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FIESTAS!

BEYOND FOLKLORE



Bolivians in Argentina

The Other Fiesta **BY IRENE DEPETRIS CHAUVIN**

IN 2007, WHILE LIVING IN BRAZIL, I DECIDED TO take a short trip to Argentina to attend the Festival of Independent Film (BA-FICI) held every April in Buenos Aires. I looked forward to seeing the first documentary made by Martín Rejtman, a director who, with only three films, had developed a trend dedicated to portraying apathetic middle-class youth in crisis. Because of his important role in New Argentine Film and concern for purity of form, the very idea of *Copacabana* (2007) seemed strange to me. Commissioned by a Buenos Aires television channel the previous year, this short documentary is a distant perspective of the preparations Bolivian immigrants make for the celebration of Nuestra Señora de Copacabana.

The history of the Virgin of Copacabana in the city of Buenos Aires dates back to 1972, when the replica of a famous sculpture of the virgin in Bolivia arrived at a little wooden chapel in the Charrúa neighborhood. From then until now, the yearly celebration brings together more than 50,000 people who come to the neighborhood to enjoy a week of dancing and musical shows with traditional Bolivian costumes—the most massive and important gathering of the Bolivian collectivity in Argentina. In 1991, the Fiesta de la Virgen de Copacabana in the Charrúa neighborhood was declared to be “of municipal interest” (rather like national patrimony, but on a local basis) by the then-Deliberating Council; later the Buenos Aires legislature pronounced it of “cultural interest,” and finally the city government chimed in by saying that it was “of interest to the capital.” This delayed institutional recognition of the Bolivian community’s most important patron saint fiesta corresponds with the relative absence of film representations of Bolivians in Argentina. Before Martín

Rejtman became curious about these celebrations, only Adrián Caetano, another of the “founders” of the New Argentine Film movement, had given a Bolivian immigrant the role of protagonist in *Bolivia* (2001), a film that narrates the drama of discrimination and the exploitation faced by these immigrants.

Argentina is a country of many waves of peoples, but while European immigrants were readily included in the narrative of *argentinidad*—what it means to be Argentine—Bolivians and other contemporary immigrant groups are still excluded from this collective discourse. Little is known about how Bolivians relate to the larger Argentine society and how they see themselves. Argentina, the so-called receiving society, often stigmatizes these immigrants. Alejandro Grimson, in his book *Relatos de la diferencia y la igualdad: los bolivianos en Buenos Aires* (EUDEBA, 2005), analyzes how, in everyday life and leisure activities, the Bolivians make efforts to insert themselves within the host society. In this sense, the patron saint celebrations, traditional markets and the growth of civil society, sports and religious organizations formulate a social code and circumscribe a common space on which the very idea of community depends.

The fiesta in Charrúa, one of those spaces identified with *bolivianidad*—what it means to be Bolivian—has become more and more visible in the past few years. According to Grimson, some Bolivians explain the fiesta in terms of Catholicism, while others make reference to Aymara-Quechua traditions and the Pachamama, a goddess revered by the indigenous people of the Andes. Still others point out the hybrid nature of the celebration’s particular qualities. Most spectators enjoy the carnivalesque spectacle of more than thirty dance groups

from different neighborhoods throughout Buenos Aires, from many provinces of Argentina and sometimes even directly from Bolivia. The different meanings Bolivian immigrants give to the event nevertheless coincide with the sense of reconstruction of “national culture,” of a “tradition” that brings them together as immigrants. This discourse operates within the immigrant group itself, but it is also directed toward the “receiving society.” The fiesta underscores the immigrants’ national belonging, their ties to a place other than that of the local society, but the ritual carries with it a profound sense of equality. In the patron saint fiestas, most of the dancers show their desire to be upwardly mobile by choosing one of the typical dances associated with the Bolivian middle class, the *caporal*, which depicts foremen and allows the use of modern clothing and urban music.

Martín Rejtman decided to show the parade of the *caporales* as a way of painting a particular image of the Bolivian community of Buenos Aires. The documentary *Copacabana* “shows” because it fits into a category that film theorist Bill Nichols has called “observational documentary,” a film that depends entirely on sound and image. Thus, *Copacabana* avoids the use of first-person sound track, on-camera interviews and even voice-over narration to explain what the camera is showing. It makes sure that what is shown speaks for itself. The narration is developed through a succession of a series of well-defined images; through the visual narrative of the camera, Rejtman first shows the local celebrations dedicated to the Virgen de Copacabana and the popular dances associated with it. Later, the film flashes back to the organization of the celebration, rehearsals, the places Bolivians congregate, their bands, their postcard and



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photo collections, their labor in textile workshops, their life in humble abodes, and ends up in the border between Bolivia and Argentina, in the Bolivian city of Villazón, with images of new Bolivian immigrants crossing into Argentina.

The fiesta, the thematic crux of the documentary, is never explained nor are any discursive details given about its

preparation and organization. *Copacabana* depends on the power of observation and threads together information through visual and sensorial means. If knowledge can be obtained from the realm of intuition and sensitivity, then it may also derive from a story constructed on these visual footprints, a tale which distances itself from a formal registry of events and

puts emphasis upon the gaze. In the case of *Copacabana*, the “gaze” is revealed through cinematography. The “other”—the non-Argentine—is a potential space for an infinite number of tales, but the form of the film, the result of the selection of audiovisual resources, constitutes one decision among many and brings a veritable wealth of meaning to the film.

This tension between the recording of events (“registry”) and way of perceiving them (“gaze”), as well as the viewers’ own preconceptions about certain migrant groups, arose spontaneously the first time I showed *Copacabana* to U.S. undergraduates in a course on globalization and migration. First of all, the students had what was also my first mistaken impression of *Copacabana*: they thought it would be a documentary about some fiesta on the Brazilian beach. In using the name “Copacabana” without specifically indicating that the film is about Bolivia, Rejtman seems to play with the preconceptions of the middle-class spectator for whom leisure is the private exoticism of the Brazilian culture and not the Bolivian one, most frequently associated with images of work and exploitation. After becoming aware of the theme, the students felt a mix of fascination and discomfort with the form in which the fiesta was portrayed: Rejtman seeks to record a fiesta with which we are unfamiliar but does not allow the fiesta to be made into an exotic subject since he situates his characters through a meticulously distanced gaze.

But why have I used the term “distant”? Throughout the film, the camera narrates by means of very fixed medium shots. Acting as a frame, tracking shots open and close the film. The first images in the documentary are tracking shots taken from a car of the preparations for the fiesta, silent shots of the parade routes and colorful neighborhood stores. Later one sees medium shots of *comparsas* rehearsing their dance steps, but this time at night. The camera briefly shows the development of the choreography, and with quick blackouts, Rejtman’s fixed planes trace in the course of a very few minutes a temporal arc that leads to empty streets at dawn, where the camera once again pans from the car to show us the remains of the celebration. In the absence of a voice-over narration, the use of tracking shots not only serves to synthesize a temporal arc, but also brings a way of looking that appears to suggest

that *Copacabana* is directed to the spectator as tourist, one who voyeuristically observes from a distance the life of the Bolivians who live on the margins in the city of Buenos Aires.

After the initial tracking shots, most of the film is a succession of objective takes of rehearsals. In the first brief scenes, the camera captures dance in its essence of magic flight, then withdraws from the perfection of the fiesta’s performance to concentrate on the rehearsals. Thus, the documentary captures the cultural density of the phenomenon of the Copacabana celebrations. The numerous moments in which dance rehearsals for the fiesta are recorded serve to illustrate a collective effort ceremoniously dedicated to the repetition of a ritual. Like the panning shots, the recording of these rehearsals is distanced. Objective shots, especially frozen stills, retain the established distance, not only because they are long or medium shots, but because they are used to frame the scene. Indeed, a great many scenes have some sort of frame (windows, hallways, doors) through which the camera captures the action. However, because the defining characteristic of a movie is that it has movement and represents the passage of time, the documentary’s images stay in the perpetual present. This temporal suspension makes the narrative construction of the film quite slow and deliberate precisely because the takes create an act of contemplation.

Yet an act of contemplation does not mean a purely formal exercise that cancels out the possibility of deeper understanding. *Copacabana* illustrates that the fiesta forms a complex weaving together of different discourses whose meaning is always being disputed. The medium-range shots show the announcer for Radio Urkupiña and suggest the importance of the radio in the organization of the fiesta and also for strengthening a sense of belonging to the Bolivian community through the programming of folkloric music and constant references to services available to members of the community.

Questioning the borders between fiction and documentary, Rejtman also refused to structure a narrative through the use of voice-over or to reproduce the “authentic” speech of the protagonists, but allows the historical and affective density of the fiestas to speak for itself. In one scene, an elderly Bolivian immigrant, whose name we do not know, shows us an album filled with postcards and photos demonstrating that the fiesta of Copacabana began to be organized early on as a way of preserving cultural memory and as a way of strengthening the ties of the Bolivian community in the diaspora. In this sense, *Copacabana* shows us a lived dimension of the collectivity in which elderly immigrants, the radio program and the dance appear as the embodiment of the collective in public space.

As in every documentary, the aesthetics of *Copacabana* present a tension between the object and the gaze, but this tension—a productive contradiction to help rethink a genre from its origins—has frequently been associated with the exercise of representing the “other” and has an ambiguous relationship with the exploration of the exotic. Martín Rejtman’s “cold” portrait distances us from perceiving the other as merely a wearer of exotic costumes. More than the simple reception of a lived scene as “authentic,” the film proposes a carefully “disconnected” gaze that does not reify the exotic but, from a respectful distance, contributes to the recognition of a group and its cultural practices.

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