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New Paths for Exploring 'History from Below': Microhistorical Documentaries

Abstract:

This article proposes a specific category of documentaries that adopt a unique approach to explore the past, and which are referred to here as “microhistorical documentaries.” These films fall within the basic parameters of written microhistory, a historiographical trend that emerged in the 1970s under the broader umbrella of “history from below.” Those parameters include a reduced scale of observation, a central role given to human agency, a conjectural approach to archival research, and a reliance on narrative structures. But microhistorical documentaries also exhibit specific traits of their own, such as underscoring the affective dimension, using autobiographical and essayistic perspectives, drawing on the protagonists’ personal memories to reconstruct the past, and using family archives (mainly snapshots and home movies). Films of this kind therefore differ markedly from the informational/expository model of the conventional historical documentary, sharing features with a certain type of contemporary documentary, with some traits that can be linked to a postmodern sensibility.

Key words: microhistory, documentary, history and film, autobiography, home movies

The ways of exploring the past in documentary cinema have been enriched in recent decades, with proposals that go beyond the classical informational/expository model that abounds in television channels and platforms. One of these approaches can be properly described as microhistorical, insofar as it exhibits the main characteristics of this historiographical trend that emerged in the 1970s: a reduced scale of observation of the past that sheds light on macrohistorical contexts; a central role given to human agency; a conjectural approach to archival research; and a reliance on narrative structures. This article analyzes what I therefore refer to as microhistorical documentary, the basic traits it shares with written microhistory, and its own specific features, related to its affective dimension and its use of personal testimonies, often including an autobiographical perspective.¹

From Written Microhistory to Microhistorical Documentaries

Microhistory, as a specific approach within contemporary historiography, can be located within the broader context of what has come to be referred to as “history from below,” which began to gain currency in the 1960s. History from below questioned the traditional approaches that studied major historical events and their protagonists, but also the quantitative approaches that had been in vogue during the preceding decades. The new historiographical approaches emerging under the broad umbrella of history from below foregrounded the everyday lives of individuals and social groups, with a perspective that opened up a dialogue with social and cultural anthropology, disciplines that were also acquiring greater importance in those years. Among these new approaches, it could be argued that microhistory — which began in Italy in the 1970s, with Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg as its best known representatives — became the most prominent, both in terms of historical practice and historiographical debates. This is evident in the abundance of existing literature published in different countries and languages, beyond the work of Italian microhistorians.²

No specific analysis has actually been made in historiography of the relationship between microhistory and documentary film, although it has been explored briefly in relation to the film medium or to fiction films by scholars such as

¹ This article is an updated version of the first chapters of my book *Filming History from Below: Microhistorical Documentaries* (2022).

² In addition to the publications analyzing specific case studies, it is worth mentioning the following texts: in the French-speaking world, the book edited by Jacques Revel, *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à la expérience*; in German, the publications of Hans Medick; in Spanish, the contributions by Anacleto Pons and Justo Serna in Spain and by Carlos Aguirre in Mexico; and in English, Sigurður G. Magnússon and István Szijártó's book *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*.

John Brewer. This author identifies neorealism as a clear precursor to Italian microhistory, from which it would take its humanist realism and its rejection of skepticism, and he asserts that Roberto Rossellini's film *Paisà* (1946) could be considered the first work of Italian microhistory (Brewer, 2010, p. 101). This perspective is of special interest because Ginzburg himself made reference to it in an interview he gave in 2014, when he remarked that neorealism — particularly the film *Umberto D* (1952, Vittorio de Sica) — constituted a foundational experience for him (2014, p. 91).

The absence of explicit references by historians to the relationship between microhistory and documentary film is perhaps understandable given that documentaries have not traditionally formed part of a shared cultural background like literature or fiction films. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that when studying documentary film, some very interesting parallels with microhistory emerge. This does not include the typical historical documentaries made for mainstream audiences, popularized by theme channels like History (formerly History Channel). Without dismissing a connection between such documentaries and microhistory outright, it seems rather tenuous, as the former are generally conceived as vehicles for disseminating history, usually understood in the macrohistorical sense, focusing either on past eras or on major historical figures. Because of their informative character, they generally fall into what Bill Nichols has defined as the “expository documentary” (1991, pp. 34-38). As Nichols explains, expository documentaries offer an argument about the world, giving the impression of objectivity and of well-substantiated judgments, with the argumentation of an omniscient commentator/narrator as their dominant textual mode, all of them features quite distinct from microhistorical approaches.

In contrast to those expository documentaries, in the 1970s and 1980s new approaches began to appear in non-fiction film that exhibit clearer similarities to microhistorical historiography. The films adopting these new approaches began to question the characteristic omniscience of the expository documentary and often included the research process itself as part of the film, thereby also bringing the filmmaker in front of the camera and breaking the objectivist paradigm popularly associated with documentary film. They also incorporated autobiographical perspectives, in which memory — personal or collective — was a central focus, and they made use of hybrid formats in which the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, narrative and essayistic structures were not always clearly delimited. And they explored new uses of the archival footage, with approaches that were more conscious of the problems such footage posed, but also of its po-

tential, with appropriation strategies that in some cases resembled those used in experimental films.

This creative hotbed has provided the milieu for the emergence of a type of documentary dealing with historical issues that I have termed “microhistorical documentary.” It is important to point out that qualifying these documentaries as microhistorical implies positing an analogous rather than a literal translation of the practices of professional written history to documentary filmmaking. Each field is governed by its own strategies and approaches, related to both the obvious differences between written and audiovisual language and the different research strategies employed in each field. As is the case in most historical research, microhistorians base their work on an intensive analysis of the sources they find in archives, and, as they often explore eras prior to the 20th century, they work largely with written documents. On the other hand, although they also conduct intensive research, filmmakers rely heavily on audiovisual sources and work with them with a more creative approach, in which formal and/or aesthetic questions may be as important as strictly historiographical issues. Besides, as is equally true of written microhistories, it is important to note that these documentaries exhibit differing degrees of affinity with the most typical features of microhistory, ranging from films whose microhistorical qualities are more paradigmatic, such as *The Maelstrom* (1997, Péter Forgács), to others whose relationship is looser, such as *History and Memory* (1991, Rea Tajiri) or *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976, Jonas Mekas).

With the foregoing qualifications in mind, it can be asserted that what is referred to here as microhistorical documentary fits within the general parameters of microhistory, as it is usually understood and practiced in contemporary historiography. To support this assertion, the following section offers an overview of the main features of microhistory and how they apply to microhistorical documentaries.

Basic Traits of the Microhistorical Approach

The change to the scale of observation is without doubt the most characteristic feature of microhistory. In contrast to historical studies traditionally focused on the macro level, microhistorical research proposes a reduction of scale for the purpose of developing a different understanding of the object of study. As Jacques Revel explains, “varying the focal length of the lens is not simply about enlarging (or shrinking) the size of the object caught in the viewfinder, but about altering its form and structure ... about transforming the content of what is being represented (in other words, the decision about what is actually representable)” (1996, p. 19). The objective here is not to offer particular case studies as

“examples” of general theories, but to discover, through a “microscopic” analysis, historical realities that have gone unnoticed in macrohistorical analysis, in order to better explain a particular era. This objective inevitably brings up one of the most common questions raised in relation to microhistory: its representativeness. Herein lies the main challenge of microhistory: to propose an alternative pathway to historical knowledge based on the microanalysis of personal and social relations, in order to make a significant contribution to our understanding of more general contexts of the society and culture to which their case study belongs.

Microhistorical documentaries are likewise characterized by a reduced scale of observation, focusing on specific individuals, families, or social groups, generally of an ordinary or marginal nature, far removed from the big figures and events of public history. Specifically, two main features should be stressed when considering this reduction of scale in these documentaries. First, the objective behind the reduced scale is not to conduct a strictly ethnographic or observational study located in the present of the filmmaker, as happens in many documentaries dealing with unknown protagonists, but to explore the past, to perform a historical investigation. And secondly, they have to place their “micro” analysis in relation to relevant macrohistorical contexts, which makes these documentaries historiographically representative in their own right. This is an essential feature of the microhistorical documentary, as it is of microhistory in its differentiation from social and cultural anthropology. In some cases, this representativeness will be quite clear, as it is in *The Maelstrom* or in *The Missing Picture* (2014, Rithy Panh). In other cases, it may not be so obviously foregrounded, but it will always emerge through the historiographical tension between the micro- and macrohistorical dimensions. Therefore, for a documentary to be understood as microhistorical it is not enough just to reconstruct a personal or family past. This needs to be brought into dialogue with the broader macrohistorical contexts that frame those personal or family histories.

Closely linked to the vindication of the micro scale is the centrality of human agency, the consideration of the individual as the main historical subject, freely engaging in social relationships, in contrast to more determinist approaches associated with structuralism or quantitative history. Ginzburg and Poni point this out explicitly in their article “The Name and the Game,” where they argue for a prosopography from below, a history focusing on the proper name (i.e., a specific individual) as a guiding thread for archival research, which would be associated with a study of the subaltern strata of society (1991, pp. 1-10). Microhistorical documentaries also prioritize human agency, i.e., the analysis of the free action of the protagonists, as a means of understanding more general

historical contexts. This feature is particularly accentuated when the films are autobiographical in nature — a point that I will return to later.

Microhistorians also advocate the use of narrative structures in writing history, once again in contrast to the strategies used in quantitative and *longue durée* histories. This idea is consistent with the frequent choice to focus their research on an individual or family, whose history is most appropriately expressed in narrative form. They also often admit the possibility of including the historian's voice in the narrative itself, in what could be described as a metadiscursive strategy, a technique rarely found in earlier historiographical approaches. Microhistorical documentaries generally employ flexible and innovative narrative strategies too. In contrast to the omniscient argumentation of the expository documentary, they offer perspectives that are more limited in terms of their cognitive ambition, due not only to the reduced scale of the object of study, but also to the position of the filmmaker/narrator or the delegated narrators. There is frequent use of structures that combine narrative elements with other more essayistic features, where the filmmaker's voice, either explicit or conveyed through formal strategies, permeates the discourse more obviously, as can be seen in films such as *The Missing Picture, A Family Gathering* (1989, Lise Yasui) or *For My Children* (2002, Michal Aviad). In this way, these documentaries reflect Giovanni Levi's suggestion that microhistory should incorporate "into the main body of the narrative the procedures of research itself, the documentary limitations, techniques of persuasion and interpretative constructions," so that "the researcher's point of view becomes an intrinsic part of the account" (1991, p. 106). It would be fair to say that these self-reflexive strategies have been integrated into documentary cinema more naturally than into historiography, often openly interrogating the different layers of the past preserved in archives or in the memory of their protagonists, underscoring the constructed nature of the work.

These features have led some to associate microhistorians with postmodern approaches, in that they foreground the constructed nature of historical studies, in clear contrast to traditional historiographical approaches and the claims to "total history" of quantitative or serial approaches. This raises a complex question of great relevance to contemporary written microhistory whose in-depth exploration is beyond the scope of this article, although it should be noted that both Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg have dismissed the postmodern label, explicitly stating their rejection of the skeptical or relativist positions often associated with such an approach (Ginzburg, 1992, pp. 82-96; 1993, pp. 31-32; Levi, 1991, pp. 104-108). The postmodern label has also been applied specifically to microhistorical documentaries. Robert Rosenstone seems to understand them

this way when he suggests that the most genuinely postmodern historiography is not being done by historians, but by filmmakers, identifying as a paradigmatic example a film with a clear microhistorical approach, *History and Memory* (1996, pp. 201-218). However, the postmodern dimension that Rosenstone identifies in these films does not seem to be related to an epistemological skepticism in the Derridian tradition. This can be deduced from the features he points out as postmodern, which range from their capacity “to tell the past self-reflexively” and “make sense of them [past events] in a partial and open-ended, rather than totalized manner” to their way of reminding us “that the present is the site of all past representation and knowing” (1996, p. 206). It is worth questioning the extent to which microhistorians would be comfortable with all the features that Rosenstone describes as characteristic of a postmodern history. But it seems reasonable to assume in any case that microhistorical documentaries fit neatly within the parameters proposed by Ginzburg or Levi for an exploration of new historiographical pathways, without this meaning the adoption of the epistemological skepticism associated with a certain kind of postmodern sensibility.

Family archives

The use of the archives also links the written practice of microhistory and its filmic variant, although their use in documentaries exhibits some specific features. A microhistorical approach requires an intensive study of available archives, which are not always sufficiently comprehensive, as the issues chosen for study are not the kind of matters that are systematically registered in public archives. However, the lacunae and missing data can sometimes be as eloquent as the documented information. It then becomes necessary to employ conjecture as a method, as Ginzburg proposed (1980, pp. 5-36). This author compares the historian to a doctor or detective (in the style of Sherlock Holmes) who works with clues or symptoms in order to draw some conclusions. This can give rise to more unorthodox historiographical approaches, as he argues with reference to the work of Natalie Z. Davies in *The Return of Martin Guerre*. The Italian historian applauds his American colleague’s combination of erudition and imagination, proof and possibility, leading her “to work around the lacunae with archival materials contiguous in space and time to that which has been lost or never materialized” (2012, p. 70).

Microhistorical documentaries also involve a thorough study of available archives, although they rely especially on audio/visual documents, taken from public, personal and family sources. Public archives — mainly newsreels and TV news — are used occasionally, on the basis of their more conventional in-

formative nature, to provide a basic macrohistorical context within which the microhistorical narratives can be placed. Sometimes the documentaries attempt a deconstruction of this archival footage, especially when it has the quality of propaganda, like the newsreels made by the Hungarian communist regime included in *Class Lot* (1997, Péter Forgács) or by the Khmer Rouge in *The Missing Picture*. They may also use personal documents, like letters and diaries, which cannot be considered properly part of the family archive, since they are not generally shared with other family members and they are preserved privately. These personal documents play an important role in some of the microhistorical documentaries, such as *Something Strong Within* (1994, Robert Nakamura) and *From a Silk Cocoon* (2005, Satsuki Ina). In the latter, for example, the parents' letters and diaries — read aloud in a voiceover — actually constitute the main source of information in the film.

But there is no question that the most common type of archive used in microhistorical documentaries is the audiovisual family archive: home movies, snapshots, and (less commonly) sound recordings. Such sources tend to be rare, especially home movies, which were costly to produce until the popularization of video in the 1980s, and which have also been affected by a lack of concern for their preservation until recently. Filmmakers are thus faced with a task of reconstruction that in some cases is similar to that performed in written microhistory. The conjectural approach becomes important here too, in relation to the need to fill in lacunae and silences, to infer the stories behind the celebratory nature of snapshots and home movies, and to complement these sources with other documentation that can convey their full complexity. What is undeniable is that the family archive constitutes a valuable source for a history from below, since it usually focuses on the lives, cycles, and rites of ordinary “anonymous” families, outside of the official records of public events. It thus provides a reduced scale of observation that foregrounds human agency. The fragmentary and non-systematic nature of these archives also fits in well with the concept of the miniature proposed by German scholar Alf Lüdtke — in his explanation of the history of everyday life — to stress the small scale where “the ‘density’ of life situations and contexts of action can be made vivid and palpable” (1995, p. 21). Lüdtke proposes creating a collage or mosaic with these miniatures to form societal “patchwork” structures, linking them together in a network of interrelations, thereby addressing the issue of how to apply the knowledge acquired on the micro-scale to larger historical frameworks. Any family archive could actually be understood as a patchwork, which acquires meaning in the most immediate interpretation of the family circle it belongs to, but which also acquires a broader, historiographical value when it is used by a historian/filmmaker to construct a microhistorical

narrative. This “family archival patchwork” gives access to the past in its own ways, revealing through its images the social and cultural tapestry of the ordinary life of an era. Besides, home movies may also include the recording of public events, which can offer perspectives complementary to public records, and sometimes can end up being the only testimony, as occurred with the famous footage of the assassination of J. F. Kennedy filmed by Abraham Zapruder.

The importance of family archives in microhistorical documentaries can be seen, among many other examples, in one of the most paradigmatic cases of this approach: the films of Péter Forgács. The Hungarian filmmaker has a filmography composed mainly of historical documentaries relying on home movies as their main archival source. Standing out among his best films is *The Maelstrom*, a microhistorical exploration of the Shoah through the history of the Dutch Jewish Peereboom family. In the visuals, he combines the home movie collection of this family, shot between 1933 and 1942, with the home movies of Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the Reich Commissioner for the Occupied Dutch Territories. In its soundtrack, Forgács uses the captivating music of Tibor Szemző, with a few inserts of audio recordings from radio broadcasts and public speeches. With these elements, the film shows masterfully how microhistory can contribute a new perspective to our understanding of history by virtue of its reduced scale of observation, the focus on the proper name as a guiding thread for historiographical research, and the priority to human agency, conveyed through a narrative-type structure.

Specific features of microhistorical documentaries

Beyond these features shared between written microhistory and microhistorical documentaries, there are some unique traits that the filmic practice brings into play in microhistorical documentaries, related mainly to the affective dimension and the use of testimonies, often of an autobiographical nature. The affective dimension of the microhistorical exploration clearly distances these documentaries from written history. The film medium offers a range of strategies that underscore this affective dimension, from the sensation of the present moment generated by the audiovisual recording to others like the use of extradiegetic music or, in the case of autobiographical narratives, the filmmaker’s voice-over narration. The end result generally contains an unquestionably powerful emotional/affective charge that can bring into play more complex spectator reactions than those elicited by conventional historical narratives, facilitating a stronger level of identification with the stories told. Moreover, it is not unusual for these documentaries to contain a clearly performative dimen-

sion that directly appeals to and seeks to engage the spectator. This is not really so different an approach from that used by microhistorians, who sometimes seek an explicit dialogue with the reader, but the film medium offers tools that can result in a higher level of involvement.

The affective engagement of the microhistorical documentary is also enhanced by the frequent inclusion of testimonies by protagonists and witnesses. This is a direction that microhistorians do not generally take, as their work often relates to eras for which only written sources survive; however, it does connect to another related historiographical approach: oral history. Although microhistorians and oral historians are situated in the same context of social history and are often inspired by an interest in “history from below,” there is actually very little dialogue between them, with exceptions such as the studies by Michel Frisch (1990, pp. 147-175) and Dan Sipe (1991, 75-87), who actually cites Lise Yassui’s microhistorical documentary *A Family Gathering*. In microhistorical documentaries, personal testimonies are often a key element, whether they appear in the form of interviews with the protagonists or through the filmmaker’s own autobiographical commentary. These interviews sometimes form part of the research process but do not end up appearing in the documentary, as is the case of some of Péter Forgács’s best-known works. But in most cases such interviews form an explicit part of the microhistorical narration of the past, as one of the threads used by the filmmakers/historians in their research. Interviewing can even become the dominant research strategy, resulting in a documentary so close to oral history that we might question whether it should really be classified as microhistorical, partly due to its lack of use of archival research.³

The autobiographical perspective used in some of the microhistorical documentaries constitutes an approach generally absent from professional written history. While it is true that over the last century a tradition of historians’ autobiographies has been consolidated, often these tend to focus more on the professional dimension of the authors as historians, as Jeremy D. Popkin maintains in *History, Historians, and Autobiography* (2005), than on the study of periods of recent history based on the author’s own personal experience. In the documentary field, however, it is relatively common to find films of a microhistorical nature presented explicitly from autobiographical perspectives. This is not to imply that the autobiographical should be equated with the microhistorical, as if the mac-

³ This can be found, for instance, in certain documentary films from Argentina that review recent history in tune with a microhistorical sensibility: from the immigration stories documented in *Hacer patria* (2007, David Blaustein,) or *Carta a un padre* (2013, Edgardo Cozarinsky,) to the stories of the victims of forced disappearances during the last dictatorship, such as the pioneering film *Juan, como si nada hubiera sucedido* (1987, Carlos Echeverría,) or Nicolás Prividera’s *M* (2007).

rohistorical belonged to the public and the microhistorical to the private, which would also include the autobiographical. Such a conclusion would be erroneous not only because there are autobiographical approaches with no historiographical intention, related more to personal introspection, questions of identity, or sociological concerns, but also because in microhistory it is not just the scope of the study that matters, but the historical knowledge gleaned from applying the “microscope” to the object of study. Having clarified this point, it seems reasonable to assert that in microhistorical documentaries the autobiographical perspective makes personal memory the foundation of the historiographical enterprise, establishing a specific link between lived memory and public history.

This representation of personal memory poses specific challenges that the best autobiographical films manage to tackle successfully.⁴ The past remembered from this perspective is contemplated and interpreted from the present, constructing the kind of complex structure characteristic of Deleuze’s crystal-images (1989, pp. 65-83). The exploration of personal memory in the autobiographical documentary also entails its transfer into the public sphere, its conversion into a shared discourse. This explicitly brings into play another of the core issues in the contemporary understanding of memory: the interwoven nature of the personal and social dimensions, of personal memory and social or collective memory. It is individuals who remember, but as social beings their memories are influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which they take part; and those memories are in turn shared socially, constructing a collective understanding of memory. This can be observed in autobiographical documentaries, as narratives of identity that filmmakers construct in interaction with their familial and social contexts, and as films that become shared public discourse, contributing to the construction of collective memory.

In this social dimension of autobiographical experience, it is clear that the family constitutes the first and most fundamental context of socialization. This acquires special significance in autobiographical documentaries, as is reflected, for instance, in Jim Lane’s proposition of the “family portrait” as one of the basic categories of the American autobiographical documentary (2002, pp. 95-119). It is interesting to note how Lane places the exploration of these family networks in relation to their social and historical contexts, implicitly suggesting a potential microhistorical dimension. He observes that “these family portraits often stand in a tension with an official past that may often be contested in various stories told by individuals” (Lane, 2002, p. 96). Juliette Goursat is more explicit in

⁴ For a proposal to analyze personal memory in film (as applied to a particular case), see María del Rincón, Marta Torregrosa and Efrén Cuevas, “The Representation of Personal Memory in Alan Berliner’s *First Cousin Once Removed*,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 12, no. 1 (2018): 16-27.

making this connection, as the title to one of the chapters in her book on autobiographical documentary, “Je(ux) d’échelles. Le devenir collectif sous l’angle de l’histoire personnelle,” creates a play on words out of the title of the book edited by Jacques Revel on microhistory, *Jeux d’échelles* (2016, pp. 145-190). Goursat highlights the journey from the “I” to the “we” articulated in a series of autobiographical documentaries with a historical approach, from the films of David Perlov and Jonas Mekas to the Chilean documentaries on the Pinochet dictatorship that she chooses as a case study.

The interaction between personal and social memory also involves specific approaches to the use of family archives in these autobiographical documentaries (Cuevas, 2013). These family archives constitute a primary context where the filmmaker’s mnemonic work moves beyond the individual “I” into the more immediate social context. Moreover, these archives are often related to broader contexts, like trips, vacations, or public events that explicitly reflect wider social contexts within which that mediated memory exists. They are also important for intergenerational memory transmission. Personal memory, as a memory of lived experience, covers the biographical arc of each individual, but it expands insofar as we are all receivers of a memory transmitted from one generation to the next. In the last century, snapshots and home movies were added to oral and written transmission, becoming powerful mnemonic anchors in the transmission of memory, as has been explored by scholars like Marianne Hirsch, with her concept of postmemory (2012, pp. 29-54). Hirsch applies this concept to memories marked by historical traumas suffered by the previous generation, in whose transmission family photographs play a key role. These are memories not experienced personally by the next generation but that still have a strong impact on them. Similar effects are explored in microhistorical documentaries with an autobiographical approach, such as *History and Memory*, *A Family Gathering*, and *The Missing Picture*.

Microhistorical documentaries have become a productive way to explore the past in documentary films. This article has shown how these films fall within the basic parameters of microhistorical practice, with its reduced scale of observation, the central role it gives to human agency, its reliance on narrative structures, and its conjectural use of audiovisual archives (mainly home movies). Films of this kind differ markedly from the informational/expository model of the historical television documentary, as their historiographical purpose is clearly different, employing strategies such as the affective engagement of the spectator,

new ways of appropriating the family archive, essayistic features that include the presence of the filmmaker in the process, and autobiographical approaches where personal memory becomes the foundation of the historical enterprise.

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