

## Film Review

- *El testigo: Caín y Abel* (*The witness: Cain and Abel*), directed by Kate Horne. Pacha Films, Horne Productions and Ronachan Films, Colombia, Peru and United Kingdom, 2018.<sup>1</sup>

*El Testigo: Caín y Abel* is a documentary about the armed conflict that has been taking place in Colombia since the late 1950s. Throughout the decades this conflict has involved various actors, from extreme left-wing guerrillas and extreme right-wing paramilitaries to drug trafficking organizations and Colombian public forces, with the civil population often in the middle of the crossfire. It has been estimated that the conflict has caused over 250.000 deaths from 1958 to 2018.

*El Testigo* is directed by Kate Horne, a British filmmaker who spent the last ten years working on documentary projects in Latin America. Horne visited Colombia for the first time when she was a teenager, during which she gained an interest in the country. Following *My Kidnapper* (2010), *El Testigo* marks Horne's second documentary as a director on Colombia's armed conflict. This time she offers an exploration of the photographic stories created by Jesús Abad Colorado, a Colombian human rights photojournalist who has been covering the armed conflict for a long time. Throughout the film, Abad, who is always accompanied by his photo camera, visits the protagonists of some of his most moving war photographs. During these encounters, he shows them photos in which they appear, and together they revisit the troubled episodes from the past. All the people who Abad visits have a common denominator: they all are victims of the Colombian armed conflict. It is a pertinent decision by Horne to choose Abad as the film's main character and narrator, since he is also a victim of the Colombian conflict. Abad's grandfather and an uncle got killed by an armed band before Abad was born in an episode that marked his whole family. This way the documentary is about a victim who portrays victims, and who together share a painful past. Setting these dialogues is undoubtedly one of the main achievements of *El Testigo*.

Horne's filmmaking approach reminds us of 'the gaze that stares at the gaze', a concept established by Colombian sociologist Alfredo Correa de Andréis, another victim of the Colombian armed conflict (and sadly assassinated

in 2004). With her gaze, Horne stares at Abad's gaze. The documentary builds a constant dialogue between the two gazes: we see the photographic views of Abad as well as the cinematic views of Horne interpreting Abad's work. This 'double' gaze, which literally moves between Horne's cinematic lens and Abad's photographic lens, (re)constructs a captivating view on the history and memory of the armed conflict.

*El Testigo* opens with shots of abandoned spaces – spaces without visible human presence but with tragic stories and memories wandering through. This opening metaphor introduces the main premise of the documentary: the war has interrupted, displaced and violated many lives, transforming human existence into abandonment and emptiness. Explaining the film's subtitle, *Cain and Abel*, Abad's voice-over reflects on how the Colombian conflict has caused a violent cycle where brothers kill brothers, in this case compatriots. He argues that, in this context, it is impossible to establish who Cain is and who Abel, referring to the biblical story where Cain killed his own brother Abel out of jealousy.

At one point in the documentary, Abad visits a church where FARC guerrillas caused a massacre of civilians during a mass celebration in 2002. In this scene, Abad talks to a local man and together they remember that terrible day. During the conversation, Abad reflects on one of his most well-known photographs, 'El Cristo mutilado' ('The Mutilated Christ', 2002), taken only hours after the attack in the church. He mentions that when he took the photo, he thought it could contribute to a collective awareness among the Colombian population as it could show that, just as the church's Christ statue was mutilated, dozens of people were mutilated during the attack.

The most significant contribution of the documentary is its conviction that collective reconciliation – the main concept of the Colombian Peace Agreement signed in 2016 – is the only possible way for a less painful future in Colombia. Reconciliation is referred to the Peace Agreement as the main purpose to be reached through "victims' satisfaction of their rights to achieve a reconciliation of all Colombian citizens to walk paths of civility and coexistence".<sup>2</sup> In this sense, Horne highlights Abad's perspective, who, despite being a victim of violence himself, decided to express and forgive his pain through photography. The most powerful scene in this respect occurs when Abad visits a demobilized guerrilla woman who once joined the ranks of the FARC to take revenge for the death of her family at the hands of paramilitaries. The woman, carrying her baby daughter, voices to Abad her hope for a reconciled Colombia.

However, here also some of the limitations of the film come to the surface. When the documentary ends, it seems we could have learned more from the victims who Abad meets. Now, the majority of the film is about the journalist, while hearing more about the victims' experiences would have been valuable. At the same time, although the director's focus on the victims is highly appreciated, as it gives a voice to the anonymous lives instead of the official narra-

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tors, a brief historical context of the Colombian conflict would have been useful. It is clear Horne does not want to deal with the causes and circumstances of the, admittedly, highly complex situation.

During the film, Horne gives importance to memory by stressing the work developed by Abad as a witness of the Colombian armed conflict. And Abad, through his photojournalistic work, also emphasizes the significance of remembering the past. In *El Testigo*, both views meet each other to reconstruct (parts of) the horrible past of the Colombian conflict. The result is an emotional exercise that reminds us that the stories told by the victims are always the most essential ones to be told. The film points out that their accounts must always be found, captured and disseminated. *El Testigo*, which was watched by more than 3 million Colombians when it was broadcasted on national television in 2019, prompts that those narratives help building a solid historical memory that can help us to avoid repeating the terrible episodes of our past.

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## Notes

1. This 76-minute documentary can be seen at Netflix Latin America.
2. OACP. 2014. Entérese del Proceso de Paz. Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz. <https://colaboracion.dnp.gov.co/CDT/Politica%20de%20Victimas/Construcci%C3%B3n%20de%20Paz/Enterese%20del%20proceso%20de%20paz.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2020].