

Archive Fever: violence and virality in Albertina Carri's *Cuaterros* (2016)

‘Is accumulating images an act of resistance?’, asks the voice-over at the start of Albertina Carri's short film *Restos* (Remains, 2010). Juxtaposing digital and super-8 sequences, frequently superimposed or manipulated in the form of scratchings or hand-colourings of the celluloid stock, Carri's short is a dense reflection on the affective materialities of images – those of the militant cinema of the Sixties and Seventies– which, just as the bodies and places whose luminous traces they had carried, have suffered not just the wear and tear of time but, first and foremost, the violent erasure perpetrated by ‘the surgical machinery of State terrorism’. How can we carry out today a visual archaeology of these celluloid remains which, during their decades-long abandonment in hiding places that rarely offered even the most basic conditions of preservation, have also been cut off from the contexts of militant action in which they had aimed to be viewed such that, in fusing the spaces and times of screen and audience, the leap into a liberated future would be all but imminent? Carri's film maintains in suspense its reply, alternating panning shots across cans and reels piled up on shelves and in corridors, of an almost haptic quality, with close-ups of deteriorated celluloid on fire or being submerged in a bleach bath, a common practice among activist filmmakers who, during the military dictatorships, attempted to erase both their own traces and those of their comrades. The emulsion detaching itself from its celluloid base and dissolving into the liquid, actively de-scribes the previous, luminous in-scription, as if, on dissolving into invisibility, the images were also being put in movement for one last time. Just as the sparks released by the burning film stock, the images already invisible in the projector due to material decay are forced into action here once more, in an act of extreme tenderness and aggression. ‘Desde esa orfandad que sólo puede decir yo,’ says the narrator, contrasting the pronouns of her own enunciatory present from the anonymous and collective utterances the insurgent filmmakers of the past had sought to forge,

me dejo encandilar por las imágenes perdidas. Buscarlas es resistir a esa intemperie sin sueños. Enhebrar secuencias para empujar los flashes sueltos de la memoria. ¿Será posible recuperar su gesto desafiante? ¿Su potencia vital, su exquisito presente hinchado de futuro? ¿Podrán todavía mellar la trama que cubre el cielo de los rebeldes? El fulgor de su ausencia quema. Ahora mismo.

Here I wish to reflect on the ways in which, in her feature-length compilation-film *Cuaterros* (Bandits, 2016), Carri draws on as well as critiques, at the very level of the image, different modes of *Überlieferung* –deliverance– of past experience in the present: the archive, the family, and the people. The dimension of mourning, as film curator Paolo Cherchi Usai has argued, underwrites *every* experience of cinema, not just because of the phantasmatic re-appearance of absent bodies that is proper to film's photographic scaffolding but also, moreover, to the perishable character of its very material base. The 'model image', the pristine and transparent notation of the event that has taken place in front of camera, Cherchi Usai asserts, is no more than a founding myth: from the very first print, regardless of whether it is on celluloid, analog or digital video, image and sound have already suffered multiple forms of damage and contamination, which every subsequent use of the device (screening, copying, even 'restauration') will only increment. Every spectator, 'given the physical and chemical phenomena at the heart of the process of decay [...], is an unconscious witness to the extinction of moving images...' (17) If, then, according to Jacques Derrida, 'anarchiving destruction belongs to the process of archivization and produces the very thing it reduces, on occasion to ashes, and beyond' (94), cinema is perhaps the most extreme version of this tension insofar as the destructive impulse is present here not just as a principle of selection and, thus, as the condition of survival of that which is being archived. Rather, the same technical apparatus that allows for the emergence of the moving image also works from the outset at erasing this same image, such that cinema really has to be considered 'the art of destroying moving images' (Usai 7). The task of the curator –the film archivist or historian– is therefore no different, at heart, from that of any spectator, in having to assume their role of witness and to take responsibility for the images that, in fact, we will always have been the last to watch.

Yet Usai's suggestion that we should therefore give up on our Quixotic quest for the 'model image' in favor of a 'moral image' –that is, to recognize virtue in our passive, non-interventional presencing of the images' gradual decay, to learn to live and die with them as we accompany them in their slow vanishing– isn't an option for Carri. Rather, *Cuaterros* wants to do something else, something in excess of a mere accumulation of images as still suggested in *Restos*. Right from the outset, following a short credit sequence, the screen splits and bifurcates into multiple series of parallel moving images, at times contracting again into a single sound-image only to split once more into two, three, five sequences running parallel to one another. Sometimes these are aligned horizontally (one image next to the other), others they are organized in groups of two on each margin framing a larger image in the center,

calling to mind the visual hierarchy of *ergon* and *parerga* found in Baroque altar tables. Instead of Cherchi Usai's 'passive spectator' who empathizes with the the images' gradual ruination, *Cuaterros* hedges its bets on a promiscuous, amoral relationship with and among images that desire, interpenetrate and contaminate one another. Carri's film sets free a feverish archive, where instead of the quiet contemplation of Cherchi Usai's moral image, the visual corpus is being turned into a body in a state of anxiety, driven by a violent desire of coupling, absorption, and swallowing-up that one image extends to the next.

We could perhaps think of an *accelerated cinema*, a cinema in overdrive, by contrast with the attitude of a 'delayed cinema', which Laura Mulvey has theorized as one of the most productive effects of the digital image: the possibility of, literally, disassembling the moving image and to produce by way of reducing or even freezing the flow of images a new kind of indexical sign (the 'paused' digital image does not, in effect, correspond to any particular frame of the analog, celluloid-based reel). The index proper to the digital image, Mulvey suggests, can therefore produce 'a new kind of ontology [...] in which ambivalence, impurity and uncertainty displace the traditional oppositions' (12), calling forth also a new kind of pensive spectatorship. Now then, how can we think with –or against– this new ontology of a delayed cinema the kind of visual sampling Carri unleashes in *Cuaterros*, also drawing on the possibilities for digital manipulation of the analog archive? For, instead of the image that is being 'paused' in an instant that does not reconnect it to the 'photographic ontology' (Bazin) of its original source, disclosing a kind of materiality that instead proper to the image itself, in *Cuaterros* we are faced with a visual maelstrom of parallel sequences bifurcating and multiplying, with many of the fragments of found footage remaining on screen for just a few seconds. We are faced, as it were, with a feverish, a viral image, which forcludes both the possessive spectator's *jouissance* and the pensive spectator's reflexive attitude – the two opposed yet complementary modes of viewing that Mulvey associates with the digital image.

In fact, this 'infectuous' visual sequence is also an effect of the vertigo of temporalities and of the versions of dis- and remembering the past navigated through by the verbal narrative of *Cuaterros*, which jumps to and fro between the legend of Isidro Velázquez –the last gaucho rebel–, a lost film on Velázquez's life by Pablo Szir, a disappeared filmmaker and one-time companion of Albertina's own parents in one of the dictatorship's concentration camps, shot in the early seventies and based on Roberto Carri's 1968 study of social banditry, *Isidro Velázquez: Prerevolutionary Forms of Violence*, on to the multiple attempts, including those of Albertina and her then-wife, the journalist and writer Marta Dillon, to recover fragments of this doubly sequestered past from film archives at Buenos Aires and Havana. The

infectuousness of the images in *Cuaterros* corresponds to an ‘archive fever’ of the kind described by Derrida, but not in any metaphorical sense and rather as a ‘mal d’archive’, a sickness unleashed by an evil that inhabits the footage preserved in the archive itself, as in the sequence of a TV interview with the dictator Galtieri, bragging about his having pacified the country. The feverish image suffers from this archival affliction, which makes it –says Daerrida– ‘burn with passion’. Being *en mal d’archive*, afflicted by archive fever, is ‘never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself’ (91).

The image goes viral, then, due to an absence, a void that it can only contain by way of multiplying into further images, even though these will never suffice for attaining this purpose. A sequence a little more than ten minutes into the film narrates Albertina’s first visit to Lita Stantic, a fellow director and producer who, at the time of shooting ‘the first Isidro Velázquez’, was pregnant with one of Pablo Szir’s children and participated in producing undercover footage, among others in Buenos Aires’ police academy. Different eyewitness accounts of the film shooting, paraphrased by Albertina’s voiceover, are set to a screen divided into five sequences of black-and-white street scenes, police parades and graduation ceremonies, some of them in reverse motion as if the officers themselves were marching towards the past. The simultaneous presence on screen of different visual series in rapid montage has the paradoxical effect of eliciting an at once concentrated and distracted gaze, literally a *divergent gaze* struggling to keep pace with the superabundance of audiovisual stimuli. The sequence is complicated even more with the ‘arrival’ at Stantic’s home, the narrative now introducing a third layer between the remembered past and the present of enunciation, that of the quest itself. Stantic, says Carri accelerating even further the frenetic pace of her voice-over, ‘never stops talking and giving orders to her assistants’ to go look for documents and recordings from her archive. A moment, then, of contagion, of archive fever, which is echoed by a screen split into five individual sequences that vaguely invoke the historical segmentations in play, from the epic past of popular struggle to the moment of encounter between the two women, reminiscing about previous instances of documenting or of reenacting this past and the way these attempts were victimized by State repression. What appears on screen is a composite image, but one that works with misplaced archives, with images that do not correspond to any documentary evidence.

What these images have in common is, in fact, this very out-of-placeness, not so much as being ‘in the place’ of other images that have been irredeemably lost to us and rather as a figure of the story they invoke or conjure in being combined together but which refuses to

appear. These images which, in their proliferation, force our gaze to maintain its distracted wakefulness to the point of exhaustion, are also a lesser version of the ‘dust’ which, in Albertina’s journey to the Argentine Northwest –the ‘historical setting’ where the documentarist hopes to finally unveil the mystery– forcludes any kind of revelation. ‘During this journey,’ Albertina says over a screen subdivided into out-of-focus shots of field workers that might be the from the Chaco or from Southeast Asia,

la única película que puedo imaginar es una cámara estática en un plano secuencia de dos horas atravesado por la nube de polvo. Cada tanto, detrás del polvo, se percibe alguna presencia humana. Pero cada vez que estás a punto de ver una cara, de entender una forma como parte de un cuerpo, cada vez que creés que alguien viene o se va, la nube lo borra todo y estás de nuevo en esa tiniebla blanca, clarita, que te hace creer que en algún momento vas a descubrir lo que hay detrás. Pero no. El dominio de la nube se extiende más allá de lo imaginable. Se vuelve a henchir de polvo en segundos, y aquello que parecía real se disipa en el lagrimal. Sí, los ojos te lloran todo el tiempo, solos. Los ojos se te vuelven unos órganos incontrolables que duelen y no sirven para nada porque las lágrimas no te dejan ver. La tierra seca volando, metiéndose en los pulmones y en las hendidias más inhóspitas del cuerpo, es la autoridad suprema en esos confines.

Mary Ann Doane, in her ground-breaking book on ‘the emergence of cinematic time’, suggests that this impossibility of witnessing the instant in its fullness is also proper to film’s own photographic scaffolding, which provides the immobile base for the moving image. Because the time of bodies and things does not know discrete instants and rather proceeds by continuous flow, through interrelated modes of occurrence, the photographic register always arrives at the scene of the real both too early and too late. The act it wants to reproduce will always already have occurred when it is being turned into an image, but it will also have been cut short in its very occurring, without yet having been fully realized. ‘What film archives – Doane concludes– is first and foremost a “lost” experience of time as presence, time as immersion’ (221-22). Eventually, cinema will have learned to resolve this phantasmatic insubstantiality by way of the cut, the instrument that will allow it to subordinate time to the apparatus and to renounce its previous vocation as ‘a record of time out of itself’ (224). Doane suggests we read this tension within the cinematic apparatus in the wider context of relations between contingency and structure that industrial modernity has had to confront since the nineteenth century. In response, film and statistics emerged as technologies for the administration of singularities, as ‘epistemologies of the indeterminate’ that maintain an

ambiguous stance towards the archive, absorbing as well as overwriting it in the process of constructing their own composite utterances.

This tension between structure and contingency is of fundamental importance in *Cuaterros*, in relation, precisely, to the apparently blatant mismatch between the enormous variety and fugacity of found footage on the image track and the soundtrack where, save for very few instances in which intradiegetic, archival sound is allowed to take to the stage, the director's own voice-over rules supreme. In press reviews, this falling-out between image and sound was decried as an aesthetic failure. While they commended the film's recovery of 'valuable archives', film critics also scolded the 'verbose delivery to the point of vomiting the words' (Diego Batlle in *Otros Cines*) or complained about the 'aural martyrdom' suffered at the hands of 'Albertina Carri's incessant, exasperating voiceover,' imploring for 'a professional narrator, with better diction and intonation, who would have made the text shine instead of blurring it' (Gaspar Zimmerman in *Clarín*). Beyond the striking misogyny of such statements, they are indicative of a sense of irritation unleashed by this 'incompetent' narrator who 'tells things badly', getting ahead of herself and, thus, muddling even further instead of clarifying the puzzle of images. What these critics ask for is, in fact, not just another voice but also another script: unhurried, lucid, transparent; the patriarchal voice of history which, in different modulations, had sustained social and political documentary from Grierson to Solanas/Getino. With their claims for seriousness, for responsibility, resuscitating once again the objections already brought against Carri's earlier work, *Los rubios* (The Blondes, 2003), the critics' unease points to one of the most interesting aspects of the narrative voice in *Cuaterros*: its tendency to slip into the very superabundance and precipitation also proper to the image track on which, instead, it ought to have imposed order, to have laid down the law. Instead of exercising the sovereignty of speech over the images' feverish vertigo, shielding us from their dangerous virality, the voice itself, it turns out, has contracted the illness and transmits it on to us, 'martyrizing' us with its verbosity.

Effectively, the relation between voice and image in *Cuaterros* is that of a *failed* inscription of meaning. More often than not, the images fail to confirm, as visual countersignatures, the verbal utterances, opening these instead towards a host of lines of semantic flight that refuse to be channelled back into an orderly figurative expression in the form of metaphors or allegories. Instead, the first-person narrator offers a *situated* point of enunciation – one situated, moreover, in relation to the archive that traverses this first person entirely, as the mark of an insuturable absence and, thus, as incapable of sharing with us the lucid, transparent, indisputable knowledge that is the domain of history and its 'professional

narrators'. Instead of the articulating work of history –a narrative which, thanks to its *ex-scription* from the time and space of the images, would have been able to construct a *de-scription* of them, capable of suturing their singularities into a unifying diegetic chronotope– here the verbal narrative unleashes yet another line of flight with respect to the visual sequence. Instead of occupying the place of history, the narrative voice in *Cuatreros* instantly betrays us and its role alike. It is, indeed, an 'exasperating' voice for, what it has to tell us, again and again, is nothing but her *failed* invocation of the archive. *Cuatreros* narrates the frustration of subsequent attempts of constructing historical and biographical narratives that could have sutured –that is, re-assembled the rubble of– the people's 'prerevolutionary struggles' of the past to the anti-imperialist critique that sought to assemble these into a shared revolutionary project, as well as to the tremendous defeat and the bestial response suffered at the hands of capitalist State terror that ushered in a present orphaned of all horizons. 'Empiezo a pensar la película de Velázquez' (I begin to plan the Velázquez film,) Albertina says, more or less halfway through the film, over a screen divided into three parallel reels that have been converted into abstract games of light and colour by the 'vinegar effect', a chemical reaction that, according to film scholar André Habib, has destroyed more than half of the world's celluloid film stock: 'Son tres tiempos, tres geografías. Tres personajes, un mismo actor. [...] La película salta del Chaco en 1966, Isidro Velázquez en su apogeo, a Buenos Aires 1972, cineasta que hace una película sobre Velázquez, a Cuba 2010, cinéfilo que busca la película desaparecida.' One by one, the 'abstract' sequences give way to images that, it seems, finally correspond to the stories suggested by the narrator: a gaucho sipping the *bombilla* of his mate, the port of Buenos Aires, a plane landing on a tropical runway. But again, disappointment is just around the corner: 'La parte de Cuba nunca llegué a escribirla porque Lita, con un simple parpadeo de ojos, me la bochó. Lo mismo que lo del actor haciendo los tres personajes. A mí me parecía una idea buenísima [...] Escribimos con mi esposa cinco versiones de posibles películas. Ninguna funciona. Ninguna está buena. Alguna tiene alguna gracia en alguna parte pero ninguna llega a tener la fuerza o la épica necesaria para ser filmada...'

The failed operation of imposing an overarching narrative structure to the story's bifurcating temporal layers –*Operación Fracaso*, indeed, was the also title of Carri's 2015 video-installation at Parque de la Memoria, Buenos Aires, the film's first echelon– returns our attention, again and again, to the subject of enunciation itself. 'A road movie without a journey,' as the author herself has described her film, *Cuatreros* is also, and not least, the adventure story of Carri and Marta Dillon's attempt to forge alternative, dissident modes of

filiation both among themselves and their families past and present – part of a wider story of human rights and GLTTB mobilizations in post-2001 Argentina that led to significant political and legal advances for queer/trans identities and reproductive rights. Carri's own experience of maternity (the occasion of another legal victory, being the first case in Argentina in which a birth certificate recognized a shared paternity between two female and a male parent) and the ultimately failed wager of forging a family unit without becoming entangled in normative forms of conviviality, take centre stage in several moments of the film. The final sequence in particular, introducing footage from one of the oldest documentaries made in Argentina – *La mosca y sus peligros* (1920), an educational short on food hygiene and the transmission of pathologies through insects and parasites – wraps up in a powerful image the film's deliberations on legacy and filiation, archive fever and anarchiving violence, contingency and structure, articulating the two 'operaciones fracaso' that have been underwriting *Cuaterros* from the outset: the failure of stringing together the maze of threads laid out on the image track, and the narrative first person's failure to sustain dissident modes of affect and desire within structuring frameworks that admit these only on condition of renouncing their singularity. 'The sentence "I have a family now" destroys it all,' says the narrator over archival shots of dissected flies and young polio victims in a hospital. The figure of contagion finally catches up with a narrative subject that, throughout the film, has sought in the poison of the archive the *pharmakon* that would immunize her against the structuring power of the family legacy: that of her own struggling family on its rollercoaster journey and that of both partners' mothers and fathers disappeared by civic-military State terrorism. In the end, the effect of this structuring framework on the mnemonic and affective construction of selves proves too powerful to be contained: 'The acid spreads like a savage virus,' Albertina concludes. But it is at this point, too, cutting from the archival images of doctors studying pathogens to microscopic shots of the ink-stained fibres of the paper on which Ana María Caruso and Roberto Carri, from inside the dictatorship's concentration camp, wrote their last letters to their daughters, that the narrator finally stumbles upon 'the definite legacy: the work as immanence of life. Life as an immense point of light from which all things emerge, even death and, with it, cinema. It's then, only then, that I make this film.'

But what about Isidro Velázquez, what about the popular struggle that drives, and drives apart, the family histories that are, in *Cuaterros*, our point of access to people and nation? In his monumental literary-anthropological essay *Muerte y transfiguración de Martín Fierro* (1948), Ezequiel Martínez Estrada claims that, in an impoverished literary tradition such as Argentina's, alienated from its own 'historical, psychological, economic and political'

invariants, only a handful of *gauchesca* poems such as Martín Fierro hold up. However, just as the internal frontier has been conquered only in appearance –but actually internalized, spread throughout the body of the nation– so its literary expressions have been gradually mythified, says Martínez Estrada –overwritten, banalized, erased– in the construction of a national canon, which in a sense has been nothing but this extirpation of the margins and of novelty. ‘To kill Martín Fierro, who had been an impertinent witness, he had to be destroyed by converting him into a heroic, patriotic myth [...] To bring him back to life, it’s not enough to resuscitate him: we need to transfigure him [*hay que transfigurarlo*]’ (I, 309). To transfigure is not to return to a betrayed origin and re-animate it: rather, it’s a kind of shamanic exercise of critique in order for the ‘soul’ of the victimized poem to finally migrate into new and different text-bodies – a gesture that pulls Martínez Estrada into the archive and into an ever more erudite forest of quotes from expedition diaries, linguistic and zoological studies in Spanish, French and English as well as the work of Freud and Franz Kafka. *Cuaterros* reinitiates –just as Roberto Carri’s *Isidro Velázquez* had done half a century earlier– this invocative, critical as well as magical, return to a still-latent popular past, which in Argentina runs parallel to, and even precedes, the writing of history proper (think only of Sarmiento’s *Facundo*). It’s the notion of a popular truth displaced –*desterrado*– from the historical record, which draws the narrator-protagonist towards the archive as the repository of a promise, that of a different story, in which past, present and future will re-align, as Martínez Estrada says, in a ‘living take’ [*una toma vivencial*]. Yet the archive’s is really a deferred promise, since the document (just as the photographic still) can only offer an account of the event as already occurred, that is: of popular truth as already submitted to the order of the letter. ‘The role of journalism in this case,’ Roberto Carri had already highlighted in his discussion of the role played by the media, in particular the radio, in the struggle against ‘banditry’ [*bandolerismo*], ‘reveals the attitude of the urban “quality” press in the face of popular “barbarism” from the backward areas of the countryside. The liberal reformism of the press coincides with “civilization” and the upholding of the police state [...] Rural “barbarism” is “understood”, in a show of liberal hypocrisy, but they never hesitate to contribute to its extermination when it puts at risk the sacred institutions of the colonial order’ (52-53).

Found footage of TV newsreels abounds in *Cuaterros*: microphone-wielding reporters interview police officers on the latest cases of ‘terrorists shot in combat’ or inquire among bystanders about rumoured kidnappings and murders, including a guerrilla unit’s assault on a wig factory, while on adjacent screen inserts the Junta leaders amiably salute worshippers at a church or spectators at the Sociedad Rural’s annual cattle show. Even more than the literary

canon, the archive of the audiovisual media is a site of anarchiving violence: neither the images of the slaughter of Isidro Velázquez and his companion Gauna can be found there nor, much less, those of the massacre of Margarita Belén, the roadside torture and summary execution of fifteen young concentration camp inmates, perpetrated on the orders of the very same police chief responsible for the killing of Velázquez's younger brother in 1961, prompting the latter's escape to the bush. *Cuaterros* is, perhaps, first and foremost an attempt to transfigure the anarchiving force of the modern-colonial civilization of the spectacle, already decried in Roberto Carri's study of 1968, making the images speak what they are meant to erase. Thus, Velázquez's off-camera death in a police ambush, is narrated over a screen split into three 'tables' like a baroque altarpiece, the one in the centre featuring a gaucho-style equestrian ballet, with the ones on the margins displaying unbearably horrible real-time footage of the torture and assassination of prisoners in a Southeast Asian swamp. By contrast, for the Margarita Belén massacre Carri chooses a single screen featuring an animation sequence of vaguely fantastic or fairy-tale resonances, interspliced with archive footage from police banquets and graduation ceremonies. That is, she forges an emblematic association between police repression of 'banditry' in the backlands of Latin America and the atrocities perpetrated in the 'late imperial wars' of Vietnam or Cambodia: but rather than, as in Roberto Carri's anti-imperialist reading of social banditry fifty years earlier, the suggestion here is not primarily that of a 'structural equivalence' between one violence and the other, just as the fairy-tale setting of the dictatorship's genocidal terror does not so much make a point about the latter's affinities with the *pogroms* and mass assassinations in twentieth-century Europe and their defiance of representation. Rather than comparisons, I think, they are composite images of the fold in time that occurs at the site of anarchiving, the falling-over of the archive's present perfect – 'this has been' – into the conditional – 'this might be' –. In fact, the threat of the archive's black holes and blind spots is directed not just at what is being deleted it but also, just as the police officers' glances out of the corner of their eyes in the found footage sequences, intimates the future to recognize in this opaque interpellation the threat that shall continue to hang over it. Its enigmatic silence, however, as Carri's film shows us, can be contested: literally, by the next image, the one that follows in time but also the one appearing next to it within the space of the screen, unleashing a process of mutual transfiguration and contagion that forces this silence to speak.