Documentary Film and Enlightenment

A UNIQUE FORM OF SOCIAL CRITIQUE

"I don't think I'm capable of answering problems that have been here for many years. But I think the best I can do is present them in a way where one wants to solve these problems."

Charles Burnett

"NIÑOS DE LA MEMORIA"

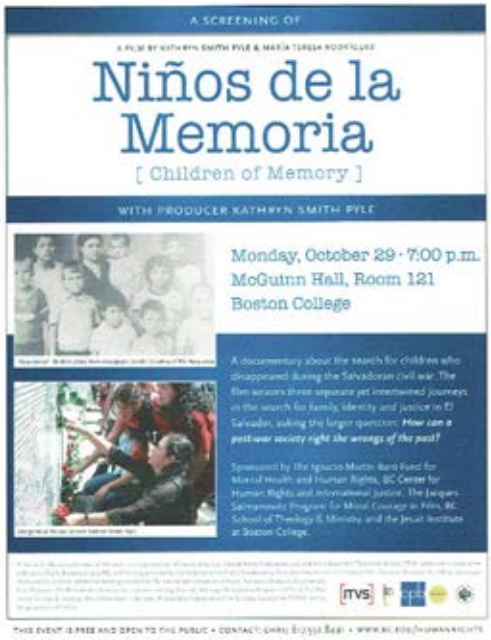

Fig. 1: Niños Poster

I'm a documentary filmmaker, interested in relationships between individuals, families, communities, institutions, and government. I like to explore the policies that impact people and communities due to race, class, and gender. I strive to create films where the people impacted are at the heart of the story, sharing their experience as witnesses and actors.

In 2007 I was working in El Salvador for the Inter-American Foundation (IAF), a U.S. government foreign assistance agency that makes grants to low-income communities for economic development projects. I had been at the IAF for more than a decade, working in various Latin American countries that had been dictatorships, responsible for the murder of tens of thousands of people. There was no accountability for those crimes and the defeated opposition was called "communists," further weakening attempts to challenge the perpetrators.

In El Salvador I learned about Pro-Búsqueda, a project that tracks down children who survived massacres carried out by the army during the civil war of the 1980s. Many were sold by army officers into international adoption. The project was reuniting the children, now adults, with surviving family members – and collecting testimony implicating the officers. The innocent children couldn't be dismissed as "communists". Pro-Búsqueda has located 469 children to date.

STORIES THAT CAN TOUCH VIEWERS

I thought a documentary film about the children – told by the children and the families – would not only educate people about this history, but would touch viewers in a way that only film can; that would motivate them to support efforts underway to bring justice.

This is a key assumption of the kind of "social issue" films that I admire. The notion that people absorb more about an issue from personal stories than from expert testimony or didactic material; and when the stories are told by the people affected by the issue, audiences become emotionally engaged.

This approach is most appropriate to documentary films. But Charles Burnett directs primarily narratives, not documentaries. Like his best-known film, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), they are grounded in a particular culture: the Black working class community in Los Angeles where Burnett is from. The compelling "fictional" story and characters represent the real economic and social circumstances created by larger historical and political forces.

“Social issue documentaries” have created a space within the film industry to consider societal problems, a unique form of social critique that can give voice and a face to the people impacted by the problems as well as the individuals and organizations confronting them. In this article, a woman who became a filmmaker in 2007 and this year, at age 80, is premiering her first feature length documentary as director, traces the elements of her current film in her previous work.

I left my job at the IAF and partnered, as producer, with director-producer María Teresa Rodríguez, to make *Niños de la Memoria* (2012, 64 minutes) with support from Sundance Documentary Fund, the World Institute of Peace, Latino Public Broadcasting, and others. It was broadcast on PBS, screened in many festivals in the US and Latin America, and is distributed by Women Make Movies. I attended post- screening discussions at colleges and met Salvadoran-American students. Many told me that they didn't learn this history from school or their parents. Some were deeply affected and wanted to help reunite the children. I believe the film contributed to a new wave of accountability in the region.

Fig. 2: Niños Margaret at wall

“We know that the history of documentary specifically was an instrument of the colonizing project. How do we become self-aware of our own interactions in our own communities and also venture out from them?”

Jocelyn Barnes

FARM LABOR

Fig. 3: Poster Farm Labor

My work in El Salvador helped me understand the roots of migration to the U.S. The beneficiaries of the IAF economic development grants were impoverished people who wanted to provide for their families but had no opportunities outside these development projects. The scores of IAF-supported projects couldn't meet the need. Migrating to the U.S. was the only economic option, especially for those threatened by gang violence. U.S. immigration policies hadn't kept up with the pleas for asylum or the U.S. demand for workers, so migration was overwhelmingly illegal.

Comprehensive immigration reform had been considered in Congress but failed to garner enough support from conservative lawmakers to pass. *Border South* (2019), a film I supported as a consulting producer, addresses the U.S.-Mexico pact that is part of the problem. “To stem the immigration tide, Mexico and the U.S. collaborate to crack down on migrants, forcing them into ever more dangerous territory” (Border South, 2019).

EFFECTIVE IN REACHING POLICY MAKERS

I was inspired by this struggle to create *Farm Labor* (2013), a website-based project with two short films *Farm Labor* and *Apple Forecast*, and directed to conservative lawmakers – because without their support no immigration reform bill will pass. Personal stories, from people who were in the very center of the debate, would be most effective in reaching policy makers.

Most conservative lawmakers are from rural areas. Small businesses like family farms are an important part of rural economies, and the vast majority of farm workers are undocumented immigrants.

I decided to focus on the apple industry: harvesting apples is simple and very visual, and apples have an innate appeal. The fruit growing region is not far from where I live, making multiple production trips feasible. I grew up there so I understood the economy, the people, and the complicated migrant labor history; and I am personally invested in the issues.

The Farm Labor and *Apple Forecast* films pair farm owners with their immigrant workers to show how essential the workers are and present them as part of a community with "family values" (a stated priority for conservative lawmakers).

JUST A FEW MINUTES TO GRASP THE CORE ISSUE

Both films are under five minutes long; I was told that politicians could not make time for anything longer. That was the primary challenge: to present people in a way that allowed viewers to connect with them and at the same time grasp the core issues, in just a few minutes.

I partnered with two national organizations that reach conservative policy makers. Impact was simply getting the films and website in front of the policy makers, and the project was very successful in that. The assumption was that the content would influence them to support reform.

I planned this as ongoing project, with more short films and more partners. That changed in 2016: The Republican party shut down all debate on reform by its members and blocked a bipartisan reform proposal then and again in 2024. Conservatives who favor reform were silenced. *Farm Labor* has been on hold since then.

Author |

Kathryn Smith Pyle, Director and Producer, just finished directing and producing the documentary film Sorority Story (2025) and co-produced the documentary film Niños de la Memoria/ Children of Memory (2012), she is also director-producer of Farm Labor (2013), and is a consulting producer for Border South (2019) and Almost Sunrise (2016)

kathryn.pyleg09@gmail.com

"Documentary, nonfiction, or experimental cinema, whatever you want to call it, does not simply record what happens; it disrupts, reframes, and expands the ways we understand history and presence, voice and form. It is not a static reflection of reality."

Sky Hopinka

SORORITY STORY

Fig. 4: Poster Sorority Story

In 2013, I read about a group of young women at the University of Alabama who publicly denounced acts of racial discrimination in their white sororities. The sororities called the women liars and a media frenzy ensued. It became a national issue.

The white Greek-letter college sororities, founded in 1870, claim six million student and alumni members, including top political, business, and professional leaders. The sororities attribute this post-college success to the fact that the white sororities dominate campus leadership positions, and their alumni networks help members parley that experience into powerful jobs post-graduation. The "white Greek" system includes sororities and fraternities. Since the film is based, for various reasons including simplicity, on the sorority story, the fraternities are largely excluded.

IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

The sororities' racial exclusion blocks those opportunities for Black women and impacts Black communities. I'd studied institutional racism and I thought the sororities could be an effective vehicle to show its impact. "Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism" (Ture/Hamilton 1967, p. 20).

I set out to tell the story through the young women who caused the sorority scandal at the U. of Alabama. I thought it would be structured as an investigation, with my personal story mirroring it. I belonged to a sorority in 1966 at Gettysburg College that discriminated against a Black woman. I quit the sorority but didn't speak out. The 2013 incident at U.A. presented an opportunity to revisit the 1966 event.

But while making the film, an openly racist government was elected and Black Lives Matter exploded. Prodded by these circumstances, I dug deeper into my own family history and found the same racist structures represented by the sororities. My personal journey became the structure for the film.

I found the woman my sorority discriminated against and she became an unexpected partner. An anonymous source led me to a historian whose research explained how the white sororities can evade the civil rights laws banning segregation.

EXPOSE RACIST DISCRIMINATION

Sorority Story was finished this year. The goal of the film is not to "integrate" the white sororities – to force them to stop discriminating against Black women. Our goal is to contribute to the ongoing debate about the role of the white Greeks on campus, taking into account their racial discrimination. *Sorority Story* provides new information for that debate.

The target audience is within academia but we'll also reach out to high school students; families of college students; people concerned about racism; college towns concerned with public safety issues. We'll organize public and private screenings and discussions and use social media. We'll begin in Philadelphia as an in-person pilot for a national program that will depend primarily on a distributor and written materials.

Sorority Story has allowed me to more directly explore the larger social, political, and economic context behind the social issues addressed in my previous film projects. The film addresses some of the most urgent problems in the U.S. today: racial discrimination; misogyny; the debate about the value and purpose of higher education; and the misinformation put forth by the current government.

Sorority Story was supported by the Independence Foundation Fellowship in the Arts, Leeway Foundation, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Endowment Fund of The Philadelphia Foundation, Philadelphia Independent Media Finishing Funds at Scribe Video Center, Waterman II Fund of The Philadelphia Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and Women Make Movies Production Assistance Program.

PRESERVING PRINCIPLES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Looking back at the films presented here, I believe the following points can be made to highlight the contribution of documentary films to preserving and enforcing the principles of the Enlightenment:

Documentary films can certainly contribute to exposing violations of essential Enlightenment elements by providing objective information. This could include examples of racism, misogyny, denial of participation, and failure to uphold legal rights.

However, this approach is enhanced when the cinematic narrative is personalized. The fate of specific individuals (victims and perpetrators) not only makes the damage they suffered more vivid and tangible, but also touches the viewer emotionally. In addition, the cinematic narrative gains legitimacy: it is not the filmmaker who tells the story from their perspective and from their distance from the events, but those directly affected who authentically describe their experiences and feelings. In *Sorority Story*, the filmmaker is a first-person narrator among the participants, illustrating documentary film's use of constructed reality.

Personalization also has the added advantage of making abstract institutional structures visible in individual fates. They thus enable a look behind the scenes and reveal the dialectic between the individual and the institution.

Finally, this concept of documentary film also leads the authors of the films to adopt a reflexive attitude toward themselves and their understanding of Enlightenment principles or lack thereof. Questions then arise as to where one was a follower or a bystander, or where one actively opposed the violation of Enlightenment, i.e., with cinematic means and with what intention.

Ultimately, documentary film in this social-critical understanding offers itself as an extremely efficient educational medium that may be able to reach audiences who tend to accept the damage to Enlightenment principles or do not even perceive it in the first place.

Literatur |

Asociación Pro-Búsqueda. Official Site (2024): https://www.asociacionpro-busqueda.org/en, last accessed on 07.07.2025

Barnes, J.: Interview with IndieWire Influencers, Fall 2021 Profiles. Indiewire.com 2021. https://www.indiewire.com/influencers/joslyn-barnes-danny-glover/, last accessed on 07.04. 2025

Border South/Frontera Sur (2019), directed by Raul Paz Pastrana: https://bordersouth-film.com, last accessed on 07.04.2025

Burnett, Ch.: Director, Killer of Sheep (1977). See: UCLA Library, https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/la-rebellion/charles-burnett

Farm Labor. An independent documentary film project in support of comprehensive immigration reform. http://www.farmlabor-film.com, last accessed on 07.04.2025

Hopinka, S. (2025): http://www.skyhopinka.com/wecould. In: SEEN, Spring 2025 Issue 008, p. 53. https://www.blackstarfest.org/seen/; Sky Hopinka see also http://www.skyhopinka.com/wecould, last accessed on 07.06.2025

Niños de la Memoria/Children of Memory (2012). See: https://itvs.org/films/ninos-de-la-memoria/

Sorority Story (2025): Sorority Story page on the website of Women Make Movies. https://www.wmm.com/sponsored-project/sorority-story/, last accessed on 07.05.2025

Ture, K. (formerly Stokely Carmichel)/Hamilton, Ch. V.: Black Power. The Politics of Liberation in America. New York 1967 [1992]. See: https://mygaryislike.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/black-power-kwame-ture-and-charles-hamilton.pdf