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## The Battlefields of Disagreement and Reconciliation. 21st Century Documentary Images on The War Against Paraguay (1864-1870)

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### Keywords / Palabras clave

Reconciliation, Memory, Argentina, Paraguay, Latin America, Politican Violence

# DISSIDENCES

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*The Battlefields of Disagreement  
and Reconciliation:  
21<sup>st</sup> Century Documentary Images on  
The War Against Paraguay  
(1864-1870).*

Sebastián Díaz-Duhalde / Dartmouth College

*Consensus is not peace. It is a map of war operations, a topography of the visible,  
the thinkable, and the possible in which war and peace are lodged.*

Jacques Rancière. *Chronicles of Consensual Times.*

On November 29, 2007, during the ceremony for the rebuilding of Yacyretá, the hydroelectric power station project between Argentina and Paraguay, the Argentine president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner publicly commented on the war that the Triple Alliance of Argentina, Uruguay, and the

Empire of Brazil waged against Paraguay from 1864 to 1870. Fernández de Kirchner highlighted the important role of Mariscal Francisco Solano López, president and commander in chief of the Paraguayan army, during the war by affirming that Solano López was a “true hero humiliated by the Alliance of the ‘Triple Treason’, an alliance that also humiliated the Latin American cause, its men and women”[1]. Almost immediately, the President’s words were discussed and criticized in the international press. A week after the speech Argentine newspaper La Nación set the tone for the discussion to come in an editorial entitled “An Absurd Tribute to a Dictator”:

Mrs Kirchner’s speech does not contribute to the building of good relations between neighbors who are at the same time brothers. If we bring to the present dramatic disagreements from the past we will irritate and ignite old passions and we will disturb the tombs of the protagonists of that distant conflict. La Nación. December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

The editorial went on to say that what the President ignored was that Argentinean, Paraguayan, Brazilian, and Uruguayan historians have already met to “talk about the War” and “have analyzed and discussed the History with great results.” The relation between war -in this case treated as a primitive expression of State violence- and representation has been openly enunciated for the public opinion: the representation of war belongs to History, a history that will not come back to blur the cultural present of the four countries, a history that will no longer cause any disagreement. In the following weeks the international debate on the War Against Paraguay disappeared from the newspaper pages and other media outlets and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was accused of being inaccurate with the historical facts, and labeled her ignorant of South American History.

This international “discussion,” however, was moved away from its most appealing argument underscored at the beginning by La Nación’s editorial: disagreement and reconciliation are a matter of regulation and control of different times, a question of how do we bring the past to the

present. In this case, we can follow Jacques Rancière's idea on consensus and the way it works in society. For the French philosopher, consensus -that is at the same time at the heart of reconciliation- is a "machine of vision and interpretation," a machine that articulates in the present time and present space the relationship between war and peace:

Its principle aims to be simple. War, says the machine, takes place elsewhere and in the past: in countries that are still subjugated to the obscure law of blood and soil, in the archaic tensions or those who cling to yesterday's struggles and obsolete privileges. But because 'the elsewhere' avers that it is 'here' and the 'past' that is 'today', the consensual machine must continuously redraw the borders between spaces and the ruptures of time." Chronicles... viii-xix.

Thus, the traumatic past of the War against Paraguay in which more than 70 percent of the Paraguayan population died [2], needs to remain in the hands of historians. According to this logic, historians (unlike the President) will keep the atrocities committed during the conflict firmly in the past, or they will bring a sanitized version of the past to the present, a past free from any possible source of disagreement, therefore relocating peace and State violence. The conservative newspaper La Nación (founded by Bartolomé Mitre, the Argentinean president who declared the war and signed the Triple Alliance's treaty to invade Paraguay in 1865) wanted to shut any possible source of disagreement on the past history between the two countries appealing to a "distance" that only "history" can provide. On the other hand, in the president's speech we can read the attempt to transform a moment of international cooperation into a moment of reconciliation. Of course, in order to do that we would have to bring history to the present, bring disagreement into a new moment that reconfigured the map of war and peace between countries.

In 2005, Argentinean film director José Luis García experimented precisely with the core of reconciliation and disagreement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, playing with the borders between history and the

present of the War against Paraguay in his documentary Cándido López: The Battlefields. In the film, the director travels around the northeast of Argentina (Corrientes) and Paraguay with a ladder and a book of Cándido López's paintings. García tries to find the same battlefields that the Argentine Lieutenant and painter Cándido López portrayed over a hundred years ago during his participation in the War against Paraguay. In order to do that, García opens the ladder, climbs up, and compares the landscapes with the book of paintings. Of course, the battlefields aren't there any more: the forest has covered most of them, and others were turned into "villas miserias." In addition, Cándido López's aerial and panoramic views are impossible to capture with a lens. However, in this journey he interviews Paraguayan inhabitants who lived next to the battlefields and the documentary subsequently becomes an exploration of the discovery of Paraguay's present (the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the impact of the global economy) and the revelation of people's memories about the 19th-century war.

Cándido López: The Battlefields rests on the intersection of two stories: on the one hand, the War that the Triple Alliance of Argentina, Uruguay, and the Empire of Brazil waged against Paraguay, the one that historiography named The Paraguayan War or The War of the Triple Alliance. On the other hand, it is the story of the director's obsession with finding a match between the Paraguay he is faced with in the documentary and Cándido López's 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paraguay. Both stories bring to light a dialectic tension generated by the constant entering of the past into the present. But, the very impossibility of the juxtaposition of past and present is, indeed, the most significant statement of the documentary.

The War against Paraguay (1864-1870) took place in the historical interregnum between Latin American independence from Spain and the technological modernization of the nation-state. The six years of this brutal and deadly war had an enormous and long-lasting impact on the

historical, cultural, social, and technological development of the River Plate region as a whole. The war was marked by regions with models and distinct economic projects that struggled for space in a shared market. These regions were the Paraná River, the Uruguay River, and the River Plate: diffuse and conflictive commercial routes between these countries and the rest of the world market. Until the beginning of the war, the Republic of Paraguay was one of the strongest nuclei of power in South America. Envied for its internal and external policies, it had no external debt and more exports than imports, it was more self-sufficient than the rest of its neighbors in the Southern Cone (Doratioto 29). The Paraguayan nation's policy of modernization began in 1842 under the mandate of President Carlos Antonio López, who established a naval shipyard for steamships and a steel foundry dedicated to the production of armaments. After his death in 1862, Carlos Antonio López was succeeded by his son, Marshall Francisco Solano López.

The documentary Cándido López: The Battlefields forces us to look at a history of the War that was full of inaccuracies: invented names of generals, uncertain combat episodes with no dates, and distorted famous quotes. Laureano Ruíz, a neighbor of Paso de la Patria, says:

- Marshall Solano López died for his country and his flag and that's why while he was dying he said: "I died for my country"...

-The director interrupts the testimony and corrects-: "with my country", he said "I died with my country".

No! – replies Laureano- he said "for my country".

-The director goes again-: "With... my country"

-Laureano hesitates for a second and asks-: If he died with his country then what nationality are we [Paraguayans] now? (Cándido López: The Battlefields)

This last question is never answered, and neither are many of the doubts or questions explored in the documentary. Paraguayan philosopher Ticio Escobar affirms that García's work helps us to understand the true value of unanswered questions in historical testimonies: the suspension of information implied in an unanswered question gives us a sense of resistance against historical models that pretend to conciliate and eliminate gaps, inaccuracies, or dark areas in the comprehension of historical events (7). The history of the war in Cándido López: The Battlefields is just a collection of fragments, incomplete and vague pieces of information. These pieces, however, are responsible for actualizing history, for bringing the past to the present as the fundamental source of disagreement.

Town by town – from Uruguayana in Brazil, to Corrientes entering Paraguay in Paso de la Patria, Humaitá, Pilar, Itapirú, Curupayty, Asunción, Piribebuy, and Cerro Corá - José Luis García, his production team, and the Paraguayan historian Cirilo Batalla Hermosa uncover a fractured present through fragments of a past war. The War against Paraguay emerges as the cause of the country's present moment, but its events, stories, and History are part of an unintelligible mythological past. Eugenio Colunga, for instance, does not know the years in which the war was fought but he sometimes listens at night to a Paraguayan ghost army that visits their dead fellows in Tuyutí's battlefield. Once a week Doña Aurelia dreams of a spectral soldier who guides her to hidden treasure in her house. An Asunción neighbor narrates how his best friend ended up being buried alive in a hole while they were digging for lost treasure from the war. The director comments: "Necessity, ambition, and the dream of finding treasure keep adding causalities to a war that finished more than a hundred years ago." Victims of the Paraguayan economic situation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and victims of the War against Paraguay in the 19<sup>th</sup> century come together in an ambiguous narration. State violence and the violence of the neoliberal model and the global market (the law of capital) ask for a new redistribution of the limits of war and peace in the present to find



reconciliation –especially when Paraguay has been asphyxiated by Argentina and Brazil and their politics of distribution of wealth in the MERCOSUR [3].

At the same time, a deep disagreement (the trauma of war) is also brought by the juxtaposition of times (the past in the present) in the very same montage technique of all documentaries about the 19<sup>th</sup> century – more precisely, all documentaries on periods of time before the invention of the moving image. Images in Cándido López: The Battlefields are arrangements of takes from the moving camera that shoots the battlefield and the testimonies of neighbors, static images of Cándido López paintings, 19<sup>th</sup> century newspapers, the paintings book, cuts from a TV show, and maps. In this sense, the documentary image is in itself the “consensual machine” redrawing the borders between space and the ruptures of time (xix), as Rancière puts it, a machine that set static images in motion. That is why the use of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century paintings of Cándido López in the documentary is a key for understanding the sociopolitical reality of the Southern Cone today (and the visual legacy of the War against Paraguay).

Cándido López (1840-1902) decided to enlist in the Argentine army at the beginning of the War. He started to draw and write about his life in the army until he was injured in 1866 in the battle of Curupayty: a bomb caused him to lose his right hand. He returned to Buenos Aires, where he began to train his left hand and painted a series of more than 50 canvases about the War against Paraguay. The documentary takes advantage of two crucial aspects of Cándido López’s work. First, Argentine lieutenant paintings did not follow the canonical model of composing battle paintings developed by French artists in the Napoleonic wars and typified by the Latin American academies of fine arts in the mid-19th century [4]. Second, Cándido López’s themes were events and situations considered irrelevant for the History of the Nation at the end of the 19th century. The march of troops, soldiers resting next to the river, daily life in camps and barracks were excluded from a National scopic regime [5] since they did not depict heroic episodes or they did not deploy the

grandiose images of heroes and martyrs. Even more, Cándido López painted the fundamental sequence of nine canvases and more than ten texts on the Triple Alliance defeat in the battle of Curupayty (September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1866). Cándido López immortalizes the collapse of the Alliance armies creating an inverted epic that commemorates above all the tragedy of war, the genocide against the Paraguayan people, and the abject violence of killing in the name of civilization and democracy.

The use of Cándido Lopez's aesthetical disarrangement is a necessary step for García to deconstruct the possibility of a reconciliation that excludes disagreement. Such step in the documentary is taken to undermine a concept of reconciliation that constantly struggles to order and arrange the present through ideas of Nation, Fatherland, Liberty, Territory, etc., ideas that, by the same token, erase all types of conflict and difference. In this fashion, images of contemporary Paraguayan crisis are interrupted by a tragic moment from the past. Formerly, Paraguay was a growing nation and an example of autonomy in the continent. Today, Paraguay is steeped in extreme poverty, with "villas miserias," abandoned factories, and starvation on unpaved roads all too clear to see. In José Luis García's words: "A forgotten country in the heart of South America." But the same modern and tragic destiny can be applied (as in the Curupayty sequences) to the other side, to Argentina, Uruguay, or Brazil, in that progress, industry, free market, and democracy – all legacies from the nineteenth century -, also made those nations collapse. The paintings just mark a moment in the past (they are maps of themselves), but at the same time, they are the present in its entire dimension: the past is always present because it claims to be today. Reconciliation –according to García's and Cándido Lopez's productions- is impossible unless we are able to open up disagreement in all its present dimensions (a fundamental disagreement).

Documentaries such as Cándido López: The Battlefields proves to us the tight connection between political disagreement and aesthetical disarrangement. Aesthetic strategies of interruption, fragmentation, and dissolution in documentary images are able to bring a fundamental disagreement

to the writing of history and the representation of the present in the Southern Cone. The fundamental disagreement will remain, until the machine rearranges the here and now, or the topography of the visible in which war and peace are lodged.

## Notes

[1] Quoted in the editorial "Absurdo tributo a un dictador". La Nación. November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2007. <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/968480>.

[2] An excellent discussion on these tragic figures and the method used for historical statistics on war can be found in Thomas Whigham. The Paraguayan War. Causes and Early Conduct. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

[3] Two excellent sources for an analysis of the MERCOSUR are Jorge Taiana, El Nacimiento del MERCOSUR. Buenos Aires: FLACSO, 1995. And Rosa Boldori de Baldussi, La identidad cultural del MERCOSUR. Buenos Aires: Ciudad Argentina, 2002.

[4] The primordial characteristics stipulated for battle paintings were the sublimation of the war by highlighting the military act, its heroes and protagonists, and the landscape as a background to magnifying the military episode. See Gulsberg, Jorge and Patricio Lóizaga. Cándido López. Fragmentos y Detalles. Una Resemantización Fotográfica. Buenos Aires: Fundación Banco de Crédito Argentino, 1993.

[5] For an excellent account on Scopic regimes in the Southern Cone, see Jens Andermann, The Optic of the State. Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007.

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