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# Remembering objects in the essay film: Andrés di Tella as heir, archaeologist and collector

## ABSTRACT

*Although Andrés di Tella is among the leading documentary filmmakers in South America, his work has received scant attention in the Anglophone world. Di Tella's essayistic films mix personal and intimate perspectives with public and historical concerns, crafting a tentative filmic voice that is articulated on the borders between the public and the private. In his subjective explorations of personal and collective pasts, di Tella calls on material objects to play a vital role. Subjective recollections are accompanied by the constitution of collections of objects, material items that are the remainders from and the keys to the past. Remembering is remembering with and through things and senses of self and identity are forged and questioned in dialogue with constellations of objects. This article examines the interaction between subjects and objects in di Tella's work with special attention to *Fotografías* (Photographs, 2007) and *Hachazos* (Ax Blows, 2011).*

## KEYWORDS

Latin America  
documentary  
essay film  
memory  
material objects  
ruins  
subjectivity  
migration

When one thinks of Andrés di Tella's growing body of work, made-up primarily of first-person essay films, what first comes to mind are not material objects but rather subjects and subjectivity. Incorporating the filmmaker as

1. Ricardo Piglia's 1992 novel *La ciudad ausente* draws inspiration from Macedonio's work and perhaps also from 'la loca del grabador' and her recording device, which Piglia inherits.
2. Piglia and di Tella also collaborated in 327 *Cuadernos* (di Tella, 2015), where di Tella films Piglia reading and commenting on his diaries, the 327 notebooks accumulated since the writer's adolescence. This filmic diary of Piglia's engagement with his diaries is made more poignant by the fact that the Argentine writer was becoming progressively ill and frail during the filmmaking process – to the point that he was unable to read the final notebook. Piglia passed away in 2017, shortly after the release of the film.
3. In his excellent book, Paulo Antonio Paranaguá places di Tella among the fifteen most important documentarians currently working in Latin America.
4. I am using 'voice' here in the sense developed by Bill Nichols. 'Voice' refers not just to the literal voices in the film but to their cumulative effect and tone and to the film's overall mode of address (1983).

narrator and as character, and putting on display processes of filmmaking that are punctuated by doubt and uncertainty, di Tella's films are decidedly subjective. The director is also keenly invested in processes of individual remembering, leading to kaleidoscopic and palimpsestic effects and occasionally even *mise en abymes* of efforts to remember that remit to other efforts to remember, so that memory's ostensive referent is as insistently evoked as it is deferred. For instance, *Macedonio Fernández* (Tella and Piglia, 1995), a film that revolves around the enigmatic figure of the homonymous Argentine writer, begins with another renowned writer, Ricardo Piglia, recalling the days of his youth when he regularly attended boxing matches in a traditional Buenos Aires neighbourhood and spent leisurely hours at a nearby cafe. There, Piglia recalls, he often talked with a woman that sold flowers on the street and who was known as 'la loca del grabador', or 'the tape-recorder loony'. 'La loca' carried a photograph of Macedonio pinned to her dress. She told Piglia that she had known Macedonio as a child and had visited him often with her father, who was a physician. Piglia's act of remembering evokes not Macedonio but the diffused memories of an obliquely related time and urban spaces. Di Tella superimposes Piglia's spoken memory of these urban spaces with images of them in 1995, creating an audio-visual layering evocative of what Gilles Deleuze would call 'sheets of the past' (1989). Macedonio Fernández, ostensibly the primary object of this remembering, is indirectly present as he is mediated by the remembrance of another act of remembering – that is, by Piglia's recalling of the memories of the eccentric 'loca del grabador', whose stories may or may not have been true, he admits. The acts of remembering contained in this brief scene also include the mediated memory of mnemonic devices – like the photograph of Macedonio pinned to her dress and the tape-recorder she always carried with her. Piglia adds that he inherited this tape recorder after her passing, though he never found out exactly how and why the machine found its way to him.<sup>1</sup>

The layered complexity of remembering that is present in *Macedonio* surely reflects the influence of Piglia, di Tella's collaborator in this project, as well as the qualities of Macedonio Fernández, a writer Piglia describes as 'an archivist of failed utopias' and 'the chronicler of a society to come'.<sup>2</sup> Yet the scene also illustrates incipient characteristics of di Tella's cinema that would blossom in later films, like *La televisión y yo* (*The Television and I*) (2002), *Fotografías* (*Photographs*) (2007) and *Hachazos* (*Axe Blows*) (2011a), and even in the relatively less polished *El país del diablo* (*The Country of the Devil*) (2008a). In these feature films the Argentine filmmaker continues to explore subjective and refractive efforts to remember, punctuating his works with incomplete acts of recall. Significantly, more often than not these efforts of remembrance revolve around minor and unofficial histories that are out of the purview of history writ large, or even in direct conflict with it. The minor character of these histories only contributes to placing his films on uncertain and subjective terrain – the terrain of memory rather than history, though these two categories invariably implicate one another in his films.

Subjectivity and the questioning of the past, then, are the trademarks of this filmmaker – who, despite being among the most important documentarians in contemporary Latin America, has thus far received only scant attention in the anglophone world (Paranaguá 2003).<sup>3</sup> Di Tella's work is essayistic in that it mixes personal and intimate perspectives with public and historical concerns, crafting a filmic voice that is exploratory and inconclusive.<sup>4</sup> Though an elusive genre, the essay can be characterized as 'a search to find

out what one thinks about something', as Phillip Lopate claims (1992: 19). It is less about the product of thinking than about its process. As Adorno puts it, the essay works 'methodically without method' (1984: 161), and the same is true of di Tella's films, which feel like provisional attempts – 'ensayos' or 'rehearsals' in the literal sense of the word.<sup>5</sup> At the centre of these essay-istic explorations are unstable senses of identity in the present, as Michael Lazzara notes. Di Tella's work documents 'the very difficulties of constructing subjectivity (and truth) in a world of competing discourses that circulate with ease' (Lazzara 2009: 148). Although characterized by subjective and uncertain engagement with the past, this cinema calls on material objects to play a vital role, as I will demonstrate.

The subjective *recollections* that characterize di Tella's essay films involve the accompanying constitution of collections of objects. Each film gathers the things that are or become embroiled with the filmmaker's and his interlocutors' reflections about the past. Remembering is remembering *things* – and remembering with and through them. Things, this cinema acknowledges, harbour memories and histories of their own, not all of which can be decoded in the present – thus the reversibility of agency implied by my title phrase, 'remembering objects', in which objects can be both the object or the subject of the verb 'remember'. The objects that are, in effect, collected in di Tella's films provide what Bill Brown would call the 'phenomenological infrastructure' that undergirds subjectivity and memory (2010: 186). This infrastructure includes many subcategories of objects, such as ordinary household items: a pile of clothes on a wooden stool, a cluttered bed and bedside table, a steaming teapot on the stove, and other such things that are gazed at without haste or any apparent narrative or argumentative instrumentality in *Hachazos*. Suitcases, boxes and trunks, items that are frequently featured in his films, constitute another category of things. These are things that bear an actual or potential relationship to other things: they contain an interior where other things can be sheltered, collected, and, also, temporarily forgotten and hidden – archived, as it were, so as to be discovered anew later. While the suitcase is associated with travel and dislocation, trunks and boxes evince, as Gaston Bachelard claims in his phenomenology of space, the human need for secrecy and for hiding places – places where treasures, mementos, and memories can be tucked away (1994: 81). Crucial moments of di Tella's films involve and are animated precisely by such objects, as in *Fotografías*, which is a meditation on the filmmaker's deceased mother propelled by the unearthing of her things from boxes and trunks.

Other objects featured in his work can be thought of as the debris or the ruins of history. *La televisión y yo* is a case in point. The film is in part about the inseparability of his generation's memory from television programming. As di Tella spent several school-age years living with his parents in London, he discovers that he is missing much of his generation's memory. The film reflects about these lacunas and attempts to recover some of the images he missed from the audiovisual archive – the problem being that such an archive does not in fact exist, as Álvaro Fernández Bravo notes (2013: 191). But *La televisión* is also a reflection about an industrial era and its failed projects of industrialization and modernization, failures that are rendered through images of obsolete TV sets and empty, ruinous factory buildings. Other objects featured in his films can be seen as ruins in the sense that the historical project that informed their making 'has crumbled' and their material remnants reveal 'dimensions that were heretofore hidden from the viewer for as long as that

5. Note that in Spanish as in other romance languages the word for 'essay' retains its meaning as 'rehearsal', with its sense of a provisional rather than final effort.

6. This is another way of referring to the indexical link between the photographic image and the photographed object. For an insightful discussion of C. S. Pierce's notion of the index in cinema see Mary Ann Doane (2007).

7. See for instance Laura Rascaroli (2009) and Timothy Corrigan (2011). I do not mean to dismiss these recent books and their use of the term 'essay film' but only to point out the validity of Renov's caution concerning the use of the literary term. Another notable essay in the critical bibliography on the essay film is Phillip Lopate's 'In search of the centaur: The essay film' (1992). Lopate places especial emphasis on the spoken word. He considers as 'essay films' only those that carry the voice of a single speaker reflecting in an open-ended way about a problem. Although insightful, Lopate favoring the aural over the visual leads him to overlook some of the expressive possibilities that are unique to film – such as the presence of images of objects, which I discuss here.

historical project stood firm' (di Tella 2009: 91), as the filmmaker himself puts it in his field notes for *El país del Diablo* – a film replete with ruinous colonial and postcolonial objects, including an eerie collection of skulls of Ranquel Indians stored in the basement of a national archive and many colonial maps and documents (mostly of broken treaties with indigenous people) that seem on the verge of crumbling and returning to dust.

Di Tella's films also feature objects that can be thought of as representational or mnemonic. These include letters, postcards, newspaper clippings, notebooks, film reels and photographs. Although freighted with representational content and meaning these objects are material things as well. They have 'volume, opacity, tactility and a physical presence in the world', as Geoffrey Batchen would put it (cited in Edwards and Hart 2004: 1). They interest di Tella's most when their significance lies somewhere between their meaning-or content-bearing function and their existence as sheer matter, as things chewed by the teeth of time. Crumbling, yellowed pieces of paper, worn-out black and white photographs, and dusty, stacked up rolls of film are significant not just in their representational content but also in their materiality. They have meanings that are inextricable from the fate of their material existence: the patina, wear, dust, and all manner of contingencies that accrue to or chip away at their bodies.

Photographs and films, particularly important objects for di Tella, can also be thought of as meta-objects, meaning that they are objects that are inherently entangled with other objects. In a sense, all objects exist in entangled relationships to other objects. But the photographic and filmic images are more potently so as they are like vessels carrying the indexical inscriptions of the material world. As André Bazin suggests in terms of the ontology of the medium, photographic images are produced with the complicity of the things photographed (2005).<sup>6</sup> Photographs and films are material things that carry the imprints or the memory, so to speak, of other material things.

This quality of the photographic image can be productive for our understanding of the essay film as a mode of documentary filmmaking that relates to but is also fundamentally distinct from the essay as a literary genre. In an insightful 1989 essay, Michael Renov showed hesitation about the use of the term 'essay films' because it suggests too easy a correlation between the literary and the filmic. He proposed the more cautious adjectival term 'essayistic film and video' (1989: 7). Although many excellent publications have emerged on the topic of the essay film, scholars have generally not been as cautious as Renov regarding the distinctions between cinema and literature *vis-à-vis* the essay genre.<sup>7</sup> I would argue that a major difference hinges on the nature of filmic objects. One way of addressing the specificity of the audio-visual essay is to account for the way that photographed and filmed objects collaborate in the production of their own image and in so doing insert a material dimension into the representational field that does not obtain in literary form. A distinctive feature of the essay as a literary genre, it has been argued, is the way in which it allows for a mixing of subject and object of discourse, setting itself apart from Cartesian objectivity by favouring the uncertainties and self-reflexivity of subjective perspective. The novelty of contemporary documentary, as Jorge Ruffinelli puts it speaking of the Argentine case but pointing to what is in fact a global trend, is precisely the dissolution of the distance between subject and object, so that filmmakers become themselves objects of their camera (2011: 73). If in the literary essay the subjects of enunciation become entangled with their objects (with

'object' here meaning 'topic'), in the essay film this entanglement can include objects in the literal, material sense. Illustrating this, di Tella's films are not centred only on subjects and subjectivity but also on an array of interacting objects and their 'objectivity', by which I refer not to the Cartesian claim to truth but to the 'thingness' of objects, to the particularities of their material existence and character rendered in the filmic image, and to their imbrication in webs of relationships. Inter-subjectivity or inter-objectivity – these terms occur to me as possible ways of denoting the contact and exchange between people and things through interactions that are at the centre of di Tella's films.

To clarify what I am suggesting, we can take recourse to one of Hannah Arendt's observations about subject-object relations in *The Human Condition* (2013). Arendt writes that lasting objects are fundamental for the constitution and continuation of our sense of self, which otherwise would be overrun by the formlessness and tractability of nature. Humans can 'retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, [only] by being related to the same chair and the same table' (2013: 137). It is our embedded-ness in the world of lasting objects, Arendt argues, that allows us to form and protect our sense of who we are. Di Tella operates with a similar assumption but what interests him is not the retrieval of the self-same self. Rather, he is interested in objects that disturb and challenge the self, producing effects of self-estrangement and self-questioning. Tensions between subjects and objects open the creative field from which his essayistic films spring, as I will now demonstrate by examining *Fotografías* (2007) and *Hachazos* (2011a).

## **'HERENCIA' AND THE QUESTION OF GENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION IN FOTOGRAFÍAS**

*Fotografías*, arguably di Tella's most intimate and accomplished film, opens with a shot of the filmmaker looking through a bundle of black and white photographs. The shot is a close-up of the photos so that we also see the filmmaker's hands but not the rest of his body. He states: '[m]y father gave me a box of photos. These are from the trip to India. I only went there once. I was eleven'. This begins a film that is centred on the memory of di Tella's deceased mother, Kamala, a complex transnational subject who lived uneasily on the borders between cultures, nations and languages. Born to a Hindu family in Madras, India, Kamala's conflicted relationship with her family and cultural heritage influenced her decision to marry a foreigner, the Argentinian Torcuato di Tella, and to emigrate from India. She spent long periods in several countries including the United States, London and Argentina, where she continued to live after divorcing Torcuato. Her best friend, the artist Marta Menujín, claims in the film that Kamala 'had a divided self'. Though she never felt fully at home in Argentina, her children bound her to that place. Drawn to her native home and family in Madras, she was never entirely at home there either – so much so that she made no effort to transmit her native culture to her children and only took them to visit once and briefly. She returned to India after that, but always alone. In a letter written from there to her soon to be ex-husband in 1976 (a letter that is among the many objects we see handled in close-up in *Fotografías*), Kamala reveals her uneasy sensation of not belonging: '[h]ere I am with my family and it is unbelievable how they receive me as if I was part of them [...] In another part of the world are my children'. Note not only the expression of her divided self, but her surprise at

8. As Antonio Weinrichter notes in his overview of di Tella's work, by focusing on his Hindu mother in *Fotografías*, di Tella moves from the 'cine de memoria' that characterizes most of his oeuvre towards diasporic and exilic concerns relatable to what Hamid Naficy calls 'accented cinema' (2001). Memory and objects remain crucial, however, as I show in this article.

being received as if she was part of her family. She lives in Argentina as an immigrant and returns home as a foreigner.<sup>8</sup>

*Fotografías* is concerned with Kamala's chronic sense of dislocation as well as with di Tella's relationship with his mother and her culture. As Luz Horne suggests, the film works with movement across two distinct spatiotemporal axes (2016). The first axis is the mother's migratory trajectory from East to West and, in a sense, from the past to the present. The second is the son's quest for that familial past and his voyage, during the making of the film, from the West to the East, to India, where he searches for his mother's and his own roots. Visually eclectic, the film combines archival footage, filmed conversations, and variety of images taken by di Tella. However, stylistically the film evokes especially two genres, which relate to Horne's assertion about its binary axes: the home movie and the road movie (2016: 87–88). In the vein of the home movie, many of the images of the film are taken with a handheld camera and natural lighting and portray seemingly spontaneous occurrences of private life in an unpretentious documentary style. The film evokes the road movie and the travelogue not only through the spatial dislocations it portrays (the mother's migration and the son's journeys to seek out that past) but also through beautiful images of landscapes that punctuate the film, such as those taken from a moving car. This combination of genres reflects tensions between the familiar and the strange, the domestic and the foreign or exotic as experienced by a self that has become, through an engagement with the deceased mother's things, unsure about his cultural identity.

*Fotografías* reflects about the issue of generational transmission of cultural identity and memory, the passing of a heritage and an inheritance in its immaterial as well as material senses. These forms of generational transmission, which necessitate two distinct words in English, are simultaneously conveyed in the Spanish word 'herencia', which encompasses the immaterial and the material and is therefore more apt for thinking about di Tella's combined interest in subjectivity and objects. The fact that the filmmaker's son, Rocco, plays a prominent role in the film confirms and extends to another generation the filmmaker's preoccupation with the 'herencia' of his mother's cultural identity. In voice-over he confesses that he would like to tell Rocco something about India, 'que es también parte de su herencia' ('which is also part of his heritage'), but has no such knowledge to impart.

In a crucial early scene we see the filmmaker and his son rummaging through a trunk of his mother's belongings in the attic. Lit with a flashlight and filmed with a handheld camera, the scene evokes the aesthetic of the home movie as well as the feel of an illicit trespass, a burglary, thanks to the setting and the lighting: 'We are like thieves', notes Rocco. The 'burglary' scene could also be seen as staging a domestic archaeology, an excavation of things that Laura Marks would call 'transnational objects' (2000: 78), meaning objects that have travelled along the paths of human migration and ended up encoding cultural memory and displacement. Like Kamala, these objects seem out of place – thus they are sequestered in the attic, gathering dust in a wooden trunk. Kamala's things, part of di Tella's 'herencia', are not quite *his* things. The contents of the trunk constitute the troubled *herencia* of such objects – troubled because they cannot be fully understood or decoded. Although the mother's things should be familiar, they are experienced as exotic and strange. This is illustrated by the way the scene unfolds. The first thing to emerge is the carving of an elephant. This is either a fertile coincidence or the result of some unrevealed staging on the part of the filmmaker

as this animal is strongly associated with India in the popular imagination. A variety of other objects come out of the trunk, including statuettes, engravings, and some large wooden marionettes that spook Rocco: 'We better put them back', the boy warns, backing away. Solid and material as these objects are, they seem to reveal the precipitous gap separating the Argentine born father and son from Kamala and her cultural memory.

A later scene further elaborates the sense of displacement encoded in these objects. There we see again the statuette of the elephant that was retrieved from the trunk. It is now on an apartment shelf, integrated into the background of knick-knacks, ostensibly domesticated. This elephant will be the object of a seemingly small but rather revealing dispute between the filmmaker and his father. Andrés passes the animal to Torcuato and observes: 'este debe ser sri Ganesh, el dios elefante' ('this must be sri Ganesh, the elephant god'), to which his father promptly replies: 'lamento decirte pero esto es un elefante' ('[s]orry to disappoint but this is just an elephant'). In this scene the ordinary object not only resists domestication but comes to play a rather burdensome role as the mediator between several unresolved relationships involving mother, father, and son, Argentina and India, as well as the present and the past.

Di Tella's cerebral father plays an authoritative role in relation to the things and the memory of the mother. Dismissive and even curt when asked about the family's past, Torcuato plays the antagonist with regards to di Tella's effort to make sense of Kamala's life.<sup>9</sup> Although resistant to talking about the family's past, Torcuato is a compulsive archivist of documents, photographs and objects ('Soy del tipo que guarda cosas', he says, and it is he who gives the box of photos that opens the film). The fundamental operation of the archive, Achille Mbembe writes speaking of a different context, is to extract something from the present and from life and to hide it for the future – a process that not only takes control of what is archived but also administers the conditions of its future access and legibility (2002). One gets the impression that in *Fotografías* di Tella is attempting to access the familial archive too soon for the archivist's taste, a violation that generates resistance and misinformation at every turn. In one conversation Torcuato summarily rejects the idea that being an interracial couple in the 1970s was in any way an issue. Yet it is among his father's files that the filmmaker finds evidence to the contrary in a yellowed clipping from a European newspaper featuring Torcuato and Kamala, the recently arrived interracial couple, which evidently was deemed newsworthy. Pressed later by his son, Torcuato concedes that he and Kamala had trouble even finding a place to live in London. Because they were interracial, most landlords rejected them outright.

Photographs are the most important objects in the aptly titled *Fotografías*. As I mentioned, the film's opening scene emphasizes the object-ness of the photographs by showing them in close-up being handled by di Tella. This compositional approach recurs in the film so that objects are shown at the moment of tactile contact with subjects. This approach gives visual expression to the subject-object interrelation that I am arguing is central for di Tella's filmmaking. The handling scenes are moments of lived duration (like the filmed trip to the attic that spooks Rocco) in which individuals discover and respond to things. Thus, as di Tella looks at the photographs of his mother in India (many of which evince a degree of exotic, orientalist objectification, like the ones showing what appears to be a tiger hunt), he is truly at a loss about

9. As Pedro Meira Monteiro notes, Torcuato begins to play this antagonistic role in the earlier film *La televisión y yo*, where di Tella starts to pry into the family's past (Firbas and Monteiro 2006: 21). *La televisión y yo*, *Fotografías* and *Hachazos* can be seen as a trilogy as each film harbours the seeds of the other.

who is in these photos, who took them, and what the images actually meant to his family then or should mean to him now.

Di Tella's essayistic and mournful meditation on his deceased mother and on photographs remits to *Camera Lucida*, the influential essay by Roland Barthes. There, Barthes makes provocative claims about the materiality of photography, comparing it to an umbilical cord made of light and describing it corporeally as 'a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed' (2010: 81). As Marianne Hirsch argues, to take Barthes' claims exclusively as a reference to photography's indexicality would be to lose sight of the fact that *Camera Lucida* is inspired by and revolves around the photographs of the author's recently deceased mother – particularly the mysterious 'winter garden' photograph, which inspires the text but is not reproduced in it (1997: 5–6). His theory of photography is deeply entwined with familial bonds and affects and described through metaphors of filiation and kinship like 'the umbilical cord' and 'the shared of skin'.

These elements echo but take on a particularly interesting shape in di Tella's film. Here the sharing of the skin is not a photographic metaphor but an embodied fact as di Tella and his mother share the brownness of their skin. Although ignorant about his mother's culture, di Tella can nevertheless be perceived by others as Indian, as a belligerent English schoolmate once did by calling him 'a fucking wog'. The young di Tella initially did not know what the insult meant but found a clue in an object, a jam jar decorated with the image of Golliwog, the nineteenth-century children's book racial stereotype (the jam jar is filmed in close-up in *Fotografías*). The traumatic moment of discovering that he belonged to an undesirable group amounts to a momentary objectification of the self. As in Du Bois 'double consciousness', in this instant of recognition one views one's self as the object of the disapproving gaze of another: '[i]t is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity', Du Bois famously writes (2007: 8). As the material surface of the self, the skin is the limit between the interiority of the thinking subject and the exteriority of the self as body, which is available to the sensory perception of another like any material thing. The brown skin is an important part of di Tella's inheritance from his mother, part of his *herencia*. But it also makes him an exotic object in the eyes of others – an object as foreign as those he and Rocco unearthed from the trunk in the earlier scene. This formative trauma, he confesses, made him internalize racism to the point that he began to find Hindu girls unattractive – the corollary of which was the fact that, in this entangled web of acts of objectifying looking, he was also rendered an undesirable object. Although these self-conflicted experiences were obstacles in his relationship with his mother and with her cultural heritage, di Tella confesses that he never found a way to discuss the issue with her, fearing that any mention of it would amount to a kind of accusation.

As Kamala was an avid amateur videographer, several tapes are also among her belongings – and Di Tella incorporates some of them into his film. In the most interesting of them, Kamala films a book of landscape photographs. As di Tella tells us in voice-over, the video was made after her final trip to India, shortly before she died. She had gone to a Buddhist temple in the Himalayas. The handheld camera initially moves across the details of the images as if it were filming nature – though the curvature of the book, the reflection of the sunlight on the glossy pages, and the casting of Kamala's



shadow over the image prevent us from mistaking what we see for an actual landscape. At one point the camera retreats slightly and reveals the objects in front of it: two books propped on a chair that is placed on the grass, probably in her own backyard. Road movie and home movie converge beautifully in this video, which ends with the camera being placed on the ground. Leaves of grass are seen in extreme close-up and enlarged as if they were part of a vast backyard landscape.

Di Tella's interpretation of the video strikes me as unlikely. His mother, he says, had forgotten to take her camera in the trip and decided to film a book instead, hoping to fool her friends into believing that she had taken the images during the trip. If that was the goal, she was rather careless in the way she filmed. What seems more interesting here is the way Kamala stages, with the use of objects, a hyper-mediated relationship between subject, time and space, performing multiple dislocations that are rather eloquent in speaking of the experience of a migrant subject living uneasily between places and cultures. By belatedly filming the images of the place she had visited, she is twice removed from it (as she films the visual record of someone else's trip). At the same time, filming in a place that seems to be a domestic yard, this imaging of the Himalayan mountains, upon which she casts her own shadow, feels like the longing for an elsewhere that removes her from home. Recall Hannah Arendt's claim that the return to one's everyday chair and table is what allows the subject to retrieve each day her otherwise untenable self-sameness. In contrast, here the ordinary chair in a homely yard stages the subjects' temporal and spatial disquiet, a scene of non-coincidence of the self. The excessive closeness of the grass at the end of the video also renders the familiar strange – making the literal placement of the camera on the ground into yet another figurative gesture of displacement and estrangement. This video suggests that, in advance of her son, Kamala uses the audio-visual to stage revealing interactions between subjects and objects. Di Tella and Kamala share not only their brown skin but also the audio-visual screen, the surface upon which their displaced senses of being are made visible. His weak explanation of the video indicates, at least to me, his remove from his mother and her 'herencia' – his incomplete grasp of her intercultural history as well as of her actual things, which he can handle but not fully grasp.

Many further examples and illustrations of subject-object interactions in *Fotografías* could be presented, such as those that occur during di Tella's visit to his mother's family in India. At one point during the visit the filmmaker is invited to attend a wedding and the invitation prompts anxiety about what would be the proper clothing for the event. In one scene we see him trying on rather regal Indian outfits at a clothing store. The scene is somewhat comical as di Tella repeatedly asks if the clothes are making him look fat. Clothing brings up not only problems about cultural identity and belonging but also about the filmmaker's more pedestrian insecurities regarding his body image. At the wedding di Tella realizes embarrassedly that he is the only man wearing traditional Indian clothing. Contrary to what he might have imagined, western button shirts and slacks worn by the Indian men bespeak of their cultural belonging to a globalized Indian culture while the traditional garb di Tella wears only enhances and marks his foreignness. Of course the preponderance of western clothing is indicative of many factors, including a colonial history in which material things play a rather important role. Western clothing, one could argue, enabled Indian men as embodied socio-historic actors to negotiate their belonging in a colonially determined global modernity (Keane

2005: 194). Di Tella does not detour from his personal journey to elaborate on this history, which would surely reveal many rich cases of subject-object relations – colonial and postcolonial relations that would be in contrast to Arendt’s homely model of one’s own table and chair. They would, therefore, resonate with the forms of object-generated disquiet that interest di Tella.

### **HACHAZOS AND THE REMNANTS OF FILM**

*Hachazos*, di Tella’s 2011 film about the experimental filmmaker Claudio Caldini, takes its title from a remarkable story that is not told in the film. It appears instead in the book-length essay by the same title that was also published in 2011. It is worth noting that Di Tella’s essayistic films tend to generate written essays, as illustrated by ‘Ruins in the desert: Field notes by a filmmaker’ (2009), which anticipated the film *El país del diablo*, and ‘Yo y tú: Autobiografía y narración’ (2008b), which extends in written form some of the themes and concerns of *Fotografías*. In the book *Hachazos* di Tella writes that it used to be common practice for Argentina’s film distributors to sell film prints to factories as raw material – in particular for acetate, which can be extracted from the film stock and used to make paint. To prevent the films from being recovered as films and re-circulated illicitly, the film prints were thoroughly destroyed before being sold as raw material. The noun ‘hachazos’, which evokes an intense physicality, means the blows of an axe or the gashes left by such blows. Films, di Tella writes, were in fact destroyed with axe blows, a method that was supposed to leave them in a state of ruin beyond repair, mere matter rather than film. This historical anecdote is rather important in Caldini’s biography. Caldini’s father and godfather were tinkers who developed a taste for salvaging ruinous fragments of destroyed films. The two men would combine the remnants of films into fragmented montages that left a lasting impression on the young Caldini. His godfather’s workshop, one of his favourite places, was so cluttered with things that one could barely move in it, Caldini recalls. There he not only became familiar with film prints and editing techniques at a young age but also developed a rare aesthetic sensibility from watching ‘dismembered versions of *Ben-Hur*, *The Robe*, fragments of Walt Disney cartoons, and musicals that skipped sections of the soundtrack and the choreography’. This tinkering, di Tella adds, demonstrated ‘an absolutely materialistic view of cinema, attentive to the material substrate of photography and the mechanical character of the moving image’ (di Tella 2011: 39–40).

It may seem odd that di Tella would leave the remarkable title story out of the actual film but, insofar as the story is ultimately about the fragments that are left after destruction, its absence enacts an appropriate logic of misplacement and loss. Be that as it may, the anecdote about the destruction of films with axe blows and the partial salvaging of fragments, remitting, as it does, to the sheer materiality of the celluloid print, speaks volumes to the reasons why di Tella appreciates Caldini and his work. True to the anecdote of his formative experiences with cinema in his godfather’s shop, Caldini is more interested in cinema as a material and as a technique than as a representational practice. He preserves and projects his films in their original super-8 form. Both in the film and in the published essay di Tella comments that this format is haunted by the ghost of technological obsolescence. Having no negative, it cannot be copied or transferred to another print, as is the case with 16 or 35mm. The only way to release Super 8 films from the fate of decay and

loss is to digitalize the contents. Asked by di Tella why he keeps his films in Super 8, Caldini responds: '[w]hat interests me is that there is a material that suffers the passage of time. These materials, [becoming] old, scratched, obsolete, with each projection [...] betray the passage of time. This is what keeps on inspiring me' (2011: 32). Caldini's main interest, then, lies in the material substrate and its vulnerability, as matter, to the contingencies of time.

In recent years Caldini's work has been digitalized and many films have even been uploaded to YouTube and Vimeo – and I encourage the reader to peruse them there.<sup>10</sup> Yet the way he preserves and exhibits his work reflects his continued commitment to the vulnerability of the films as objects. Caldini's exhibitions of his movies are singular, unique events, as we see illustrated in di Tella's film. He deploys several projectors that simultaneously cast adjacent images onto the screen. The projectors themselves, old, refurbished, and slightly modified machines, add a degree of materiality and contingency to the exhibition. Caldini splices several of his films together and feeds the same combined footage from projector to projector. The combination of old materials and machines almost invariably causes problems, necessitating tinkering and improvisation during the projection. The exhibition is about more than the images on the screen. It is also a live performance involving the materiality of the medium and the sometimes frantic work of the artist as projectionist.

Di Tella's interest in Caldini is partly autobiographical and in that sense related to *Fotografías*. As we learn from *Hachazos*, di Tella's first filmmaking experience was his participation in a filmed performance by artist Marta Menujín, Kamala's best friend, as I mentioned. In this performance Menujín, wearing a bathing suit and sunglasses, is buried alive. A teenager at the time, di Tella had the task of shovelling sand on Menujín from off-screen space while Caldini, 'the first filmmaker [he] saw in action', filmed the scene. 'This, in a time when in Argentina anonymous bodies were being buried everyday', comments di Tella in the voice-over that accompanies a clip of the film, connecting the performance to the bloody chapter of national history brought about by the military coup of 1976. After this event di Tella did not see Caldini again for a long time, though he heard that he had gone to India where he had supposedly gone insane. Caldini's tenuous mental health, I will argue, fuels di Tella's interest in him.

The story we gather from *Hachazos* is as follows: In 1979, while living in Sri Aurobindo's Ashram in India, Caldini suffers a psychotic meltdown that leaves him hallucinating and completely out of his senses. He has barely any memory of this episode, which resulted in his removal from the Ashram and, shortly after, his repatriation to Argentina by that country's embassy in India. From the period leading up to the meltdown, he remembers that he had been compulsively filming sunsets. This footage results in a film (included in *Hachazos*) that shows multiple sunsets in accelerated time so that the sun appears to fall precipitously and repeatedly onto the surface of the earth. This was more than an artistic conceit. At that time Caldini recalls being consumed by the irrational fear that the sun was indeed about to fall cataclysmically on the surface of the earth, a sensation that reached fever pitch just before he lost his senses. After the breakdown and his forced repatriation, Caldini gradually recovered consciousness and coherence. At first he did not remember who he was at all – and his confusion was aggravated by the fact that his name in his passport was blurred or incorrectly printed (it is unclear which), leading doctors to call him by another name for several weeks. For many years after this meltdown, Caldini lived an unstable life, including periods in which he was on the verge of

10. A reevaluation of this filmmaker, who until recently was an obscure figure, is underway. Di Tella's film and book are part of the recuperation of Caldini and his work for Argentine film culture.

11. It is worth noting, also, that Caldini's plans for this unfinished narrative film gave prominence to objects. The film was about Tomás Sinovčić, a filmmaker from Caldini's generation who was 'disappeared' by the military regime in 1976. Caldini's plan, di Tella writes in *Hachazos*, was to film the materials he was collecting during his research, such as the notes he took from a phone conversation with Sinovčić's father, clippings from the press, a music sheet of the national anthem with the phrase 'juremos con gloria morir' ('we swear to die with glory') underscored, the programme of a film screening from 1974 featuring Caldini and Sinovčić, among other things. In other words, Caldini's attempt at a narrative film was going to be a collection of images of objects related to Sinovčić.

homelessness. This instability lasted until his current employment as grounds-keeper of a country house near Buenos Aires, where much of the film is shot.

Caldini also notes that his crisis in India was not an isolated event but rather the culmination of a long process of estrangement that started in Argentina during the 1970s, when he began feeling like a stranger in his own neighbourhood. He started to feel that even the people he knew were complete strangers. These feelings, he continues, 'are not resolved by going to another country, to another city'. In relation to *Fotografías*, I discussed the non-coincidence of the self – a self that is destabilized and under reconstruction through the interaction with the material world. Caldini illustrates potentially the precariousness of the self – and he does this in such an intense and life-threatening way that di Tella's own elaborations of crises of identity (in *Fotografías*, for instance) seem like low-risk conceits. Like Kamala, Caldini feels like a stranger in the world. But in his case this state of being cannot be attributed to or rationalized as the result of a migratory, inter-cultural history. Caldini is a stranger because his sense of self skirts the abyss of insanity. In *Hachazos* Di Tella registers the intensity of the breakdown experienced by Caldini in India by inserting footage from the latter's film 'Rolf Gelewski, danzas espontáneas', where the German Brazilian choreographer moves as if his body was electrically charged or undergoing an intense involuntary convulsion. It is as if Gelewski's body was becoming the vehicle of raw movement and energy, the depersonalized conduit for a charge so potent that it might just tear its conductor apart.

Di Tella renders the fragility of Caldini's subjectivity through close attention to objects. In the very first shot of the film, Caldini holds up and reads a document that lists his belongings at the time he was removed from Sri Aurobindo's Ashram. This inventory of ordinary things, then, lists material remains left by an unmoored self. Given that Caldini has almost no memory of the event, this list of objects is made to stand in the place of memory proper. In contrast to the objects listed, the recurring shots of Caldini's modest dwelling, with attention to its ordinary furnishings and objects, suggest this abode as the 'table and chair' of Caldini's current life, the material ground enabling the sense of stability he developed in recent years. Caldini's leather suitcase is another central object that recurs visually and in his conversations with di Tella. Apparently the worn out suitcase can hold all of Caldini's films – that is, his entire life's work. At one point in his errands Caldini did precisely that. It is not surprising that this declaration would fascinate di Tella as it renders a life's endeavour in terms of a few fragile material things collected in an aged suitcase.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Hachazos* is the gaping difference between di Tella's and Caldini's work as filmmakers. Caldini's films are brief, visually intense, and non-narrative. The one time he attempted to make a narrative film he failed completely and the project remains unfinished to this day.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to Caldini's work, di Tella's films are warm, humanist narratives. Though quite invested in material things as the constitutive counterpart of subjectivity, his films are compelled by stories, biographies and histories. At one point in *Hachazos* Caldini mentions that he agreed to make the film with di Tella because he believed that the latter could tell the story about what happened to him in India – a story that he himself is unable to tell. Caldini's films enact a radical decentring of the human. Not only are human figures rare in them, they also present forms of seeing that are far from the normal operations of human vision. Caldini manipulates the camera as a physical

and mechanical object that is entirely unlike the human body. For instance, to make one film he tied the camera to a rope on a tree, spun the rope until it was taut, and then released it to film the spinning world resulting from the rope's unwinding. The images produced are a fascinating non-figurative haze, a vertiginous whirl of movement, colour, light and blurred shapes that only gradually suggest themselves as familiar figures, such as plants and trees. A similar result was obtained in another experiment in which he used a rope to spin the camera overhead as if it were a helicopter propeller. Another film was made by tying the camera to a bicycle and filming the play of lights and shadows from what seemed to be a richly coloured dawn or dusk (this 1993 film is appropriately titled 'Heliografía', or the writing of light).<sup>12</sup> In addition to using the camera as an object to produce images that are not human centred, Caldini also explores the tractability of cinematic time to render non-human forms of temporal experience. Events that occurred during extended periods of time are compressed to just a few seconds, like the repeated sunsets in India or the several passing seasons condensed in a few hypnotic minutes in *Lux Taal* (2009). Superimpositions and the stop motion editing also distance these films from normal human sensorial and temporal experience. In his conversations with Caldini, di Tella overtly links these filmic experiments with the filmmaker's crisis in India: '[w]hat happened [in India] is part of what you do with cinema', he muses. As I understand it, he means to suggest that the decentring of the human in his work reflects the loss of self he experienced during his meltdown in the Ashram. Caldini agrees with the association and follows up by suggesting that he understands cinema to be an exploration of limits: 'with cinema we try to show with images what images cannot show'.

In some ways Caldini resists di Tella's approach in *Hachazos* and the film stages a battle of sensibilities between the non-narrative experimental filmmaker and the humanist documentarian. Caldini finds di Tella's fascination with his leather suitcase disproportionate and gets annoyed when asked to place all of his films in the bag and ride a train, like he once did. This reenactment of a past occurrence interests di Tella precisely for the centrality of objects, the protagonism of the suitcase holding the super-8 films. The idea strikes Caldini as contrived – though a later shot of precisely such a ride suggests that he humoured di Tella after all. The somewhat enigmatic conclusion of the film also places significant emphases on object-subject relations. First we see Caldini packing some cardboard boxes with his belongings, suggesting that he is moving from the country house that gave his life stability. Then Caldini takes di Tella to see a large fire pit, a bed of ashes: 'this is what is left from my last six years'. He lists several things that have been burned: his old clothes, his mattress and beddings, books that had grown mouldy, a printer, an answering machine, a telephone. The camera peers at the ashes, as if to glean something from these remains. Indeed we see the ruined fragments of many burned objects, like notebook spirals, illustrated magazines, darkened tin cans, and other unidentifiable things.

Tellingly, the film begins and ends with inventories of objects: first of the objects that were accounted for when Caldini lost his senses in India and, at the end, Caldini's listing of his disposed things. There is perhaps an implied emancipation here, or even a wager about the strength of Caldini's sanity: now the objects are disposed of and he is left standing, in a sense just the opposite of the India crisis, when the objects were left after the crumbling of his subjectivity. At any rate, the objects destroyed by him are not all of his belongings. 'Did you burn your files', di Tella asks? 'No, no', he answers. In

12. In *Hachazos*, di Tella not only includes excerpts of these and other films by Caldini, but also reconstructs these filmmaking experiments, exploring again the potential of the camera as mechanical object.

13. For another history of crumbled empire, see the story of Jaime Yankelevich, Argentina's radio and television pioneer, a central figure in *La televisión y yo*.

Spanish the word used is 'archivo', which means both 'file' and 'archive'. 'El archivo va conmigo' ('the archive comes with me'), Caldini says, indicating that he is about to move. The long final takes show him in the back of a small truck with what we presume to be all he has left: a plant and a few boxes. Di Tella withholds narrative information and we are left wondering what the future holds for this man and his things.

Although Di Tella's films delve into the particularity of individual lives and into the specificity of many material things, they also invariably signal towards broader stories and histories. Here ruinous old objects unearthed by the filmmaker are approached as potential links to familial, national, transnational and intercultural histories. It is in this sense that I have been thinking of di Tella not only as an heir and a collector but also as a kind of archaeologist who uses film to excavate and inquire about the memory of things. *Hachazos* is primarily about Caldini and his work but it is also about the memory of a historical moment that included radical aesthetic experimentation and voyages to Ashrams in India. Caldini's films and sensibility are remainders of a bygone countercultural utopia. For di Tella, Caldini's work is also the bearer of an unfulfilled futurity. They suggest 'what cinema could have been', he says in the film. Interestingly, the history of Caldini's avant-garde background is connected to di Tella and his family. Caldini is related to the group of artists that worked under the patronage of the Instituto Torcuato di Tella, a philanthropic organization founded with the wealth of the industrial empire built by di Tella's paternal grandfather, who was an entrepreneurial Italian immigrant. This empire has crumbled, however, and in *La televisión y yo* we see the family's empty, ruinous factory buildings, part of the ruins of modernity in Argentina. Histories of crumbling empires recur elsewhere, as in when di Tella discovers his mother's familial past.<sup>13</sup> 'As far as the eye could see this land was ours', says Gautam, one of di Tella's uncles. Until their grandfather's time their family 'ruled the region', he adds. This uncle does not appear to be the heir of an empire. From what we can tell, he is a just middle-class man who owns a butcher shop – though the deference with which one of his employees treats him may be a trace of the family's noble past or a remnant of India's caste system. At the end of di Tella's visit, Gautam gives him a regal scarf that is 100 years old and has been passed down from his grandfather. Filmed in close up, this item has its brief moment of protagonism as the material relic of an empire that no longer exists. Following the logic established by the film, we can imagine that this scarf will travel across the world and become another transnational object, a material link to an intercultural history awaiting the attention of an heir, a collector, or some type of archaeologist interested in the fragments of history that ruinous things might reveal. Someday one of di Tella's descendants, living in another language and culture, might find this object in a trunk in the attic and wonder about how its history bears on who they imagine they are. In advance of this future moment, di Tella places the scarf on the shoulder of his son, Rocco. It is a scene of generational transmission of a material and immaterial 'herencia' – the transfer of cultural memory that preoccupies much of *Fotografías*. Too young to understand the scene, the boy looks puzzled.

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