

## **RadioDoc Review**

**Volume 6 • Issue 1 • 2020**

2020-12-29

### **Tools of Rescue: A Review of Silencio para rescatar: documental sonoro**

Sonia Robles, University of Delaware

#### **Abstract**

In this audio documentary, Mexican cultural promoter and sound artist Abraham Chavelas recounts rescue activities in which he took part after a 7.1 magnitude earthquake rattled Mexico on 19 September 2017. Answering a call for help, Chavelas was assigned to a collapsed factory where an unknown number of undocumented Asian and Central American women working as seamstresses were trapped under the rubble. For two days, he aided rescue efforts by using a high-tech microphone to help determine whether or not there was life under piles of concrete, glass and debris. Chavelas used the audio he gathered before the Mexican Marines arrived and prevented untrained emergency workers like himself from helping. Subsequently he organised it to create a cathartic homage to the real heroes of the catastrophe: people, not government officials.

#### **Keywords**

audio documentary, earthquake, Mexico City, rescue efforts, technology

#### **Recommended Citation**

Robles, S., (2020) "Tools of Rescue: A Review of Silencio para rescatar: documental sonoro", *RadioDoc Review* 6(1).

## **Tools of Rescue: A Review of *Silencio para rescatar: documental sonoro***

By Sonia Robles, University of Delaware

Hear: [Silencio para Rescatar / Documental Sonoro 19S 2017. by Abraham Chavelas | Free Listening on SoundCloud](#)

At 10:00 a.m. on 19 September 2018, tens of millions of people throughout Mexico participated in a *simulacro de evacuación* (evacuation drill), to commemorate the 7.1 magnitude earthquake that in the previous year had rattled the nation, led to hundreds of deaths and left scores of buildings severely damaged or in complete ruin. The *simulacro* began when the more than 12,000 speakers throughout the city repeated the same sound: a 40-second alarm featuring an irritating buzz and a male voice saying “*Alerta sísmica*” (seismic alert) slowly four times. The alarm was followed by a minute of silence.

Under most circumstances, the purpose of the drill is preventive: by pretending to experience an earthquake a person can trick their brain into accepting what needs to happen when a real crisis occurs, which in Mexico could be at any moment. But the moments of forced silence during the 2018 *simulacro* triggered painful emotions not only for the millions who experienced the earthquake the previous year, but for those aware that 19 September was also the day in 1985 when an 8.1 magnitude earthquake struck Mexico and led to thousands of deaths, widespread damage to the capital city’s infrastructure (including factories and residential areas) and a complete disruption of travel, commerce and communication for weeks. Each year, officials and organizers ask residents, office workers and passersby to stop what they are doing, gather outside in designated safe places, wait for the alarm, and sit in silence for less than one minute. Memories of these moments of chaos, followed by hurried orders for silence, resurfaced when I listened to Abraham Chavelas’s audio documentary. The entire piece wrestles with forced moments of silence when nameless authority figures hush others or when pleas for stillness are followed by seconds of quiet. This imposition is the documentary’s most prevalent feature. During the 20-minute ode to rescue workers, you hear men and women say, “Silence, please,” more than a dozen times. At one point, an unidentified man asks the numberless crowd for silence, “until the [rescue] dog comes out” of a tunnel in the rubble.

The documentary tackles a challenging topic in a country that cannot escape earthquakes. An Internet search for ‘Mexico earthquake’ yields dozens of news articles, photographs, videos and reports spanning from the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the summer of 2020. For an outsider or a first-time visitor, it can be difficult to accept what students of history and Mexicans have known for centuries: ancient Mexicans built what today is North America’s largest city in a high-altitude volcanic area surrounded by several lakes. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, city officials and planners redirected water and dried up segments of the lakes as the urban population expanded and demand for infrastructure increased. In fact, preventing structures from sinking is one the many daunting assignments that architects in Mexico City undertake.

In addition to the sedimentary basin in the capital city, Mexico is prone to earthquakes because two tectonic plates along the Pacific coast are colliding. The Oceanic plate, Cocos, is slowly sinking underneath the Continental and (much larger) North American plates. Earthquakes occur when friction is released from movement within or between the slabs. Twelve days before the 19 September 2017 earthquake, the most powerful tremor in more than a century was the result of movement within the Cocos plate. The epicentre of that 8.2 magnitude quake was in the southern state of Chiapas, and while it was felt in the capital city there was minimal damage—nothing compared to 1985.

For Mexico, the earthquake on 19 September 1985 was one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century. After the event it became clear that Mexican authorities were unprepared to respond to a natural disaster (see for example Abarca, et al., 2005; Monsiváis, 2005; Poniowska, 1995). As a result, the government created a centralised control system that was capable of sending out warning signals through thousands of speakers; introduced the *Protección Civil*, a non-governmental body of first-responders, engineers and experts in seismic activities; and the implementation of standardised building codes through a 1987 law. Yet because 1985 presented devastation unlike anything that anyone had ever experienced and the government was slow and inept in its response, it became clear to the majority of the population that when an earthquake hit again, taking to the streets and helping others was fundamental to the rescue efforts and that solidarity was more effective than government action.

Abraham Chavelas was living in Mexico City in the fall of 2017 when the earthquake struck the city and a number of locations in the coastal state of Oaxaca and the nearby state of Puebla, where the epicentre was located. An experimental sound artist, Chavelas's interest is in capturing unique sounds—from children's brass band concerts to poetry readings—and he frequently travels with his recorder. After the quake, his instincts led him to respond with questions that thousands of others had contemplated after they acknowledged they were safe but countless others were either dead or buried under collapsed buildings: "What can I do?"; "How can I help?". Glued to social media, as many of us were in the time post-earthquake, it seemed impossible that Facebook and WhatsApp groups displayed videos of swaying buildings—with entire walls crumbling off buildings, and bricks and glass falling from houses and apartments in real time—before the event had actually registered in our brains. Chavelas answered a Facebook message that asked for people with recording equipment to assist emergency workers in the zones where buildings had collapsed.

### **Ode to rescue workers**

If you type, 'Calle Bolivar 168 and Chimalpopoca, Mexico City, Mexico' on the Google maps website and select the option for satellite view, you will see a mostly empty lot flanked by an open-air parking garage and an elementary school named after the South American liberator Simón Bolívar. If you zoom in, you will find a number of spray-painted messages along the walls facing the empty lot including, *La vida de una costurera vale más que todas sus maquinas. Justicia!* ("The life of a seamstress is worth more than all of her sewing machines. Justice!"). Before the building became a pile of rubble in 2017, three clandestine factories operated in that lot. It is both ironic and sadistic that dozens of women lost their lives when the building suffered

damage after the 1985 earthquake and that the structure was never razed. The spray-painted message reminds passersby that to this day, no one has been held accountable for the buildings' shoddy structures there or at any other major destruction site in Mexico City (see for example Martré and Marval, 1995).

Chavelas's documentary begins and ends in this factory, known as "the building of the seamstresses," which is located in an industrial working-class neighbourhood. No one describes the opening scene of the documentary but the surrounding noises suggest that it does not look like what you could see today, a seemingly abandoned lot. Instead, as soon as the recording begins you are transported to the middle of a chaotic and disastrous post-earthquake scene. As a listener, you know that people are trapped under mountains of rubble only because (by the first minute) sounds of rescue collide: shovels, pickaxes, whistles, people wandering to and fro asking simple questions or blurting short answers. The first few minutes lay out the structure of the entire documentary: restless, continuous movement; requests for silence by hurried and determined people; along with mystery and suspense.

This story is told without a narrator to guide you; intermittent sounds of rescue appear with intensity and quickly fade away until the final segment. Despite the omission of a storyteller, any Spanish-language speaker cannot ignore that those who speak are not just from Mexico but from its capital city. The cacophony of background voices weaving in and out, asking for silence and tools, assigning tasks, shushing others, all sound exactly how *chilangos*, or people from Mexico City, speak. Mexico City Spanish is an idiom unto itself. In 1996 Mexican rock/alternative group Café Tacvba showcased how *chilangos* speak in their song *Chilanga Banda*, which is an urban tale featuring a fast-paced plethora of dozens upon dozens of words including or beginning with 'Ch'. To an outsider, listening to this song may sound like a nonsensical tongue-twister, yet to millions of Spanish-speakers it is the jargon they know and identify as working-class Mexico City slang. The first section ends when a woman approaches Chavelas and asks him if he was able to hear anyone or anything with his microphone. He responds by saying yes, but that the sound was difficult to make out because of other much louder surrounding noises in the rescue scene. Immediately, the woman responds, "So there is life then".

The first and second segments of the documentary are separated by a brief pause, an actual moment of silence. The middle section is the longest and where the action intensifies. It is there that a concerted effort to find out if there is life under specific sections of the rubble begins. A plan is made and executed. Instantly and without warning, the rescue approach changes: instead of asking for silence, you begin to hear one or two people asking for noise. You hear a man say, "I need you to make noise". This is followed by, *Somos de rescate, somos de rescate. Hagan un ruido. 1-2-3* ("We are from the rescue operation, we are from the rescue operation"). Make noise. 1-2-3," which is repeated in the recording a number of times. The calls are unanswered.

It is difficult to determine when the middle section ends and the final one begins, except that in the last minutes of the documentary a second and different female voice enters the scene. The woman hushes the crowd using a tone that suggests she is either a mother or that she has

hushed others repeatedly “Don’t move. Everyone shut up”, she says. Then, while the documentary does not describe the activity, it has been repeated enough times that you know what is happening: a group of men are gathered beside a pile of rubble. Chavelas is there with his microphone to determine if there are any sounds. A regressive count is made followed by the command: “If you can hear us, make a loud noise. At the count of one. At the count of two. At the count of three”. Silence... the man repeats the phrase but adds, “We have a microphone, if you can hear us use all your energy to make a noise. 1-2-3”. The documentary ends before you hear a response.

### **The silence to rescue**

All cities have sounds. Automobiles, motorcycles, bicycles, people, factories, animals, growth and decay emit particular noises, some of which are so engrained in our psyche that we fail to pay attention to them (Droumeva and Jordan, 2019). Mexico City is not a quiet place and the workweek is long. Tens of millions of people rise at dawn to begin their day, you can find vendors outside of metro stations selling juices and tacos at 6:00 a.m. A two-hour commute is common and the typical workday concludes after 7:00 p.m. because it takes into account a two-hour midday break when the largest meal of the day is consumed. Yet the capital and home to over 20 million people still produces timeless noises. Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón was praised for his ability to reproduce many of the sounds of his youth—whistles, horns, hollers from vendors, and even the sound water makes when it splashes onto a concrete surface— in his autobiographical Oscar-winning film *Roma*.

However, earthquakes and their aftermath emit noises that are impossible to put into words. Chavelas, who was born and raised in the coastal city of Acapulco, explains that when an earthquake occurs the ground near the ocean produces a distinct sound, a particular crack that the local population recognises instantly and knows to be a *terremoto* (earthquake). The sound artist, who learned how to tell stories from working in the commercial radio industry for more than a decade and knows that you need a professional ear to hear certain sounds, demonstrates the need for silence in the documentary. The most accurate translation of *Silencio para rescatar* is not “silence for rescuing” but the silence needed *to* rescue, the silence needed for a rescue effort to be successful. This title favours the use of the rescue tool he knows best: not a megaphone, a whistle, or a rescue dog... but a microphone.

### **Conclusion**

Mexicans are not afraid of the dead. In fact, each year on 1 and 2 November they pay tribute to relatives, friends, loved ones, and even celebrities who



have passed by either visiting their graves or making an *ofrenda* (altar) at the cemetery or in their home. *Ofrendas* include candles, photographs, marigold flower petals, snacks and vices that the deceased person liked, and anything else that the spirit of the dead one might enjoy when he or she returns to earth on the quiet dawn hours of 1 November each year. This tradition is personal, reverent and also a part of a ritual that dates back to the pre-Hispanic era when the indigenous Aztecs set a special altar for the dead in their homes, as they believed that when someone died their spirit travelled to the underworld.

In recent years, Hollywood and US consumer culture have exploited this ancient tradition and placed it under the umbrella of *Día de los muertos* (Day of the Dead). Clothing, toys, animated films, decorations and an array of products for audiences throughout North America have appeared in an unprecedented way. In 2015 the director Sam Mendes chose Mexico City for the opening scene of the James Bond film *Spectre*. That year, for the first time ever, a *Día de los Muertos* parade, which used many of the objects from the film, took place along the capital city's main streets.



The event was so successful that it was repeated the following year with a combination of props, both Mexican and foreign. By the third year, the parade took place five weeks after the earthquake on 19 September 2017. The event on 28 October was dedicated to the rescue workers and people who lost their lives as a result of the quake. It opened with police officers walking the rescue dogs that became Internet celebrities: Frida, Evil and Ecko. Behind the dogs organisers created a mobile containing axes on top of concrete slabs and dozens of helmets used by emergency workers in the shape of a close-handed fist.

This giant fist was the signal that was used on the ground in the scene where Chavelas and countless others found themselves during their rescue operations. It was also the signal for silence. It was the gesture that was made when someone heard noise under the rubble and wanted to exclaim, "Use all of your energy to make noise".

## References

Abarca, Cuauhtémoc., et al., 2005. *20 años después: los sismos de 1985*. PUEC/UNAM: Mexico City



Droumeva, Milena and Randolph Jordan, eds., 2019. *Sound, Media, Ecology*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York.

Martré, Gonzalo, Angélica Marval., 1995. *Costureras: debajo de los escombros*. Grupo Editorial Planeta: Mexico City

Monsiváis, Carlos., 2005. *No sin nosotros. Los días del terremoto, 1985-2005*. Ediciones Era: Mexico City

Poniatowska, Elena., 1995. *Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake*. Translated by A. Camacho de Schmidt and A. Schmidt. Temple University Press: Philadelphia.

\* Photographs by the author.



Sonia Robles grew up in Mexico City in a bilingual and bi-national household. She studies and writes about wireless media, history and culture in Mexico and among Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States. She teaches courses in Latin American, Mexican, Borderlands and Latinx history at the University of Delaware and wrote a book about Mexican radio entrepreneurs and their Spanish-language audiences titled, *Mexican Waves: Radio Broadcasting Along Mexico's Northern Border, 1930-1950* (The University of Arizona Press, 2019). Currently she's working on a project exploring radio advertising among Spanish-speaking communities in the U.S.A. and she's writing a history of Mexico's first public broadcasting radio station.