

Film Review

– *Tus padres volverán*, directed by Pablo Martínez Pessi. Gabinete Films, Uruguay, 2015.

“A ver quién es el guapo que se para delante del avión y dice ‘no, no, esto no’” (“Show me who’s brave enough to go stand in front of the plane and say ‘no, no, no way!’”). This statement in the documentary *Tus padres volverán* perfectly reflects the position of the Uruguayan military dictatorship on 26 December 1983, when an Iberia plane arrived in Montevideo. It carried 154 children whose parents were either exiled Uruguayans or political prisoners in Uruguay. The “vuelo de los niños” was an initiative of Uruguayan opposition figures to reunite these children with their families for the Christmas holidays. It was a “fait accompli”, and the military government could not do anything about it, not during the preparations, nor indeed, after landing in Montevideo – as no *guapos* were volunteering. Popular enthusiasm was just too overwhelming. All along the road from the airport to downtown Montevideo, thousands of Uruguayans were jubilantly cheering, chanting anti-dictatorship lines and “tus padres volverán”. The implication was “now it’s you who are coming back, but soon your parents will return” and with them democracy.

However, collective memory is short, and many Uruguayans do not remember what happened in December 1983. It is therefore fortunate, if only to keep the memory alive, that the young director Pablo Martínez Pessi (1980) took up the idea to make a documentary about the children’s flight. The greatest merit of his film is that, true to the maxim “nothing about them without them”, he leaves politics almost completely aside and focuses on the children themselves: their experiences, perspectives and feelings, then and now. What do they remember of their trip to Montevideo, the stay with their relatives and their return? How do they feel about it now? Did it influence their lives, such as the decision to go and live in Uruguay or not? How did it shape their identity?

Roughly, two groups can be identified. Those in the first group are, to this day, unequivocally positive, considering the trip both as a nice vacation and something that had a noble political dimension (Salvador: “It was a brilliant idea”). Those in the second group feel they have been used for a publicity stunt that has done them more harm than good. They travelled to a country that they

did not know, met grandparents and other unknown relatives, got somehow attached to them, and then had to leave again. “We were hostages of a political project. A seven-year-old child cannot understand, and as a result, something breaks inside”, says Cecilia Rodríguez, whose bittersweet dialogue with her mother is a powerful moment in the film. And she’s not the only one who struggles, to this day, with the consequences of their trip. A particularly moving testimony is that of Guzmán Tierno. Seeing him talking and remembering is heart-wrenching, though he now lives happily in Florence with his Italian wife and children.

Martínez Pessi got the idea for *Tus padres volverán* in 2010 when he saw a TV programme featuring some images of the children’s arrival in Montevideo. He wondered what could have gone through their minds after travelling twelve hours to an unknown country where they were received by virtual strangers. He started to track the children down, and ended up choosing five men and one woman whom in his view best represented the diversity in the whole group. Their testimonies make up the main body of the film, alternating with statements of some of their parents and archival footage of the children’s arrival in Montevideo and their departure a few weeks later. In the last minutes, the famous poem *Pero vengo* by famous Uruguayan writer (and exile) Mario Benedetti is recited in voice-over.

The film’s reception in Uruguay and elsewhere was excellent (it won several prizes at international film festivals), although some critics said that the structure of *Tus padres volverán* was too “loose”. The question is whether that is very important considering the film is deeply moving from beginning to end. The personal stories are very touching: not only those of the “children”, but also the interviews with some of the parents. Those of Marcos Medina still live in Europe and feel stuck: first they could not return to Uruguay because of politics, and now that it is safe, they do not want to be far away from their grown-up children who made their lives in Belgium. “Exile brings you to a place that is not yours”, says Marcos’ father, crying. As the Argentinian poet Juan Gelman (winner of the Cervantes Prize in 2007) wrote, exile is like living “bajo la lluvia ajena”, under a rain that is not your own.¹

This points to a more important criticism about the way the film is presented and promoted. Contrary to its tagline, “The flight that defined the identity of 154 children”, *Tus padres volverán* is not just about that. It is about exile and what it did to the children and their parents, how it uprooted their lives in ways that are hard to repair. This does not make the documentary any less powerful, but there is a mismatch between presentation and content at work here.

Out of six, Salvador is the only one who has now made his home in Uruguay. For different reasons, the others could not or would not return. But whatever their choice, they contributed to a great documentary. For anyone interested

in the way “big politics” and dictatorship influence the lives of ordinary people, *Tus padres volverán* is a must-see.

Jur Schuurman, Guatemala City
Schuurman.j@chello.nl

Notes

1. Gelman, J. (1980). *Bajo la lluvia ajena*. Editorial Libros del Zorro Rojo. Barcelona (new edition, 2009).

Documentary details

Title: Tus padres volverán (Your Parents Will Come Back)

Tagline: ‘El vuelo que definió la identidad de 154 niños’ (The flight that defined the identity of 154 children)

Production: Gabinete Films

Director: Pablo Martínez Pessi

Genre: Documentary

Year: 2015

Country: Uruguay

Duration: 80 minutes

Language: Spanish (with, among others, English subtitles, see <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/tuspadresvolveran>)

Website: www.tuspadresvolveran.com

Can be seen at: selected film festivals