Theorizing on Honduran Social Documentary

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

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March 2010

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This thesis titled
Theorizing on Honduran Social Documentary

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ABSTRACT

MENDOZA, DARWIN Y., M.A., March 2010, Film

Theorizing Honduran Social Documentary (52 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Jack Wright

This work explores documentary film practice looking not at a concept of realism set by the coming of the photograph, but toward a concept of realism coming from the rethinking of art as a faithful system of representation in dialogue with a dynamic concept of reality. I will establish key aspects of the relationship between documentary film, artistic practice, and the concept of reality.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This theoretical work is the result of meticulous research, but also consequence of extended discussions about documentary and experimental film with my advisers: Ruth Bradley, Jack Wright and especially with Dr. Ryan DeRosa, whose work, support and attention inspire this product. This work comes also from the interaction with my professors, especially George Semsel, Tom Hayes and Dr. Adam Knee, my classmates at the M.A. film program 2007-2009 and, in particular way, from the support and the intellectual dialogue with the visual artist Pilar Leciñena.
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Without experimentation, documentary loses sense. Without experimentation, documentary does not exist. Alberto Cavalcanti

Cinema appears directly related to “reality” because its technology extended the invention of photography, a medium which produces a more complete image of the world in precise detail and mechanical “objectivity.” This fact gives origin to what we understand nowadays as “Documentary.” We can find Erik Barnouw’s general reference to this origin of non-fiction film as early as 1874.¹ Analogously, Julian Burton locates the beginning of Latin American documentary film at the moment of the incursion of the cinematograph in the region and its immediate social impact.² For film historian María Lourdes Cortés, Central American social documentary production arose in the seventies when filmmakers used the medium as a response to local social oppression. This author also argues that film practice in Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, lacks “what we can call ‘a pre-history of film’” (La pantalla rota 29).

Nevertheless, I will argue that the new trends of documentary representation are finally abandoning this conception of documentary realism based on the photographic nature of the medium. What connects “reality” and documentary film today is the wide spatial and temporal possibilities of film/video to represent changes in the perception of reality or to examine the concept of reality, both in a political and a historical sense.

¹ Erik Barnouw’s historical study of documentary, in spite of having its first edition in 1974, remains as one of the most extended and accomplished views of non-fiction film around the world.
² Burton Julianne, The Social Documentary in Latin America
Specifically, this new conception of documentary completely abandons the false objective ground in which the filmmaker must act as mere observer, and places itself in the subjective arena where the documentarian embraces an active position in the process of creation, pointing to the practice of documentary as an artistic and political form of expression.

My project explores a new genealogy of documentary film practice looking not at the current and relatively recent concept of realism set by the coming of the photograph, but to the values of a more complex concept of realism coming from the rethinking of art as a system of representation in dialogue with changes in our competing concepts of reality. I will establish key aspects of the relationship between documentary, artistic practice, and the concept of reality in a Honduran socio-political context. In this sense, in response to Cortés’ statement, I will analyze what I found as the roots of Honduran social documentary practice that take us back further from the seventies to 1932. As a final point, taking as reference points the subject matter, the author, and the spectator, I will approach a concept of documentary that necessarily reflects my own artistic practice as a Latin American socio-political filmmaker.3

To begin with, in Chapter 1, I will insist that we need to examine the concept of “reality” we use when we talk about documentary film, to understand what, in a broad sense, documentary film practice seeks to represent. Also, too often theories of realism in art take for granted (fail to historicize) the notion of “reality.” I will thus evaluate specific representational strategies in the “subjective” contemporary representation that

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3 Bill Nichols also suggests looking at the documentary definition from these three points: the filmmaker, the text and the viewer (Representing Reality 12).
undermines the binary of “reality” and “art” or “reality” and “fiction,” in order to re-conceive the social nature of reality (its need for representation). Based on these explorations, in Chapter 2, I will consider the possibilities of rethinking the documentary film practice. I lay the foundations relative to the history of documentary theory in the West in order to appropriate these fundamental concepts and strategies, and to discover a new system of values and practices for a new Latin American practical documentary art. Chapter 3 focuses on an analysis of a painting that I consider the beginning of the social documentary movement in Honduras.
CHAPTER 1: THE REPRESENTATION OF LIFE

1.1. Reality

If a documentary film is categorized by its desire to accurately represent a given reality, what are the features of this “reality” that the documentary creator needs to look for? We first need to explore the concept of Reality before we analyze the process of representation and then approach new working definitions of Documentary film. In these terms, I will argue that we also need to reconceive the meaning of “document.”

In What is Philosophy? (1960), the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset (1883 - 1955) summarizes two tendencies within the philosophical debate about “reality,” which can be posed as a question about the essence of the life that we belong to: is “reality” based in objects or in ideas? Ortega wishes to move beyond this binary, which has also been expressed as the binary of objectivity versus subjectivity. According to Ortega y Gasset, “[f]or the ancients reality [or “being”] meant ‘thing’; for the moderns reality meant ‘innermost subjectivity’; for us” -and here I include myself as an documentary artist- “being means ‘living’, therefore intimacy with ourselves and with things” (206). This reality, which he calls "radical", connotes interactive levels of experiencing reality. I underline his concept of a “living” sense of reality as vital to documentary practice. The intimacy of being with things and with ourselves, identified by Ortega with the concept of "life", exceeds the idea of reality presented by the ancients (objectivist realism), which gave priority to the nature of man, and the modern proposal (idealism), which states that the sense of “objective” reality depends on subjective consciousness.
Ortega’s concept of “essential reality” will be a fundamental framework for my conceptualization of documentary practice and more specific for my conceptualization of document; it is a dynamic concept that depends equally on what our senses perceive, and on the information that these sensory stimuli activate in our mind. These two ways of “seeing” the real, in fact, are indivisible: the purely sensory and the conceptual operate together in an active and participatory rather than a passive world. What is exceeded, or broken down, is not only the binary of subjectivity and objectivity, but the binary of mind and body. For example, if representation only relates to the passivity of the impressions (the functioning of the senses in a bodily sense), the work of art would be reduced to a chaos of points of light and frequencies, smells, tastes and textures. To summarize, the complex concept of reality that serves me as point of departure in this exploration is an intangible dimension located in the dialectic between the perceptible world (which Ortega y Gasset defines as world devoid of latency, mystery and transcendence) and the meanings of these physical bodies (which he defines as the deep world, the one that urges us to open something more than our eyes to perceive it).  

This new concept of reality, Ortega says, goes also beyond the limits usually connoted by idealism. In Lesson IX, he concludes that the primary reality is “life,” the coexistence of self and the world. For Ortega, physical and psychological reality, both are secondary compared to the primary reality of “life.” Once we understand life, as a reality “made up of a group of categories, or components all of them essential, equally original

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4 José Ortega y Gasset, Meditations on Quixote 66.
and inseparable among themselves” (235), we can debate productively about the ways in which documentary art films represent this reality.

1.2. Representation in Art

To explore how contemporary documentary art represents and helps to reconstruct reality, it is necessary to know roughly what a representation is. This project will ask: what are the strategies of representation that today's world requires in order to approach reality as Ortega refines and rethinks this concept? For this approach to a theory of representation of the essential reality (or a radical representation of reality), I will explore and put to new use some of the main ideas of Ernst Gombrich (1909 -2001), whose ideas of art history and notions of how tradition in art approaches a changing concept of reality remain influential in the Western conceptualization of art. Furthermore, Gombrich becomes crucial for my particular approach to documentary, first, because as an art historian, he always looked at history not as an exact science but as a subjective exploration of the “why,” and secondly, because his study of art making goes beyond the piece of art and includes the subjectivity of the artist who made it. In this respect Gombrich relates directly with Ortega’s dual idea of “being.”

Gombrich distinguishes the functions of a mirror from those of an artwork; his theory thus helps bring into focus what theorists throughout film history have debated concerning the documentary film as a representation of reality. Gombrich argues that

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5 A subjective world dominated and conditioned by its relation with the mass media. Also because of that, it is a world that increases the use of the concepts of “otherness” and “neo-colonization.”

paintings (he speaks of painting but lets us also think of documentary film) are not replicas of reality in the way a mirror can be; whereas a mirror is a device that allows the viewer to explore her own reality from a certain distance, art is a language constructed by signs, a representation of that reality. As such, art does not depend on an indexical relation to what it represents; yet Gombrich insists that an “efficacious” – and an active-representation of reality is possible, hence a representation “may be lifelike if that is thought to contribute to its potency, but in other contexts the merest schema will suffice, provided it retains the efficacious nature of the prototype. It must work as well or better that the real thing” (Art and Illusion 110).

This section of my study very closely follows Gombrich’s position to create a platform from which I may reveal the rich implication of his ideas for contemporary documentary practice, while distinguishing more clearly his concept of art from my own. First, he stresses that art uses, above all, a language, a structured vocabulary as a schema to describe the prototype. I share the imperative idea that art is a specific language; however, my exploration of documentary as a compelling representation of reality goes beyond Gombrich’s consideration of prototype, which for him connotes mainly the perceptible world. Based on Ortega’s approach, the reality that the documentary film should and can investigate, today, appears as a more complex challenge that I define, revising Gombrich’s term, as a fluid prototype. Second, he refers to the context of action or a “mental set” in which the author and the reader each play a key role in the effectiveness of any representational system and thereby of art. Drawing from Gombrich’s theorization of representation, I locate five characteristic elements of art that
will help in my theorization of documentary: trope, point of view, selectivity, order, and catalysts.

Gombrich’s ideas express the importance of “the trope.” The trope is a rhetorical element that directly relates to metaphor, allegory and poesis. From the beginning, art has been understood as a symbolic system of representation, functional for rituals, knowledge, documentation and communication. Thus, we find representations of the contexts of action lived by the primitive man, as well as by great civilizations. For example, ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Mayan cultures used symbols to represent a magical and spiritual world, a world in turn validated by oral narrative and literature. The accepted faithful representation, in this case, can be understood through Gombrich’s affirmation that the cultural standards of truth “are based not on a comparison of the motif with the image but on the potential capacity of the image to evoke the motif” (The image and the eye 271). The use of metaphoric symbols offers to the actual system of representation of reality the quality of “universality”: metaphoric symbolism allows a culturally-based, relatively open reading of a particular reality. Furthermore, it refers always to language, discourse and the representation of reality as a text. Metaphor gives more possibilities and flexibility to the artistic vocabulary. Gombrich, taking a social-psychological approach to image-making and reading, emphasizes that metaphor offers “a new way of articulating the world” (Art and Illusion 74). The successful function of

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7 See Film Form: essays in film theor by Sergei Eisenstein which is based on the principle of metaphor as the essence of his Montage Trope.
8 Gombrich refers to Picasso’s use of metaphor in Baboon and young (1951). For an extended analysis of this specific issue see Carroll’s Visual Metaphor in his book Beyond Aesthetics.
“trope” depends equally on the mastery of the artist in selecting it, on the richness of the text, and on the exigency of an active reading by the spectator.

In counterpoint to the “universal” potential of the trope, is the particularizing idea of “point of view.” The concept of point of view describes a quality in artistic representations. Even so, Gombrich’s intricate conception condenses several accomplishments extracted from the development of art representation. In the Quattrocento, the art of the Italian Renaissance stressed the concept of perspective. This marks a turning point in Western artistic representations, in which the artist looks not toward a spiritual reality of “man” for his technique of depiction, but to man himself (bodies in a secular breathing world) as the center of interest. Artists and viewers (in this context patrons) demanded the physical reality available to the human eye and used perspective as a response to the lack of the third dimension of depth in two-dimensional representations.

This radical addition to the representation structure at that time was arguably concerned more with physical values than with conceptual values; nevertheless, Renaissance perspective is one source of the subsequent artistic problem of defining distance, space, and point of view. For Gombrich, this moment in art history, marks the beginning of the decline in importance of the trope in representing reality; an open search for the perfect imitation of the natural world increases, a search that establishes the goal of “realism.”

Although I agree with Gombrich’s idea of a radical revolution in representing reality, I believe in a more complex interrelationality between trope and point of view.
Realism in art is more than a specific movement or trend, because it has been a great constant within art history in different periods and latitudes. Representation in perspective, for Gombrich, far from being just a symbolic form, is the attempt to reflect onto the canvas a two-dimensional image that creates the perfect illusion of reality—“illusion” is the key word, which allows interpreting the stimuli from shapes in two-dimensions as equivalent to those received from the objects in three dimensions. This was a predominant convention in Western art that faithfully complied with the function of representing physical reality.

What is important to recognize is Gombrich’s way of privileging the visual nature of our access to (or conception of) reality. This obscures his vital idea that what is changing is not only the representation of reality, but the notion of reality itself. Gombrich connotes that this early realism intended to inflect representation with the sense of reality—what he called the ambiguous reality of depth (Art and Illusion 242). Realism in Gombrich’s view reflects reality (conceived as a physical—more specifically visual—reality) as it could be perceived by the artist and the viewer, with fidelity and with absolute accuracy. As Ortega y Gasset might argue, Gombrich falls into the same trap as the documentarian who privileges the photograph, because he privileges the “reality” offered to the senses, without requiring more effort to see it and contemplate it (What is Philosophy? 232).

For example, against realism, Gombrich opposes expressionism, a point of view that would convey an internal reality imperceptible to our senses, and which focuses on the subjectivity of the artist. This concept of a psychological reality, emotional and
without clearly recognizable features of a physical reality would be perceived as a representation of the deeper meaning of the being. Depth and spatiality in expressionism relate neither to the physical world which can be tested with the senses, nor to the constructed world within the limits of the piece of art, but to an uncontrolled territory for the viewer: the inner subjectivity of the artist.

Gombrich contends that the loss of identifiable space in expressionism, can lead us to engage in a dangerous theory of valuing representation merely for the reference to the being. In Gombrich’s view, art in its highest form -realism- is neither an expression of the artist's personality, nor of his experiences, nor even a manifestation of the spirit of the times and attitudes of a general period; art (fully realized in realism) is the result of the current view of the surrounding reality. My position is different: what is admissible as realism in expressionism is how the art work refuses to simply reside in a realm of subjectivity and invokes, for example, cultural tropes or knowledge shared between artist and viewer. Vicenc Furió underlines this point, quoting Gombrich’s idea that the artist, in order to express an emotion, utilizes, in the same way that he captures the likeness of the visual world, the color chosen from his palette that is most similar to that emotion (Ideas y formas en la representacion119).

Ortega y Gasset, investigating the treatment of these different kinds of realities (physical and psychological) in art representation, invokes Don Quixote as an interesting example in which realistic and imaginary worlds converge and interact. In Ortega’s illustration, the character of Don Quixote lives constantly between the material world and his adventures. Cervantes’ representation of this dual reality appears as the product of a
new conception of reality coming from the Renaissance moment – but not as Gombrich imagines this moment as implicitly fixing our idea of reality in a register of the visible. 9

In these terms, following Gombrich, Cubism should be analyzed as a real revolution in point of view matter. Opposed first to a simple and superficial conception of reality, and second, to a static and limited vision, the Cubist movement, aware of the need to represent the third dimension of the body, renders the concept of point of view into a different level; creating "its [own] response to the radical art reading" (Gombrich Art and Illusion 281). Like the Cubists, Ortega conceptualizes depth as inherent to the essence of reality. He asserts that “[t]he ‘meaning’ of a thing is the highest form of its coexistence with other things –it is its depth dimension (Meditations on Quixote 89). Cubism revises representation as a process in which the reality is deconstructed and reconstructed on the canvas leaving to the viewer the impression of several points of view within the same surface. This risky exploration of reality representation in painting parallels the revolution that film was making over the depiction of point of view.

Film appears capable of providing the missing feature in the artistic practice of imagining point of view: temporality. This idea of a mobile point of view –which cubists demonstrate does not exclusively belong to cinema- completes the parameters in which the actual concept of point of view needs to be understood: as a dynamic point in space and time from which the artist and the viewer can inquire into reality.

In the development of visual representation, specifically with the advent of photography and cinema as more “absolute” (or tendential) means to represent reality, a

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9 Jose Ortega y Gasset, Meditations on Qixote, Poetry and Reality/ Reality leaven the Mith.
problem in relation to the mechanization of the medium demands from the artist his close attention to the next two essential components in the system of representation: selectivity on the one hand and order on the other. Gombrich, as a specialist in the psychology of perception, also states that there is a close link between the way of one perceives reality and how one comprehends that reality and, therefore, between perception and the intellectual rationalization of it. On the one hand, the element of selectivity alludes to the artist who chooses the forms and concepts that better suggest the essential reality. On the other hand, it indicates the selection of codes within the medium used to represent that reality.

This selection is what distances a simple record of reality from a subjective representation of it. In this respect, Gombrich asserts that "even the eye of the impressionist must be selective" (The image and the eye 266) and, in terms of the new medium and its mechanization, he states "[n]eedless to say that [the] camera can never achieve the tact and selectivity which the painter can display in this effort to evoke a subjectively truthful visual experience" (The image and the eye 267). Following this point, in an interview made by the Mexican journalist Jacobo Sabludovski, one of the great masters of Surrealism, Salvador Dalí, implies that the camera dehumanizes, arguing that “the difference between painting and photograph is precisely that the photograph is created by a mechanic eye, completely mediocre made in Japan, Cleveland or else where, and on contrary, painting is created by a quasi divine eye made by God”. 10

10 Explaining the same analogy translated to the world of sound, John Butler, professor in sound for film at Ohio University, states that what separates us from microphones is our
Gombrich applies the distinction of mechanical versus human selectivity to both the artist and the viewer. The perception of the world through a constructed text –visual or not- always involves a critical, active and selective look. In the field of visual representation, as Gombrich suggests, it is absolutely impossible to speak of an act of "mechanical" or innocent vision, because every vision, every optic experience is a discriminatory and combinatory vision (Art perception and reality 61). He also stresses the very nature of the eye: the retina is a fragment of the brain, and that every perception is an active perception, an ordering perception. Therefore, the element of “order” in the system of representation demands the organization of features -the construction of the discourse that is directly connected with the technique and the artist’s strategy. For documentary film, this means reorganizing the selected profilmic elements and the extradiegetic elements (voice over, graphics, intertitles, etc) to represent such reality in a more efficacious way.

An effective observation must capture the most important attributes of the dynamic essential world. Even if the accessed world is conceived of as static, as natural or only visible, the way the artist (in relation to the observer) looks at this world is dynamic, selective and organized. As an observational phenomenon, experienced by the viewer, the world changes with any observer’s change of position or perspective.

In that way, the participation of the spectator in the process of representation of reality is critical. What Gombrich underlines as the power of interpretation, Ortega refers as “foreshortening…in which we find an extreme case of a fusion of simple vision with a hearing selectivity, because otherwise we should pick up a chaotic noisy world and could perceive it yet not understand it.
purely intellectual act” (Meditations on Quixote 69). Gombrich’s complete theory of the
history of visual representation is based on a psychological path that stresses “the
beholder’s share in the reading of images, his capacity…to collaborate with the artist and
to transform a piece of colored canvas into likeness of the visual world” (Art and Illusion
291). In this way, Gombrich presupposes a viewer –as much as an artist- as the catalyst
for art. However, this does not lead him to theorize the art practice (and the interpretation
of art) through an analysis of the specific social needs of the viewer. Gombrich conceives
of the need to understand the visual reality through the viewer’s comparison between
those fragments of reality and its representation.

Gombrich cannot imagine cinema as a vital realistic art (Looking for answers
88).11 His personal studies about the representation of reality lead him to explore three
dimensions of reality: height, width, and depth.12 In this, I found the major difference
between his concept of realism and my own; I consider movement as the four dimensions
of reality that film brought to complete the system of representation. In addition, the
contemporary spectator can only be understood in the contemporary age with the arrival
of the experimental aesthetics of the “happening,” the “installation,” and the
“performance.” These art forms are characterized by the radical combination of
audiovisual elements and the great significance of the interactivity with the spectator,
 hence ceasing to create a static representation of reality “to offer [instead] the living
experience of a new reality” (Arizpe 277). What I extract from this extreme notion of the

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11 When Gombrich was asked about why he did not include film in his *Story of Art* his
vague answer tells us first that he was not interested in moving images, but we also infer
that he does not consider documentary film in a category of art.
spectator’s participation is the basic concept of interaction between the author and the viewer, not in the physical way expected in these art projects, but in terms of what Gombrich calls the “expectation” and “reactions” of the viewer. The viewer’s expectation interacts in the process of creating the representation, and the viewer’s reactions complete the representation in the act of reading and using it. “It is the power of expectation rather than the power of conceptual knowledge that molds what we see in life no less than in art” (Art and Illusion 225). Therefore, “[w]hat a painter inquires into is not the nature of the physical world but the nature of our reactions to it” (Art and Illusion 49).

To conclude, I want to point out that the effective system of representation in current times depends, first, on the ability of the artist to use these five elements (trope, point of view, selection, order and catalyst), and second, on the possibilities afforded by the medium that allows him to do so. In addition, the art medium that, at this moment and for my project, may offer the most possibility to create a truthful socio-political representation of life is cinema, and in particular, experimental documentary film.
CHAPTER 2: TOWARD A CONCEPT OF DOCUMENTARY FILM AS REPRESENTATION OF LIFE

John Grierson, one of the first theorists of documentary film, suggests the term “documentary” means “the creative treatment of actuality” (qtd. in Rotha 70). It is interesting to notice that this definition, which I consider synonymous with “a creative representation of life,” refuses to limit documentary to just being a trace of our world, yet embraces the concept that documentary is a rhetorical reference of our world. In the documentary aesthetic I am valuing, the documentary form should be, first of all, conceived as an artistic construction; we must avoid the restrictions and manipulations of the category of “document” like the news in the media that, due to its objectivity, would be perceived only as information (taking the same rule as the mirror in Gombrich). As Brian Winston argues in his extended analysis of Grierson’s concept of documentary, “[i]n documentary film practice this vision of art is measured by Arnheim-style consideration of selectivity, which distances the form from other types of non-fictional filming” (22). In this regard, the documentary as a piece of art cannot escape the subjectivity of the artist and the viewer, and becomes the product of a particular vision of a certain reality. Paul Rotha, a practitioner and one of the first documentary theorists, wrote in his introduction of his first book (1935) about this –at that time- new and fresh form: “I look upon cinema as a powerful instrument for social influence today; and I regard the documentary method as the first real attempt to use cinema for purposes more important than entertainment” (25). In this sense it is clear that “documentary…arose in response to the sensationalized oversimplified representation of reality offered by the
average fiction film. Documentary might treat reality creatively in Grierson’s words (i.e. with narrative and dramatic techniques” (Nichols, Blurried boundaries 47).

But to start defining a concept of “documentary” associated with the current Latin American trend (and responding to the social needs of the poor and the marginalized in Latin America today), I need to understand it from its inner structure and its function rather than from an established definition. I find critical some observations of Bill Nichols, one of the most dedicated documentary theorists.

Looking for a definition of documentary, Nichols suggests it involves “the filmmaker, the text, and the viewer” (Representing reality 12). These three main components work actively in a contemporary Latin American representation of its own “essential reality” or of what he calls the “historic world.” However, when theorists are debating the veracity of photography and documentary as a trace of reality, they are talking mostly about a superficial reality, visible or perceptible in terms of light, putting aside other aspects of reality that make up its whole essence.

For example, if we talk about a photograph documenting a “tomato,” we can have its image. But this image is not enough for us to know the essential reality (the tomato’s “life”). In fact, this could be the photograph of the hyperrealist sculpture of a tomato – a perfect illusion in Gombrich’s theory- which has a very different life. The simple photograph does not give us any other particular characteristics of the tomato such as its taste, its smell, its temperature, and so on. Thus, the photograph is a document that talks about one aspect of that reality. As a result, we need to find ways to express these other aspects that will give us a full idea of what this tomato is. As our subject "tomato," unlike
a person, has no means to express itself in front of the camera, in order to give its information to the viewer, it is necessary to use a narrative device to describe what this tomato “really is.” This narrative or dramatic technique, Nichols points out, is what differentiates a documentary from the news-reel. Contemporary documentary, therefore, must contain the five main elements that I discussed above: a rich symbolic language, a dynamic point of view, a critical selectivity, a specific order, and a dialogue between the artwork and the spectator, in order to be considered “as representation of the historical world rather than a likeness or imitation of it” (Nichols, Representing reality110).

I want briefly to consider, in the way of an evolution of conceptualization, an interesting debate developed by three of the most influential theorists of non-fiction film: Gregory Currie, Noel Caroll and Karl Plantinga. First, I agree with Gregory Currie’s theory that in a documentary, "meaning passes from image to narrative" (296). Currie thinks that narrative is a crucial element in documentaries. But I disagree with him in delimiting the function of the narrative only to images that represent what they are traces of (290), because the power of metaphor lies in using some features to describe the meaning of different ones (metaphor is a central part of my conception of documentary). This is the first step to define the term documentary; the narrative as spinal column.

Currie’s argument for the “ideal documentary” – which he defines through the film’s capability to capture one aspect of reality in an audiovisual way is completed by Noel Carroll’s concept. Carroll completes Currie’s arguments and his concept of documentary as "film of presumptive trace" (188). Nevertheless, Carroll prefers the broader term "film of presumptive assertion" (189) to define documentary, the
importance of which lies in the intention of the filmmaker and the response of the viewer. Hence, he distinguishes in that way a documentary from an informative video that we can watch in the TV news. This idea parallels the criteria by which Gombrich theorizes art as special relation (or access) to reality.

This debate about the definition of “documentary” calls attention to the two main streams of mimesis versus meaning, around which the general theory of representation has moved. In documentary film theory, on the one hand, documentary intends to reproduce the image or sound of reality - Nichols’ “observational category” - taking advantage of the mechanical faculties of the medium and with the possible intervention by the artist kept at a minimum (free cinema, cinema verité, direct cinema etc.). On the other hand, documentary shows and tells realities through a conceptual cinematic language. I personally believe in the transcendence of the last by simply considering the first as just informative. The documentary as a current representation of reality needs to include the active participation of the creator in selecting and organizing aspects of that reality in a conceptual process. Bill Nichols, defining documentary film by its approach to reality, finds a category which uses referentiality and evocation of “truth” as its dominant features. The performative documentary, in Nichols’ words, “burst the contemporary prison world (of what is and what is deemed appropriate, of realism and its documentary logic) so that we can go traveling within a new world of our own creation” (Blurried boundaries 102). This category of creative treatment of the essential reality evokes the subjectivity of a particular vision, and the liberty of the text to develop “persuasive strategies to [make an] argument about the historical world” (Nichols,
Blurried boundaries 94); through its expressive poetic and rhetorical (evocative) discourse, this documentary form asks for the viewer’s response to complete the representation. Gombrich states that all art is conceptual, giving priority to construction over imitation. In Ortega’s words, the concept more than the impression conveys to us the “form” of things—“the physical and moral sense of the things” (What is Philosophy? 92). In this way, we can begin to analyze the current documentary tendency in Latin America as a conceptual form of art.

For decades, the documentary film was considered prisoner in the jail of realism, following the limitations of capturing just the present reality (in front of the camera) or working with archival material of an identifiable reality. The filmmaker that only moves in this space can never show what Ortega calls the “latent world,” the "unseen" reality that in other terms would be impossible to see, which is as real as any visible reality. In this respect, Karl Plantinga proposes that the documentary film should be a mixture of the two streams: Currie’s “documentary of indexical record (DIR)” and Caroll’s “documentary of assertion (DA)” as “an asserted veridical representation” (114): an argument about the world. This definition involves a contestable representation of reality, making clear an authorial voice. This authorial voice or argument is similar to what Nichols means by documentary voice, “the voice of documentary gives expression to a representation of the world” (Representing reality 140). The key element in the definition of a documentary here is that the text (documentary discourse) and spectator establish a dialogue in which the first exposes an affirmation that the second must confirm or correct in relation to her expectations and information. Plantinga’s definition of
documentary matches perfectly with the panorama in which we might place the Latin American documentary. This is from an ambivalence I find in Plantinga’s definition that productively disrupts the distinction between conventional documentary and fiction film in that it can be applied equally to fiction films as to non-fiction films.

Nowadays, without doubt, with the fast development of technique, style and rhetoric in documentary representation (voice), documentary and fiction cannot be located as opposites. Nichols argues that due to its link to narrative, documentary can use plots, character, situations and events; nevertheless,

[I]t is still unlike fiction in important ways. The issues of the filmmaker’s control over what she or he films and of the ethics of filming social actors [instead of just performers] whose lives, though represented in the film, extend well beyond it; the issues of the text structure, and the question of viewer’s activity and expectations […] suggest important ways in which documentary is a fiction unlike any other. (Representing reality 109)

Within the Latin American context this dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction in film has always been unclear. The stream known as the New Latin American Film – emblematic of the Latin American film tradition- is characterized by a constant dialogue between two opposites: fiction and non-fiction. In that way, Julio Garcia Espinoza argues that it is inappropriate to debate this issue of documentary versus fiction. We need to conceive documentary, Espinoza implies, not as a non-fiction film form but as an active film form. This “film to action” appears, in the 1960s, as a response first to the emptiness
of entertainment films, second, opposed to the simplistic realistic film in the form of reflection (mirror), and third, as an active way to understand the Latin American reality.13

Let us take a scene from Jorge Furtado’s film Ilha das Flores (Brazil, 1989). This film is a radical example of how fiction (narrative) and non fiction (reference to reality) can mix within a documentary. In the scene, the director shows the image of one of the main “characters” in the movie, -a tomato-, but also uses a narrative discourse to describe its activity as a commodity. One scene is an interior in which the director’s point of view shows a selection of elements: several tomatoes in a bag, a woman and a trash basket. Furtado’s discourse, or his order of these selected elements, is as follows: the woman takes one of these tomatoes, smells it and expresses her rejection through a facial gesture. The woman throws the tomato in the trash. The next shot is an image of four conventional symbols making the word LIXO, which in Portuguese means “trash.” This simple action is an example of the creative use of narration (from a particular point of view and with a selected and an ordered structure) to provide a more complete representation of that reality (tomato). Now the viewer, through her catalytic participation, infers that the discarded tomato is different from the rest of the group because of its unpleasant odor; also, the viewer can identify the importance of the word LIXO and its meaning in the representation of that tomato. Nevertheless, the director is in fact not interested in just showing the plain reality of that tomato, but in using it as a metaphor to explore a social reality of the Brazilian society. Furtado follows the trajectory of that “tomato” to take us to a subworld very present in today’s Latin

America. The director plays a role as an intermediary between a simple reality that demands to be observed and another more complex reality that is latent, observed and is susceptible to be changed.\(^{14}\)

In that way, Furtado offers us in this simple documentary scene a reference for the essence of reality. Leandro Rocha Saravia states that *Ilha das Flores* evidences that images have powerful representative value if they are covered by a critical selection of mechanisms of representation, when also, it indicates those mechanisms that dominate the contemporary audiovisual production in Latin America today (398).

To Summarize, a documentary film always is a narrative that works based on documents (social and historical meanings). The documentary film is a form of active representation, rather than just a "window" of reality. In addition, the mixing of film genres is a constant in Latin American Film (as the example of Furtado’s film) where a hybrid concept of documentary uses both genres as a means to ensure a cinema available to the people.\(^{15}\) This contact between opposites allows richness and enrichment, an opening to finding other possibilities for audiovisual creation and social activism. This active approach to documentary film offers resources and facilitates new ways to develop a social documentary that, in representing the current Latin American reality, urges for social changes and, as Fermando Birri declares, this “social documentary” is knowledge,\(^{14}\)  

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\(^{14}\) Document from the “Video Documental Social” 2003 workshop, Yolanda Prieto Ramos and Raul García García.  
\(^{15}\) Jorge Sanginés y Grupo Ukamau, *Teoría y Practica de un cine junto al pueblo*. 
consciousness, the making of consciousness of the reality, problematic, and change from a sub life to a life.\textsuperscript{16}

CHAPTER 3: PABLO ZELAYA SIERRA AND THE SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY IN HONDURAS

As film historians Julian Burton and Maria Lourdes Cortéz point out, social documentary filmmaking in Latin America has inspired many renowned artists whose origins are outside Latin America – such as Sergei Eisenstein (Que Viva Mexico, 1932), Luis Buñuel (Los Olvidados, 1950), and Joris Ivens (A Valparaiso, 1962). These filmmakers have also seen Latin American filmmaking as an opportunity to merge the practices of social documentation (looking closely at the “reality” of social turmoil and social contradictions) with a revolutionary impulse to change social conditions. While this practice of merging documentary film with revolutionary theory has continued in Latin America, in recent years it is evident that the means to represent “reality” on film no longer depend on the old realist tradition in which the film took on its shoulders the obligation to tell others, in the most clear and accurate way, the conditions of poverty or inequality. When we look at the film scene in Latin America today, we observe that the stories told, the characters revealed, the plot and the visual elements, express new signs of an identity and a history that cannot be captured, only recreated.

In order to approach contemporary documentary practice in a Honduran context, we must understand the tradition behind it, a tradition of using what I would call a Latin American documentary imagination. My particular education as a filmmaker is one of many similar stories within the young filmmakers of Honduras. Since we do not have a school of film yet in our country, we often seek our training within “international” film schools – in Cuba, Argentina, Mexico, or in my case, the United States. However, these
schools are usually not the beginning of our artistic journeys; we have come to film from other arts and media rooted in Honduran experience, including literature, the theater and fine arts. Consequently, our film tradition comes permeated by and with other artistic languages, those that spring from the world as a mix of cultures, and those that come from the cultural mix that is Honduras itself. This way of re-constructing tradition is not unusual for countries without formal means of education in film, as the Argentinean Fernando Birri, whose work provides a foundation for the Honduran social documentary, mentions about himself: “In the beginning I was a puppeteer…[M]y roots, however, are in poetry…[A]s a puppeteer, as a theater director [and] as a filmmaker –what has guided my steps is nothing other than the search for and expression of a poetics” (2). Modern Latin American artistic history has been written and realized in great part by individuals like Birri and most of the filmmakers of the new Latin American cinema, who have had the opportunity to look at their countries from an outside position, and then returned to struggle against social problems by creating art that represents the multiform and sometimes confusing reality as a new sensorial experience.

Therefore, I would like to define a “Latin American documentary imagination” in terms of historical necessity: this imagination or tradition looks at the documenting of reality as a tool to change reality, reflected in the practice of bringing a certain “distance” to an indigenous reality that can seem too close to many who are embedded in the social struggle and suffering of that reality. This imagination evokes a need to affirm one’s own background of struggle through employing multiple artistic perspectives. Thus, taking as my object not a “film tradition,” but rather a tradition of the documentary imagination
that is vital to a future theory of today’s Honduran documentary, I will analyze the formal structure of what I consider one of the roots of Honduran social and political documentary practice: Pablo Zelaya Sierra’s painting *Hermanos contra hermanos* (*Brothers against Brothers*), made in 1932. My method for delineating its formal structure is to identify the five basic points I proposed above (the trope, point of view, selection, order and the catalyst) as a practical way to approach a “documentary” representation, an image meant to capture a social reality.

*Hermanos contra hermanos* was Sierra’s personal response to the Honduran reality of civil war that confronted and inevitably enveloped him on his return to the country after 12 years of absence. During this absence, he had absorbed in Spain the radical experimentations and exigency of the modernist movement. Nevertheless, his personal notes about his artistic sojourn reveal that he was more influenced, on the one hand, by the Catalan *Noucentisme* - which partly reacted against modernism’s tendency towards ambiguous perspectives – and, on the other hand, by oral literary tradition very common in Latin American art. We see these European and Latin American premises translated into a tense visual narrative in the works of Pablo Zelaya Sierra. This appropriation and reinvention of documentary style moves his paintings beyond the representation of static moments to give them a storytelling character, and a radical impetus to participate in the social movement that he depicts.

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17 “‘Hermano contra hermano” oil painting over canvas 32” x 32.” To find more information about Pablo Zelaya Sierra look at the commemorative publication of his first century, Central Bank of Honduras.

18 Pablo Zelaya Sierra left a personal and very detailed description about this issue in his writings, now called “Hojas escritas a lápiz,” published in 1964 by the *Geography and history of Honduras magazine*, nos. 7, 8 and 9, Tomo XLI.
3.1 Visual Discourse: Metaphor in “Brothers against Brothers”

The element of trope, or metaphor, in the discourse of *Brothers against brothers* appears as identifiable elements around the frame, as well as a chain of interconnected meanings and their interaction with the spectator that makes them deliver their meanings and therefore complete the discourse. A discourse that emerges as an open dialogue but depends on the viewer’s response to consolidate a universal or a local context. The metaphoric elements share the same space and importance with literal images within the composition. This balance between a visible reality, portrayed as a photographic image, and an element that speaks about an unseen reality is what give us the sense that this documentary is approaching a more complex and wide reality in Ortega’s way. Because of its figurative visual account, I will not spend time trying to identify every trope in this work. I will focus my study in the three main tropes that Sierra cleverly left us: the image of the donkey at the center of the composition, the small flowers in the lower left corner and the pinecone in the lower right corner. Sierra strategically locates these three connected metaphors in our way to explore the story. As I will mention right below when I will analyze the point of view, “Brothers against brothers” presents two predominant visual paths to follow the story.

The donkey that carries on its back the body of one of the victims in this story, at the center of the composition and behind the main character of the story, refers to ignorance. This ignorance applies to the main character, but Sierra faces the spectator directly with it. The donkey is the only character that looks directly to the spectator without any expression. This metaphor is a direct influence from the latest work of the
Spanish master Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (whose work Zelaya Sierra knew very well). Mostly developed in the series “Los Caprichos” and well know in his painting “El Coloso”, Goya’s metaphor implies the lack of education but also the lack of sensibility.\textsuperscript{19} Pablo Zelaya Sierra’s metaphor also infers to the same concerns, hence the donkey is a metaphor about people, and it is the direct connection with any spectator to start the exploration of this painting.

The pinecone becomes apparent as a reference to place. With this element, Sierra set clear the context in which this documentary vision need to be interpreted: Honduras. The pine tree is abundant in the rural areas of Honduras, for this reason this particular tree became Honduras’ national tree. Sierra uses it as an icon that embraces all parts of Honduras, stating that this situation affects not just that part of the population but the whole country. The last metaphor I want to mention is the three little white flowers in the lower left corner of the composition. This is the most personal statement set by Zelaya Sierra within his work. The colors used in this element are green (hope) and white (purity) and actually is located right above his signature –in green color and without date- expressing Sierra’s last word at the moment of making this piece. This trope tells the spectator that not everything is lost; three small flowers can grow and represent a possible future to the country. As a metaphor of youth, the three little flowers relate directly with the three victims and with what they left behind. In the same way as these three metaphoric elements, we can find many visual figures that adopt the function of symbols, \textsuperscript{19} Los Caprichos, by Francisco Goya y Lucientes. Philip Hofer. New York Dover Publications 1969.
the process of finding them and sometimes giving them particular meanings creates the dialogue between the author, the piece and the spectator.

3.2 Within the Edges: Narrative Perspective in “Brothers against Brothers”

The element of point of view appears clear when the whole piece, as a narrative account, shows three specific and important moments in its story from the same wide-open perspective. Due to the nature of the technique used by Sierra (bi-dimensional panoramic exposition of the action as a continuous story), the author locates the spectator’s gaze in the middle of the whole composition. Sierra’s composition urges us to follow a visual path that always starts at the central zone of the panoramic but that offers two possible ways to finish the story. I need to mention that this temporal-visual treatment does not separate the events of the story by any kind of device or montage to cut the actions or moment. For this reason, I will support my analysis of this element with some lines of one of the most prominent and influential theorists that has examined the binary film-reality; French film critic André Bazin, who states that the more effective film representation of reality can be achieved just through the use of “depth of field.”

Before I discuss this device of panoramic view, I need to make clear a point between his ideas and my own. Inside the debate about cinema as an art of reality, theories of a realistic film practice have never created a kind of uniform position, but several discourses, that match in postulating this aesthetic as the most consistent with the native properties of the film camera or the specific qualities of the medium. Within these discourses, André Bazin takes a special place because his theory appears as one of the

20 In *What is cinema?* André Bazin analyzes Orson Wells’ “Citizen Kane” as the perfect example of this technique that following Bazin it respect the ambiguity of reality.
most influential. But in his discourse, it is difficult to determine a single reading line. In a simplistic view, one might find in his theory a sort of “functional realism,” due to the emphasis on the power of the camera to accomplish a “faithful reproduction” of the physical world; the film camera is a tool for exploring the world. At the bottom of his theory, we will find a kind of "existential realism" or an "ontological realism" that comes also from the photographic attribute of film, but goes further to point out and to emphasize the intimate link between the reality represented and its representation, rather than rely on the simple question of likeness. For my analysis, this conception of ethereal contact between the reality and the representation opens the door to explore later a conceptual point of view inserted in “Brothers against brothers.”

Bazin’s central precept of his famous article “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” is taking in light of Malrauxian reflections on the evolution of the art of painting, and he even quotes the lines that summarize these thoughts: "the cinema as the furthermost evolution to date of plastic realism, the beginning of which were first manifest at the renaissance and which found a limited expression in baroque painting” (What is cinema? 10), Bazin declared himself in line with the ideas of his admired French contemporary. Photography, Bazin implies, satisfies our ancestral desire for likeness, frees the painting of its "mummy complex,” this obsession with looking for the likeness, but, finally stresses Bazin, in a breaking with this line of Andre Malraux, the camera, unlike painting, captures reality mechanically and automatically. "For the first time," he writes, "between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent” (What is cinema? II 13).
I accept from Bazin this connection between painting and film, but I refuse to believe that this “neutrality” or this “essential objectivity” is only attributed to the camera and not to hand-made images. From my point of view, first, the neutrality of the camera lacks a scientific basis to prove a perfect capture of reality; on the other hand, I am sure that the dichotomy between reality and representation is still relevant for photographic images on the same level as manufactured images. But Bazin’s study of appearances is relevant, since he opts for a total participation of the viewer and minimal involvement by the director when he suggests that appearances, in fact the only thing the camera can capture, provide the only access to the object or the essence of this object. That is, the viewer accesses the being of the object through its appearance. Laterally, Ortega examining Don Quixote, infers that one leading way to access the deep dimension of reality is through appearances.

Realism within the integral theory of Bazin is presented as a challenge that the film does not deal with at once, but gradually, with partial victories. One of these conquests was the “depth of field” and the “long shot” that create a stage of perceptual

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21 Bazin also falls on an essentialist approach of film theory whose goal is to define what is and what is not legitimate real on film. In Bazin’s theory, photography ensures an essential objectivity in film, and creates an ontological link between the represented object and the representation. Hence, it refers to a phenomenological realism, and this phenomenology refers to the psychological-philosophical perception of the film experience that can finish in a kind of meta-physical transcendence. This transcendental virtue is manifested in the ability of film to preserve moments in time -past-present-future- “mummified” forever. Therefore, the other essential quality of cinema, its indexicality: the film is a trace of how things are or have been. To me, it is impossible to agree with this essentialist tendency, however, I am interested in the realist theory of Bazin as an evolutionist theory of film medium. The representation of reality in film is developed along with the constant changes about the concept of reality itself.
realism capturing an event in its spatio-temporal unity. Following Bazin, the camera only records the event without major human intervention; film is close to our natural mode of perception. Bazin believes that this perceptual realism was not materialized in a satisfactory manner until the forties, when the director began to abandon the analytical montage and choose the sequence shot as the main element of the narrative, specifically with the movie *Citizen Kane*.

Depth of field here appears as the ideal form to “capture” the ambiguity of reality, bringing this concept into my analysis, I state that in “Brothers against Brothers”, all the basic elements are embedded around Sierra’s way to frame this multi-angle situation. In this sense, Zelaya Sierra takes advantage of the medium –painting- to present the complete story with minimum guiding of the spectator. Baudelaire asserts that painting is the perfect form “because [it] is tangible, direct and capable of being perceived as a totality” (qtd. in Johnson13).

If we look at *Brothers against Brothers*, we appreciate that Sierra’s depth of field allow us, as I mentioned above, to follow two possible visual paths. One these visual paths can take us down the composition and suggest that we slowly go through the left edge and move toward the upper left corner where we find a group of people evidently abandoning their land. From this point, a little and powerful detail translates us directly to the opposite corner of the composition. This detail reveals from the group a little boy who turns his head to look back, and with this look take us directly to find the conclusion of the story and the answer of why the group of people is leaving; we witness, at this moment in the story, how their house is being destroyed.
The other possible visual path functions in the same manner but through the right edge of the composition, allowing us to find first the house burning, and then the family abandoning the land. After following either of those paths the spectator, if she continues to explore the painting, she inevitably returns to the center of the composition where the Donkey’s eye is located, this moment of confrontation with the work and with the spectator herself, adds to the painting another spatial dimension. Furthermore, that moment moves the point of view from an outside position to an inner, almost metaphysical, position to start the exploration again. From a conceptual perspective, Sierra locates his point of view circulating among the subjects inside the composition and among the viewers outside of it.

In terms of time and related to the element of perspective, the selection and organization of the three specific moments to tell the story indicates Sierra’s temporal point of view: the present. A story like this can be documented from several temporal perspectives. One author can look back to the causes of the problem, another artist on the contrary, can approach the story by exploring the future consequences of those acts, or a third documentarian can present an overall perspective waving among past, present and future. Sierra emphasizes the current actions and leaves to the spectator the possibility to enquire about why this happened (past) and what will happen (future).

In this way, and following Bazin, Sierra’s use of depth of field and sequence shot Sierra frees the viewer and lets her explore the complete frame, in contrary to a formalist film technique that forces us to follow a specific rhythm that distorts the natural space-temporal flow of reality.
3.3 Expressive Means: Selection and Organization in “Brothers against Brothers”

The aesthetic language used by Sierra is determined by the elements of “selection” (what the author chose to show and consequently everything that it is left out) and “order;” both need to be analyzed at the same time because of their correlation. In order to conduct the analysis of these elements, I will follow the conceptions of the Ukamau group in the words of Jorge Sanjinés. Ukamau, more than a Bolivian filmmaking crew, is now a symbol of art and political activism in Latin America.²² Their documentary films and the process of making them represent what I will call a practical theory of Latin American effective cinema.

The element of selection and order gives Sierra the opportunity to use a coherent language that serves him as a tool to avoid the trap of just showing instead of telling or revealing other aspects of that moving reality. In order to tell the story within the limits of the frame, Sierra offers an economy of visual propositions. The formal composition can be simplified in seven individual and particular elements that interact with an energetic group of metaphors. These elements are: the criminal (or group of criminals), the victim (or the group of victims), the weapon, the donkey, the family, the house and the terrain. Looking at the high level of detail in every element, we can deduce that every

²² Jorge Sanjinés and the members of Ukamau group refused to leave their country and they continued creating films focused on the real participation of the people in Latin America, where the making of political films became almost an impossible task due, not just to lack of resources, but because the opposition of our governments. For this reason, Ukamau is an inspiration for new generations of socio-political filmmakers.
single element has been carefully assimilated, located and absorbed by Zelaya Sierra in the process of their systematization.

Jorge Sanjinés, from his group’s experience, states that “[w]hat the filmmaker thinks and feels is manifested in the expressive means he chooses to use. His selection of language forms reveals his attitude and, therefore, a film tell us not only something about the subject it treats but also something about the filmmaker” (143). And, due to the brutality of the images, there is no doubt that Sierra had a profound pain and personal relationship with every element, so we can feel his personality evoking a “subjectively truthful visual experience” (Art and Illusion 267) in Gombrich’s words.

In addition, we can notice, looking at the painting, that this economy of elements fits the entire frame because of the way in which they are organized. Pablo Zelaya Sierra gives almost the entire space to the first three elements and makes the other four hard to perceive in the background. Ordering them in this way, Sierra is clearly stating that temporally, the last are consequence of the first. Furthermore, and taking into account that in a country like Honduras, unfortunately, violence is an every day event, Sierra triples the violent action to emphasize it, assuring that the spectator can not avoid to observing it, not because he, as creator, is sharing it but because he is suffering it in a sort of personal ritual.23 He strategically locates the head of the victim in our visual path connecting the other elements like the family abandoning the land or the destroyed house.

23 In a personal interview, Rudrico Ernesto Argueta, who is in charge of the most extensive collection of Sierra’s works as art curator at the Central Bank of Honduras, interprets the artist’s sensitivity referring to him in these terms.
As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Pablo Zelaya Sierra’s work follow the influence of the European noucentism and clamors for a clear and beautiful language. With this point, it is important to clarify the term “beauty” in Latin American documentaries since most of them talk about a crude and painful reality. What does beauty mean within a Latin American context? Julio García Espinoza asks the same question in his proposal toward an “imperfect cinema” when he inquires about the concepts of perfection in cinema. Espinoza infers that between the boundaries of the Latin American social film practice the concept of beauty works more as a functional aesthetic that generates an “active film form” very far from the perfect poetic that generates just a selfsufficient and contemplative film document (Por un cine imperfect 23). Also Sanjinés touches on this issue when he remarks on the interrelation between technique and the objectives of art: “cinema must seek beauty not as an end but as means… in order to produce an effective work” (141).

In this way, Sierra’s language is connected to the intricacy of the reality he is representing and with his objective of reaching his specific audience; the people. Pablo Zelaya Sierra explores an extreme and deeply complex reality that demands a poetic to the people, not a poetic directed to a narcissistic minority that attends art galleries just to contemplate narcissistic art as well. This observation does not mean that Sierra dismisses the aesthetic level of his work; on the contrary, he utilizes an aesthetic that, as Espinoza would say, appears as an answer and a question at once. A very elaborate association of elements that avoids superficialities or extras and accomplishes a clear objective: to request for actions. The Cuban documentarian Santiago Alvarez establishes that the
nature of documentary requires from the author a full understanding of reality because if he does not comprehend it, he is out of it.  

From this approach to documentary as representation of life in the Ortegan concept of reality, Sanjinés expresses that

The lack of a coherent creative form reduces its effectiveness, destroys the ideological dynamics of the content and merely locates for us what is, on the surface, the superficialities, without giving us any of the essence, the humanity, the love –categories that can only issue from a sensitive and responsive means of expression, capable of reveling the truth.  

3.4 The Subject: The Catalyst in “Brothers against Brothers”

“Let us consider two important factors, the two poles of the creation of art: the artist on one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity” (Stiles and Selz 818). With this statement the conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp opens for us the analysis of the subject in current social art in general, and consequently, the subject in “Brothers against Brothers,” in particular.

To evaluate the role of the spectator in Sierra’s work, we need to mention that one of the most significant and evident phenomena in art today is the growing involvement of the audience in the process of artistic creation. This new active audience has gone from being a mere passive recipient of a closed-ended work to intervene actively in it, interpreting or physically manipulating part of its components. In the Latin American art context this current notion of active spectator becomes more visible among the circles of

the “perfect” art in Julio García Espinoza’s words. Nevertheless, within the movement of popular art or Arte del pueblo, this participation of the spectator is nothing new. This kind of art moves along with the modifications and the dynamics of the Latin American society, as I will argue from Pablo Zelaya Sierra’s work, the social documentary in Honduras must have the human factor as a priority. Sierra wrote referring to the youth, “art is their the refugee against the crudity of life.” In “Brothers against Brothers” the three main points of reference from which I explore the concept of active art documentary (the author, the text and the viewer) became one when we refer to the subject of this kind of documentary. In these terms, the author, taking an active position became part of that reality he is representing, and the text deeply alludes to people and people problems. Finally, the spectator (the people) participates at Sierra’s request concluding the work and generates actions over that social reality that asks for change.

Following Jorge Sanjinés, Sierra’s observation and incorporation of popular culture is one step to develop the language for a liberating art.

Sanjinés also points that “[p]opular cinema, in which the fundamental protagonist will be the people, will develop individual histories when these have meaning for the collective, when these serve the people’s understanding, rather that of one individual, and when they are integrated in the history of the collective as a whole” (142). Taking this Eisensteinian concept of a collective character and coming from a personal impulse, Sierra’s first attempt to draw our participation into his painting is giving us the title: “Brothers against Brothers.” The dimension that the word “brothers” gains in this context is huge and mobile. The title of the piece refers to community in which everibody is
integrated with the simple act of mentioning it, starting with the person who mentioned it first, which is the author. Pablo Zelaya Sierra makes evident that this active participation of the spectator must take place every time someone looks carefully at his work; he wrote the title in words over the rifle’s butt stock. Sanjinés continues in this issue asserting that this collective treatment of a film gives the spectator the necessary distance for reflection. In this kind of art proposal, Sanjinés wrote, “we always encounter the stylistic mark of a people and the life-breath of a popular culture that embraces a whole community of men and women, with their particular way of thinking and conceiving reality, and their love of life” (146). Zelaya Sierra, aware of how Hondurans interact with their reality, leaves another writing clue very close to the rifle butt stock. This little note requires from the spectator to attribute a personality to the criminals. The text in the note says something like “My general ordered to take some hair from this dog to get convinced that he is death.” The note has orthographic mistakes that speaks to the illiteracy of the criminal and opens another vein from which this work need to be approached. It talks about a military superior order, and this demands that the viewer imagines this unseen character and its context.

The idea of a spectator that participates in the process of creation of documentaries in Sanjinés’ group came from the experiences of their first film facing the local public. As he mentions in his theory, they were just portraying a reality that every single spectator knew very well; for this reason, the film did not have any transcendence. They came to the conclusion that active filmmaking needs first to incorporate the viewer’s needs in order to search for social changes, “the people want to be exposed to
the *causes* rather than the *effects*” (Burton, The New Latin American cinema 38), as well as Julio García Espinoza reminds us that imperfect cinema demands, above all, to show the process of the problems. That is, it goes contrary to a cinema, which dedicates itself, to celebrate just the results of situations.

This direct relationship between Pablo Zelaya Sierra and us as spectators goes beyond the dialectical field and places us as subject, visualizing ourselves and listening our own voice. As Nina Felshin points out in her extraordinary and extended edition about art and activism, “[p]articipation is thus…an act of self-expression or self-representation by the entire community” (12) that became impulses for social change. For this reason, I consider that the catalyst in this piece is the dominant formal feature from which all the rest of the elements (point of view, selection, order and metaphor) need to be perceived.

The point of view becomes more dynamic in the level we as spectators connect with the work. The limits of the frame are full of details of figures that the spectator has to complete in her mind to continue exploring the full scene, as is the case, Sierra does not offer an open sky but the composition and the framing offers the spectator the possibility of continuing the picture in the imagination and creating her own sky. This particularity of framing reality is evident in all of Sierra’s work. The selected and organized language within the work act as channel from which we can read the story giving more attention to some elements than others or adding more elements to appropriate that story to a personal experience. The language even if it is well crafted does not invite the mere contemplation of the images, but its very detailed manufacture
retains the spectator’s attention in order to go beyond the superficiality and look for reflection. In the same way, the metaphors function as detonators for meanings that we have in our personal experiences, and that we use at the moment of approach to the work. The spectators extend their own “expectations” and “reactions,” in Gombrich’s terms, to find the meanings not from the objects themselves “but in its contextual frame work” (Felshin 20).

In this sense, retaking these elements, I can conclude that *Brothers against Brothers* is Sierra’s personal manifesto that explores a current living, a critical and urgent reality that challenges us to act and look for immediate changes. When Sierra shares his work with the community, the process becomes an inclusive activity, a collective art that separates us from the dangerous world of the personal subjectivity of the artist, in the way Gombrich rejected the expressionism movement by finding its subject in the deepest interior of the artist.
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Hermannos contra hermanos (1932), Oil on canvas

Author: Pablo Zelaya Sierra

Atlantic Bank collection, Honduras