

# VOCES PARA UN SILENCIO

## THE COMMEMORATIVE FILM: WHAT INTERPRETATION FOR THE HISTORIAN?

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*Voces para un silencio*, from Gloria Rolando (2011), is a historical documentary about reconciliation. Based on pieces of audiovisual archives and testimonies of international and local scholars, it immerses us into Cuba's troubled and unspoken history. By confronting Cuba today's society with its silent, though vast Black community, Gloria Rolando was able to make a piece of history that was necessary for the country's unity.

The movie investigates the past at several levels. The first noticeable aspect is the leitmotiv that has driven the film director so far. By entitling her movie *Voces para un silencio*, she meant to give a voice to this incomplete memory, to break the silence, therefore making a strong standpoint: the fight against forgetting the story of the Partido Independiente de Color.

Some would thus ask who she had in mind when she was doing the movie. Which generations was she hoping to target to face this memory and share it? The answer is to be found in the words of the young sociologist we hear at the beginning of the movie (Yesenia Selier), who asks: "What have Blacks done in this country?"

Gloria Rolanda starts from a current claim from the descendants and heirs of the Afro-American community in Cuba, in the larger context of African memory in South America. She

therefore establishes since the beginning of her documentary a past and present dialogue, based on the Afro-American community's interest in learning about their ancestors and their achievements. Her purpose is to make them proud of those who helped to build the Cuban nationhood.

The result is an in-depth reconstruction of a multifaceted and multicultural memory – one could talk about the numerous references to arts and churches in the movie. It's an advocating message to reinstate this memory in Cuba history and not to perceive it as a communitarian one. All her narrative is therefore highly dependent on the deconstruction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuban ideology of "racial unity" and the claim that its diverse ethnic groups were "all in the nation".

The movie is following an oral tradition, as it was the case in the Afro-American memory so far. It can be seen and heard very clearly through the didactic and constant calls that she asks regularly throughout the movie. These questions could be those of the people who are assessing the right of this memory, like these silent faces that are shown in watermark effects, faces from the present that are surfacing and diluting in the past reflections and souvenirs.

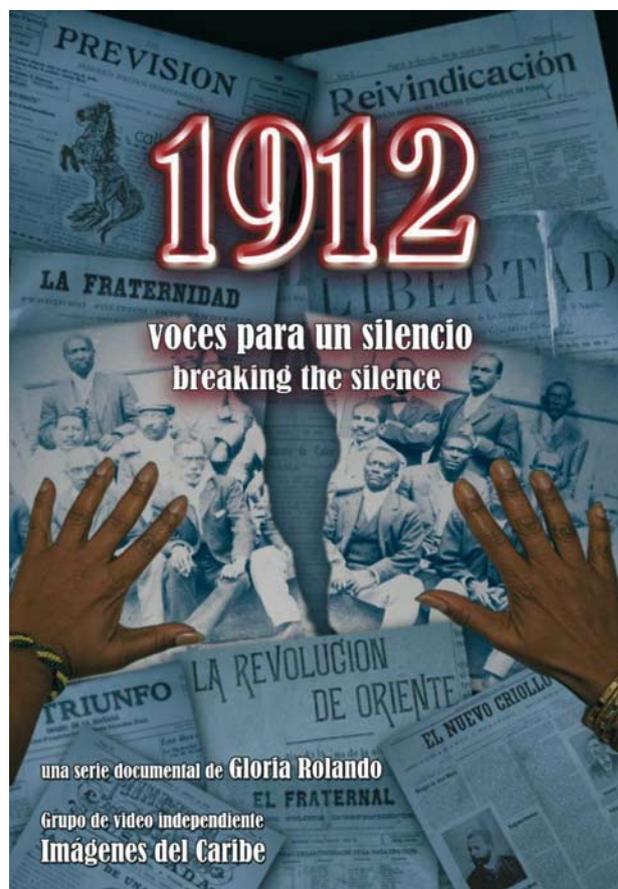
We are also struck by the wide quality of semiotic materials that are used in the movie. It is important to mention,

because the documentary speaks of a period where there was no cinema, so no audiovisual archives were made of that time. While the commemorative film relies so much on images, the film director was able to make a meaningful story out of fragments, in all narrative tensions, developments and back and forths that underline the quality of the whole historical overview. It also highlights the quality of the documented research that was done to find the materials, whether written or visual. One could think of a true archeology of sources and historical records that were used to dig up newspapers, cartoons, literature and correspondence extracts shown in the movie.

There all provide an "image to the words", to help the audience to immerse itself into an age of violence, where perceptions and sensibilities were totally imbued by racism. As the battle of words taken from the titles of newspapers shows, we are discovering the other side of the myth of "racial unity". This is strengthened by the importance of music – such as the different hymns to the Afro-American heroes – but also the Black Cuban culture in general. This aim to revive those characters from the past, those Quintin Bandera, Carabali, Maceo, Pedro Ivonnet whose names are somehow remembered by the elders, blurry ghosts from the past buried in folk and hip-hop songs.

These archival materials are doubled by the voice of witnesses and experts. The first category are those artists, painters or singers who carry on this duty to remember. They participate in the reconstruction of those mythical figures and heroes. The second category are the historians. Whether they are local, Afro-American historians or international experts, their scientific discourses embody the legitimacy of this memory. They reaffirm the position and the place of this memory in Cuban society. The third category are the survivors and descendants, as we can see in the discussion around the filial bound of names such as Ivonnet. It shows that the transgenerational memory is still present but is based on a lie. It really reflects the history of the winner over the defeated. The movie therefore gives a voice back to this oppressed memory, with a will to inscribe it for the young generations. It shows a concern for the future and thus carries a pedagogical message.

Finally, it is also important to distinguish the posture of the film director and the scope of her documentary. Her aim here was to make history alive. Her reflection also goes further on racism, its construction and perception in a World History approach. The reminder of Jim Crow laws in the movie shows us the link with North-American racism; Afro-Cubans were marginalised under US occupation, at the same time Afro-Americans were fighting for their rights in the cities of the USA.



Afiche del documental 1912

Gloria Rolando's purpose was to build a national memory, and not to focus only on the racial narrative. In this sense, the images of the movie also tell of the forgotten status Afro-Cubans once had in the society. It opens a window on their everyday life, their political activities, their gatherings and their belonging to Cuban society. The film director tries to bring this missing part of the national memory into the heart of society; this is why it is about reintegration. By overlaying several strata of memory (Spanish, African, American), she aims to reconstruct Cuban unity. It is a call, almost an injunction for the young generations to care for this past. It is her own rewriting of history, moving from the myth to a pacified and scholarly history.

To conclude about the role of such historical documentaries, it is very clear that they are needed when almost no one cares and remembers. It puts the film director somewhere between the figure of a journalist, a historian and a judge. By doing this inquiry, it helps to gather sources and witnesses towards a much-needed confrontation of a society into its troubled past.