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LEO SCHWARTZ

Review of Diego Enrique Osorno's *1994*

On January 1, 1994, the Zapatistas declared war on the Mexican government. Three months later, as the country prepared itself for a presidential election, Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) heir-apparent Luis Donaldo Colosio was assassinated at a rally in Tijuana. Six months after that, PRI secretary general José Francisco Ruiz Massieu was assassinated in Mexico City. Just 11 days before Mexico could escape 1994, the central bank devalued the peso, triggering an economic crisis. If this seems like an overload of information for a paragraph, imagine living through it in a single year.

In honor of the 25th anniversary of Mexico's tumultuous year, Netflix released a new five-part documentary, simply titled *1994*. In our 24-hour news cycle, anniversaries offer a rare opportunity for reflection: to slow down the onslaught of information and consider our present from a more longitudinal scope. When done successfully, anniversaries don't have to just be cheap vehicles for nostalgia, but instead fulcrum points for analysis.

Last year, for example, marked the 50th anniversary of 1968: a truly world-historical year that witnessed the assassinations of MLK and RFK, student protests around the globe, the Tet Offensive, the U.S. moon landing, Tlatelolco, and the Prague Spring. Examining 2018 through the lens of 1968 allowed us all to become historians rather than pundits and question the exceptionality of the present moment, and how it is informed by previous social movements and events. Forty-seven years from now, 2016 could be given the same treatment.

While 1994 might not have shaken the world quite like 1968 or 2016, it certainly reshaped Mexico. With President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his Fourth Transformation, the country is currently undergoing perhaps its most pivotal year since 1994. Just like studying the turmoil of 1968 helped the U.S. contextualize the last few years, I would argue that the

documentary *1994* does the same for López Obrador. Although the documentary occasionally loses sight of its narrative en lieu of hagiography and conspiracy, *1994* makes a convincing case for why it is so important to look to the past in order to understand the current political moment.

The documentary is centered around the rise and fall of presidential candidate and would-be iconoclast Luis Donaldo Colosio. Even if the viewer is unaware of his tragic trajectory going in, *1994* shows news footage of his assassination within the first couple minutes. Like López Obrador, Colosio was a reformer (at least, as painted by the documentary). The context, of course, was different. Colosio was part of the PRI, a single-party regime that had had a stranglehold on every aspect of Mexican political life since 1929 and maintained its control through graft, fraud, and violence. President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the man who tapped Colosio as the candidate in 1994, was widely believed to have stolen the election in 1988. Colosio was his campaign manager. So within the confines of the PRI in the 1990s, the "reformer" label can really only go so far.

Through archival footage and talking head analysis (largely from allies, advisors, and even his son), Colosio is characterized as an almost saintly figure capable of bringing Mexico into a more democratic future. For example, after the dubious 1988 elections, Colosio, then serving as head of the PRI National Executive Committee, ensured that the 1989 governor's race in Baja California would be fair. The result was the first non-PRI governor since 1929, Ernesto Ruffo Appel of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). In serving as the PRI candidate for president in 1994, Colosio would play a role in ushering in a new opening for the party and for Mexico.

Two politicians affiliated with Colosio—Agustín Basave and Igor Herrera—describe him early on in the documentary as a "true democrat," saying he was "going to shatter from inside the regime of privilege and injustice." Herrera, who worked on Colosio's campaign staff, says Colosio "wasn't part of oligarchy, [he] didn't



A still from 1994 (COURTESY OF VICE STUDIOS LATIN AMERICA)

come from family of politicians or wealth”—though Colosio’s father had held a number of positions in their hometown in Sonora, including municipal president and city councilor. In footage of Colosio, he speaks grandly but broadly, stating in one interview on ForoTV, “We want democracy—democracy as a way of life, as a way of thinking, where citizen engagement through a party like ours results in collective well-being.”

The documentary goes on to frustratingly admit how little we really know about why Colosio was murdered, but the implication is that Colosio was assassinated because of his plans to change Mexico. For example, Carlos Salinas gives an ominous sound bite in an interview for the documentary, saying “Machiavelli said that reformers faced a huge disadvantage, because the changes they propose often take a while to impact those who’ll benefit them, while the negative effects of the reforms are felt immediately.”

Colosio’s positioning in the documentary as a reformer seems convenient when most of the contemporary talking heads are questionable political figures who are clearly in a position to gain from association with such a martyr. For example, Federico Arreola, an often controversial fixture of Mexican media, is featured

throughout, casually mentioning how much Colosio sought out and valued his opinion. For Arreola to seem allied with a man who could have changed Mexico for the better certainly is advantageous, especially when there aren’t many counter-points.

And Colosio may have been a much-needed reformer. By all accounts, Colosio was a charismatic figure with good intentions who truly wanted to create a more democratic Mexico. The more interesting question posed by the documentary, though, is not what type of president Colosio would have been, but how his death shaped Mexican politics.

Paving Paths for Change

Before the documentary follows this thread, however, it takes a detour. In 1993, while the PRI grappled with what it meant to have a reformist candidate, Salinas signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The day NAFTA went into effect, January 1, 1994, the Zapatistas—largely comprised of Indigenous people in the southern state of Chiapas—began their revolution.

By expanding the scope to focus on the Zapatista uprising, the documentary demonstrates why it’s

named *1994* and not *Colosio*, and underscores its thesis that the year is not only worth examining, but worth four or more hours of prestige streaming. Colosio rose to the fore of Mexican politics because Mexico was ready for a reform—though a change in party wouldn't come for another six years. We cannot view the unrest that led to Colosio's assassination in a vacuum—which came amid not only the backdrop of PRI machinations, but also alongside a reckoning with Mexico's failed economic and political experiments. The impacts of these events and their backlash still reverberate today.

While his name is never actually spoken, López Obrador looms over the documentary. López Obrador was a member of the PRI during the 1988 election, but left the party soon after, led by the losing candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, which would become the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). In 1994, as the PRD candidate, López Obrador ran for governor of his home state of Tabasco. Though he lost to the PRI, this race catapulted him to the national stage. In parallel trajectories, where Colosio became the face of reform for the PRI between 1988 and 1994, López Obrador was becoming the face of a more radical reform—one that was not only anti-PRI, but anti-elite.

The distinction of anti-elite is important to underscore. While the unrest of 1994 and instability in the PRI's power led to the party losing power in 2000 to Vicente Fox of the PAN, the subsequent presidential terms did not address the underlying societal problems embodied by the Zapatista uprising: the effects of free trade on systemic inequality, the stripping of collective, Indigenous, and rural rights, and the retention of control through corruption and wealth of what López Obrador refers to as “the power mafia,” which is largely indifferent to party affiliation. Even though López Obrador would not win the presidency until 2018, the events of 1994 set the stage for his victory over two decades later. In many ways, the election of López Obrador is the realization of a political transformation initiated in 1994 by Colosio and stalled by his assassination.

Unfortunately, this is where the documentary could take a more interesting turn, but frustratingly begins to lose its focus. The last two episodes focus on the question of why Colosio was assassinated, and the assorted missteps of his campaign manager—who became the PRI candidate and president, Ernesto Zedillo, and his mishandling of the peso crisis. After slowly extending the scope for the first three episodes,

the documentary narrows it again, chasing threads of political deceit, tinfoil hat theories, and the ineptitude of the Mexican legal system.

This could have been satisfying if there were any kind of resolution. We still don't know if Colosio was assassinated as part of some larger conspiracy or by a single, crazed gunman, Mario Aburto. If you're a JFK truther, the last two episodes are perfect (down to the multiple gunman theory). If you're looking for the same kind of contextual analysis of the first three episodes, not so much.

While I hoped the documentary would do more to explain the path from Colosio to López Obrador, or even to Fox, the subtext is clear. Despite its faults—namely, a reliance on marquee but clearly biased talking heads like the Salinas brothers, instead of ones with less personal stakes—the documentary as a whole is engaging and informative, both for those deeply versed in the history and for those who have never heard of Colosio. It's also clear why the director, Mexican journalist Diego Enrique Osorno, wants to show off his talking heads: he's assembled a truly impressive who's who of Mexican politics. He's also done a terrific job of the visuals, which are mostly assembled from riveting archival footage.

As a means for understanding how the past gives us meaningful insight into the present, though, the documentary is at its best in the first few episodes. It's easy to view transformational presidents like López Obrador or Hugo Chávez or even Donald Trump as singular, unique events, but the truth is more complicated. In both cases, events from decades prior set the stage for their paths to victory, leading to moments where their respective countries were primed for disruption. A documentary like *1994* helps to explain López Obrador more than the endless stream of concerned op-eds in *Milenio* or *Excelsior*. I can't wait to see *2018* on Netflix in 24 years. **■**

Leo Schwartz is a graduate student at New York University pursuing dual Master's Degrees in Journalism and Latin American Studies. His work has appeared in Roads & Kingdoms, Deadspin, PBS NewsHour, and Latin America News Dispatch. He is currently working on a project about President López Obrador and the Mexican press, and began working as NACLA's web editor in July 2019.