



An Interview on the Interview: A Conversation with Carlos Motta

Eva Díaz

Eva Díaz: The most recent addition to your ongoing *The Good Life* project is a searchable online archive of the over 360 videotaped interviews you conducted with pedestrians in 12 Latin American cities about the history of United States intervention in the region and the socio-political effects of those disruptions. I'll come to the substance of those interviews in a minute, but I want to consider the precedents in film and artistic practice for such a project, and the interrelated issue of your engagement with sociological methods such as field research and participant survey. In particular, an element of your approach seems to be a readdress of the history of artist's uses and appropriations of sociological/social science methods (interviews, data collection/archive management, longitudinal—or in your case latitudinal—studies, and forms of statistical compilation). One can trace a lineage from Hans Haacke's 1970 poll of MoMA visitors' political opinions to your work, for instance. On the other hand, *The Good Life* hearkens to late 1950s and early 1960s explorations of new forms of documentary practices such as direct cinema's innovative use of hand-held cameras and synch sound, or more specifically cinéma vérité's approach to the passerby in street interviews. How did you come to the interview as a formal structure?

Carlos Motta: As I started to consider a formal method to approach my interest in this fascinating yet enormous subject—the way we as citizens of Latin America perceive and assimilate personally and collectively the history of U.S. interventions in the region—I carefully looked at Latin American documentary film from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. These decades staged several forms of resistance to what these filmmakers termed “American imperialism and bourgeois neo-colonialism,” and witnessed the production of alternative ways of social empowerment via the politicization of culture. Filmmakers such as Fernando Birri and Fernando “Pino” Solanas in Argentina; Carlos Alvarez, and Jorge Silva and Marta Rodríguez in Colombia; Patricio Guzmán in Chile; and Jorge Sanjinez in Bolivia used film as a political tool to inform, instruct, educate, and stir “popular” audiences about their social conditions, and their political needs, rights, and responsibilities.

A shared interest for all of them—and a central subject for my project—was the production of alternative ways to construct “public opinion.” A critical position with regard to the largely unquestioned manipulation of the mainstream media's production of political and social consent was essential to the creation on new forms of mediatic interaction. Perhaps influenced by the recently formed cinéma vérité in France led by Jean Rouch, and its informal aesthetics, some of these Latin American filmmakers were also going out on the streets equipped with a microphone and a hand



held camera confronting pedestrians with difficult questions, documenting social movements, and talking with individuals and groups about politics and society.

These historical precedents, as well as my growing concern about the corporate structure of the media—and its unapologetically biased reporting in the name of the “public”—led me to use the interview form in *The Good Life*. It was soon clear to me though, that I wouldn't make a film but use only the interview form to underline and contest its potential for the acquisition of knowledge and information. While interviewing is commonly only one of the features of a documentary film (along with a voice-over narration, etc.), the interview for me was the means and the end. Consequently I sought for a form to organize these hundreds of interviews in a “democratic” way, which led me to the creation of an online archive.

ED: I'm glad you mentioned the media and its constitutive effects on public opinion. The agglomeration of the media into mega-corporations indicates that the reproduction of the existing social order—the economic structure in which these corporations continue to be some of most profitable institutions owned by the wealthiest people on earth—is the fundamental form of consent they orchestrate. We are (too) familiar with the resulting cycle of fluff and mayhem that characterizes media entertainment logic, particularly for television. When you adopted the posture of the interviewer, but offered your set of seven questions on U.S. intervention and perceptions of democracy, obviously dissonance in the familiar media-based model of the interview was created. Did people pick up on that? I should say, did your subjects reflect, on or off camera, on the form of media agency you yourself posed, or that you solicited from them?

CM: Upon beginning the project in Mexico City in 2005 I had to come up with a methodology to conduct the interviews that would work to achieve the kind of content I was looking for. I realized very soon—after several failed attempts—that the set up of the interviews I had seen and studied from several news channels and documentary films (including Jean Rouch's “Chronicle of a Summer” and Vilgot Sjöman's “I Am Curious (Yellow)”) wasn't the appropriate one for my project. Generally, in these works, a cameraperson and interviewer approach a pedestrian or a group with a microphone in hand and confront them with a direct question (such as, “Do we have a class system in Sweden?” (Sjöman)). The pedestrian chooses whether to stop and answer or not. The dynamics of this *confrontation*, the initial shock it may produce, the attraction or repulsion to the camera, the individual's time constraint, the particular bias intended with the question, etc. become constitutive of the kind of answers that interviewers seek. This fast-paced street acquisition of information and opinions is often associated with the notion of “public opinion,” which literally means the opinions of the public about a given subject in a public space confronted by the machine of the media. However, Rouch, Sjöman and other cinéma vérité makers brilliantly deconstructed this notion in the 1960s with the



careful insertion of key protagonists in their films (interviewer, interviewees, camera, microphone, etc.) that openly performed and commented on their assigned roles.

I chose a different approach for *The Good Life*. I wasn't interested in exposing the mechanisms behind the construction of the notion of "public opinion," but rather in inviting the interviewees to thoughtfully reflect and take time to comment on the questions I asked. Towards this aim, I never approached walking pedestrians but only individuals or groups that were sitting down in parks, waiting in street corners or hanging out in other public spaces. I invited them to answer the questions after explaining who I was, what I wanted, where the material would be presented and who was financing me. The idea was to give them as much information about my intention so that we would feel more inclined to have a dialogue.

In other words, and to answer your question more directly, yes and no. "My" subjects picked up "on the form of media agency" I posed most of the time primarily because I told them. Some people chose to truly engage with the questions and would then think of me more as researcher than as a journalist. But others were disappointed to find out that I was an artist and not a journalist that would guarantee them a spot on TV!

ED: This will be a long question, I apologize in advance. Your comments on the volition, often coercive, of the interviewer are a perfect segue to this question, and to the rationale behind you and I doing an "Interview on the Interview," which is, after all, a riff on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's "A Lecture on the Lecture." In this important speech, given as his inaugural address at the Collège de France in 1982, he elaborates his concept of participant objectivation. Briefly, he means that in attempting to represent and enact scientificity, sociology's epistemology of certainty and objectivity often masks underlying interests that say more about the researcher and the field itself than the object of observation. In contrast, Bourdieu posits a "reflexive sociology" in which the position of the observer/researcher can be more transparent. Reflexivity also points to the ways in which power flows unequally within knowledge claims—that the "object" of inquiry is often disadvantaged by a lack of access to the concepts and categories governing its representation. It seems that as you conducted the interviews, they have more of the features of open, dialogical social exchanges than serving as instruments of knowledge acquisition. In this sense, do you see the time and space of the discursive exchange, of the "reflexive" interview itself, as "the good life"?

CM: The concept of "the good life" that I reference in the title of my project is borrowed from Aristotle's *Politics*. It refers to the responsibilities of a citizen within the political functioning of the city-state. For him, citizens should be active participants of the construction of a democracy by engaging in social activities that are often based on discussions amongst themselves. This kind of "democratic" social interaction is the framework that I wanted to



replicate in *The Good Life*. To ignite these discussions, I chose the form of the interview (today largely and ambiguously associated with democracy) to address and contest its use by the media, documentary film, and sociology, the set of problems it posits for the acquisition of knowledge and, of course, the complex contradictions of the act of interviewing in itself. Although these critical points are very important, their consideration is only productive to me in so far as they provide alternative ways for the implementation of a dialogical system that would help me to find out people's actual opinions on the questions asked.

In these terms, Bourdieu's "reflexive sociology" is a very useful notion, and in particular, as you described above, the idea of the "unequal flow of power within knowledge claims." This idea resonates in two ways in *The Good Life*. First, from a personal stand point, I, the interviewer/artist came to the interviewees with a set of difficult questions and expected them to answer from whatever angle they chose to. I was empowered simply by asking the questions since these demanded a degree, however little, of specialized knowledge and political engagement. Interviewees often also presupposed that I had "an answer" to the questions, what posited a second level of *difference* between us. To avoid this kind of hierarchical structure I attempted to explain in detail the intention of the project and to turn this into a dialogue as opposed to an interview. But the "participant objectivation," however "reflexive," was something I couldn't escape. I believe it to be an inherent condition to the form...

Second, from a socio-political standpoint, U.S. intervention and neo-colonialism in Latin America have clearly demarcated the limits and access of the vast majority of the population to information and to the formation of an opinion. Transnational corporations whose economic interests are at the service of a privileged, often foreign, elite own Latin American media. Their interest is to keep the audience ignorant, to manipulate them to believe in and buy their product. Through the social interactions created by *The Good Life*, I wanted to disrupt this principle to encourage public discussion about subjects that are not commonly reported by the local media (It is important to note, though, that there are large numbers of social movements of opposition and several independent media channels primarily in the form of Internet blogs but also in the form of TV and printed media.)

All of these are forms of uneven and hierarchical distribution of knowledge, which widen the gap between subjects and objects and promote a tyranny of power and ignorance. The only way to propose a truly democratic interaction between subjects, to live a "good life" is, as you imply, to emphasize the construction of discursive arenas of social exchange; spaces for dialogue, which might lead to both confrontation or consent.

ED: Let's get to the online nature of this archive of discussions, and the feasibility of imaging this as an Internet "demos" beyond the temporality of the initial interview. How do you envision *The Good Life* existing into the future, and to what effects?



CM: *The Good Life* is the online archive of video interviews, the accumulation of these temporal encounters that now, out of place and time, seem out-dated, a bit like old news. From a political point of view, *The Good Life* is already dead because of the fast changes in the landscape of the countries where I conducted the interviews. Take for example the question on democracy in relationship to Mexico City, a place that I visited in August 2005 during Vicente Fox's last year in office. The race to succeed him as president was one of the most contested and violent elections in the recent history of the region, and it made the world severely question the legitimacy and commitment of Mexican politics to democracy. My interviews do not reflect this defining moment that surely has changed the public perception of their system or rule. *I was there too early.* I mention this to suggest how the project is only a snapshot that may reveal historical patterns in regards to the issues raised. In that sense its future is precisely that of any archive.

Its online presence is very important primarily because it potentially provides access to the interviewees and other people in the cities where I worked. I don't want to sound naive about this, but being accustomed to the selective audience of art museums and galleries, the Internet seems like an endless platform for distribution! My aim is to distribute this url address via public libraries and cultural institutions in Latin America and the U.S.

I am a firm believer in the power of alternative ways of disseminating (counter) information; it is an essential feature of a democracy. The Internet in that sense is certainly living up to its expectations and it is exploding its full potential to do so. We now have access to multiple of narratives and that allow us to live and imagine a decentralized, inclusive, free and democratic world, even if it is only a virtual illusion.

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