work, Beatriz Tadeo Fuica uses the 1.5 generation to describe the children of survivors of the Uruguayan dictatorship whose direct memories may be similar to their parents' (2015: 303). Despite the problems of using generational concepts to categorize and encompass heterogeneous populations, this hybrid generation serves as a framework to identify how memory practices shift over time and within a particular group. By inhabiting an interstitial zone, the 1.5 generation also encompasses the complex range of experiences that coexist in Chile's *hijos de la dictadura*/children of the dictatorship. Those considered children of exile compound the generation's marginalization in history, expressed in various recent 'autobiographical' or 'subjective' documentaries.<sup>1</sup> In first-person documentaries such as Alejandra Carmona's *En algún lugar del cielo/Somewhere in Heaven* (2003) and Macarena Aguiló's *El edificio de los chilenos/The Chilean Building* (2010), filmmakers who were children of exile approach the dictatorial past through personal and familial narratives and archives. These films portray the on-going effects of exile and affects of loss through cinematic techniques that recreate distance, displacement and estrangement. Through first-person narration of subjective experiences of dictatorship, these documentaries dialogue with the previous generation's production of *testimonios*. María Teresa Johansson and Constanza Vergara propose that these types of documentaries represent a new 'audio-visual *testimonio*' that 'represents a new position of enunciation and employs a variety of methods, such as accentuating the performative character of discourse or reinserting the parents' image and history into public life' (2014: 91, author's translation). As a result, these documentaries privilege 'more quotidian and familial images' over the traditional testimonial genre's literary rhetoric (Johansson and Vergara 2014: 100, author's translation).

Whereas Johansson and Vergara claim that these films move away from literature, this article argues that two Chilean documentaries from 2010 – *Mi vida con Carlos/My Life with Carlos* (Berger-Hertz) and *El eco de las canciones/The Echo of Songs* (Rossi) – adapt literary techniques, specifically from letters and diaries, to the audio-visual format to further build on collective experiences expressed in *testimonios* and emphasize other personal narratives of absence, affect and interstitiality associated with childhood and exile. The unknown, or rather unknowability, structures them as epistolary and diaristic documentaries, respectively. Moreover, the 'in-between' of this particular post-dictatorial generation resonates with the generic hybridity of letters and diaries. Traditionally considered 'lesser' or 'secondary' genres, letters and diaries cross and combine temporalities, geographies and subjectivities. The adaptation of letters and diaries to Chilean documentaries, is, however, not a new trend; it finds important predecessors in exilic documentaries such as *Diálogos de exiliados/Dialogues of Exiles* (Ruíz, 1975), *Diario inacabado/Unfinished Diary* (Mallet, 1982) and more recently Tiziana Panizza's short films *Dear Nonna: A Film Letter* (2005) and *Remitente, una carta visual/Postage: A Visual Letter* (2008). In response to the lineage of Chilean exilic filmmaking, this article explores an often over-looked aspect of both Southern Cone memory film and epistolary and diaristic documentaries: aurality.<sup>2</sup> In *Mi vida* and *El eco*, disembodied voices and extra-diegetic sounds highlight the absence of bodies, promoting a sensuous viewing experience that makes the

stories of *desaparecidos*/disappeared, exile and memory felt within the viewer's body. The filmic content explores the contradictions between presence and absence, between knowing and not knowing, and the letter and diary formats evoke haptic hearing to reproduce the same tensions in the spectator. Using Laura Marks' notion of haptic cinema – in which film is felt in the spectator's body through the viewing experience – this article will examine how silences, voices and sounds highlight absence to create an alternative embodied presence in relation to disappearance under the dictatorship and the unknown of both the present and past, as well as the fragmented and complex identity of children of exile (2000). Furthermore, both documentaries allude to the absence of witnesses, ultimately calling on the viewer to be a potential witness who occupies the interstices between presence and absence.

These 'subjective' documentaries draw on the ethics of previous testimonial literature largely through the audience's responsibility to bear witness to the effects of violence on other subjects.<sup>3</sup> Whereas *testimonio* traditionally seeks justice for victims of torture, the documentaries by *los hijos de la dictadura* seek recognition of the on-going effects of past atrocities in later generations and choose not to present decisive conclusions in order to underline truth's unknowability. Because dominant human rights narratives often overshadow the stories of later generations, films such as *Mi vida* and *El eco* encourage viewers to consider the marginal position of the children of exile and thus nurture ethical spectatorship characterized by 'reflection, recognition, and responsibility' (Aaron 2007: 109). In particular, the documentaries' instances of haptic aurality ask viewers to listen with 'ethical ears, to reconsider how the cinema can operate to query, interrogate and force issues and concerns of philosophical consequence through resolutely auditory and audio-visual means' (Coulthard 2012: 20). By focusing on aurality, this article aims to further emphasize the ethical importance of bringing to light ways of thinking that are often absent from hegemonic discourse, including scholarship itself.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of *Mi vida con Carlos*, absence is quite literal, as the director, Germán Berger-Hertz, searches for a more complete understanding of his disappeared father, Carlos Berger, who died when his son was an infant. Carlos was killed during what is known as the Caravan of Death, Pinochet's death squad that travelled the length of Chile by helicopter directly following the 1973 coup, ultimately killing over 70 people and burying the bodies in unmarked graves in the Atacama Desert. At different parts in his life as a youth, Germán moved with his mother to Argentina and Europe in exile, claiming at one point that during a visit to Barcelona, he found the freedom that his generation had missed in Chile. Throughout the film, the director attempts to learn about his father's life and disappearance through various documents such as family photos, letters, and public media footage. The director of this film performatively inserts himself into the documentary by appearing in the film, manipulating images and sounds, and writing and reading letters. The film's non-linear structure mirrors Germán's search, the uneven process of memory and the silences surrounding Carlos within his family and Chilean society. Described as a film 'organized around the memories of memories' by Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Mi vida* approaches family biography, history and genealogy through interviews with Germán's mother, Carmen Hertz, a human rights lawyer, and his two uncles, one who remained in Chile and the other who left for Canada (2012: 10).<sup>5</sup>

Germán's voice-over directs the film to his father in a second-person narrative whose structure resembles a letter. This filmic letter includes

3. For more on ethics and testimony in literature, see Carlos Amador's *Ethics and Literature in Chile, Argentina, and Paraguay, 1970–2000* (2016).

4. Naficy explains how exilic filmmaking often emphasizes aurality to draw our attention to non-hegemonic modes of expression and thinking:

Stressing musical and oral accents redirects our attention from the hegemony of the visual and of modernity toward the acousticity of exile and the commingling of premodernity and postmodernity in the films. Polyphony and heteroglossia both localize and locate the films as texts of cultural and temporal difference.

(2001: 25)

By extension, 'the hegemony of the visual' also exists in academic research, especially in the West, and redirecting the focus of scholarship to multiple, alternative perspectives has become increasingly important.

5. Ricardo, Germán's uncle who remained in Chile, was involved with the Chilean Socialist party until his brother was killed. Germán's other uncle, Eduardo, also distanced himself from politics when he relocated to Canada. Dying of cancer, he returns to Chile with Germán in the film to reunite with his family and say goodbye. The director explains that each of his uncles represents a different response to the violent past: 'Uno, el silencio, y el otro, la huida. Pero uno no

puede callarse ni huir eternamente/'One, silence, and the other, escape. But no one can be silent or flee forever' (Fernández 2009). The documentary proves therapeutic for the family members, as they began to talk about Carlos' life instead of his death.

various visual reproductions and voice-over re-readings of the family's letters exchanged during the dictatorship while it also inserts new letters – from Germán's uncles and from himself – into the familial history of letter-writing in an attempt to break the silence that has surrounded Carlos' disappearance. *Mi vida* can be characterized as both a letter-film (formatted as a letter) and a film-letter (including letters as evidence), as defined by Hamid Naficy, who explains, 'Exile and epistolarity necessitate one another, for distance and absence drive them both' (2001: 5). He continues, 'The very fact of addressing someone in an epistle creates an illusion of presence that transforms the addressee from an absent figure into a presence, which hovers in the text's interstices' (Naficy 2001: 103). This 'illusion of presence' is doubled in *Mi vida* by the fact that each letter has either a missing (dead or disappeared) recipient or writer. Thus the documentary also highlights other absences within Chile, not only of the *desaparecidos*, but also of collective experiences of mourning. This article will explore how absences are perceived through the film's soundtrack to communicate a particular generation's memories in Chile's post-dictatorial landscape.

In contrast to *Mi vida con Carlos*, Antonia Rossi's *El eco de las canciones* has a more experimental aesthetic likened to collage. The film is narrated from the first-person perspective of Ana, a fictional woman born in Italy where her parents were exiled, similar to the director. Ana, however, is never named in the film; rather, this information is available in articles and interviews with the director. Rossi explains that she based the film's script on interviews she conducted with other children of exile in Italy and found footage, because they mirrored her own experience. The director's goal was to create a film that expressed the experience of her generation, which had been marginalized by the previous generation's stories. According to her, the film '[l]ooks to constitute a journey of our story, using various elements to draw an identity map of ourselves that contains particular experiences that mark us as subjects and as a people' (Rossi 2011, n.p., author's translation). *El eco* lacks a clear argument; rather it is a non-chronological exploration of exile structured by unknowability. The voice-over ruminates over the past and family relationships, not to question the previous generation's decisions or attempt to discover some truth about the past, but rather to express feelings towards childhood exile and its effects in the present.

While Fernanda Carvajal (2012) identifies traces of autobiography in the film's voice-over, Catalina Donoso Pinto describes *El eco* as 'an essay about the present in the first-person documentary mode' (2010). Although Carvajal identifies the film's autobiographical and literary (poetic) traits, she also recognizes that 'the autobiographical genre is weakened by a voice that has neither face nor name' (2012, author's translation). Dialoguing with this interpretation, I contend the film approximates a diary, replete with self-contemplation instead of a coherent narrative as in autobiography. The diary, like other literary forms, is difficult to classify or define in terms of genre because the boundaries are not well defined. Considering that autobiography is typically characterized as finished, polished and carefully constructed, the diary is considered fragmentary, associative and trivial (Hogan 1991: 96). Although *El eco* does not present a series of chronological, daily entries, it is a collection of first-person, subjective thoughts about daily life and dreams. Whereas *Mi vida* is explicitly structured as a letter, *El eco* does not present itself as a diary, yet it can be considered a diaristic film because of its first-person narration that exposes the construction of memory through its fragmentary collage

aesthetic and its emphasis on intimate life. In the end, the documentary is at times chaotic, fragmented and confusing, yet its disorienting aesthetic communicates the narrator's constant displacement and requires active, embodied viewing. While *Mi vida* is slow-paced, replete with pauses, silences and gaps, *El eco* is more quick-paced, saturated with a wide array of images and sounds whose disparate fragments invite the viewer to contemplate their sutures. Despite their different approaches, both films are examples of haptic cinema, requiring an attentive viewer capable of inhabiting the fissures that each film presents.

In *The Skin of Film*, Laura Marks describes haptic cinema as encouraging a 'bodily relationship between the viewer and the image' that defies narrative cinema (2000: 164). She distinguishes between haptic images – those that force the viewer's critical reflection on the image rather than its relationship to a narrative – and optical images – those that fit neatly into a closed, filmic narrative. Although Marks mainly focuses on haptic visuality, she briefly mentions haptic hearing, explaining that just 'as vision can be optical or haptic, so too hearing can perceive the environment in a more or less instrumental way' (2000: 183). Since Marks' work, other scholars have proposed the concept of haptic aurality, which Franziska Schroeder presents as 'an analogous paradigm for listening' (2009: 122). In a similar vein, Lisa Coulthard regards haptic aurality, or 'the sound as sense', as a way for scholars to contemplate that which exceeds rational comprehension (2012: 19). As she reminds us, 'sound literally touches our bodies, moves and vibrates the inner workings of our ears and echoes through our bodies in order for us to hear' (Coulthard 2012: 18). Combining these perspectives, this article further interrogates the role of the haptic in film sound, particularly in relation to the sensuous perception of absence, disappearance and unknowability: the documentaries analysed perform the construction of film, memory and identity and elicit the viewer's own performative engagements with these terms.

## SOUNDSCAPES AND LANDSCAPES

In both documentaries, sounds from nature highlight tensions surrounding the homeland. Whereas images of Chile's desert and coast are nationally recognized landscapes, the sounds associated with these same tropes – notably, of wind and water – are not so easily identified. These natural soundscapes, however, conjure up broader embodied affects and memories in addition to their corresponding national landscapes. According to Naficy, 'One typical initial media response to the rupture of displacement is to create a utopian prelapsarian chronotope of the homeland that is uncontaminated by contemporary facts' (2001: 152). For him, traditional representations of the homeland, such as nature and landscape, are examples of these open chronotopes.<sup>6</sup> However, although Chilean landscapes are portrayed in these documentaries, the sounds that accompany the images and the history embedded within them undermine any 'utopian' vision of the nation as a welcome maternal, feminine force. By focusing on sounds, this article finds that the visual symbols of Chilean landscape – desert, mountains and sea – are instead marked as sites of death and disappearance that unsettle the filmic protagonists, and, by extension, the viewer.

*Mi vida con Carlos* and *El eco de las canciones* begin in similar ways, turning to personal observation, landscape and archive to play with sound and silence, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence. In both opening

6. Bakhtin coined the term 'chronotope', which he describes as 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature', as opposed to in reality (1981: 84).



Figure 1: Super 8 home footage of Carlos jumping into the ocean in *Mi vida*.

scenes, unknowability structures the films' searches for memory and the protagonists' confusion. These scenes communicate an absence of bodies and answers while they simultaneously highlight the roles of aurality and hearing. *Mi vida* depicts the desert's supposedly barren landscape whereas *El eco* shows a blank screen equally devoid of bodies. By beginning with these haunting visuals and sounds, the films allude to secrets containing the unknown and the undiscovered while they also reflect on how to access the past.

*Mi vida* opens with a slow, low pan of the seemingly empty Atacama Desert accompanied by low lighting, to suggest a liminal time such as dawn or dusk. Hovering, the camera's movement repeats the act of looking for evidence. This opening scene lasts nearly one minute before fading to the film's title unaccompanied by audio, followed by a cut to home video footage in Super 8 of Carlos running into the ocean. Whereas the film begins with the diegetic sound of wind blowing in the desert, this next scene changes archive and juxtaposes death and life: the film moves from a public, natural landscape that serves as a haunted site of disappearance and death to a personal collection that also contains human remains of Carlos as a moving, living being. Nevertheless, Carlos remains in both scenes; the public and private archives and spaces are connected through his body, the wind and landscapes. Germán's voice-over layered over the slow motion Super 8 footage further highlights the intersection of absence and presence through the juxtaposition of silence and voice. In the next to last scene of the film, the camera returns to the desert, to show a group of family members digging for the remains of their missing loved ones. Following this, Germán, accompanied by his uncles in the desert, tearfully reads a letter that he wrote to his father in what he describes as a 'memory exercise'. As he reads, Germán glances directly at the camera with tears streaming down his face to address the recipient of the letter. In this scene, the audio-visual letter and the physical letter along with the performances of filming and reading converge in the direct address to the recipients:



Figure 2: Shot through the window of the trees and neighbouring building in *El eco*.

the viewer and Carlos. The same sound of wind blowing completes the film's circular narration, connecting the beginning with its end, and linking collective, familial and individual memories. The film begins as a letter in a direct address to Carlos by Germán's extra-diegetic voice-over and ends with Germán's and his uncles' embodied performance of letter-reading in the desert. Once separated, desert, voice and body are reunited towards the film's end.

Similarly, *El eco* opens with the sound of wind blowing, but this time in an urban landscape. As the introductory credits scroll, a first-person camera angle through an apartment window shoots a neighbouring building and trees blowing in the wind. Although the sound appears to come from the wind rustling the leaves, it is not completely clear. Following Marks' work on 'thin images' this article proposes that unclear sounds such as the ones in this scene can also be considered 'thin' since they require the viewer's 'rigorous engagement' (2000: 44). According to Marks, thin images are "'slight' and 'meaningless' in themselves', but can 'call up volumes of images that are not or cannot be represented' (2000: 43). Because the wind in this case does not have any clear relationship with the filmic narrative, it requires haptic hearing, as the viewer makes associations with other sounds outside the film. Haptic hearing – defined as 'that usually brief moment when all sounds present themselves to us undifferentiated, before we make the choice of which sounds are most important to attend to' – makes the viewer aware of discursive construction (Marks 2000: 183). This type of hearing is simultaneously ethical and reflexive as the viewing subject listens to herself listening, both within the filmic experience and beyond it (Coulthard 2012: 26). After the opening credits to *El eco* fade, the wind continues to be heard and a black screen appears, forcing the viewer to concentrate on the audio that follows. Eventually disappearing, the wind serves as a sound bridge to connect the opening credits with an audio clip of a conversation between Pinochet and other military leaders following Allende's death on the day of

the coup. Fernanda Carvajal notes that instead of turning to the emblematic images of the coup, such as the burning of La Moneda, the director 'privileges the sound framing of the *authoritarian voice* that, by removing the image, serves as a register of the secretive and the sinister' (2012, original emphasis, author's translation). In addition to this, the black screen – possibly a reference to Fernando Solanas' famous revolutionary documentary, *La hora de los hornos/The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) – requires an attentive listener. Like the clip that accompanies the opening credits, the audio from the radio conversation is difficult to discern, interrupted at times by static. Similar to *Mi vida*, access to the past in *El eco* is not clear or direct but rather blurred and elusive.

## HAPTIC SILENCES AND (DIS)EMBODIED VOICES

Just as natural soundscapes incite sensuous engagements with memory and reflection, layers of silences and voices provide other examples of haptic aurality in the documentaries' soundtracks. Silence forces the viewer to reflect on herself and on the film and offers alternative modes of memory and existence that exceed linguistic constraints. As Coulthard remarks,

This absolute eradication of sound suspends filmic reality, thus throwing not just the spectator but the film itself into a momentary otherworldliness more disorienting, rupturing and resonant than any imagistic black-out. The aural black-out reminds us of our own void and inevitable silence.

(2012: 26)

The ethical implications of silence are twofold: the film's silence highlights the construction of competing memory narratives and invites the viewer into the pauses as an active participant in the film. In what follows I look at silence as both pauses on the film soundtrack and acts of suppression of diegetic and extra-diegetic sounds and voices.

Both *Mi vida* and *El eco* use imaginative projections to simultaneously recognize and fill silences, encouraging empathy with others, especially with family members. These epistolary and diaristic techniques construct identities in the present that include the wounds and silences of the past. Claudia Barril relates the experimental and imprecise nature of first-person documentaries to the work of mourning, in which silence plays an essential role:

[these documentaries] articulate new places for history, which upon being visited, illuminate collective realities, tentative and imprecise stories of the past where descendants test possible versions of that past. And the voids and silences end up being important discoveries.

(2013: 38, author's translation)

The films at hand emphasize the silences of official history, not just of what is untold or unknown, but also as another sensuous mode of remembering and feeling loss. Scenes of wandering, like the silences, abound as invitations to and expressions of reflection. These acts of wandering seem aimless, yet they are performances of stillness due to language's inability to fully express thought; instead, the body expresses what language cannot. In addition to haptic aurality, Coulthard proposes that silence is also haptic for it 'is



the essence rather than absence of sound, and the body of the subject is its origin and endpoint' (2012: 19).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, like Coulthard, I argue absence be considered a potentially embodied aural presence: silence becomes an invitation to consider alternative versions of the past and of the present, to imagine other forms of expression.

At one point in *Mi vida*, Germán's voice-over – directed to his father – describes his family's silence regarding Carlos: 'After your death, everything changed. No one could speak about you anymore. In our family, the silence was like a fragile sheet of ice that could break at any moment'. The photos that float under water in this scene suggest, however, that the film helps to address this silence – melting it in fact – by allowing memories to surface and be shared. The director himself confirms his film's purpose when he explains: 'I decided to make *Mi vida con Carlos* with the purpose of breaking my family's silence' (Chernin 2013, author's translation). This objective surfaces clearly in a scene with Germán's uncle Ricardo and his family. Germán's voice-over explains that his uncle never spoke much of his father's life and death to anyone, including his own children. The camera slowly pans Ricardo's family members sitting silently and uncomfortably in a semicircle outside in the yard; no one speaks and no one looks up. When Germán's voice-over ceases to speak, only the natural soundscape of birds chirping is audible. Pauses, such as this one, are heard in the film's soundtrack and are felt in the slow pace of the film, inviting the viewer to partake in the heavy silences that surround the relationship between Germán and Carlos within his family. Although the director claims to break his family's silence through his film, silence is also an important component of the film's hapticity, making the viewer feel his father's absence. At the beginning of the film, when Carlos dives into the ocean in the Super 8mm home movie footage, we only hear Germán's voice-over; he eventually pauses at the end of this sequence, and the soundtrack is completely silent as we see Carlos' slow-motion splash in the water, asking the audience to contemplate his life and disappearance through the filmic medium.

Similar to *Mi vida*, *El eco* also takes up unheard versions of the past. The voice-over critically reflects on how she remembers when she says,

It's easy to become nostalgic. I was always stuck on details of my childhood. If only I could sit on that armchair for a long while. Recognize what has been left hidden in time. But I spend most days making things up. The escape is so powerful that I've never wanted to abandon it [author's translation].

In this example, the voice-over speaks in fragments parallel to the film's aesthetic. At other times, the voice-over disappears for stretches up to eight minutes long in which other – often diegetic and archival – sounds, voices and music takeover. Whereas *Mi vida* makes silence tangible through hollow soundscapes or an empty soundtrack, *El eco* uses the voice-over's slippage between presence and absence to create the illusion of silence among other voices or sounds in the soundtrack. In addition to the voice-over's disappearance, other voices are silenced through soundtrack manipulation, or only the faint background noise of an urban soundscape is perceived. About halfway through *El eco*, footage depicts crowds of protesters and the ensuing chaos in the streets of Santiago in the 1980s, as the camera unsteadily shoots buildings and people protecting their faces from tear gas. Among the shouts and

7. Paraphrasing Slavoj Žižek toward the end of her article, Coulthard writes,

as audible, resonating presence, silence is not an absence but an insistence on emphatic nothingness – it points toward the gap of what is unseen, elusive and unknowable, and exposes the void at the centre of subjectivity. In this way, audible silence can render explicit the ethical and ontological difference between hearing and seeing, can force us to recognize the transsensorial nature of hearing with our eyes and seeing with our ears and can remind us of our subjectivity and of the potentially troubling sense of duty and exposure that this implies.

(2012: 28)

In this way, haptic aurality, which uses audible silence, becomes a feature of ethically engaged cinema.

whistles in the background, the collective chant of 'asesino' ('murderer') becomes recognizable before cutting to silence accompanied by close-ups of a few individuals wiping their faces from the effects of tear gas. By emptying the soundtrack, the film emphasizes the physical suffering of protesters and passers-by to move towards hapticity.

Although these examples from *El eco* may seem to privilege visual referents by erasing sound, they heighten the viewer's awareness of the arrested voice. The visual saturation starkly contrasts with and contradicts the film's verbal silence, making the viewer question what is said and heard. Similar to this is the idea that 'Image and sound tracks usually corroborate each other, but they can also be used to undermine each other, to show the limit of what each is able to represent' (Marks 2000: 30). What's more, sound, more so than image, depicts the ephemerality of memory and experience, as well as the instability of identity associated with childhood exile. As Naficy poignantly elaborates,

One of the characteristics of sound that distinguishes it from vision is that sound is perishable, evanescent, and unstable. Unlike vision, whose existence can be stabilized, sound exists only when it is dying or coming into being; it cannot be frozen in place like a still frame. Further, if sight is analytical, operating by isolating and distancing the seer from the seen, sound is immersive, functioning to incorporate and unify the sender of the sound with its recipient.

(2001: 121)

Thus sound alludes to its own disappearance since it cannot be captured in a still, the way a visual image can, despite advances in recording technology. Although sound may be recorded in many ways, it is never motionless as, for instance, the arrested visual of a photo. Sound, then, seems to be a particularly relevant resource for aesthetic representations of the ephemerality of memory. Furthermore, the viewer connects with the person or object that emits the sounds, and, I would add, silences. In *El eco*, when the voice-over stops explaining, archival materials (images, sounds, voices) fill in the blanks for the viewer. However, these inexplicit links and inferences suggest that not everything is visible, pronounceable or knowable.

The voices featured in *Mi vida* and *El eco* function as mechanisms to approach absence and silence in individual, familial and national memory landscapes. Similar to Coulthard's argument that silence is the essence of sound, absence appears to be the essence of the voice-overs in these documentaries. The lacunae of knowledge, information and memory are palpable through the filmic juxtaposition of embodied and disembodied voices. Similar to the first-person narrative voice of letters and diaries, the films' voice-overs connect with other voices and bodies, conjuring their presence across distances. In the case of *Mi vida*, Carlos's absence materializes through his son's filmic address, whereas in *El eco*, Ana's recipient remains unspecified. If *El eco* is a diary written for the self by the self, then this 'self' is equally inaccessible as she remains in the future. Whichever the case, these present absences materialize through the artistic practices of imagination and creation in the voice-overs, which remain trapped in the films while they refer to an invisible, ghostly, off-screen body. Voices recover the disappeared for 'While images may exist separately from their producing agency, no voice exists without the force that generates it, the breath' (Naficy 2001: 121). Because of this, subjectivity and life emanate from the sound of voice, granting speech special



*Figure 3: Poetic sequence of Germán's childhood photos overlaid with images of rain and sounds of a thunderstorm in Mi vida.*

power (Naficy 2001: 121). This power doubles in the documentaries through the evident tension between physical absence and the recorded voice's presence, another testament to the speaker's actual absence and silence.

Although the director's voice-over narrates the majority of *Mi vida*, other voices contribute to the film's extra-diegetic narration. For instance, Carmen, the director's mother, provides the voice-over that rereads a letter written during exile in Argentina to her now deceased mother-in-law, Dora. Right before this scene, Germán explains how he and his mother went into exile in Argentina, while home movie footage depicts a younger Carmen in slow motion. Following this, the scene cuts to one of the film's more poetic sequences, in which the camera lingers over family photos as if to create the illusion that they are floating. Simulated lightning flashes and rain falls over the materials while thunder rumbles and a distant conversation – presumably between Germán's young daughter, Greta, and her grandmother, Carmen – is heard. Then, Carmen's voice begins to read the letter, first announcing the place and date of her writing. The conversation between Greta and Carmen, although at an audible distance, takes place between two people whose bodies are off-screen. Carmen's letter to Dora does not displace this conversation, but rather adds to the network of familial communication that is the focus of her son's film. When Carmen's voice finishes reading the letter, the faintly audible dialogue with her granddaughter re-emerges. By distorting the volume of these two conversations, the film addresses the various coexistent levels of narration in memory, and again, unclear access to the past. By making the audio 'thin', the film requires the viewer to interpret both relationships simultaneously. The viewer either remains in the layers of voices at differing degrees of audibility, in the disorienting sounds, or tries to distinguish and interpret them. Either way, the viewer is confronted with the possibility of never completely understanding the soundtrack.



Figure 4: Moving down the road in the Atacama Desert in *Mi vida*.

Towards the end of *Mi vida*, Carmen's voice is again heard as part of the voice-over that accompanies footage of the moving road in Chuquicamata, where Carlos was last seen alive. This time, however, the audio likely comes from an interview with the director as Carmen describes a dialogue between her brother-in-law Eduardo and her father-in-law that took place when they learned of Carlos' fate. Next, Eduardo begins to narrate the dialogue as a voice-over, and the audio alternates between Carmen's narration and Eduardo's retelling; with each change, the road also changes, progressing towards the desert, the place of disappearance and mourning. The more is revealed about Carlos through the family's conversations, the closer Germán approaches the unknown site of his father's remains. Symbolized and recorded in the documentary, the filial journey towards Carlos pieces together both audio and video clips in this particular sequence, eventually arriving at the desert. The narration ends with Carmen's description of Dora's visceral scream when she found out Carlos was dead. Although Carmen's voice ceases to speak, the camera lingers on the same moving image of sand blowing across the highway and the audio immerses the viewer in the desert's soundscape of howling, haunting winds. Here both sounds and silences invoke haptic hearing: first, the silence of Dora's actual scream, described in such a way that the viewer imagines the scene of incommensurable pain; and second, the silence of Carmen's voice that makes the viewer reflect on the wind and seemingly empty desert. The wind lingers into the next few frames, similar to the film's opening soundscape. After Germán's voice-over relays his father's assassination and concludes that the location of Carlos' remains is unknown, we hear the wind as sand is digitally blown away to reveal a photo of Carlos. The sound of blowing wind continues in the cut to an extreme close-up of women digging for remains in the desert. The soundtrack proceeds for three minutes, leaving the viewer with only two sounds: wind howling and women digging. At this point Germán starts to read his letter to his father as his uncles and he walk around the desert in silence too.

In the examples described above, other voices, largely from Germán's family members, participate in *Mi vida's* voice-over narration. Similarly, other voices and sounds displace Ana's voice-over in *El eco*, either from found footage or official archives. Early in the film, right before the film's title appears

written on top of a boat, a clip of Pinochet's voice compares exile with God's banishing the demons to Hell to justify this measure:

They were ungrateful Chileans. They wanted to sell their homeland. They wanted to convert Chile into a colony and hand it to the Russians. Of course they deserved to be punished. When God got angry and threw the demons into Hell, wasn't that an extradition? An exile? [author's translation].

Although the word exile is only named as such in this instance, 'silenced' in what follows, it lingers thematically throughout the entire film. The film purposefully partakes in silencing, highlighting the irony behind authoritarian speech in filmmaking and in Chilean society. Pinochet's voice fades into the background as instrumental music and Ana's female voice-over is layered over it. The film's beginning disconnects Pinochet's body from his voice, undoing his authority while at the same time granting him a ghostly presence to introduce the film.

By beginning like this, the film's gendered voice-over undermines the 'voice of God' narration traditionally associated with authoritarianism, both in documentary film and in the dictator's speech. Although authoritarian speech attempts to eradicate other voices, Ana's voice replaces and challenges this idea with a collective, imagined and female voice. The use of this clip also foreshadows the film's use of official media. Other voices that provide extra-diegetic narration are official voices, ironically contradicted by accompanying visuals or displaced by other sounds such as music. Beginning with Pinochet's voice reverses displacement by exiling Pinochet within the documentary conventions of voice-over narration. Marks explains that films use media clips because often there is no other image and they may also form a refusal to represent the traumatic event. For her, this technique serves 'the double purpose of emphasizing the fleeting and conditional nature of recorded images and forcing the viewer to recreate for herself the unrepresentable events' (Marks 2000: 44). In dialogue with this, *El eco* features various clips from official media archives, often distorting both sound and image to challenge the viewer's interpretations. Pinochet and other right-winged politicians such as Jaime Guzmán appear in television footage, yet the documentary's camera performs extreme close-ups of their faces from unconventional angles, making it impossible to have a complete view of the footage and the person. Complementary to this, Ana's voice-over interrupts archival footage of Pinochet speaking on television after his attempted assassination to instead contemplate the first time she experienced his embodied voice. In an ironic gesture, the film distorts the archival media in the way that official discourse distorts or obscures other perspectives. By performing the same manoeuvre, the film makes the viewer perceive both the documentary's ability to distort as well as the original footage's. Nothing, in the end, remains stable or completely credible.

Official footage throughout *El eco* revisits various key moments in recent Chilean history including the 1988 plebiscite in which citizens voted on whether Pinochet would continue as the country's president for eight more years (SÍ/YES) or the country would begin a transition to a democratic form of government (NO). Both sides held campaigns, including TV spots, which recently garnered worldwide attention in Pablo Larraín's 2012 film *No*. Ultimately the NO vote won by a narrow margin (55 per cent). *El eco* collects footage from both sides of the plebiscite, as well as the public celebrations

8. I do not mean to suggest that the film is pro-Pinochet by any means, but rather that it goes beyond a dichotomous interpretation of Chilean politics. Chile's Transition to Democracy remains controversial as many leaders under the dictatorship continue in powerful government positions, among other issues. Carvajal's reading of the documentary supports this interpretation: she explains that the film's representations of displacement and exile suggest an uncomfortable position of inhabiting the homeland that 'underlines the fictional character of reconciliation and unity' (Carvajal 2012: 17, author's translation).



Figure 5: Archival footage of man celebrating the NO's victory in *El eco*.

following the NO's win. This long sequence begins with archival footage of Lucía Hiriart, Pinochet's wife, delivering a speech from the balcony of La Moneda to encourage citizens to vote SÍ. Following this are a number of clips from events surrounding the plebiscite: a TV interview with Pinochet, people lined up in the streets to vote, a clip from the NO's televisual campaign and the NO's celebratory victory in the streets. The voice-over is silent in this sequence while the soundtrack plays diegetic voices and sounds from public archives as well as extra-diegetic sounds and music. In addition to muting the voice-over, the film also silences clips from official archives and found footage. One notable sequence from the depiction of the plebiscite mutes a scream while it layers extra-diegetic sounds on top of found footage. Finally, when the NO campaign wins, in a clip – likely from found footage because of the imperfections in the tape – an effervescent man looks at the camera and screams in favor of the victory, yet his voice is not heard. Instead, we hear extra-diegetic music and faintly, a boat creaking, a trope present throughout the documentary to suggest the interstitial identity of the children of exile. In such an important moment in Chilean history that marks collective identity and memory, the man's mute voice accompanied by melancholic music expresses tension and displacement. An example of haptic sound, this scene requires the viewer to interpret how sound, like history, is manipulated and listened to. The sounds and silences – heard in conjunction with the images on-screen – disrupt the NO's celebration. The protagonist's constant feelings of displacement emerge once again, undermining the supposed happiness of returning to Chile or to 'democracy'.<sup>8</sup>

### **HAPTIC ECHOES: RESONANT LISTENING AND VIEWERS AS WITNESSES**

The title *El eco de las canciones* brings to the forefront the role of sound in the documentary and the focus of this article. The film's reference to echoes implies emptiness, as auditory reverberations bounce off surfaces in hollow

spaces. Seemingly stagnant, the void actually touches the listening subject, similar to how gaps are perceived in the transmission of trauma. Literally and metaphorically, echoes are audible, sensuous traces of the past. Often weaker in volume, echoes maintain a connection with the original sound, providing a relevant metaphor for the self-reflexive processes of memory and film reception. Moreover, echoes, as temporal sounds, underscore the spatial experiences of memory. *El eco's* allusion to a collective, cultural framework and reverberations of sounds across space and time encourages haptic hearing and what Coulthard describes as resonant listening, in which 'Meaning continues to resonate and move within such a subject as what is listened to agitates, resounds and reverberates' (2012: 17). In the end, she asks if listening can be a 'resonant act not set on understanding but on the senses themselves' (Coulthard 2012: 17). In particular, for her, filmic silence calls for resonant listening that does not require complete understanding but rather leaves questions unanswered and subsequently moves the active, listening viewer to contemplation. Coulthard's insights argue for practices of ethically engaged cinema, which I claim *Mi vida con Carlos* and *El eco de las canciones* aim to create, as many other documentaries in post-dictatorial Chile.

By focusing on aurality, this article has moved towards an emphasis on the ethical relationship between filmic text and viewing experience. Whether filled with pregnant pauses, or saturated with layers of (thin) images and sounds, *Mi vida* and *El eco* provide examples of haptic aurality that invite the spectator to occupy the interstices and absences of post-dictatorial and exilic memory. They are examples of a turn towards otherwise unknown memories through the viewer's sensuous engagement with sound in cinematic spectatorship. By placing these two documentaries in dialogue and analysing their sounds and silences, this article concludes that the burden on the viewer to be a witness to the children of exile is acutely perceived because of sound's reverberations within the body. In moments of filmic silence, the viewer realizes that the film is also listening, and it exposes the viewer's silence – a complicit act to listen to the film. As childhood memories continue to mark Chile's memory landscape, haptic hearing and resonant listening become increasingly prevalent markers of cinematic practices because of the body's relationship to identity, memory and subjectivity. To return to Naficy, sound cannot be arrested as stills, but is instead constantly moving, always just beyond our grasp. As both documentaries suggest, echoes are the elusive traces that continue to move, unsettle and, ultimately, haunt. It is this bodily, sonorous engagement that positions the viewer as a witness to on-going injustices.

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