

Review
Heddy Honigmann (dir):
***No Hay Camino* (There is no path)**
Netherlands: Pieter van Huijstee Film, 2021. 93 mins.
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Reviewed by Bill Nichols



No Hay Camino (There Is no path), 93 minutes, 2021, Netherlands

Heddy Honigmann's latest, and perhaps last, documentary film is a stunning journey of memory and melancholia. As she says in an interview at the Walker Art Center in 2020, "In my films, people have left or are leaving," a remark that clearly circles back to Honigmann herself who was suffering from an incurable and terminal illness when she began this film. "There is no path" becomes a mantra for her life and work. She does what the moment calls for; she steps forward regardless of whether there is well-marked path or not, and preferably not. *No Hay Camino* conveys a sense of purposeful wandering as Honigmann returns to

people and places from her past for what may be a final farewell. What will happen in these reunions is unplanned. What will follow in the film from one encounter to another is unknown. Honigmann is a filmmaker of the present moment, however laden with loss and melancholia it may be.

In some ways her films resemble Frederick Wiseman's in that the camera observes what happens but does not intervene, for the most part. But observation does not exclude Honigmann from the frame, as it does Wiseman; quite the contrary. She is on-screen in almost every scene and not only directs the *mise-en-scène*, from her wheelchair, but guides most of the conversations with her friends and family. This quality aligns her more with another great woman filmmaker, Agnès Varda. Varda, too, but even more persistently, regards her own life, and the magical qualities of cinema, as a vital part of her filmmaking, especially in *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000) and *Varda by Agnès* (2019). And like Varda, but unlike so many documentary filmmakers from Errol Morris to Alan Berliner, Honigmann stresses conversation, with its open-ended, unstructured wanderings in search of a path, instead of interviews, with their carefully structured, goal-directed teleology. Her encounters with friends and family are precisely that: conversations, although there is a definite sense that Honigmann, the director, plays a veiled hand at keeping conversations pointed and probing. At one point, Honigmann states she has never done an interview, although she has prompted monologues and given some shape to them, as in the clip from *Good Husband, Dear Son* (2001) of a survivor of the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The gentleman walks through a cemetery of white marble obelisks, near Sarajevo, naming relatives buried beneath many of them and succinctly citing one or two of their distinctive qualities from "loved sports" to "loved being unfaithful." Honigmann urges him, in an early take included in this new film, to walk faster. He does. The result is all the more moving.

Loss and regret take a particularly sharp focus in relation to Honigmann's father. An extended conversation with her sister reveals very different memories of this man, a Holocaust survivor who became a highly regarded cartoonist in Lima, Peru, and both a scourge and protector for Heddy as a child and young woman. He was cruel much of the time but also overly invested in Heddy's well-being, as if his more brutal side were mobilized for her own good, to guide her onto the path he envisioned for her. But Heddy was not one to walk down someone else's path and that independent spirit was what took her from Peru to Rome to study film, and eventually to the Netherlands where she would become a citizen and reside the rest of her life, apart from her peripatetic filmmaking.

What becomes remarkable in her conversation with Kristina, her sister, is how their memories of their father diverge. Kristina knows things Heddy does not, partly because she never left Peru, and Heddy recalls her own experiences with

him that were unknown to Kristina. The result is a form of understanding that stands apart from fact-gathering, reasoned analysis or explanation. It is what we may call dialogical truth, understanding that emerges in the interchange between people that did not exist in tangible form prior to that exchange. Unlike most interviews, depositions, interrogations, medical histories and the like, dialogical truth does not arise from setting out to achieve a particular goal. It is the serendipitous result of standing in an open, receptive, exploratory, and unguarded relation to an Other, akin to what Martin Buber described as an “I-Thou” relationship.

Heddy Honigmann embodies this quality not only in the dialogue with her sister but throughout her films. Curiosity, vulnerability, and spontaneity generate a form of knowledge, or *verstehen* (‘understanding’), that depends on empathetic connection between participants in a given exchange. This quality is one of the most distinctive features of Honigmann’s manner of engaging others and therefore of her films as a whole. Even failed encounters can contain the seeds of dialogical truth. In one scene she is driven around Lima looking for the house where she grew up. Suddenly, an exclamation. There it is! With her son, Henk, the driver, she, lodged in her wheelchair, enters the courtyard, distinguished by a street lamppost, incongruously positioned in the center of the open space. Memories flood back. A woman cracks open a door. A conversation ensues in which Honigmann pleads to be allowed to come inside a little bit to see the house. The woman politely but firmly, and perhaps fearfully, refuses. It is her sister’s house; she can’t permit it on her own. Honigmann’s pleas demonstrate her patience, politeness and her persistence. She does give up easily. The other woman will not allow her mind to be altered. It is a standoff but one that testifies to qualities that would not emerge except in a strained and difficult dialogue such as this.

The film circles around family homes and family relations. Some encounters are with professional colleagues but the most powerful are with family and the memory of family. Honigmann came to see her father as more protective than overbearing, an unstated reason for her departure from Peru, which was more ostensibly to attend film school in Rome when there were no film schools in Peru. She shares this perspective with her sister, and they come to a deeper understanding of how their father, more than their mother, shaped the path which each of them subsequently chose. Surviving the Holocaust marked Victor Honigmann in ways that brought pain and suffering to his children, but as a mature adult Heddy Honigmann now understands this side of him. He was not cruel in his parenting by default; it was what his own experience had imprinted on him, a necessary tool of survival but not one that can be easily modelled for others.

Interestingly, however, although both her sons are in the film, we find neither at the center of any of the scenes, save one with Stefan, who handles some of the cinematography. This absence is in part testimony to the power of non-verbal communication, to trust and comfort, and the lack of a need to revisit and remember that which has been a set of more continuous relationships than with the other people we meet. In part it is also a demonstration of the dictum Honigmann offers at one point: speaking about the subjects in her films, she says she never felt she truly knew them. “I remain detached,” she says as a statement of an aesthetic principle, an existential proclamation of the limits of engagement, and a lament for the sense of loss that is a necessary condition of every life no matter how great our powers of empathy.

As another point Honigmann says she is making the film and visiting people important to her to “say goodbye and remember.” It is one of the people in Patricio Guzman’s *Chile, La Memoria Obstinada* (*Chile, Obstinate Memory*, 1997) who reminds us that *recordar* (‘remember’ in Spanish) shares an etymological kinship with *corazón* (‘heart,’ the traditional repository of memory and emotions). Honigmann remembers in precisely this sense: she wends along a path that is not a path, but it is a journey rich in memory and melancholia, love and loss. It is the kind of film that invites us to say, from the heart, “Thank you, Heddy, for this precious gift.”

References

- Patricio Guzman, dir., *Chile, La Memoria Obstinada*. 1997. Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films. Film.
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 Agnès Varda, dir., *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse*. 2000. France: Ciné-Tamaris. Film.
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About the reviewer

Bill Nichols is professor of cinema studies at San Francisco State University (California, U.S.). Earning his Ph.D. in theatre arts and film from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1978, he edited *Movies and methods: An anthology*, volumes 1 and 2 (University of California Press, 1976, 1985), works that helped establish film studies as an academic discipline. He has since published a dozen books, more than 100 articles, and lectured widely in many countries, including in Canada where he was chair of the film studies department at Queen’s University (Kingston, Ontario). His *Representing reality* (Indiana University Press, 1992) launched the contemporary study of documentary film, and *Introduction to documentary* (Indiana University Press, 3rd edition, 2017) has become the most widely used introductory textbook in the field. His general introduction to

film, *Engaging cinema* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), is the first overview to film studies that integrates a study of film's formal qualities with its enormous social significance. *Speaking truths with film: Evidence, ethics, politics in documentary* (University of California Press, 2016) explores key issues in documentary film. He has served on film festival juries in a host of countries and writes about film and other topics on his blog billnichols.net.

