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## Film Research in Argentina

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## Film Research in Argentina

Film research in argentina  
David Oubiña

Throughout the twentieth century, Argentine audiences had an intense cinematographic experience. The first films arrived in the country a few months after Auguste and Louis Lumière's exhibition at the Grand Cafe on the Boulevard des Capucines. From as early as 1897, Eugenio Py and Max Glucksmann were using the new invention of the movie camera to record newsreels or documentaries, and in 1909, Mario Gallo made the first fiction film. However, from its very beginning, cinema was looked upon solely as a popular entertainment for the people. Cinema needed rather a long time before it acquired its own aesthetic entity and to shape itself into a cultural product worthy of attention.

The first film publications either targeted mass audiences, focusing on the world of stars and providing information about upcoming releases – magazines like *Film-Exelsior*, from 1914, and then *Imparcial* film, *Cinegraf*, *Sintonía*, *Cine popular*, *Cine argentino* and *Cine revista* – or were meant for exhibitors, and contained information about technical or industrial issues – trade journals which included, from 1914, *La película*, and then *Cine productor*, *Gaceta de los espectáculos* and the most enduring, *Heraldo del cinematografista*, which circulated between 1931 and 1988. In none of the magazines mentioned did the film writing have any resemblance to the notion of film criticism as we understand it today. The articles had no pretensions to investigation or analysis: they attempted merely to be informative about the films and their social context, or about cinema as a business.

Certainly, some writers – such as Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Arlt and Horacio Quiroga – did notice the new medium's potential and their path-breaking writings are precursors of systematic scholarly reflection on cinema in Argentina. For the most part, however, during the first half of the twentieth century the educated or academic elites seldom ventured into mass media. As a result, that territory was left open to newspapers and popular magazines. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s, with the emergence of cine-clubs, archives and specialized magazines, that cinema started to be appreciated as a culturally respectable product worthy of serious consideration. And even then, it was only towards the end of the 1980s that cinema would become a field of study and a specific area of knowledge taught in university classrooms.

### Cinephilia, Avant-Garde, Mass Culture and Militancy

The *Historia del cine argentino* by Domingo Di Núbila was first published in 1959(1960). This work could be considered the first, reasonably systematic, historiographical attempt to account for the films made in the country. The book is dominated by a journalistic tone, it offers a level of analysis that would be deemed superficial by today's standards, and its conception of history amounts to an endless listing of film titles. Even so, it is equally evident that there is a willingness to regard film history research as an autonomous discipline structured by specific rules. It is significant that Di Núbila's history appeared alongside the emergence of cine-clubs and novel filmmakers, that is, at a time when the films described by the critic started themselves to become historical objects. It is almost as if that summing up of the classical period had been a necessary closure before Argentine cinema entered modernity.

In fact, since the mid-1940s the decay of the industrial system and the dismantling of the studios left a margin for the development of cine-clubs and film magazines that would accompany the emergence of the new cinema of the so-called 'Generation del 60'. Publications such as *Cuadernos de cine*, *Cinecrítica*, *Gente de cine*, and above all, *Tiempo de cine* were responsible for fashioning a type of critic and a type of reader knowledgeable about films and fully able to debate theoretical, aesthetic and historical questions.

*Tiempo de cine*, published between 1960 and 1968, was a product of the activities of the Cine Club Núcleo, and was modelled on publications such as *Cinema novo* and *Cahiers du cinéma*. The magazine encouraged the development of a number of young critics: Salvador Sammaritano, Victor Iturralde, Jose Agustín Mahieu, Edgardo Cozarinsky, Homero Alsina Thevenet, Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Jorge Couselo, among others.

Some came from journalism, others had studied filmmaking in France or Italy, and a few had an academic background. The one thing they all shared was a cinephilic passion for cine-clubs.

The key features of the *Tiempo de cine* style were rigorous research and methodological precision; an eagerness to intervene in the struggle against censorship and in debates on cinematographic policies; a certain flair for essay writing and an effort to process the new theories coming from Europe. Thus, as in a continuum, the magazine's pages contain comments about *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, France/Japan, 1959), *La Dolce Vita* (Federico Fellini, Italy/France, 1960), Ingmar Bergman, Vera Chytilová and Jerzy Skolimowski alongside articles and interviews with the young Argentine filmmakers of the time: Lautaro Murúa, Manuel Antín, Jose Martinez Suarez, David Jose Kohon and Leonardo Favio. Common to all the contributions is an enthusiasm for the notions of experimentation, rupture and auteur filmmaking typical of the new cinemas of the 1960s.

In this context we find *La obra de Ayala y Torre Nilsson en las estructuras del cine argentino* (1961) by Tomas Eloy Martinez, and the *Breve historia del cine nacional* (1974) by Mahieu.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Di Nubila's two volumes, these texts are brief, marked by an essay tone, concerned with formal analysis and clearly interested in the innovations of modern Argentine cinema. Worthy of special mention is Cozarinsky's *Borges y el cine* (1974) which introduces an elaborate hypothesis about the influence of a certain cinema in the shaping of the writer's early works. At this time, when the basis of his poetry was being forged, Borges found, in the films by Joseph von Sternberg, Ernst Lubitsch and King Vidor, a resonant device to amplify his general ideas on narrative.

The decade of the 1960s was a time of profound political turmoil and of notable production in both film praxis and film theory. On the one hand, there was Roland Barthes (1964), structuralism, semiotics and Jacques Lacan; and on the other, Franz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre and Marxism. In this context two names should not be overlooked: Oscar Masotta and Eliseo Veron. The former introduced Lacan's thinking to Argentina and the latter was an early translator of Claude Levi-Strauss.<sup>2</sup> Through them, Marxism intersected with psychoanalysis, structuralism and semiology. In that intersection of several lines of thought, the films themselves were viewed as a reflection on their modes of producing meaning. As regards film theory, this allowed the inclusion of studies of mass culture into ideological discussions, and their use against the mechanisms of spectacle cinema. If the Marxism acknowledged a process of awareness and reflexivity, then the structuralism showed the functioning of the work as a system of variable relations.<sup>3</sup> For its part, the work of Christian Metz provided the basis for a film semiology that, in Argentina, would remain a productive model of scientific legitimation in academia well into the 1980s.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s there was a boom in communication studies. Researchers with backgrounds in literature, philosophy and the social sciences began to take an interest in mass media and popular culture. Even so, it was still not possible to speak of a specific and distinctive study of the cinematographic phenomenon: films became part of research as yet another facet of a set that included radio, television, comic books and pop music. But certain works on social communication media from this period proved fundamental for later research on cinema as they clarified a field of study even though they did not specifically tackle films: *Literatura y cultura de masas* (1967) by Jaime Rest; *La historieta en el mundo moderno* (1970a) by Masotta; the writings of Anibal Ford on popular culture; and the work of Hector Schmucler on communication (mainly through his contributions to the magazine *Comunicacion y cultura*).<sup>5</sup> The common thread in these works was a displacement from fine arts or highbrow literature towards unexplored zones of popular culture, and the use of analytic tools, until then restricted to conventionally prestigious objects, to the study of expressive media deemed marginal or of little interest.

As the debate on the ideology of form deepened, purely scientific concerns came more and more under siege from attempts to question the dominant model of representation in films. The view was that film analysis must be based on a process of generalized distancing and disassembling: a process learned from an intersection between Bertolt Brecht and structuralism and whose purpose (as Barthes puts it) is, precisely, 'reconstructing the "object," so that in this reconstruction the rules of functioning (the "functions") are manifested in the object' (1983: 257). Representation can and must become an ideological questioning of representation itself. In reaction against the dominant form of classical realist cinema, modernism should choose a critical model that would culminate in what Peter Wollen defined as 'counter-cinema' (1986: 126). This perspective entailed an

interrogation of the codes of Hollywood narrative cinema: criticism of the narrative unity, linearity and closure that provide a false harmonious totality; questioning of the strategies of transparency that erase the film's materiality and its production conditions; and rejection of the codes of verisimilitude that foster a passive acceptance of the fictional world.

The paradigm for this critical alternative was, of course, Jean-Luc Godard's *Vent d'est* (France/Italy/West Germany, 1970) which reverses all the mechanisms employed by realist discourse to achieve its fluency. Using them against this very discourse, the filmmaker produces its 'disarticulation' and leaves in plain sight the devices that uphold it and ensure its continuity. Though the film was never well known in Argentina, Godard became, towards the end of the 1960s, the mandatory point of reference for any study dealing with political radicalization and aesthetic rupture. Godard and his anti-realist aesthetic were cited not only in film praxis from the artistic avant-garde of certain cine-clubs to the militant films of the Grupo Cine Liberation, but also in critical publications such as *Cine & Medios* as well as in more academic research. The question was: how to denounce oppression without reproducing its means? How to pose revolutionary ideas without articulating a new language? Hence, Godard's option was interesting because it showed a dramatic distance from Michelangelo Antonioni's model which just a few years earlier had characterized many of the choices of the Generación del 60. Certainly, although there was a marked change of style in Antonioni compared to previous cinema, it was Godard who introduced a radical rupture, as though cinema could start all over again, relying on new creative premises.

In the early 1970s, the aesthetic avant-garde fostered by the Instituto Di Tella and the political radicalism supported by militant cinema established a tense but productive space of friction and exchange among different cultural spheres. *La hora de los hornos* (Fernando Solanas, Argentina, 1968) is a key film because it was intended to be not so much an artwork as an audiovisual analysis of neo-colonialism. It soon became the focus of a debate about the diverse ways in which it might be possible to articulate an artistic avant-garde with a political avant-garde. The dilemma was this: is it more effective to intervene politically from the specificity of aesthetic praxis or to make political use of aesthetic mechanisms? That enriching tension would eventually lead to a violent confrontation between aesthetic reflection and political agitation. But what is left from that period is a notable consolidation of intellectual activity and several contributions that, even if not systematic, still offer an interesting reflection on cinema. These pioneers' purposes set the basis for what in the 1980s would become a more clearly defined field of research. After the brutal fracture imposed by the military dictatorship and its attempts to repress all kinds of research in the second half of the 1970s, cinema studies would continue from that point, which had come to a halt before the coup d'état, to explore the media.

### **New Criticism after Military Dictatorship: Cinema Studies and Film Magazines**

The coup d'état of 1976 put a stop to any possible developments in Film Studies and film scholarship. Apart from those who had been killed or who had 'disappeared', many researchers went into exile or were forced to work in grim conditions. With the exception of *Heraldo del cine*, all film magazines stopped circulation and most cine-clubs closed down. Not being a securely established field, film research suffered the rupture caused by the military dictatorship in a more distressing manner than any other discipline within the social sciences or the liberal arts.

During this period, the most interesting works were written in exile. From very different perspectives, two filmmakers, Raul Beceyro and Octavio Getino, endeavoured to reflect on cinema by intertwining history, theory and politics. Getino, one of the makers of *La hora de los hornos* (1968), outlines in *Cine y dependencia* (1990) a brief history of Argentine cinema along the lines of the critical analysis of neocolonialism staged by Fernando Solanas' film. <sup>6</sup> Even if Getino's historiographic scheme is partial and his selection of films may come across as biased, the value of his work lies in its dismissal of the supposedly innocent historicism of other similar works and its explicit declaration of its ideological viewpoint. Getino's great virtue is that he views Argentine cinema as a space, and a topic, for debate. In response, Beceyro in *Cine y política* (1976) criticizes the way that Getino and Solanas conceptualize the links between militancy and aesthetics. Borrowing from Theodor Adorno's theories, Beceyro defends aesthetic autonomy, and asserts that cinema's revolutionary character is not to be found in its capacity to be used for a concrete action but in its form's radical rupture.

In 1983, with the return of democracy, some small signs of research timidly started to surface. Co-ordinated

by Couselo, *Historia del cine argentino* (1984) came to replace Di Nubila's old book. It is an informative work, almost a film catalogue, which does little more than update a descriptive panorama. Like the book by Di Núbila, perhaps its value lies in looking back and revisiting earlier cinema to put it in an historical perspective. It so happens that towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, a series of simultaneous changes took place: the boom of film schools (headed by the *Fundacion Universidad del Cine*, and the *Centro de Experimentacion y Realizacion Cinematografica*, the film school of the *Instituto Nacional de Cinematografia*), the emergence of several film magazines and of a new generation of filmmakers who brought in an alternative approach to cinema.

Film schools and technical progress have given filmmakers a different kind of education, and paved the way for new ways to make cinema. These young filmmakers have a background in making short films (not from the industry or the advertising arena) and in academia (and as such are well-versed in film history and film theory). The first trait suggests a parallel with the young filmmakers of the *Generation del 60* and the second reveals a difference. In fact, in both groups the short film is a common origin, but whereas the directors of the 1960s discovered their influences in the cine-clubs, the learning experience during the 1990s was found in the more institutional frame of film schools.

All this activity and innovation has been presaged and accompanied by new magazines, new critics and new ways of understanding cinema. Between 1984 and 1985 there was a debate on creating a university degree in 'Combined Arts' (which would include historical, critical and theoretical studies on cinema, theatre and dance) within the Arts School of the *Facultad de Filosofia y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires*. In 1986 the first two courses of this program were introduced – 'Film Aesthetics' and 'Introduction to the Language of the Combined Arts' and later on 'Film Analysis and Criticism', 'History of Argentine and Latin American Cinema', 'History of Universal Cinema', and 'Cinema and Literature'. However, what is regarded as the common element that gathers studies on cinema, theatre and dance within the same academic program is their supposed common location in the field of the 'performing arts'. Unavoidably, this perspective has limited the manner in which films and film history are studied.

Even so, the program in 'combined arts' installed the systematic study of cinema within academia for good. If the works of Barthes and Metz were already present in cinema studies, now semiotics applied to film analysis expanded to embrace other authors. The writings of Yuri Lotman, Dudley Andrew and, above all, those of the critics from *Screen* were integrated with local readings of *Cahiers du cinéma*, which had traditionally taken centre stage.<sup>7</sup> Gradually, academic research brought together elements from studies on enunciation, narratology and reception. And with the works of Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis or Annette Kuhn, feminist theory and genre studies entered the field.<sup>8</sup> It must be noted that, in general, this was not a mere repetition of models. Instead, many researchers use and continue to use these concepts for the analysis of Argentine or Latin American films and even provide reformulations, confrontations, or local inflections.

Initially, the most influential figure was probably Noël Burch (1985) and his notion of the Institutional Mode of Representation, which flourished in numerous works of analysis during the 1980s. Then came the studies by Gilles Deleuze on the 'movement-image' (1983) and the 'time-image' (1985) and, in recent years, authors as diverse as Serge Daney or David Bordwell. The case of Bordwell is significant because the cognitivist approach does not obviously blend harmoniously into the perspective traditionally adopted by local cinema studies. Nevertheless, his works offer a model of academic research legitimating a novel field which in Argentine universities had to be developed in a short time. That perhaps also explains why these heterogeneous proposals have not always been engaged in a debate. Instead, they have often been combined in a single statement. In this sense, it must be said that the field of cinema studies in Argentina has been particularly receptive to the inclusion of new theories. For better or worse, Argentine Film Studies has developed through integration and assimilation rather than through confrontation.

In recent years, and in parallel with these academic studies, intense critical activity has been promoted through the film magazines *Film*, *Haciendo cine* and *Sin cortes*, as well as a number of other more short-lived publications. Above all, and especially in its early years, *El amante*, published continuously since 1991, has played an important role in the re-education of a critical gaze through its irreverent and passionate style and its consistent, sceptical questioning of the cinematic establishment. Broadly speaking, it is probably true to say that academic research and film magazine criticism embrace opposite viewpoints. University studies tend

to take shelter in scientific rigor, analysis, objectivity and historicism. Magazines, in contrast, have favoured a strongly personal and subjective perspective, emphasising arbitrariness of opinion and the use of the first person. Reacting against an academic approach that aims to be classificatory and rigorous, magazines celebrate cinephilic passion and usually adopt an anti-intellectual stance. As regards Argentine cinema, this debate has had some positive effects. It has allowed different appraisals of the tradition and has recovered a polemic gaze on the role of films during the dictatorship, and about the relationship between cinema and society.

Some recent magazines such as *Kilometro 111* and the web magazine *Otrocampo* have tried to cover the lack of academic publications and, with more or less success, have built some bridges between the contrasting perspectives of film magazine criticism and academic research. In this context, *Punto de vista*, which began its publication in 1978, amidst the military dictatorship, is a peculiar case. Though its writers are related to academia, the magazine is not institutional by any means. Its writing seeks to achieve analytical profundity and methodological rigor but to express them in the manner of an essay rather than a research paper. And although it is not a publication specializing in film, it has gathered an important corpus of writings (by Beceyro, Rafael Filippelli or Beatriz Sarlo, among others) that aims to reflect on the current state of cinema through the complex intertwining of politics, theory, history and society.

Even if it is still far from being an established discipline, film research can certainly be said to have acquired in recent years a certain methodological strength and to have recovered the polemical edge of a battlefield.

### The Research Scenario

In Argentina, there is no tradition of film research. The *Fundacion Cinemateca Argentina* (founded in 1945) and the *Museo del Cine* (founded in 1971) have meagre and poorly preserved archives. Academic studies are still too young and the first graduate students in film completed their studies between 1990 and 1995 (there are very few doctoral theses in the field). However, it should be acknowledged that there has been a notable increase in filmmaking students and a growth in the exploration of alternative film poetics, as well as a scattered yet dynamic interest in cine-clubs, festivals of independent cinema and magazines.

The research scenario is still in an early and disorderly condition, but it shows some promising signs for the future. Even though the few publishing houses that put out film books deal largely with translations or imported writings from Spain, works that study Argentine cinema from multiple directions are starting to surface. They offer critical re-appraisals of past cinema, director studies, dictionaries variously focused on films, filmmakers, actresses or magazines, and interpretations of the poetics of the new cinema. Argentine cinema is a territory still to be conquered. These filmographic maps confirm that its exploration is definitely under way.

### Notes

1 Mahieu's *Breve historia del cine nacional* (1974) revisits and expands his previous work in *Breve historia del cine argentino* (1966).

2 See, for example, Masotta's *Introducción a la lectura de Jacques Lacan* (1970b) and Verón's edited collection *Lenguaje y comunicación social* (1969).

3 Significantly, the notions of 'conscience' and of 'structure' are united in the same syntagma in the title of Masotta's book: *Conciencia y estructura* (1968). The same tense bond between Marx's ideas and those of Lévi-Strauss is noticeable in the book by Verón titled *Conducta, estructura y comunicación* (1968).

4 Metz's influence is perceptible mainly through his books *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* (1968; 1973); *Langage et cinéma* (1971) and *Le signifiant imaginaire* (1977).

5 See, for example, Schmucler's '*La investigación sobre comunicación masiva*' (1975) and Ford's '*Literatura, crónica y periodismo*' ([1972] 1985).

6 Getino began writing his book in 1976 and finished it in 1983. But it was not published until 1990.

7 The most influential works were Lotman's *Estética y semiótica del cine* (1979); *The Major Film Theories* (1976) and *Concepts in Film Theory* (1984) by Andrew; Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in Cinema* (1972); and Stephen Heath's *Questions of Cinema* (1981).

8 See Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989), de Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't* (1984) and Kuhn's *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1982).

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