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## Narratives that travel across space and time: the intertextuality of Eliza Lynch

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**Resumo:** Filmes contemporâneos sobre a viagem problematizam o conceito das fronteiras nacionais, as interações entre o público e o privado, e as formas narrativas utilizadas para representar os encontros inter-hemisféricos entre pessoas de diferentes raças e etnias. Os filmes podem ser vistos como leitura crítica de nossas economias globalizadas e seus deslocamentos atuais. Nesse contexto de produções culturais, pode-se situar o filme *Eliza Lynch: a Rainha do Paraguay* (2013) de Alan Gilzenan. O documentário dramático, que se pode definir como *docudrama*, sobre a vida de Eliza Alicia Lynch, retrata também as jornadas de Lynch no século XIX: da Irlanda a Paris, à Argélia, ao Paraguay, a Buenos Aires, e novamente a Paris. O presente trabalho analisa as formas como o filme *Eliza Lynch: Rainha do Paraguay* problematiza as diversas leituras realizadas sobre a vida de Eliza Lynch em suas relações com a nação Paraguaia e com Solano López.

**Palavras-chave:** Eliza Lynch; Documentário; Guerra do Paraguai.

**Abstract:** Contemporary films about travelling problematize the concept of the national frontiers, the interrelations between the private and the public, as well as the narrative forms used in the films themselves to convey hemispheric encounters among various peoples, as a form of critique of our own globalized economies and forms of dislocation. *Eliza Lynch: Queen of Paraguay* (2013) directed by Alan Gilzenan, can be included within this context. Gilzenan's film, which can be defined as a docudrama about Eliza Alicia Lynch's life, is also a movie about the journeys Lynch had to endure in the nineteenth century: from Ireland to Paris, to Algeria, to Paraguay, to Buenos Aires, and back to Paris again. This paper analyzes how Gilzenan's film problematizes the various readings of Eliza Lynch's life and travels and her relation with the Paraguayan nation and Solano López.

**Keywords:** Eliza Lynch; Documentary; War of Paraguay

Cinema has constantly been associated with the transposing of space and time: from real events to imaginary ones; from the present to the past and to the future. Similarly, travel narratives in film can be seen in various contemporary productions across nations. Travel narratives can be revealing not only of one's self-discovery

journey but also of a displacement of the self as the traveler encounters the other. As Sandra Almeida and Renata Wasserman explain,

[t]ravel writing brings to the fore fundamental and unresolvable contradictions: it records (but at times simply imagines) how geographic dislocation confirms and destabilizes the self, whether that is understood culturally or psychologically. It records conquest and the imposition of the cultural self on a cultural other, but it also records exploration and the opening of the self; it glamorizes the dangers of both. It probes, discovers, and misunderstands. It caters to irrepressible needs for movement and for stories, and explores the tension between the restlessness of dislocation and the quiet needed for stories (ALMEIDA & WASSERMAN, 2009, p.9-10).

Within a Latin American scenery, contemporary films about traveling in its various possibilities, including migratory ones, like *Elena* (2012), directed by Petra Costa; *Rio* (2012), by Carlos Saldanha; *Goodbye Dear Love* (2002), by Ruth Behar; *South of the Border* (2009) by Oliver Stone, *La Jaula de Oro*, 2013, by Diego Quemada-Diez; and *Babel* (2006), by Alejandro González Iñárritu, problematize the concept of national frontiers, the interrelations between the private and the public, as well as the narrative forms used in the films to convey hemispheric encounters among various peoples, as a form of critique of our own globalized economies and forms of dislocation. Along with this film tradition, which is revealing of displacement, estrangement and implicit struggles between the self and the other, we can include *Eliza Lynch: Queen of Paraguay* (2013), directed by Alan Gilsenan.<sup>1</sup> The film, which is a documentary and also a drama – as a form of docudrama based on Eliza Alicia Lynch’s life –, is also a movie about hemispheric encounters (between Europe and America) and the conflicts engendered by them. As the film portrays Lynch’s migratory process in the nineteenth-century, from Ireland to France, to Algeria, to Paraguay, to Argentina, and back to France again, the audience is given the possibility to understand the historical contingencies surrounding her life: hunger in Ireland; love and deception in Algiers, and war and destruction in Paraguay. Born in 1833, in Ireland, Lynch married a French army-surgeon and had to move to Algiers at the age of 16, later returning to Paris by herself. Her marriage did not last and Lynch had to find a way of surviving. Later, in 1854, she met Solano López and moved to Paraguay. Although she did not marry him, she was somehow accepted, while criticized by his family and the elite classes of

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<sup>1</sup> The filmography of Alan Gilsenan includes the production of various documentaries and TV series, such as *The Road to God Knows Where* (1998), *The Ghost of Roger Casement* (2002), and *Paul Durcan: the Dark School* (2007). He has won several awards in Europe and the UK, and he is also the director and producer of various plays on Irish historical events.

Paraguay. Nonetheless, she was the mother of his seven children. Eliza Lynch moved in opposite direction from those of our contemporary migratory currents, which go from Latin American countries to Europe or North America (or from the periphery to the center). Furthermore, her travels are also the scenery of her displacement, self-discovery, and reinvention, as she is given the chance to encounter this other – the Paraguayan nation – and to redefine her role in history, from a seducer, to a mother and finally to a heroine.

In Gilsenan's *Eliza Lynch: Queen of Paraguay*, it is in Paraguay that the most dramatic events of Eliza Lynch's life take shape: first, as the unofficial companion to Francisco Solano López; second as the mother; third, as the protagonist of, perhaps, one of the most violent wars of the nineteenth century (BETHEL, 1996, p. 1-4); and finally as a dispossessed widow whose kingdom is both an act of faith and an ironic trope. The very last two words of the film's title, "Queen of Paraguay", can be seen as an ironic comment on all the achievements and failures of Eliza Lynch. As the film introduces to us its protagonist, the audience wonders how Lynch ever achieved her fame as a voluptuous woman and the seducer of a dictator, Solano López, and, at the same time, managed to be the mother of Lopez's children and a heroine in Paraguay – not to speak of her martyrdom as she was expelled from Paraguay, being dispossessed of her lands and rights after the war. In spite of the fact that the movie does not give us readymade answers to any of these puzzles and avoids a final conclusion, the poetic outcome of Eliza's own memorialist readings of her short autobiography written in Buenos Ayres, after being expelled from Paraguay, could be seen as the film's leitmotif.

In one of the first sequences of the film, as Eliza (Maria Doyle Kennedy) talks directly to the audience, she says, "for a long time, perhaps too long, my name has been attacked by the most determined enemies" (1:31-2:08). She is framed in close shot as she stands at the top of the stairs in what looks like a phantasmagoric appearance in an abandoned house, filled with indirect light. The first long shot frames her going up the stairs with a long yellow silk gown. With her disheveled hair, a melancholic non-diegetic song, and an abandoned house, the whole sequence, as in similar sequences in which she appears, reminds one of a world gone by – a world of the dead. This sequence, for instance, is preceded by one which shows Eliza's body being exhumed to be sent back to Paraguay, from France, during Alfredo Stroessner's military regime. The juxtaposition of these two initial sequences reveals one of the main concerns of the film:

the many expositions of Eliza Lynch's life and body since she became Solano López's companion from the 1850s until the Paraguayan War, which took place from 1864 to 1870. Later on in the film, the audience is given the information that Lynch's exhumation took place when Stroessner decided to turn her into a national heroine.

In the film, the various reports by historians, economists and specialists on Lynch and on Paraguay, which function as fragments of a life narrative, are juxtaposed to the dramatized performance of Lynch's reading of her autobiographic statements. This memorialist approach guides the audience to an understanding of the film's retrieval of her subjectivity. In this context, I would like to address the different readings of Eliza Lynch's life within the web of multiple voices presented in *Eliza Lynch: Queen of Paraguay* and the significance of such readings, as they force her into a constant shift and dislocation.

The multiplicity of viewpoints presented in the film seems to echo the various fictional accounts on Eliza Lynch in theater, film, and literature in the last 100 years, which can be seen as a web of texts, through various historical periods. In many ways, this web of narratives echoes the web of perspectives on the Paraguayan war, as these narratives on Lynch are marked by the historical contexts from which they sprang. Gilsenan's poetic and subjective approach to Eliza Lynch's life, which redeems her from the alleged objectivity of history, reveals a contemporary perspective on Lynch, which is more intimate and less grandiose. The docudrama enacts the microhistory of Lynch's life as opposed to the macrohistory of the Paraguayan War, and it is as if we were looking at Paraguay from the lenses of Eliza Lynch's subjectivity.

As Madame Lynch (as she was called) reads excerpts adapted from her own autobiography, *Esposicion Y Protesta* (1876), she is rendered from an intimate perspective. Indeed, the monologues are reminiscent of the lines which she wrote. In the beginning of *Esposicion Y Protesta*, she says,

Largo tiempo he guardado un silencio profundo, á pesar de haber sido mi nombre explotado durante seis años por enemigos de causa, por personas que buscaban un lucro escribiendo folletos y libros que revestían de escenas espantosas, presentándose como el tipo de la prostitución y del escándalo, y como á una de esas fieras humanas que se complacen y deleitan en el exterminio de la sociedad (LYNCH, 1876, p. 3).

The attempt to recover her own past and to disclaim the scandalous associations imposed on her seems to be one of the main concerns of Lynch's book. However, unlike the

film, which is introspective and non-linear, the book presents a very linear and logical narrative.

The film gives a more intimate view of Eliza Lynch's autobiography, as opposed to many historians' perspective, whose readings of her autobiography are based on the argument that Lynch's short autobiography was an attempt to reclaim her lands and properties after she was forced to leave Paraguay, once Paraguay lost the war to the Triple Alliance, which was constituted by Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. A more critical view of Eliza Lynch is given, for instance, by Nigel Cawthorne's biography, *The Empress of South America*, 2003. In *The Shadows of Elisa Lynch: How a Nineteenth Century Irish Courtesan Became the Most Powerful Woman In Paraguay* (2003), Siân Rees presents a more positive portrayal of the events surrounding Lynch's life and Solano López's struggle to react against the alleged conspiracies against him. In the film, however, one moves from the realm of history into a more personal perspective of Lynch's own voice as it is through her voice off that we are presented to her forced exile, as if the loss were of an intimate nature rather than an economic one.

The subjective view point of Gilsean's documentary can be contextualized within a contemporary tendency in historical films and documentaries to question the alleged objectivity of history. In this way, the inconclusive and multifaceted form of Gilsean's documentary problematizes the historical narrative or the "voice of God" associated with more traditional forms of documentary. The narrative is divided in many segments named after major events in Eliza Lynch's life. These segments show the turning points in Eliza's life, such as "Hunger", her life in Ireland; "Innocence", events which took place before her alleged marriage to a French doctor; "War", the war in Paraguay; and "Rebirth", her exhumation. All of them are framed by an initial sequence in which we have the voice off of Eliza Lynch, as a memoir reading performed by the character herself. Each fragment is interspersed with reports given by historians, biographers and economists. None of these segments is conclusive, and the last one still leaves room for an understanding of the possible manipulations of Lynch's life by different people and her own adjustments to take hold of the power position she acquired as the companion of Francisco Solano López. The openness of the documentary form, which is shown by the narrative construction of *Eliza Lynch: Queen of Paraguay*, can be associated to a poetics of resistance against an underlying closure, which reduces the other to a determinate ideological position, or to a stereotype

(CORSEUIL, 2009, p. 144). In this context the new documentary, or what I am calling the postmodern documentary, is characterized by its questioning or rupture with the assumed objectivity and realism associated with the genre, by means of a self-reflexive meta-narrative.

The montage of the docudrama, with Lynch's voice off juxtaposed with reports by Ronan Fanning, Michael Lillis, among other specialists on Lynch's life and history, as well as the mingling of realistic images (photographs, paintings and newsreel footage) and fictionalized ones, places fiction and realism within the same ontological level, thus, reflecting Gilson's awareness of the constructed nature of the documentary. As defined by Stella Bruzzi, the documentary foregrounds its problematic relation with reality, since the "objective" search for the real associated with documentaries has always been an impossibility. In her words, the documentary "is predicated upon a dialectic relationship between aspiration and potential, that the text itself reveals the tensions between the documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim" (BRUZZI, 2000, p. 4). In that sense, contemporary documentaries, such as *Eliza Lynch: Queen of Paraguay*, reveal the process of building meanings by selecting, organizing, and representing historical facts and characters, making evident the interpretative mark by different documentary makers. Documentaries can also be seen as representations bearing a specific ideology through which ethnicities and nationalities are represented. In the same way, images, narratives and stereotypes related to certain ethnicities and nationalities come to influence significantly the collective imaginary of a more globalized world population. In "The Modernist Event" Hayden White (1996)<sup>2</sup> suggests that new genres such as "faction" and "docudrama" have displayed the intricate relation between the real and the imaginary (WHITE, 1996, p.66-68), as if they were on the same ontological level. In many ways, the audience is, thus, invited to participate more actively in the meaningful processes associated with fiction and history.

The association between fiction and history can be paralleled with the retrieval of microhistories within historiography. As we move away from macrohistorical perspectives into the microscope world of individual lives, single events and other

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<sup>2</sup> See WHITE, Hayden. In: SOBCHACK, V. (Ed.) *The Persistence of History*. New York: Routledge, 1996. pp. 17-38. White argues that the modernist event abandoned the "grounds of realism" opening up space for new genres in postmodernism as "parahistorical" representation. Historical events that are fictionalized but with "characters and events that serve as historical referents" (p. 17).

minor narratives, the object of analysis of microhistory, as a form of “cultural history” (MAGNÚSSON and ISZIJÁRTÓ, 2013, p. 5), retrieves individual lives as valid narrative forms to the examination of the intricacies between history and subjectivities. Within this context, one can understand the various historical accounts on Eliza Lynch: her personal affiliations, desires and choices are shown as being interconnected with the destiny of the Paraguayan people. In this way, Gilsenan’s film is of extreme importance as its format, a blend of fiction and documentary, seems to be capable of retrieving a more personal tone to the historical events surrounding Lynch’s life. The history of Eliza Lynch is, thus, conveyed from a more personal perspective, as if the film could give her a chance to recount her own life from her own perspective.

Contemporary media, available within globalized contexts, such as Netflix or in Brazil, TV network Rede Globo, have produced various series on historical figures – biopics -- such as on Queen Elizabeth II in *The Crown*, or Juscelino Kubitcheck in the Globo miniseries *JK* (2006). Anita Garibaldi’s biography has also been widely revised and fictionalized. One could point out certain parallels between Anita Garibaldi and Eliza Alicia Lynch. Born in 1821, Anita Garibaldi had to change her name in order to marry Giuseppe Garibaldi, as she had already married another man at the age of 14 years old. Anita, like Eliza, was also a heroine for Brazilians; she not only fought with Giuseppe Garibaldi for the independence of the Southern Brazilian provinces from the monarchic empire in 1839, in the Farroupilha Revolution, but also moved to Italy to live with him. Many narratives in novels, TV series, biographies were dedicated to Anita Garibaldi, whose courage and reinvention of her life (as she is known to have forged a new identity) have attracted the attention of biographers and writers, as well as of the public.<sup>3</sup>

Since late 19th century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the circulation of various narratives about the life of Elyza Alicia Lynch has invited us to think about the historical contexts from which they arose. I would like to mention a few: Viriato Corrêa’s *Crônicas dos meus avós*, 1930<sup>4</sup>; "Madame Lynch and Friend" by Alyn Brodsky; The play, *Visions* (1978) by Louis Nowra, which depicts Lynch and López

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<sup>3</sup> *A Casa das Sete Mulheres* (TV mini-series, produced by Globo 2003), *Anita: Storia di Anita Garibaldi*, by Lisa Ginszburg, 2005, among other texts.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of Eliza Lynch during the Paraguayan War see *Mulheres comuns, senhoras respeitáveis: a presença feminina na guerra do paraguai*, tese de mestrado de Maria Teresa Garritano Dourado. Título obtido no Programa de Pós-Graduação em História da UFMS, 2002.

leading Paraguay to disaster in the Paraguayan War; Graham Shelby's *Demand the World* (1990); Anne Enright's *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2003); Lily Tuck's *The News from Paraguay* (2004), which won the National Book Award for that year; "Pancha Garmendia y Elisa Lynch – Opera en cinco actos" by Augusto Roa Bastos. *Paraguay 2006; Ballet in two acts "Elisa"* (2010) libretto by Jaime Pintos and Carla Castro, music by Nancy Luzko and Daniel Luzko. Lynch's life moves across media, history and nationalities. From chronicles to novels, operas and plays, from writers of various nationalities, such as the Australian Louis Nowra, the Paraguayan Roa Bastos, the British Graham Shelby, the Brazilian Viriato Corrêa and the American Alyn Brodsky, Lynch's name moves beyond its stereotypes, escaping the limits of her depiction as a sensuous woman in Parisian society, or a devoted mother, taking care of the country's soldiers, in the Paraguayan war. Her body is cut through by various narratives, which are shaped by history and by the most varied contexts. Gilseman's film could be seen as being informed by these previous texts. The movie's effort, however, is not only to divest Eliza from previous definitions and stereotypes imposed on her image, the prostitute or the mother, but also to place it back on the realm of individuality and subjectivity: her needs, emotions and desires. Furthermore, the film empowers Lynch as she is shown being aware of the different stereotypes imposed on her. In this sense, the various narrative voices within the documentary complete each other, by their being inclusive rather than exclusive. Because the first sequences of the film show Elyza in the process of writing her autobiographic text *Exposición y Protesta*, we see her from an intimate perspective. According to historians and biographers, Elyza's autobiography, which consists of a shorter narrative format, about 40 pages, presents her defense against those who expelled her from Paraguay. The framing voice off by Eliza evinces her self-awareness of the extremes to which her life was submitted: to be seen as a whore or an angel. The ways in which she is portrayed – in complete control of her voice, writing her own story – can be seen as a counter-narrative to the various accounts of the stereotypes imposed on her image. Furthermore, throughout the documentary, the reports given by the various biographers and historians are also focused on Lynch's life, needs and context. Some of these reports are based on the historical issues that lead to the war itself, and all of them highlight the role of Brazil as a determinant agent responsible for the genocide of Paraguayans (mostly after the war was over) by Conde d'Eu, who was married to Princesa Isabel.

One of the critiques that can be raised about the film is its lack of reference to the British influence on the politics played by Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, as a factor that may have been the hidden cause for the war carried out in Paraguay. Contemporary Marxist historical accounts have advanced the thesis that the British Empire had a great interest in the war against Paraguay, as the British may have acted as a fourth ally in the Triple Alliance war. Although the alleged intervention has been questioned by more recent theories, the fact that Gilsenan's documentary on Elyza Lynch is also, indirectly, about Solano López, makes the omission of the economic background for the war a relevant one.<sup>5</sup> It is understandable that certain narratives are quite appealing as they travel across our globalized and transnational cultural landscape, especially narratives on individuals ahead of their own times, such as Lynch's. The power of their stories can be better understood and evaluated if the traces of the macronarratives in which their lives were inserted, which include economics, especially in times of war, are also assessed and taken into consideration. Nonetheless, *Elyza Lich: the Queen of Paraguay* depicts to us a forgotten historical protagonist in control of her own life. Her dislocation from Europe to Paraguay and her reinvention of her own identity, reveal to us a new perception of the power of women in the nineteenth-century. In this sense, the name Elyza Lynch, which is pervaded by questions of genre, culture, nationality and history, is also reinvented by Gilsenan's documentary in its reenacting of the subjective position of Elyza Lynch. She embodies an unexpected social code of behavior for her time, as well as for our own time. Lynch's and Garibaldi's narratives transpose their own historical moment and space. And, yet, those were women of their own context, because they lived intensely their own passion, lives and desire. The most recent films, biographies and novels that fictionalize the lives of these historical characters are immensely valuable by giving them a voice and by questioning the stereotypes imposed on them. *Eliza Lynch: Queen of Paraguay* can be included within this recent trend.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on British imperialism in the nineteenth-century in the Americas, see HOBBSAWM, Eric. *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875*. (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: London), 1975, p. 78.; GUNDER, Andre Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), p. 287.; BETHELL, Leslie. "The Paraguayan War". Institute of Latin American Studies. Research paper 46. University of London, 1996. pp.15-35. <[http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/3585/1/B28\\_-\\_The\\_Paraguayan\\_War\\_\(1864-1870\).pdf](http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/3585/1/B28_-_The_Paraguayan_War_(1864-1870).pdf)>.

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