



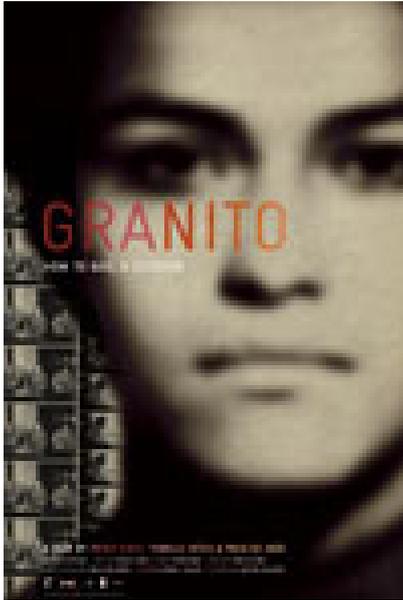
The Caba family in front of their home in the Ixil highlands of Guatemala. (Credit: Dana Lixenberg; courtesy of Skylight Pictures)

Pamela Yates's *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator*

Fiorella Cotrina | University of Miami

Granito: How to Nail a Dictator. Directed by Pamela Yates. English with Spanish and Mayan subtitles. 100 minutes. Guatemala, Spain, and USA 2011.

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At the opening of *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* (2011), director Pamela Yates addresses the audience in voice-over. Speaking in the first person, she reflects on her incursion into the Guatemalan civil war, 25 years prior to the making of *Granito*, when she shot the material that would become her earlier film, *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983). Yates tells viewers that her impetus for going to Guatemala to shoot her first documentary was idealist: she shot *Mountains* to raise social awareness of the hidden war being waged on Mayan people and guerilla groups opposed to the government by the Guatemalan military in the 1980s, with the aid of U.S. funds. *Granito*, by contrast, is the product of chance. In 2009, Yates became part of a team of expert witnesses brought together to provide collaborative evidence of the Mayan genocide for a Spanish court hearing. In lieu of the Guatemalan local courts' reluctance to open up the case locally Yates' *Mountains* became part of the evidence an internationally appointed judge reviewed in the process of deciding whether top military leaders responsible for committing these crimes against humanity would be extradited and tried in Spain. As Yates' voiceover narration asserts, each participant became responsible for contributing their own *granito de arena* (grain of sand) to putting away those responsible for the murders of more than 200,000 Mayan people and *desaparecidos* (the disappeared) during this thirty-six-year war (1960-1996).

Yates's documentation of the investigate team's collaborative efforts intertwined with her subjective voiceover narration makes of *Granito* a hybrid narrative, part-thriller, part-memoir. It also showcases two conflicting approaches to documentary work. Importantly, these two ways of telling the story of Guatemala's bloody civil war have very different implications. Yates's aesthetic and commercial appropriation of Mayan images in both *Mountains* and *Granito*, as I will illustrate, show the perils of using the filmmaker's subjective memory and affect, through memoir, as the master narrative through which to document the victimization of Mayan people. By contrast, the thriller narrative that

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documents the investigate team's efforts, establishing a dialogue between the evidence and the voices of the victims of the civil war, does not try to speak for or artistically exploit the subaltern.



Pamela Yates filming on "When the Mountains Tremble" in the Guatemalan highlands, 1982.

Credit: Newton Thomas Sige; COURTESY OF SKIYLIGHT PICTURES.

The process of gathering evidence in *Granito* unfolds in the manner of a detective thriller. The investigative team, which includes archival expert Kate Doyle (recently awarded the Alba/Puffin for Human Rights Activism) and forensic archeologist Fredy Peccerelli, slowly gather their evidence over the course of the film: classified military documents, the identification of murdered victims' remains, as well as Yates's earlier film, all become evidence of military genocide. At the top of the "granito" team's list of targets is Efraín Ríos Montt, one of the bloodiest military dictators of Guatemala who held power from 1982 to 1983. Following his departure from office, Rios Montt continued to wield power and influence in Guatemala with impunity. He was the founder of the Guatemalan Republican Front (FDR), a candidate in the Guatemalan presidency in 2003, and an elected member of Congress from January 17, 2007 to January 14, 2012. What is at stake for the investigative team in compiling these different grains of evidence is to find justice for victims of the violence. As Mayan victim and political activist Antonio Caba Caba states in *Granito*: "we seek justice so that this won't happen again, because if these crimes are left unpunished, they could be repeated." (Judge Carol Patricia Flores indicted Rios Montt in a Guatemalan court for his crimes on January 26, 2012,

three months after *Granito's* September 2011 release).

In contrast to the team's engagement with Caba Caba's desire for national healing through the enforcement of justice for those responsible for the systematic murder of his Mayan community, Yates's memoir, in placing Yates herself, as documentarian, in the privileged role of "fated witness" of the civil war, detracts attention from the team's work. Instead, in the voiceover, Yates emphasizes her privileged role as witness: "witnessing is the essence of being a documentary filmmaker; capturing moments in time, never knowing how history will judge them, or how the documentation will be used in the future." Because Yates's voice, and not that of the victims, occupies the central position in *Granito*, the historical moments she captures with her camera become subjugated to her point of view. Yates' voiceover narrative thus hijacks the visual documentation of the Guatemalan war to affirm ontologically that without her filmic presence, the secret war waged in Guatemala would have remained hidden, and therefore not existed for the world.



Credit: Jean-Marie Simon; COURTESY OF SKIYLIGHT PICTURES.

In a key scene toward the end of *Granito*, Yates screens *When the Mountains Tremble* inside a Mayan village schoolhouse. As the documentary plays on a small television screen, the camera lens zooms in on the spectators, giving *Granito's* viewers close-ups of Mayan faces as they watch the most visceral parts of the film, including footage of male corpses strewn outdoors and mourned by disconsolate female survivors. Turning the Mayans into pained spectators promotes *When the Mountains Tremble* as the canonical text of the Guatemalan civil war. This scene establishes the previous film as required viewing for *Granito* spectators, legitimized by the fact that Mayan villagers themselves are watching this film and "learning" about the effects the civil war had on their culture. This endorsement is followed by a second shot, which foreshadows the promotion of *Granito* for American and European audiences: after the screening of *Mountains*, a foreign photographer organizes the group of Mayan spectators into an aesthetically pleasing visual composition and takes their photograph against the backdrop of the mountains and the small wooden-schoolhouse. Intended for promotional

purposes, this still exploits the fantasy of child-like innocence projected onto indigenous peoples' bodies present since the beginning of the colonial encounter. Yates thus displays her appropriation of Mayan people's image for her memoir's master narrative, which denies the possibility for their own self-representation. Moreover, the structure of *Granito* holds up Yates's *Mountains* as a key part of the team's evidence. This enables Yates to idealize her role as a documentarian on the side of justice and dismiss a crucial ethical question she posed in the earlier film: how does each of us weave our own responsibility for the pattern of history? This question becomes particularly pressing when we consider the self-promotional element present in both *Mountains* and, to a greater extent, in *Granito*, both of which rely heavily on the imagery of the Mayan people as victims of a sadistic state.

Ultimately, the two-pronged narrative approach in *Granito* (part detective thriller, part personal memoir) demonstrates a disjuncture in the ethical treatment of victims in political documentaries such as *Granito*. The attempt to uncover evidence of the war is the great strength of the film. Its weakness is Yates' memoir, which takes away from *Granito*'s political power. As a way of self-mythologizing, Yates's account ethically fails to put the victims' voices first. By contrast, the investigative team in the thriller narrative section never loses track of its mission to reveal the social breach that was broken by the military leaders who masterminded extermination campaigns directed at all those who threatened their power. From this viewer's perspective, the thriller narrative is a more ethical way of documenting the story of the Guatemalan civil war than Yates's memoir, as it maintains the focus on the victims and the evidence mounted by the investigative team, rather than on the filmmaker's cult of self-aggrandizement.

Fiorella Cotrina is a visiting assistant professor at the University of Miami in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, where she teaches courses in Spanish and Latin American studies. She received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Southern California in 2009. Her areas of specialization are 20th century Latin American literature and cinema. Cotrina is interested in interdisciplinary studies of aesthetics, ethics, technology, and consumer and popular culture. Her current project is an examination of how cinema spectatorship affected the definition of Latin American masculine identity in the novels *La invención de Morel*, *A hora da estrela*, and *El beso de la mujer araña*.