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The Fiction of Evidence

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Abstract

Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo (2023) reconstructs a traumatic Colombian event using only archival television footage. Though the event occurred, the widely shared memory of its live broadcast is false—no such transmission exists. The film becomes a case study in how collective memory forms around emotionally-credible but fabricated images. Drawing on film theory, memory studies, and archival critique, this essay examines the mythopoetic function of audiovisual media. It argues that moving images do not record reality but generate the sensation of truth. In post-conflict contexts, wherein video is used as legal evidence, such affective mechanisms reveal deep epistemological instability.

Keywords


Film Theory | Memory Studies | Archival Critique | Critical Media Studies | Sociology of media



On n'est pas encore habitué à parler de la
mémoire d'un groupe, même par métaphore.

Maurice Halbwachs (1950)

1. *Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo* (2023): Speculative Ethnography and the Fabrication of Memory.



On May 15, 2000, in the Colombian town of Chiquinquirá, a woman named Doña Elvia Cortés was murdered in one of the most atrocious acts of violence committed during the country's long internal conflict. Accused of refusing to comply with an extortion demand, she was fitted with a collar-bomb in front of her family and held hostage for hours while bomb experts attempted to defuse the device. The device eventually detonated, killing both her and a police officer. This event, instantly condemned nationwide and internationally, marked a rupture in public support for the peace process then underway between the Colombian Government and the FARC guerrillas. The atrocity became a symbol of failed dialogue and unthinkable cruelty. And yet, for many Colombians, the event is remembered not just for its brutality, but for its televisual presence – its *live* broadcast. The collective memory of this “collar bomb” episode has been shaped by a vivid, widely-shared image of its unfolding on national television.

As its director, I conceived *Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo* not as a documentary or reenactment, but as an exploration of cinematic form shaped by a conceptual premise. Its premise was deceptively simple: to reconstruct a traumatic national event using only archival television footage. What the project ultimately revealed was startling: although the traumatic event unquestionably occurred, the widely shared memory of its live television broadcast is entirely false – no such transmission ever took place.

The film's original goal was not to recover a suppressed truth hidden within the archive. Rather, it sought to dismantle the narrative machinery of televised realism – to expose the affective and rhetorical codes that make moving images persuasive as “evidence.” Elements such as editing, pacing, sound, and visual style – rather than content alone – constitute the deep grammar of credibility.

The need to produce such a film emerges from the fact that, during Colombia's post-conflict process, certain televised images and video archives – particularly those depicting or purporting to depict acts of violence – have been treated as probative documents and submitted as evidence in national court proceedings. The project's central hypothesis was that audiovisual narrative does not transparently record reality but produces the *feeling* of objectivity, a phenomenon upon which the probatory dimension of the audiovisual document is built. Television news is not a neutral

conduit of facts; it is a genre with its own conventions. The camera does not merely witness; it performs. The anchor does not simply report; they narrate. And the viewer does not passively receive; they absorb, project, and remember – becoming active participants in the creation of audiovisual meaning. In this sense, the legitimacy of news footage does not rest on its factual accuracy, but on its affective resonance and circulation within collective memory (See, Zelizer, 1998 and Zelizer, 2004).

As director, I sought to exploit this structure by working exclusively with archival footage. The original plan was to edit the entire traumatic “event” using only found materials, without voiceovers, interviews, or explanatory text. Editing alone would reorganize the temporality of the source footage, allowing the emotional rhythm and genre conventions of television to construct a new narrative. The aim was not to manipulate the viewer into misrecognition, but to demonstrate that plausibility and credibility are not inherent in facts themselves, but in how those facts are narrated – how they are shaped into stories. In other words, the project sought to highlight the idea that objectivity in cinema is merely a narrative style.

The emotional and conceptual fulcrum of the project was a particular image: a vivid recollection of a live television broadcast showing an act of extreme violence.

This memory – described with extraordinary clarity, including camera angles, graphics, and the tone of the reporter – was widely shared among the film’s creators and participants, including myself. It seemed impossible that such a powerful transmission could be lost. And yet, as the search through the archive deepened, the team discovered something uncanny: the broadcast did not exist. No trace of it appeared in video records, metadata, or official registries.

What emerged was not the absence of evidence, but the presence of a collective hallucination – an image remembered by many that never existed. The traumatic event was never broadcast live. Only a few photographs documented the atrocity; the rest came from journalistic coverage after the fact. This realization reframed the project entirely. It was no longer a reconstruction of a televised event under a different narrative structure, but a meditation on a collective memory unsupported by any image – a collective false memory of an entire country watching live television during hours of anxiety and anguished broadcasting.

The event itself – traumatic and vivid – had undeniably occurred. But the image that had lodged itself in national memory, the one mentally replayed over two decades, had no empirical basis. In Baudrillardian terms, the sign had overtaken the referent. The memory of the broadcast had become more real, more present, than any actual footage (Baudrillard, 1995). The live transmission never happened, yet it was remembered with more detail, intensity, and confidence than many verified events. This phantom image entered the public imaginary not through deception, but through the repetition of aesthetic tropes, the saturation of genre codes, and the emotional imprint of mediated violence.

What *Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo* uncovered was not a hidden truth, but a mythopoetic memory: a collectively held, affectively charged, aesthetically constructed recollection that assumes the function of fact. Through a kind of speculative ethnographic approach, the film suggests that what matters – at least in the formation of collective



memory – is not the absence of archival images, but the affective architectures that have taken their place. More importantly, it reveals the tragic substitution of the historical dimension with a memory process rooted in emotion, irrationality, and collective impulse. This is tragic precisely because such irrationality becomes veiled in the appearance of probative, documented evidence.

Rather than correct the false memory, I chose to work with it. I was confronting a *lieu de mémoire* – a symbolic reconstruction that substituted lived memory with the mediated testimony of a society that experiences history primarily through simulations (Nora, 1997).

To determine whether this was an isolated case or a widespread phenomenon, I proposed a collaboration with the national newspaper *El Espectador*, which agreed to broadcast the film in exchange for including a public survey. On the 24th anniversary of the attack, the film was released online and reached approximately 700,000 viewers across digital platforms and social media. To access the film, users were asked to answer two questions: (1) Through which medium did you first learn about the attack? and (2) Do you recall seeing a live broadcast of the event? The vast majority reported learning about the event through national television, and among those, 87% recalled seeing a live transmission – despite the fact that no such footage exists.

The survey confirmed that a vivid and emotionally-charged false memory had permeated the national consciousness. The images remembered by the public were not historical documents, but reconstructions formed through media, imagination, and emotional resonance (Van Dijck, 2007; 2)¹.

This widespread misremembering aligns with what is popularly known as the **Mandela Effect** – a term describing the phenomenon in which large groups of people recall an event that never occurred. While the term is now often applied to trivial or anecdotal cases – such as misremembered logos, movie quotes, or fictional characters – its origin lies in a collective false memory surrounding a major historical event: the widespread belief that Nelson Mandela died in prison during the 1980s, even though he was released in 1990 and later became President of South Africa.

This foundational example reveals that the phenomenon is not confined to pop culture quirks; it reflects a deeper and more mysterious social and cognitive condition: the emergence of false but vividly-shared memories of significant historical events. In



¹ It is interesting to see how Van Dijck introduces his concept of “mediated memories,” in his words “Media technologies and objects, far from being external instruments for ‘holding’ versions of the past, help constitute a sense of past – both in terms of our private lives and of history at large. Memory and media have both been referred to metaphorically as reservoirs, holding our past experiences and knowledge for future use. But neither memories nor media are passive go-betweens: their mediation intrinsically shapes the way we build up and retain a sense of individuality and community, of identity and history. Therefore, I introduce the concept of mediated memories not only to account for the intricate connection between personal collections and collectivity but also to help theorize the *mutual shaping* of memory and media.”

the case of *Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo*, this is not merely a media curiosity, but a deeply unsettling manifestation of post-traumatic collective memory.

What remains mysterious is how a community – without overt coordination – can sincerely and vividly share the same incorrect memory of a traumatic event.

This suggests that memory, particularly when mediated by powerful audiovisual narratives, is not merely stored individually and aggregated, but produced through shared cultural mechanisms operating at the intersection of affect, narrative, and institutional authority (See Halbwachs, 1950).

The traumatic event in this small town in the Colombian Andes – with all its brutality – undeniably took place. What was ultimately at stake, however, was not the fact of its occurrence, but the way it entered collective memory and became inscribed into the national historical consciousness. That inscription did not result from documentation, but from a false memory stabilized by the familiar tropes of televised violence – endlessly reenacted and recycled across fictional, journalistic, and hybrid media. The public memory of the event came to resemble a suspense film, complete with Griffithian techniques such as cross-cutting and sustained tension. In effect, the collective false memory was cinematic in nature – even in the absence of any cinematic record. The memory did not imitate a documented transmission; it reproduced the emotional and formal grammar of suspense cinema itself.

In this sense, the “document” around which memory crystallized was not evidence, but myth, rendered believable through the aesthetic conventions of the audiovisual, and thus tragically granted the status of history. What emerges is a **mythopoetic archive** – one that does not simply classify or record, but fabricates continuity, causality, and even memory itself. In this sense, the audiovisual image can become the archive’s alibi: it absorbs the evidentiary weight of the image while replacing epistemological rigor with narrative affect. The archival image ceases to function as a probative document and instead becomes part of a performative structure of belief: a system that constructs historical sense not through documentation, but through the aesthetics of plausibility and emotional immersion.

This phenomenon – collective belief in a non-existent broadcast – cannot be adequately explained by media exposure or memory distortion alone. Rather, it demands a deeper interrogation of how cinema and television produce meaning, realism, and emotional coherence. What follows is a theoretical excavation of the cinematic structures that allow such mythopoetic memories to take hold.

2. Cinematic Emotion and the Construction of Meaning: A Chronic Pathology of Narrative Form

The phenomenon revealed by *Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo* – a widely shared memory of a live broadcast that never occurred – points to a deeper pathology in the audiovisual construction of collective memory. The project did not merely uncover a false memory; it exposed the formal conditions under which such memory becomes



possible, believable, and affectively resonant. To understand this, we must turn to the history of cinematic form itself.

Early cinema foregrounded affective intensity over narrative coherence by disrupting theatrical mimesis in favor of an immediate, sensation-driven aesthetics. Long before the advent of formalist film theory, early filmmakers – experimental by necessity – demonstrated that cinema resists fixed grammatical norms. The Brighton School (1896-1910) revealed that film's ability to narrate across fragmented spatial and temporal registers stemmed not from logical sequencing, but from its capacity to *mobilize emotion*, and more crucially, to *activate perception* – the viewer's innate ability to stitch together discontinuous fragments into a coherent experience.

As Erwin Panofsky noted, cinema became a distinct form of storytelling from the moment it learned to *dynamize space and spatialize time* – a power rooted not in narration, but in emotional manipulation (Panofsky, 1992). This affective structure became the very foundation of cinematic intelligibility. While early critics sought to understand film through analogies to theater and literature, they missed cinema's true logic: not language, but rhythm, spatial composition, and sensorimotor immersion.

This conceptual shift – away from linguistic models and toward affective structures – finds one of its most articulate expressions in Gilles Deleuze's theory of film. Deleuze rejected the notion that cinema functions as a language governed by grammar. Instead, he conceived of film as a dynamic geometry of perception, wherein meaning arises from sensorimotor circuits, rhythmic flows, and non-linear narrative structures (see Deleuze, 1983 and Deleuze, 1985). As with early montage – from Edwin S. Porter to D.W. Griffith – discontinuity does not disrupt realism; it intensifies it. Viewers experience fragmented images as coherent and emotionally-true, not because they remember what they saw, but because they remember what they felt.

The paradox lies here: the illusion of objectivity, rooted in the indexical nature of the photochemical image, was not disrupted by fragmentation; on the contrary, it was **amplified by it**. Yet, this amplification did not stem from a true correspondence with the represented object and its presence in physical reality, but rather from its **phenomenological existence within the darkened room** – from the immersive, affective experience of cinematic projection itself.

The cut becomes central to this pathology. Far from being a mere technical device, the cut is the *engine* of cinematic attraction. It is through cuts – interruptions, juxtapositions, and/or temporal leaps – that cinema generates rhythm, tension, and anticipation. As André Gaudreault has argued in his remarkable work *Cinéma et attraction. Pour une nouvelle histoire du cinématographe*, the logic of attraction was not only the dominant principle of early cinema, but one that fundamentally contradicted the narrative logic that later came to define institutionalized cinema (Gaudreault, 2008; 95). In other words, the foundational structure of cinematic expression was borne not from the need to tell stories, but from the impulse to attract, affect, and interrupt.

Yet, recent insights, including those from neuroscience, suggest that the invisibility of editing lies not in visual continuity, but in embodied experience (Gallese, Guerra, 2015). The viewer does not rationally decode meaning; rather, they are absorbed – estranged from their own perceptual stability and immersed in a field of shared



emotion. The cinematic cut functions analogously to empathy: it forges a visceral connection, grounding narrative comprehension in *pathos* rather than *logos*.

Unlike literature or theater, in which emotion follows plot, *in cinema, emotion precedes meaning*. It becomes the condition under which meaning can occur.

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, catharsis follows mimetic structure. In cinema, pathos is the structure. Narrative is not built from facts - it is felt into existence.

This explains why audiences across Colombia could so vividly recall a non-existent live transmission. The memory was constructed not from exposure to a singular event, but through exposure to a repeated audiovisual form: the grammar of breaking news, the tropes of televised tragedy, and the pacing of crisis.

The emotional syntax was familiar. So familiar, in fact, that it fabricated its own referent. This emotionally-driven logic of cinematic meaning, as evidenced in *Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo*, is not a contemporary anomaly, but rather a continuation of a much older tradition within film history. To fully grasp how audiovisual media creates emotionally-coherent but factually-unstable narratives, we must turn to the foundational geometry of cinematic storytelling itself. Nowhere is this more evident than in the early works of Griffith, whose pioneering use of montage forged a path not just for cinematic realism, but for the emotional infrastructures that continue to shape collective memory.

Consider, for instance, Griffith's 1909 film, *A Corner in Wheat*. His montage was not governed by syntactic rules, but by emotional urgency. The juxtaposition of two temporally-distinct scenes – a wealthy grain speculator dining and the poor lining up for bread – was not conceived to mimic linguistic alternation, but to provoke a visceral moral and affective response. Griffith did not aim to translate linguistic structures into cinema; rather, he constructed metaphoric meaning through an instinctive, affect-driven form of montage. This particular film is especially revealing in how it exposes Griffith's intuitive use of montage as an affective, rather than linguistic, device: its diegesis gradually discloses his intention to create a "meanwhile" effect – a conjunctive structure that initially suggests contrast ("on the other hand"), but, through repetition, evolves into an adverbial sense of simultaneity ("while"). It is striking to observe how a diegesis built on emotion and indignation – opposing the world of finance to the hardships of agriculture – ultimately discovers, and then mechanizes, shot alternation as a means of producing, in the viewer, the sense that two actions are unfolding at the same time.

Griffith's emotional use of parallel action exemplifies a broader dynamic in film history; one in which cinematic coherence is grounded not in narrative logic nor in the objective reconstruction of reality, but in **affective tension and spatial juxtaposition**.

Later developments, particularly in American cinema, crystallized this affective structure into a dominant narrative logic. The rise of what Peter Watkins termed the *Monoform* – a modular, accelerated, and homogenized audiovisual structure – pushed cinema toward a one-dimensional stream of uninterrupted emotional intensity, leaving little room for pause, interruption, or reflection. In the Monoform, editing became not only seamless but compulsive, transforming audiovisual language into a



system of emotional saturation. Borrowing from Watkins, we might say that this system paralyzes critical distance by replacing deliberation with immediacy, and judgment with emotional consensus (see Watkins, 2004).

Herein lies the fundamental issue: if the mechanism through which cinema produces meaning is built upon a structure of estrangement and emotional immersion, how can moving images be trusted as neutral records of fact? The very mechanisms that generate coherence in audiovisual language are opposed to rational distance; they **operate through rhythm, repetition, and emotional saturation**, not through detachment or documentation.

Thus, to engage seriously with audiovisual media as historical or legal evidence, we must move beyond concerns of technological indexicality. The deeper problem lies in the narrative act of cinematic representation itself – and it is not merely a question of subjectivity. As Umberto Eco once argued, for an instrument to be capable of telling the truth, it must also be capable of lying. If it lacks this ambivalence, it is useless as a narrative device (Eco, 1975: 17). In the case of audiovisual narratives, we encounter the same structural ambivalence, but with an added complexity: in order to narrate, the medium must first alienate the viewer. The act of storytelling in cinema presupposes a form of affective estrangement; one that draws the viewer into a rhythm of emotional immersion before any critical engagement with the “truth” of what is seen becomes possible.



3. Audiovisual Archives and the Myth of Objectivity: Estrangement, Affect, and the Crisis of Evidence.

The phenomenon explored in *Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo*, and later unpacked through the cinematic logic of affective realism, reaches a critical culmination when considered in the context of the archive – especially the audiovisual archive – within judicial, political, and historiographical regimes. In Colombia, as in many other post-conflict nations, certain televised images have been treated not only as historical documents, but as *probatory evidence* – legal artifacts invested with the burden of truth.

Yet to regard moving images as evidence – as neutral, factual, or judicially-stable – is to overlook the narrative and affective structures by which such images acquire meaning in the first place. Drawing from the Colombian television archive, which spans decades of armed conflict and political violence, the final section of this essay interrogates the unstable status of audiovisual material as both memory and proof.

The archive, as Michel Foucault insisted, is not merely a repository of information, but a discursive apparatus: a system that regulates what can be said, seen, and remembered within a specific cultural order. It is an engine of legibility, not an inert collection (Foucault, 1969; 177). Photographic and cinematic archives, however, add a further layer of complexity. Unlike textual records, they carry with them the indexical aura of objectivity – a perception rooted in the belief that the camera, by physically registering light from the scene it captures, bears direct witness to reality. This cultural inheritance from the photochemical era endowed audiovisual images with a privileged

evidentiary status: they were seen not just as representations, but as imprints of the real.

This belief, famously articulated by André Bazin as *the transfer of reality from the thing to its reproduction*, granted the image a privileged status in evidentiary discourse (Bazin, 2008; 14). But that ontological trust has persisted beyond its technological grounding. As the image transitioned from photochemical to electronic and then to digital form, its material link to the real weakened, while its cultural authority remained intact. The result is a crisis: a legal and epistemological framework that still treats images as facts, even as their production, manipulation, and circulation operate within fundamentally narrative and affective regimes.

As scholars like Allan Sekula have shown, photographic archives have never been neutral. They were – and remain – tools of classification, surveillance, and social ordering, encoding subjects within institutional systems of control (Sekula, 1986). Sekula's work, like Foucault's, emphasized the discursive construction of visibility. What this project now proposes is an additional layer regarding the mythopoetic function of the audiovisual archive; not its classificatory logic, but its emotional grammar.

This is where the narrative structure of cinema becomes critical. The argument is not that narrative simply distorts reality, but that the **narrative act in cinema functions as a force of estrangement**. Before the viewer can engage with the image rationally, they are already immersed in a sensory and affective field that reconfigures perception. The image does not present itself as a document to be examined or verified; it compels the viewer not through factual coherence, but through rhythm, tone, and aesthetic composition.

This structure complicates the possibility of treating moving images as evidence in the traditional juridical sense. Audiovisual material can, of course, function as a document – it records, it registers, it preserves. But it does so through a particular mode of intelligibility: one grounded not in textual *logos*, but in **estrangement**. The cinematic apparatus does not simply inform; it **immerses**. It mobilizes the body before it addresses the intellect, drawing the viewer into a field of affective engagement before any critical distance can be established. When audiovisual media are used in legal or institutional contexts, they are not neutral records awaiting interpretation, but **aesthetic experiences that generate belief through form** – documents that become legible only through rhythm, emotion, and narrative intensity. In this sense, they are not written or constructed in a traditional evidentiary mode; they become documents only through a force of estrangement that invites the viewer – or the legal interpreter – to transform perception into proof.

The rupture, then, is not merely technological (from analog to digital), but ontological and narrative. The cinematic image no longer serves as a mirror of the real; it becomes a medium of affective orchestration, constructing collective memory through emotional geometry rather than factual fidelity. As Sara Ahmed has noted, emotions are not internal states, but relational vectors; they shape the surfaces of bodies, identities, and communities (Ahmed, 2004: 10). In the archive, the image is not



just a trace, but becomes a site of shared affect, binding the social through felt experience.

In this light, the images stored in Colombia's audiovisual archive – particularly those documenting decades of political violence – do not function as neutral records. They are active agents in the production of public memory and historical feeling. Their designation as “documentary evidence” reveals less about their content than about the institutional fantasy that sustains their probatory status. These images do not simply show the past; they perform it, reenact it, and aestheticize it – rendering it legible through forms of suspense, catharsis, and repetition borrowed from cinematic convention.

What emerges is not a record of what happened, but a mythopoetic construction of the real, shaped by the aesthetics of plausibility, the structures of emotional immersion, and the one-dimensional temporality of moving image narrative: in other words, the *Monoform*. In this sense, the archive becomes not merely a machine of visibility, but also a machine of affect and memory, fabricating historical experience through cinematic logic.

The consequence is epistemologically profound: when we accept moving images as evidence, we must also accept the conditions under which they produce belief. And those conditions – far from being neutral – are governed by the very forces of narrative estrangement, emotional saturation, and formal manipulation that define cinema itself.

The mythopoetic force of audiovisual narrative lies in its extraordinary ability to shape collective memory – not merely by representing events, but by giving them emotional form. This power is both captivating and dangerous, particularly when images are treated as legal or historical documents. *Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo* stands as a striking example: a film that exposed how a false televised memory can become embedded in national consciousness.

Today, we are no longer debating whether images preserve an indexical bond to reality – that question lost relevance with the advent of digital media. In the current mediascape, especially with the rise of AI-generated visuals, it no longer matters whether the object depicted ever existed. What matters is **affective plausibility** – the emotional and stylistic coherence that allows an image to be felt and believed.

This is why we must return to a deeper, unresolved question from over a century ago: the narrative palette invented by early filmmakers like Griffith. That elusive geometry – now only beginning to be understood through insights from neuroscience – laid the foundation for what Peter Watkins later termed the *Monoform*: an affect-saturated, rhythmically compressed structure that has come to dominate the global infosphere. And within that terrain, synthetic images are now taking root.²

Appendix: Access to the Film

² I would like to thank Natalia Romero Jaimes for her invaluable work in production, and Diego H. Franco Cárdenas for his contribution to the film's sound and music design. I am also deeply grateful to *Programar Televisión* for granting access to the archive of the *Noticiero de las Siete*, without which this project would not



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To view *Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo* (2023), scan the QR code below or visit the following link: [Chiquinquirá 15 de mayo \(2023\)](#)



have been possible. Special thanks to *El Espectador* for supporting the public release and survey that helped shape the collective dimension of this work.



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