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Te Amo Mujer: a Film

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HONS 497

J.N. Andrews Honors Program

Andrews University

Honors Thesis

“Te Amo Mujer”

A Film

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March 31, 2014

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Department of Visual Art & Design

Abstract

“Te Amo Mujer” is a documentary film project exploring the story of Don Gustavo Jiménez, an old man who lives in a small village in the south of Mexico, and the grandfather of the filmmaker. The film seeks to use the narrative of Don Gustavo to explore the question of why we live where we live. The thesis of the film—or more accurately the suggestion, as the film is a very personal work—is that we live where we do, and how we do, out of love for the people that are closest to us.

Introduction

Te Amo Mujer began as an exploratory project aimed at understanding the affect of migration on identity. As the project grew, the search became more focused on the *why* of migration—why it is that we live where we live, and how it is that our identity affects migration. This project contributes value in its exploration of immigrant identity through the medium of documentary film, contributing a unique story to the increasing conversation in American culture.

Methodology

The methodology for “Te Amo Mujer” was three-fold, following the established structure for documentary filmmaking:

1. Pre-production, in which I made arrangements for the filming of the documentary, including research, funding, preparation of equipment, and detailed planning of the five-month trip under the close advising of Professor Kim.
2. Production, which involved a five month stay in the south of Mexico, recording footage, interviews, and B-roll of my grandparents, while keeping detailed production notes and communicating with my advisor regarding process, potential narrative arcs, and challenges.
3. Post-production, which involved the editing of the footage with the guidance of my advisor. Carefully selecting from the store of footage I accumulated, I crafted a narrative, combining my design and storytelling skills to create not only an engaging story but also a high quality visual experience. As I near completion of the project, I am

preparing the film for showings in the area and under the guidance of my advisor will prepare it for broader distribution to the public.

Process

The style of documentary that I was pursuing for the majority of the production was that of *cinéma vérité*, a style that favors observational footage over a strong narrator's voice. It was my intent to find a story that was currently in progress, and to use that as a vehicle for exploring my roots, seeking to understand why it is that I have found myself so far from the birthplace of my parents.

I concluded my trip with 113 hours of footage, along with extensive notes on themes, stories, and possible narrative structures. Selecting down from that amount of material has involved a deliberate process of decision-making—evaluating the various themes, stories, and the ability of the medium to communicate them in an effective manner.

The final style of the film, a blend of *cinéma vérité* and reflective narration, was chosen to match the strongest narrative for the medium, that of my grandfather's love for his wife.

Results

The project, which took extensive hours of shooting, editing, and writing, has resulted in a documentary film that will have its first screening on April the 13th in the Newbold Auditorium of Buller Hall on the campus of Andrews University. Following is a comprehensive treatment—the documentary film equivalent of a script—of the film in

its current state. After the completion of the first showing, the project will continue to live and develop as equipment, post-production techniques, and stories progress. The completed film is only one of many stories discovered in the project, and other videos and writing pieces will continue to supplement the film's grasping for memory as this story of generational movement continues.

Synopsis

Te Amo Mujer is a reflective film about the conflict that sometimes occurs between ambition and love. Following the story of Don Gustavo, who once had a shot of fame in the Mexican music industry but chose instead to return to working in small stores, the film asks why it is that he gave up an interest, and an incredible gift, to remain living in a small village in the south of Mexico.

Main Characters

The main characters of the film are Don Gustavo, who is the grandfather of the filmmaker, Don Gustavo's wife, Doña Antonia, and the filmmaker, whose perspectives, reflections, and searching, shape the course of the film.

Don Gustavo's goals evolve as the film progresses, as he describes his journey in love, commerce, religion, music, and ultimately love once more. He wrestles in the present with his goal of visiting America again, which is in conflict with his wife's desire to stay planted firmly in Mexico.

Doña Antonia's goals, as shown in the film, are to remain in her house, in her village, and to remain faithful to her religious identity. Very close to her roots, Doña Antonia seeks to remain where she is.

The Filmmaker, an American-born Mexican-American, is seeking to understand his cultural identity, and why it is that his immediate family chose to live in America. In exploring the story of his grandparents, the filmmaker hopes to understand why they stayed in Mexico, and if that can provide him with any insight about his own identity. He is met with his grandparents' loose and seemingly simplistic memory of events, and his grandmother's persistent silence.

Treatment

Prelude

The film begins with unsteady shots of effigies burning brightly in the dark streets of a village. Limbs and segments of abdomen are blown off as firecrackers explode, the effigies disintegrating both slowly and suddenly.

The filmmaker: *“Every new year is ushered in by destroying the old one. Human-sized dolls, stand-ins for all the bad that has happened in the past year, are lit. Built of crudely sewn sacks, stuffed with straw, sawdust, and simple explosives, they are lit. And the people celebrate. It’s unsettling to me, this tradition—this symbolic purging of memory; as if the past doesn’t matter. As if we can discard old dreams and do not injury to our future. But I am a stranger here, and here these bodies burn all night.”*

Act I

Introduction

Shots of loud darkness cut to silent day. A sequence of stable, symmetrical shots introduces the village, “El 11 De Febrero,” and establishes the pace of life in the village, displaying the type of people who populate the place. A dog chases lazily after a man on a bike, kids stand beneath hanging meat in a *carniceria* with a hand-painted sign, and old men sit silent at stands selling sweet *empanadas*. A loud, metal shop-door is heard rolling open, and the scene cuts to an old man opening up his store for business. He is slow, deliberate, and he hobbles, looking full of thought and reflection.

Shots of the store and the various goods sold from it play as the man, Don Gustavo, is heard speaking to customers in Spanish. Subtitles appear on the screen, approximating his conversation with his customer.

Don Gustavo: “*We sell many things here,*” he says, and enters into a conversation with a customer about prices, and the increasing cost of turkey feed.

A long, fixed shot continues to play of Don Gustavo attending customers

The filmmaker: “*This is my grandfather. I don’t know very much about him. I grew up in the United States, and my family didn’t visit often. What I do know is that he has worked in stores like this his entire life; except for one year that he spent in the United States. I know that he has always wanted to return there.*”

The last time I was here was around six years ago, and I didn’t speak much Spanish. I’m here now, in this village, because it seemed important to me to know where I came from—to understand my roots. I want to know why my grandfather decided to stay in Mexico, and at the same understand something of why my parents decided to leave.”

As the filmmaker mentions his grandmother, shots transition to the inside of a house, where an old woman is sharing pictures with him of his aunts, his mother, and himself.

There are pictures of them in New York, and they talk about his grandmother's one visit to America.

Don Gustavo's Story

Don Gustavo begins to speak of his past as shots transition to him in the store looking to the camera. He speaks, subtitles transcribing and translating his words, of growing up and working in the south of Mexico. He mentions that his whole life he has been a *comerciante*, except for one year in the United States.

Don Gustavo mentions that he would like to return to America—how he has plans in place to do so within the next few months.

A customer asks if he has food for ants, and Don Gustavo replies: “we have all types of food for animals; feed for chicken, feed for turkey, feed for dogs, but when people ask for feed for ants, *poison!*” He says this smiling. “Poor ants,” he says with a sweet sympathy in his voice.

As Don Gustavo continues, he begins to speak of his wife, and how he met her. He speaks kindly of her.

Doña Antonia's Story

The scene cuts to a car ride with an unhappy-looking petite, old woman sitting in the back of the car. Observational footage follows of her walking around her childhood home, sharing anecdotes of her life and sharing that it is in this place that my grandfather wooed her. As she is followed, she is seen taking limbs off of plants for her garden at home.

Doña Antonia: “*There isn't enough time to tell of all the stories that this place reminds me of,*” she says to the camera. When the filmmaker asks her to share some, she can't think of any.

Images of the land she grew up on play across the screen.

Act II

America

The scene cuts to the exterior of Don Gustavo's store, where the streets are relatively busy with traffic from people walking, biking, riding motorcycles, and driving. A dog crosses the street, as the scene cuts to the interior of the store.

Don Gustavo is telling of his time in the United States—about how he went to work, but was discovered for his musical talent, and how he began to compose songs, and ultimately how he decided not to stay.

He talks about the songs—mentions all the scraps of lyrics he has been finding, and he is seen trying to remember.

The filmmaker: *“One of the few things I have known about my grandfather is this—that he was briefly a musician. I never understood why he didn't pursue it, and as he tells me now—as he mentions his religious beliefs about that music industry—I can't help be think that that's not the whole reason why.”*

As his memory is triggered, Don Gustavo begins to sing some of his songs, and he notes in an endearingly self-congratulatory way, how moving they are. He talks about writing songs.

Don Gustavo: *“When you write a song, it's not always about a thing that is true—but it is about something you imagine could be true—something that could happen.”*

He continues to sing his songs, which from the subtitles speak of the difficulty of distance.

Doña Antonia's Thoughts

With Don Gustavo still singing, shots transition to the exterior of a house, and a beautifully kept garden. Tropical plants, palm trees, and exotic flowers, play across the screen, as an interview begins with Doña Antonia.

Doña Antonia: *"I never cared about his music. That was of the world," she says. As she talks about Don Gustavo's talent, she states strongly, but without much passion, that God doesn't like things that are of the world."*

The filmmaker: *"Was it not difficult for you when my grandfather was gone?"*

Doña Antonia: *"No, it wasn't hard."*

The filmmaker: *"As I learn about my grandparents, I have trouble understanding their story. They both, at times, seem like unreliable narrators of their own lives, and as I listen to my grandmother say this, I find it so hard to relate to—I find it so simplified of a story that it sometimes seems false. My grandfather sings songs of missing her, and she says she was fine."*

Doña Antonia wraps up her life story neatly, speaking of God and being completely happy, and in the span of a few minutes she returns to her silence.

The filmmaker asks her about America, and she says she doesn't like it.

Shots of her flowers play across the screen and end on a shot of her fence.

The music

The scene cuts to my grandfather in his store, looking out onto the town as he keeps remembering his songs. He relates his experience with his buddies in America.

Don Gustavo: *“People would always ask me, Don Gustavo, what happened to you that you write such sentimental songs? Did you go through some sort of trial? My trial was being away from my wife,” he says. “I wrote what I did because I missed your grandmother.”*

The Violence

Doña Antonia is sitting at a dining room table, looking over a newspaper while talking to the filmmaker. She discusses what is in the paper that day.

The filmmaker: *“My grandmother tells me she is reading about the recent kidnapping. We discuss some of the errors in the newspaper’s reporting—news in these parts travels so quickly that sometimes you hear of things before they happen. The girl, according to the reports, seems to have been a day late to her kidnapping.”*

The newspapers here are filled with violence. Some of my relatives say, with a sort of morbid cleverness, that if you squeeze the newspapers blood will drip out.”

Doña Antonia continues to look through the paper, mentioning that she is interested in reading the article about the recently ousted state governor.

“Lately, as the violence in the south of Mexico has been increasing, my mother, and the rest of his daughters—most of whom live in the States—have wanted my grandparents to move closer to them; to a safer place; to a place where children aren’t kidnapped and old men aren’t assaulted in their own stores.”

The Antagonist

The scene opens with the exterior of of a church. Shots of the Don Gustavo and his wife transition as they are seen both engaging and losing interest with the service.

Audio starts to fade as the filmmaker reflects on the experience.

The filmmaker: *“I wrestle with the story of my grandparents for a very long time. I can relate so much more to my grandfather, the poet, than my grandmother who seems so stern sometimes. And when I think about their life—and why they live where they do and do the things they do, I can’t help but feel sometimes as if my grandmother is something of an antagonist in this story. And it hurts to think that my grandmother seems to have no appreciation for my grandfather’s poetry—even the poetry he writes to her. To be an artist of any sort seems to me to be such an intrinsic part of personality, and to have a person—your best friend—your wife not get you like that—it seems so hard.”*

Act III

As the filmmaker nears the end of his reflection, static is heard, and the scene transitions to a blurry shot of a record turning.

The filmmaker: *“I spent five months in the south of Mexico, trying to decipher all of this. What I saw for so long was a tragedy of art versus religion, dreams of travel versus the tending of gardens, my grandfather’s desires for his life versus my grandmother’s for hers. And I wondered for so long if there was not some other way to see all of this. And then I found the one remaining copy of his record.”*

Static gives way to music, as subtitles appear on the screen translating the lyrics of the record. The audio fades out as the filmmaker continues. “Of the 26 songs my grandfather wrote, these were the only two he allowed to be recorded.”

Audio fades back in, as the track changes.

The Filmmaker: *“One of these songs is about a separation that happens over the phone, because of distance. And the other one—this one—is about being in love.*

And as I listen to these songs, over and over again, I remember what my grandfather said about how music isn’t always about what actually happens, but what you imagine could

happen. And I understand finally that the conflict in this story is not really between my grandfather and my grandmother, but between my grandfather's love of music and his love of his wife. It is about the conflict that sometimes happens between our ambitions and our love for people. And I think what my grandfather saw in America was a land of promise where he could realize a new-found dream, but it was a land where his most beautiful dream could not and still refuses to go.

And so the song—the greatest expression of why it is that he chooses not to pursue composing in the end, is in a language his wife will never understand, but the language that tells it best.”

Concluding Reflections

When I began the project in fall of 2012, I had it in mind to answer the question of why I live where I live—why it is that I live so far away from my extended family and the birthplace of my parents. I wanted to learn something of my ancestry—to understand the larger narrative of my family—and the effects of my family's relocation on my sense of identity. I wanted a story that would be worth sharing, and that would resonate with an entire generation of immigrants' children. What I found instead was a much smaller, and yet universal story.

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