

Documentary *Vuelvo donde nunca estuve* as alternate temporalities for Selknam territories.

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Abstract

Documentary cinema is an artistic medium that enables the presentation of factual events from the author's own perspective. This is where storytelling becomes crucial, as the filmmaker must convey an idea to the viewer in such a way that the audience receives, processes, and reflects upon it. Recently, the standardization of the creative process in documentary filmmaking has resulted in productions that follow a fixed narrative pattern, primarily based on a neutral recounting of events within a linear timeframe (before and after). Streaming platforms are now flooded with standardized documentaries featuring true crime, reality television, world travel, and nature observation. Within this universe of standardized productions, documentaries breaking from this norm are rare, often independently produced on smaller budgets. One such example is the documentary *Vuelvo donde nunca estuve* ("Returning Where I Have Never Been"), which I co-directed with journalist Constanza Vásquez Palau. The film documents the journey of a young woman from the Selk'nam People who returns to live in her ancestral territory in Tierra del Fuego, Chilean Patagonia, over a hundred years after the genocide perpetrated against her people by European settlers. This essay is a reflection on the temporal patterns employed in the documentary's scriptwriting, in which the concepts of "before" and "after" blur into a layering of historical events that accumulate within the same physical space, sharing a non-linear temporality. My background as an architect specialized in heritage provides unique tools for documentary filmmaking, allowing me to analyse the physical spaces where the protagonist's actions unfold, and to draw historical and contextual information essential for writing the script. Ultimately, the script evolved into a collage of events occurring in different periods but within the same physical space, challenging linear temporality through non-linear storytelling. The protagonist's worldview, deeply influenced by her indigenous ancestors, gradually permeated the production, becoming an integral part of the script itself.

Keywords

Documentary filmmaking; Non-linear storytelling; Indigenous heritage; Temporal narratives; Chilean Patagonia.

1 - Introduction

In recent years, documentary cinema has increasingly converged with spatial practices, archival ethics, and decolonial critique, challenging linear histories and aesthetic conventions by foregrounding embodied memory, multisensoriality, and the performative nature of place-making. Within this expanded field, film becomes not only a medium of storytelling but a method

of investigation and a site of epistemic tension. Situated at the intersection of these practices, the documentary "Returning Where I Have Never Been" (2025) offers a powerful case study for analysing how moving images can mediate historical trauma, contested territorialities, and indigenous presence through non-linear narrative strategies and spatial montage.

Chilean Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego in particular, remains one of the most charged and violently erased territories in the Chilean national imaginary. It has long been depicted through aesthetic paradigms of untouched wilderness, heroic exploration, or ethnographic distance, shaped by tourism discourse and extractive imaginaries. These representations often efface the region's colonial and genocidal past, particularly the systemic violence committed against the Selk'nam People during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which was carried out through land dispossession, forced assimilation, and visual manipulation.

This article discusses "Returning Where I Have Never Been" as a cinematic and architectural counter-narrative that intervenes in these dominant framings by enacting a return—not only of a young Selk'nam woman to her ancestral territory, but also of layered histories, embodied griefs, and speculative futures. The return depicted is both physical and epistemic: it involves walking ancestral routes, revisiting erased sites, and reviving silenced stories through embodied gesture and visual resonance. As such, the film operates as a site-specific archive, assembled not only through institutional research but through affective mappings and intergenerational memory.

Drawing from the author's dual training in architecture and heritage studies, the article examines how the film performs temporality and spatial memory through three intertwined strategies: montage as temporal palimpsest, site-based cinematography as spatial testimony, and the ethical interplay of archival materials. Rather than constructing a linear historical account, the film's structure weaves together scenes from different temporalities and positionalities, ancestral, contemporary, institutional, and personal—collapsing the distance between past and present. This montage methodology echoes the cinematic strategies of "third cinema" and "essay film" traditions that foreground voice, absence, and reappropriated images.

Crucially, the discussion is grounded in the lived process of filmmaking, which involved investigative work in Salesian archives, collaborative memory reconstruction with members of the Selk'nam community, and critical decisions about image selection and authorship. The documentary resists the ethnographic fetishisation that has historically framed Selk'nam representations by exposing the constructed nature of colonial photographs, staging visual counterpoints, and privileging situated testimony over visual spectacle. In doing so, it invites a reflection on the politics of seeing, the violence of visual archives, and the possibility of reclaiming visual sovereignty through collaborative practices.

By situating "Returning Where I Have Never Been" within this broader field of spatial, archival, and decolonial cinematic practices, the article proposes that the film functions not only as a narrative of return but as a speculative act of spatial justice. Through its layered temporalities and embodied re-inscriptions, the documentary contributes to a pluriversal cartography of memory in Tierra del Fuego—one that resists closure, honours survivance, and reclaims the right to narrate from within.

2. Background: Documentary Form and Indigenous Representation

Documentary cinema has long been dominated by conventions of linear narration, chronological sequencing, and the presumption of objectivity. Rooted in Eurocentric historiographic traditions, these conventions often reaffirm notions of historical closure and rational progression, privileging voice-over narration, archival authority, and evidentiary realism. In contrast, Indigenous epistemologies frequently operate through cyclical, layered, or relational conceptions of time and space, prioritising oral transmission, embodied memory, and multispecies entanglement (Escobar et al., 2024). These divergent frameworks produce significant tensions in how Indigenous histories are represented—or misrepresented—within mainstream visual culture.

“Returning Where I Have Never Been” subverts these dominant conventions by adopting a non-linear and speculative documentary form, one that resonates more closely with alternate temporalities and with affective, place-based modes of knowing. Rather than constructing a unified historical narrative, the film weaves together fragments of memory, archival traces, and speculative re-imaginings. This aesthetic and narrative strategy destabilises the colonial logic of disappearance that has long shaped the visual representation of Selk’nam People, whose portrayals have historically oscillated between ethnographic fascination and tragic extinction.

The documentary’s structure is articulated through three intertwined visual threads that correspond to distinct temporalities and epistemic modes:



Figure 1. The contemporary journey of Fernanda, the protagonist, is filmed in vibrant colour and follows her physical and affective return to Tierra del Fuego. This thread documents her traversal of historically significant sites, ranging from Punta Arenas to Estancia San Sebastián, mirroring the forced displacement of her great-grandfather a century earlier. These contemplative sequences engage the landscape as a palimpsest of unresolved violence and as a witness to intergenerational survival.



Figure 2. The archival reconstruction of her great-grandfather's trajectory is represented in desaturated black and white, visually echoing the aesthetics of historical photography and silent film. Here, the filmmakers juxtapose legal excerpts from an historic trial documenting the forced relocation and child separation of Selk'nam families with imagined visual re-enactments. This thread

constitutes a speculative archival montage, pieced together through the research process, oral history, and a politics of inference. Its muted palette and textual overlays mark a rupture with conventional documentary realism, highlighting the absence of visual records and the violence of historical erasure.



Figure 3. The performative “thought-room” serves as a third, meta-narrative layer. In this space, Fernanda engages in situated reflection, positioned in front of a blank wall where projected images of Selk’nam landscapes and colonial footage such as the films of the Salesian priest Agostini. This segment is where the film becomes explicitly self-reflexive, questioning not only what is seen

but how it is seen and by whom. The wall becomes a symbolic screen onto which contested memories are cast, while Fernanda’s voice-over introduces an indigenous counter-narration that unsettles colonial spectacle. These moments of visual interaction serve as acts of “reclamation,” not of authenticity *per se*, but of interpretive agency and temporal co-presence.

Together, these three threads create a complex temporal braid that resists teleology. Instead of a linear trajectory from past to present, the film foregrounds a form of “historical layering” where times coexist, echo, and haunt one another. This approach aligns with what Haraway (2016) might describe as “staying with the trouble” inhabiting unresolved inheritances rather than resolving them into tidy narratives. Similarly, it resonates with Candace Fujikane’s (2021) notion of “relational abundance”, in which Indigenous cartographies do not map disappearance but continuity, kinship, and territorial presence.

By structuring the film as a layered and performative cartography, “Returning Where I Have Never Been” challenges the aesthetic conventions and epistemological assumptions of the documentary genre itself. It becomes not just a story *about return*, but a *spatial practice that enacts return through multisensory, temporal, and intergenerational encounter*.

3. Flag and Thread: Tracing Continuity through Material Memory

One of the most emotionally and politically resonant discoveries within the making of “Returning Where I Have Never Been” is the recovery and reactivation of a Selk’nam flag crafted by girls held in the Dawson Island Salesian mission. According to oral testimony gathered during the production of the film, this flag represented the ancestry of the girls who wove it, incorporating colour and motif choices that encoded familial and territorial memory.

During Catholic mass, the flag was placed near the altar, a site of imposed Christian ritual, but the girls appropriated this setting for their own spiritual purposes. They would secretly direct their prayers not to the Catholic saints but to their Selk’nam ancestors, using the flag as an intercessory object. This intimate act of resistance, nested within the daily structure of forced religious indoctrination, reveals the persistent negotiation of spiritual autonomy even under conditions of institutional violence and cultural suppression.

The rediscovery and current ceremonial use of this same flag, unfolded, repaired, and mobilised in present-day gatherings, carries a powerful temporal charge. It functions not merely as a historic object but as what Marianne Hirsch (2012) might describe in the context of *postmemory: an artefact that bridges lived and inherited memory, reactivating narratives that official archives sought to silence. In this sense, the flag disrupts the linear temporality of colonial museology, which often seeks to fix Indigenous objects in the past, extracting them from their relational and ritual life*.

From a theoretical standpoint, the flag can be understood as a material witness, a concept explored by Susan Schuppli (2020) to describe objects that carry and transmit traces of violence, environmental degradation, or human rights violations. In this context, the flag bears the imprint not only of individual memory but of structural trauma—an embodied archive of both survival and defiance. Simultaneously, it might be read as a decolonial artefact that resists museal containment and reclaims its epistemic autonomy when activated in community contexts. This resonates with the work of scholars like Walter Mignolo (2011), who argues that decolonial objects and performances constitute forms of epistemic disobedience, enabling alternative modes of narrating history that do not rely on Western archival authority.

Importantly, the materiality of the flag, its textile form, its threadwork, its colour, also evokes Indigenous women’s knowledge practices and the politics of care. Weaving has long been recognised across Indigenous cultures in South America as a medium for encoding genealogies, cosmologies, and territorial relations (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012). In this case, the threads do not merely signify continuity; they perform it. The act of reweaving or unfurling the flag in present-day ceremonies stitches together a broken history, quite literally connecting generations across a century of attempted erasure.

By centring this flag within the narrative structure of the film, “Returning Where I Have Never Been” reframes the archive not as a static repository but as a living fabric. The flag does not serve as an illustrative prop but as a protagonist in its own right—an active agent

in the reconstitution of memory and community. Its journey from missionary storage box to ceremonial use on Selk’nam territory reflects the film’s broader strategy of tracing counter-geographies of memory, wherein material culture enacts a return not only to land but to relational ways of knowing and honouring the past.

4. Archive, Absence, and Speculative Imagination

A second pillar of the documentary’s narrative structure is its creative engagement with audiovisual archives, specifically, footage from Salesian missions in Argentina that closely resembled the Dawson Island mission. These historical recordings, though not directly linked to the protagonist’s family or the exact Chilean context, are visually and thematically proximate. They depict Indigenous girls weaving in enclosed missionary settings, their hands repeating the motions of textile creation under surveillance. Though fragmentary and displaced, these sequences allow the filmmakers to construct a speculative visual bridge between what is known, what is imagined, and what has been erased.

Rather than deploying these images as illustrative “evidence” in the positivist sense, the filmmakers treat them as affective and mnemonic cues, enabling a form of visual continuity that extends beyond factual precision. This gesture is part of a broader cinematic strategy in “Returning Where I Have Never Been” that privileges emotional resonance, temporal layering, and embodied speculation as tools of historical reparation. The archival footage is not used to confirm or authenticate a past event; rather, it functions to re-inhabit a silenced possibility, to animate gestures that might have belonged to Fernanda’s ancestors and which still resonate in her own corporeal memory.

This speculative use of the archive aligns with what Tina Campt (2017) terms an aesthetics of reparation, a mode of engaging with visual traces that does not seek to restore a complete or transparent past, but to listen to the quiet frequencies of refusal, endurance, and presence within images that have been historically muted. Campt’s work invites viewers and artists alike to attune themselves to what she calls the felt sound of the image, the vibrations of experience that persist

even in stillness or partial visibility. In this sense, the documentary’s archival sequences do not speak in declarative statements; they hum, reverberate, and suggest.

By juxtaposing these Salesian images with present-day footage of Fernanda re-tracing her great-grandfather’s journey, the film constructs a dialogical space where the past does not simply precede the present but inhabits it, re-emerging through gestures, landscapes, and spatial overlaps. The archival absence is met not with closure, but with a deliberate openness to narrative fabrication. This is not fiction in the conventional sense, but a speculative historiography rooted in testimony, intuition, and the ethical imperative to refuse erasure.

In doing so, the film situates itself within a tradition of decolonial cinematic practice that interrogates the truth-claims of the archive and instead proposes what Ariella Azoulay (2019) calls potential histories, histories that could have been, that still may be, and that resist the foreclosure imposed by colonial documentation regimes. The speculative element becomes not an escape from truth, but a method for accessing suppressed or structurally impossible truths, particularly for Indigenous communities whose visual archives have been fragmented, curated, and exploited by missionary and colonial institutions.

The decision to reinsert these gestures, girls weaving, hands moving rhythmically, cloth taking form, into the visual narrative of “Returning Where I Have Never Been” thus constitutes both an act of cinematic conjecture and political reclamation. It allows for the reactivation of embodied knowledge, showing how seemingly minor visual acts can participate in larger genealogies of memory, resistance, and survival. In the face of archival absence, the filmmakers opt for a poetics of relational imagination, wherein history is not retrieved as a fixed account but approached as a layered, reparative, and ongoing process.



Figure 4.

5. Reenactment and Spatial Memory: Walking the Great-grandfather's Route

The documentary stages a contemplative reenactment: Fernanda walks the same route her great-grandfather was forced to follow over 100 years earlier, from San Sebastián Estate to the port of Punta Arenas. Along the way, layers of history are reactivated by proximity: the landscapes of Tierra del Fuego remain largely unchanged, while urban Punta Arenas has transformed, offering friction between memory and present-day materialities.

The reverse journey, Fernanda departing from Santiago, her ancestor from the south, symbolically converges in the Strait of Magellan, a physical and narrative crossing. This mirrored structure prompts reflection on indigenous displacement and return as spatial practices.

6. Montage and Narrative Inversion

At the structural core of "Returning Where I Have Never Been" lies a deliberate use of temporal inversion and non-linear montage that challenges conventional

storytelling forms. The film weaves together two narrative strands: History A, the contemporary journey of Fernanda across the landscapes once inhabited by her Selk'nam ancestors, and History B, the archival reconstruction of her great-grandfather's path. These two trajectories unfold in visual and temporal dialogue, intersecting at the geographic threshold of the Strait of Magellan before diverging once more.

The editing decisions—juxtaposing colour and black-and-white footage, varying paces, and interspersing text fragments—serve as more than aesthetic devices. They become spatial and mnemonic tools, mapping relationships between historical violence, archival erasure, and embodied memory. This montage operates in the spirit of what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991) has described as "decolonial montage": an editing practice that deliberately interrupts narrative flow, avoids explanatory closure, and foregrounds the constructedness of the image. In this sense, montage is not merely a sequencing technique but a method of critical spatial storytelling,



Figure 5.

allowing dissonance, resonance, and multiplicity to co-exist within the frame.

The visual contrast between the two narrative strands reinforces this multiplicity: Fernanda's footage is in saturated colour, filmed with handheld immediacy, evoking a sense of presence and embodied witnessing. In contrast, the history of her ancestor unfolds in desaturated black and white, overlaid with onscreen excerpts from legal documents and testimonies. This formal choice not only reflects the limitations of the archival gaze but also critiques it. The viewer is made acutely aware that the story of History B is reconstructed from partial, institutional, and colonial records, never fully accessible or recoverable.

The point of convergence between the two stories—the encounter at the Strait of Magellan—functions less as a climax and more as a rupture, emphasising the unbridgeable gap between lived experience and historical record, between personal grief and bureaucratic text. The divergence that follows is not a failure of reunification, but a statement on the ethics of representing loss: the film refuses to claim what cannot be known, instead leaving space for affective presence and speculative reverberation.

In doing so, "Returning Where I Have Never Been" subverts the classic documentary impulse toward resolution and coherence. It foregrounds what Saidiya Hartman (2008) terms the "afterlife of slavery", or in this case, the afterlife of genocide, as a structure of feeling, a temporal haunting that remains unresolved, yet must be addressed. Montage, in this context, becomes a decolonial apparatus: a way of seeing, sensing, and narrating the unspeakable through visual disjunction, repetition, and spatial memory.

7. Visual Ethics and the Fetishism of the Indigenous Image

One of the most ethically and politically charged decisions in the making of "Returning Where I Have Never Been" was the filmmakers' explicit rejection of the iconic photographs taken by the missionary ethnographer Martin Gusinde. These images—widely

disseminated and often reproduced as canonical depictions of the Selk'nam people—were in fact constructed through a performative and extractive logic. Gusinde, arriving in Tierra del Fuego in the 1920s, encountered a population already deeply affected by colonisation and forced assimilation. To create what he perceived as "authentic" documentation, he instructed Selk'nam individuals to "dress up" as their ancestral selves, staging ritual performances and body paintings for the camera (Gusinde, 2002). These images, though ethnographically significant, are imbued with layers of colonial desire and reconstruction, transforming living subjects into museumised artefacts.

The documentary critiques this visual regime not only in its script and interviews but also through its visual grammar. Instead of relying on the Gusinde corpus, the filmmakers turn to the lesser-known photographs of Lucas Bridges, an Anglo-Argentine settler who, unlike Gusinde, formed long-term relationships with Selk'nam individuals and photographed them in everyday contexts. These images lack the theatricality and exoticism of Gusinde's compositions and are, in many cases, taken in domestic or informal settings, allowing for a visual proximity and relational ethics absent in missionary iconography.

This visual substitution is not merely aesthetic; it is a gesture of refusal and re-inscription. By privileging the images of Bridges and rejecting Gusinde's, the film undermines the dominant visual canon that has long exoticised Selk'nam bodies and turned their culture into a consumable spectacle. It stages a counter-archive that prioritises intimacy, familiarity, and self-determination, aligning with current debates in Indigenous media about visual sovereignty (Raheja, 2010) and the right to control one's image and its circulation.

Moreover, the inaccessibility of Gusinde's photographs due to copyright restrictions becomes part of the film's political commentary. The rights to the images are currently held by the European publisher Seix Barral, who charges 600 euros per image for use—an amount far beyond the reach of an independent, publicly funded production. This economic barrier, embedded

in transnational copyright regimes, serves as a material reminder of ongoing colonial property logics: the visual representation of an Indigenous people remains locked behind paywalls and corporate ownership, largely inaccessible to the very communities depicted.

The film thus uses absence as a tool of critique. Rather than reproducing Gusinde's images with a critical caption or overlay, it chooses not to reproduce them at all, allowing the silence to speak to the violence of extraction and the persistence of colonial control over Indigenous visual heritage. This aligns with Tina Campt's (2017) call for an aesthetic of refusal, where non-visibility or under-seen images can be more politically powerful than the re-circulation of traumatic or fetishised visuals.

In this sense, "Returning Where I Have Never Been" proposes a visual ethics of accountability: one that resists both the voyeurism of colonial photography and the neoliberal commodification of Indigenous representation. By foregrounding relational images, community memory, and deliberate absences, the film participates in a broader movement of Indigenous and decolonial media that seeks not to "represent" the Other but to unsettle the conditions under which representation becomes possible.

8. The performative “thought-room” as Cinematic Space of Relation

The third visual and affective axis of "Returning Where I Have Never Been" unfolds in what the filmmakers call the performative "thought room". This is not a physical place located in the ancestral territory nor a documentary interlude of explanation. Rather, it is a carefully constructed cinematic environment in which Fernanda, the protagonist, sits in a white room while projected images of Selk'nam territory, historical footage by Father Alberto María de Agostini, and archival faces flicker across the wall behind her. These images are neither background nor spectacle, they envelop her, interact with her gestures, and provoke spoken and unspoken reflection.

This space, stripped of representational realism, operates instead as a site of reflexivity and relation. It functions as a kind of epistemic in-between, where past and present, voice and silence, landscape and self, begin to entangle. Fernanda does not narrate over the images in a traditional documentary voice-over; rather, she becomes entangled with them. Her body sits at the intersection of memory and projection, acting as a witness in relation rather than as a distant observer.

From a theoretical standpoint, the performative "thought room" may be read as a cinematic enactment of relational epistemology, a space that privileges affect, multispecies presence, and territorial sentience. Donna Haraway's (2016) notion of "staying with the trouble" offers a compelling lens here. Rather than offering closure or redemption, the thought room invites the viewer to inhabit uncertainty, to remain with the discomfort of unresolved histories and persistent colonial violence. The room does not explain; it asks. It "holds space" for grief, resurgence, and unfinished worldings.

Similarly, the room can be interpreted through Arturo Escobar's (2014) framework of "Sentipensar con la Tierra", which calls for an embodied, affective, and territorial way of thinking-feeling with place. In this setting, Fernanda is not merely remembering or imagining—she is thinking-feeling in relation with landscapes, ancestors, and fragments of her people's forcibly interrupted story. The cinematic room becomes a form of territorial memory, not anchored in fixed geography but mobilised through affect and presence.

The projected images, many of them taken by missionaries or settlers, are thus reclaimed through relational practice. In allowing herself to be in dialogue with these fragments, Fernanda enacts a visual and embodied form of sovereignty, one that refuses to accept the archive as static or the past as closed. The room becomes a threshold, a space where Indigenous temporality and visual agency are not illustrated but performed.

9. Conclusion

"Returning Where I Have Never Been" presents a radical proposition for what decolonial documentary cinema can do. Rather than reproducing linear narratives of victimhood or disappearance, the film activates a relational and pluritemporal storytelling form that resists erasure and honours the continuity of Indigenous presence. Through its layered montage, its refusal of fetishised imagery, and its spatial ethics, the documentary exemplifies an aesthetics of survivance one that foregrounds the agency of landscapes, the opacity of ancestral grief, and the speculative potential of memory work.

By integrating oral testimony, site-specific filming, and archival material, the film constructs a cartography of return, a cinematic reinhabitation of a landscape marked by colonial violence but also by resurgence. In doing so, it challenges not only dominant histories but the very conditions under which history is made visible.

The film's ethical refusals—its deliberate absence of Gusinde's images and its enactment of relational testimony, offer a methodology for visual resistance. Here, landscapes are not inert settings, but agents and witnesses. Stories are not recovered, but reactivated through embodied encounters. The past is not behind, but layered, waiting to be traced, sung, walked, and felt again.

In this sense, "Returning Where I Have Never Been" offers not only a narrative of Indigenous return, but a speculative act of spatial justice, where the right to memory and the right to land are entangled in affect, vision, and voice. It stands as a testament to what becomes possible when cinema listens otherwise.

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