Caso Colosio: Re-examining Historical Narratives

Jessica Wax-Edwards
Royal Holloway University

Over twenty years have passed since the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta, the Priísta[1] candidate for the 1994 Mexican presidential elections. The leading candidate in the presidential race, Colosio was killed on the 23rd March 1994 during a rally in Lomas Taurinas, in the city of Tijuana. The gunman, Mario Aburto Martínez, was arrested at the scene and confessed to the murder. Although the official investigation concluded that Aburto acted alone, public opinion has questioned this simplistic resolution. Such a high-profile and public assassination had not occurred in Mexico since the murder of President

[1] "Priísta" is the adjectival form for Mexico's largest political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Of Mexico's three main political parties, the centrist PRI ruled exclusively for 71 years until the presidential elections of the year 2000, when the centre-right Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN) came to power. The third main political party was formed originally by dissenting centre-leftist members of the PRI and is now known as the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD).

Journal of Languages, Texts, and Society, Vol. 1 (2017), 4–17.

Álvaro Obregón in 1928. The year 1994 was already a tumultuous time given the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional's (EZLN) declaration of war on the State, and the assassination of Colosio had thus left Mexico with an international reputation for instability and violence. The candidate's murder shook the nation and the motivation for the assassination has never been satisfactorily resolved, remaining a topic of contention in the collective public memory. This is evidenced by the plethora of literature and documentaries on the subject such as *El Caso Colosio* (2010), a documentary produced by the Discovery Channel, and Héctor Aguilar Camín's *La Tragedia de Colosio*.

Carlos Bolado's film *Colosio: el asesinato* (2012) returns to this turbulent period. The film re-explores the events at Tijuana under the banner of fiction based on true events, as explained in the title sequence, and casts its own aspersions on who was responsible for the murder of this prominent political figure. Adopting the police thriller genre, the narrative follows detective Andrés Vázquez, who is hired by members of the PRI party to perform a secondary parallel investigation into the Colosio case. As Vázquez's investigation begins to raise questions that contradict official conclusions, witnesses begin to be murdered one after another until Vázquez realises he and his family are also in danger. The film ends in a dramatic and violent climax where Vázquez uncovers a corrupt and intricate political plot to eliminate the candidate that implicates the highest echelons of power in Mexico. This essay will examine the paradox of historical fiction and the often unclear distinction between historical fact and artistic license, as a means of placing *Colosio* in the critical tradition of historiographic metafiction.

Upon its release, *Colosio* reached an audience of 228.5 million, making it the highest grossing Mexican film of 2012 (Ponce). Exhibited the same year as the 2012 presidential elections and exactly eighteen years since the killing, *Colosio* provides the audience with the opportunity to revisit the traumatic events of 1994 and to re-examine this historic moment of political uncertainty when institutional corruption was arguably at its nadir. The film's popularity testifies to the relevance of its subject matter in present-day society, remaining a polemical topic in Mexico. *Colosio* advances the tradition started by Jorge Fons' feature *Rojo amanecer* (1989), which revisited the Tlateloclo

Massacre of October 1968, where Mexican cinema is used as a tool for filling the historical voids of the past. As director Carlos Bolado states, "What is important is for people to know what happened eighteen years ago, to recover our memory" (qtd. in Rodriguez). However, *Colosio*'s innovative approach of portraying a contested and violent historical event using combinations of sundry archival materials, re-enactments, and creative explorations of conspiracy theories tests generic boundaries and provides a productive opportunity to explore the notion of historiographic metafiction.

Historical Narratives

The recounting of history is itself a narrative process. In 1967 Roland Barthes challenged the idea that history constituted a discourse *sui generis*, suggesting that there was no linguistic basis for distinguishing between "factual" and "imaginary" forms of narrative and equally calling into question the impartiality assumed by the historian (Lane 1940: 145). Barthes, examining this notion within the framework of semiology, thus intended to expose the belief that historical representations cannot simply be restricted to referential meanings and that writer and reader alike will also inevitably bestow that meaning. As Barthes, among other theorists, has demonstrated, the process of signification is essential to the practice of historical representation and, with this in mind, historical record cannot be viewed as a discourse based on transcendental or indexical facts. Similarly, in the essay 'Interpretation in History,' historian Hayden White defines an historical narrative as "necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts and at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in narrative" (281). Thus White argues that history and fiction are epistemologically equivalent forms of storytelling. Thus much like the complex relationship between documentary film and its representation of the historical world, historical narratives found in and produced from historical record are equally a representation of reality offering their own interpretations and explanations for the events of the past.

Building on White's metahistorical approach to the process of historiography, Linda Hutcheon (1989) examines the potential of metahistory in fiction, what she terms "historiographic metafiction." For instance, a filmic text such as *Colosio*, which could be generically characterised as historical fiction but advances an alternative historical account alongside a fictionalised narrative, constitutes a historiographic metafiction. According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction differs from the traditional genre of historical fiction because the former "works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction" (2002: 4). By subverting or denying official history, "Historiographic metafiction manages to satisfy such a desire for 'worldly' grounding while at the same time querying the very basis of the authority of that grounding" (2002: 5). Thus while theorists such as Barthes and White emphasise the constructed nature of both fiction and history, Hutcheon emphasises how the intertextuality and self-reflexivity of historiographic metafictional undermines claims of historical veracity in tandem with fictional narratives (2002: 3).

Although Barthes, White, and Hutcheon all refer specifically to written narratives, the conclusions of their arguments can be applied to the filmic medium and its narrative treatment of historical "facts". As Bill Nichols explains when trying to distinguish between documentary and fiction films anchored in a historical reality, "Although fiction films employ elements of realism in the service of their story, the overall relation of film to the world is metaphorical" (115). Nichols' statement infers that documentary film maintains a literal relationship with the world it represents, while fiction film is not constrained by such associations. By embracing White's assertion that history and fiction are analogous, overlapping modes of storytelling, *Colosio* provides an open space for the exploration and reconfiguration of the historical past. Fiction film is not moored in an imaginary universe, but instead remains in dialogue with the "real" world, whilst at the same time forming itself into a new representation of the same historical reality. As such, a historically centred fiction film is not simply a mimetic representation of the world but a supplementary interpretation of a time period or incident that can be viewed alongside all other accounts of events. It is a palimpsest, in that each representation adds a new layer of

interpretation that interacts with former and future versions of history. Equally, a film's reliance on narrative form as a means of proffering its own interpretation of historical events is a recourse that underpins, and, once again, parallels the role of narrative discourse in relation to historical representation. Thus it is important to examine a historically based and politically pertinent fiction film such as *Colosio*, which supplies an interpretation of the changing political contexts that framed the 2000s, Mexico's transition to institutional democracy, and the instances of violence and corruption of the past that continue to impact society's faith in the politics of the present.

Colosio: el asesinato *(2012)*

Colosio is a fictional story "based on real events" and thus, like a historical account, provides a narrative space where interpretation and representation coincide. Bolado's film seeks to represent the events of Colosio's assassination but equally the inadequate explanation of events, to use White's words, and a public distrust of official accounts allow for the film's own interpretation of the Colosio killing. Bolado uses the narrative element of a subsidiary investigation spearheaded by fictional detective character Andrés Vázquez, played by José María Yazpik, to broach the topic. This is coupled with the subsequent focus on his wife Verónica, played by Kate del Castillo. While Vázquez provides a privileged perspective into the results of both the official and subsidiary investigations, Verónica functions as a *vox populi* by providing the perspective of the public, the media, and the conspiracy theorists in her role as a radio presenter. These antagonistic roles are evidenced in a scene featuring Vázquez and Verónica on a stairwell after a doctor's appointment. The couple is trying to conceive but, consumed by the complexity of his investigation, Vázquez has missed the appointment. The couple is framed in close-up using shot/counter shot as they dispute Verónica's radio coverage of the *Colosio* case. Vázquez complains that Verónica has alleged, without proof, on her show that the Aburto held by the authorities is not the same Aburto who committed the murder. The detective's concern is that listeners will believe Verónica's interpretation of events as fact. As such, they may think she is privy to secret information, which might be linked back to his clandestine investigation.

However Verónica's response that, "todo el país piensa que no es el mismo tipo,"[2] highlights the public's own distrust towards the government and any official conclusions offered by those in power. A history of government cover-ups and misreporting, such as the patently fraudulent PRI victory in the 1988 presidential elections or even the government-instigated 1968 student massacre, have resulted in a public critical of official reports presented by the executive power. For instance, in October 1968, a student protest against the hegemonic PRI regime in Mexico was met with violent repression by the government, resulting in hundreds dead.[2] Despite its suppression, this event—known as the Tlatelolco Massacre—continues to influence political culture and directly affected the stability of the ruling government in part due to the emergence of discourses of scrutiny including Elena Poniatowska's *La Noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) that challenged the official representation of events. Similarly, after the Colosio assassination, general public opinion maintained that Aburto did not act alone, and many believed that Colosio's own political party, the PRI, had organised the murder (Orgambides "El asesinato"). Further confusion and suspicion had been aggregated by the presentation of Aburto to the press after his capture. Government officials had shaved and cut Aburto's hair, prompting allegations that he bore no resemblance to the gunman captured on camera after the murder (Oppenheimer 62; Orgambides "Condenado"; Icela Rodríguez and Urrutia; AFP-AP). The suggestion that the true explanation for Colosio's murder remains to be discovered is once again foregrounded in the film.

Apart from Vázquez and Verónica, the film consists predominantly of political figures and events from the year 1994, which form the central elements of the plot. These include characters based on politicians such as Secretary General of the PRI José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, and then-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, to credible but unofficial explanations for the assassination as with the suggestion of an internal

[2] "The whole country thinks that it is not the same guy" (editor's translation).

plot to kill Colosio masterminded by members of his own political party, the PRI. Some journalists publicly argued that only members of the PRI would have had the means to effect such an assassination (Orgambides "Condenado"). It is these plausible explanations for events, which can be labelled neither entirely false nor true, that provide the intrigue of the narrative. Establishing what is "fact" and what is fiction can be problematic, as making this distinction implies that there is one true version of events. However, as previously discussed, to relate history is to relate an interpretation of history. Ergo, no one indexical version of events can exist. Nonetheless, it is these instances where fact and fiction elide that call into question the notion of the "real" and the validity of historical discourse.

The recounting of historical realities through fictional narratives is not uncommon in Mexican cinema, particularly in regards to traumatic or controversial events. Jorge Fons' *Rojo amanecer* (1989), one of Mexico's most influential and potent fiction films of the last 25 years, is a key example of this. *Rojo amanecer* tells the story of a middle-class Mexican family as they witness the day of the Tlatelolco Massacre on 2nd October 1968. The film is shot predominantly within the family apartment, one of many that surround the Plaza de Tlatelolco in Mexico City, and thus locates the family in a central position in order to witness the unravelling of these historical events. Much like *Rojo amanecer* provides a new representation of the events of 2nd October 1968, *Colosio* offers a novel interpretation of the events surrounding the Colosio case. Both films centre on a collectively significant and arguably unresolved event in contemporary Mexican history. While *Rojo amanecer* tackles the trauma of the government-incited attack on the Mexican populace, *Colosio* deals with the brutal assassination of a leading presidential candidate that promised to eradicate institutionalised corruption from within Mexican politics. The repercussions and effects of both these poignant events are never satisfactorily resolved, and thus persist in public memory. Hence, these representations are important because of what they add to the public understanding of the trauma. Both the slaying of Colosio and the massacre of citizens in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas are events characterised by their unexpected levels of violence and the suspicious circumstances that surround their effectuation. Both relate to the

untrustworthy and chary connection of political institutions and constitutionalised power linked to these events. Thus the reasons to broach the events of the 1994 assassination under the protective guise of fiction, much like the approach of *Rojo amanecer*, constitute a framework through which filmmakers and audiences alike can re-explore, discuss, and ideally contend with the issues that permeate the event, as a means of addressing the trauma that it caused and that persist in popular cultural memory.

The point, perhaps, where *Colosio*'s re-examination of the past differs from that of *Rojo amanecer* may be identified through the film's desire to solve the Colosio case. *Rojo amanecer* provides an insight into the way politics and society had polarised different Mexican generations and classes by imagining the effects of the Tlatelolco Massacre on one family. As such, the film supplies a microcosmic version of events. *Colosio*, however, explores an entirely alternative explanation for the historical events it depicts. The official report on the Colosio case, entitled *Informe de la Investigación del Homicidio del Licenciado Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta* and published by the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) concludes that Colosio's murder was planned and completed by Mario Aburto. The report states, "a ninguno de los miembros de esta subprocuraduría nos queda duda de que Mario Aburto Martínez fue el autor material del homicidio del licenciado Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta."[3] However, the supplementary investigation carried out in the film proposes a far more complex and layered conspiracy plot engineered by members of Colosio's own party, the PRI. Although not an implausible scenario, the film's version of events challenges the official historical version of events. Equally, though this explanation differs from that of the approved historical record, it is in keeping with the many conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination such as the alleged involvement of the PRI (Orgambides "El asesinato"). This reworking of history from

[3] "None of the members of this Assistant Attorney General's Office has any doubt that Mario Aburto Martinez was the material author of the murder of Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta" (editor's translation).

within the spatiotemporal dimension inherent to fiction fits closely with Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction as previously defined. Bolado's *Colosio* locates itself within the controversial period of the 1994 presidential electoral race but adds the entirely fictional device of the detective character, Andrés Vázquez, and his family. Vázquez's story allows the filmmakers to arrive at conclusions that oppose the official historical accounts without totally denying them due to the film's classification as fiction.

Also implicated in the notion of historiographic metafiction is the concept of parody. Hutcheon refers to parody not in its eighteenth-century definition of "wit and ridicule" but in its postmodern notion of "contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history" (2002: 91). In *Colosio*, the events of 1994 are reimagined in a way that differs from official accounts of the assassination, however the film questions these "facts" without resultantly rejecting them. Instead the issues of representation are foregrounded. For instance, in a scene featuring Police Commander Torres, head of the official investigation (played by José Sefami), and the character nicknamed El Doctor (played by Daniel Giménez Cacho), it is clear that Torres is not convinced by the simple resolution of the assassination that Aburto acted alone. However, blackmail and pressure from El Doctor result in a subsequent scene where Torres announces to the press that Aburto was the sole participant in this murder. This conclusion given by Torres to the media will thus become the official record of events, however the previous scenes in the film undermine the credibility of this conclusion. This overt suggestion that the official report is a constructed lie clearly suggests the existence of an unconstructed truth and thus further highlights the representational nature of alleged historical facts. As Hutcheon wrote, "The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction […] offers a sense of the presence of the past, but this is a past that can only be known from its texts, its traces—be they literary or historical" (1989: 4). In *Colosio* the audience is confronted with these traces, in the form of official documents, recordings, conspiracy theories, and more; however, the film also challenges the veracity of these materials. The film itself provides yet another interpretation of the events and its self-reflexivity and

intertextual parody work to situate its own historical value on par with the materials it consults and references.

In *Colosio* the examples of moments where fact and fiction are elided into one symbiotic entity are prolific, but the epitomic fusing of these is perhaps most illustrative of historiographic metafiction in the scene where the "true" events of the assassination are revealed. The classic detective story itself can be read as a metaphor for the process of reading or understanding an account of an event (Diemert 1996: 69). The detective character collates facts, re-interpreting them until the true unfolding of events reveals itself. Thus, detective fiction itself, which inherently thematises narrativity, provides a rich illustrative example of metafiction. Coupled with the historical nature of *Colosio*, the film's classification as historiographic metafiction is further evidenced. The entire narrative structure of the film, as is typical of the police thriller genre, builds towards the climactic revelation of how the crime was committed and by whom, the proverbial showing of the cards, and *Colosio* is no different in this sense. Twenty-five minutes from the end of the film, Vázquez presents the conclusion of his investigation to El Licenciado, a character presumed to represent Secretary General José Ruiz Massieu (played by Odiseo Bichir). In this sequence the scene of the assassination is reconstructed in the present timeframe of the diegetic world using members of Vázquez's team, and combined with historical re-enactments of the assassination filmed for the purpose of the narrative. Thus the filmic account is aligned with the original archival footage of the assassination. This palimpsest of narrative and truths merges the fictional and factual elements of the story and subsequently highlights the constructed and interpretive nature of historical discourse. The Greek word *historein*, which forms the etymological root of the word "history," is a transitive verb meaning "to learn by inquiry" (Marincola 40). Thus "history" is defined as a type of investigation. Similarly, the word *historia* in Castellano signifies both history and story. This once again resuscitates the issues of interpretation and perspective that hamper the possibility of an indexical historical account. The recounting of history is a narrative process that contains elements of personal interpretation as a means of explanation. As such, writing history ineluctably implicates the formation of a story.

In the same vein, this sequence of re-enactment in *Colosio* foregrounds the notion of history as performance. The filmic text is both intertemporal and multi-layered. Not only are fiction/reality boundaries blurred but so too are time frames and representations. The revelatory sequence highlights the continued presence of representations within representations, while the use of the *mise-en-abyme* technique once again foregrounds the metafictional quality embodied by *Colosio*. This layering of perspectives and times highlights the many differing opinions and understandings of the crime and the impossibility of reaching one "true" conclusion. While Vázquez explains the events, using his team as the relevant pawns in the re-enactment of the attack, the spectator is privileged with the juxtaposition of visually demonstrative shots depicting the described events related by the detective. For instance, when Vázquez describes to El Licenciado the position of Javier Ortiga, a security officer and representative of the Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN), the camera immediately cuts to a sepia-coloured close-up shot of Ortiga looking through binoculars and features the subtitle "Javier Ortiga, CISEN". Thus the film is able to demarcate visually who Vázquez is referring to and this person's specific role within the narrative. The film then returns to the cooler, white balance of the diegetic present, where Vázquez indicates to Massieu the member of his team representing Ortiga in the re-enactment, shown holding a triangular paper flag with the name "Ortiga" written on it. The performance element of history is thus brought to the fore. Although no one present was in Lomas Taurinas to witness the assassination, the reproduction of events in the forest sequence provides the kind of subjectivity produced by self-witness. As an account of the events, and perhaps even an example of oral history, the re-enactment provided by Vázquez is first a representation of the assassination that in turn re-creates the event and finally allows the event to be seen in a different way; the re-enactment thus arguably mobilises new ways of seeing the assassination. It is thus clear that *Colosio*'s use of multi-layered and intertemporal representations can itself be read as a thematising of narrativity. The constructed nature of historical discourse is continually brought to the fore in the film and is itself a central theme within the narrative. Equally, the text's classification as a historiographic

metafiction—and particularly the notion of parody—implicate the ongoing need for the nation to contend with the past in the present. Hence, it is through a parodic reworking of history that a fictional narrative can establish an informed dialogue with the past. *Colosio* blurs the boundaries of truth and fiction but in turn creates novel interpretations of the events of the Colosio assassination. The film re-creates these historical events in order for them to be re-seen from a different perspective, both within the diegetic world of the narrative and in the present day. In *Colosio* the key events of 1994 remain unchanged: Colosio is assassinated, the government concludes Aburto acted alone, and Ruiz Massieu is later murdered in his car. It is, however, the explanations for these events, which differ from formal historical record, that provide new and illuminating interpretations.

Colosio is a prominent example of the continuing presence of a Mexican visual culture that seeks to represent the corruption and violence that has characterised national politics since the Mexican revolution. The film provides compelling insights into the functioning of elite power under PRI governance and elucidates the similarities between the regimes of the past and present. Through its innovative approach to history, the text constitutes an interesting exemplar of Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction. Historical research is often compared to detective work and the film's treatment of events uses the generic tropes of police procedural to explore such a sensitive and contested historical event. More than twenty years on from the violent and public killing of Colosio, the assassination still remains an important part of both Mexico's collective memory and, equally, a mirror to the nation's current crisis. Despite the re-election of the PRI to executive power in the year 2012, Bolado's film indicates the continued public disillusionment with complex and opaque systems of power that characterised 71 years of PRI rule. The allusions to the growing levels of violence in Mexico since Colosio's murder, as highlighted in Bolado's *Colosio*, implicate the ongoing failure of the government to abolish corruption and the haunting presence of the party politics of the past.

WORKS CITED

AFP-AP. "Hubo complot contra Colosio." *El Tiempo* [Bogotá, Colombia], 29 Mar. 1994, www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-88273. Accessed 16 Nov. 2016.

Camín, Héctor Aguilar. *La tragedia de Colosio*. Alfaguara, 2004.

Colosio: el asesinato. Directed by Carlos Bolado, Udachi Productions and Alebrije Cine y Video, 2012.

Diemert, Brian. *Graham Greene's Thrillers and the 1930s*. McGill-Queen's UP, 1996.

El caso Colosio. Directed by Alan Tomlinson, Discovery Channel, 2010.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic Metafiction Parody and the Intertextuality of History." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, edited by P. O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis, Johns Hopkins UP, 1989, pp. 3-32.

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Routledge, 2002.

Icela Rodríguez, Rosa, and Alonso Urrutia. "Cárdenas: las pruebas contra el ex funcionario, públicas, no personales." *La Jornada* [Mexico City, Mexico], 10 Jun. 1997, www.jornada.unam.mx/1997/06/10/cardenas.html. Accessed 16 Nov. 2016.

Informe de la Investigación del Homicidio del Licenciado Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta. Procuraduría General de la República, 2000.

Lane, Michael. *Structuralism: A Reader*. Jonathan Cape, 1940.

Marincola, John. *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*. John Wiley and Sons, 2009.

Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality*. Indiana UP, 1991.

Oppenheimer, Andres. *Bordering on Chaos: Mexico's Roller-coaster Journey toward Prosperity*. Little Brown, 1996.

Orgambides, Fernando. "Condenado a 42 años el asesino de Colosio, candidato del PRI a la presidencia de México." *El País* [Madrid, Spain], 1 Nov. 1994, www.elpais.com/diario/1994/11/01/internacional/783644407_850215.html. Accessed 16 Nov. 2016.

Orgambides, Fernando. "El asesinato de Colosio fue un compló organizado por miembros del PRI." *El País* [Madrid, Spain], 5 Apr. 1994, www.elpais.com/diario/1994/04/05/internacional/765496815_850215.html. Accessed 16 Nov. 2016.

Ponce, Armando. "'Colosio. El asesinato", la película mexicana más taquillera en 2012: Canacine', *Proceso* [Mexico City, Mexico], 12 April 2013, www.proceso.com.mx/338852/colosio-el-asesinato-la-pelicula-mexicana-mas-taquillera-en-2012-canacine. Accessed 16 Nov. 2016.

Rodriguez, Olga R. "Films Highlight Mexico's Dark Political Past." *Miami Herald*, 14 Jun. 2012.

Rojo amanecer. Directed by Jorge Fons, Cinematográfica Sol, 1989.

White, Hayden. "Interpretation in History." *New Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1973, pp. 281-314.