

ABSTRACT

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AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN BRAZIL
AND ARGENTINA, 1955-1980

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My dissertation explores the relationship among visual culture, nationalism, and modernization in Argentina and Brazil in a period of extreme political instability, marked by an alternation of weak civilian governments and dictatorships. I argue that motion pictures and photojournalism were constitutive elements of a modern public sphere that did not conform to the classic formulation advanced by Jürgen Habermas. Rather than treating the public sphere as progressively degraded by the mass media and cultural industries, I trace how, in postwar Argentina and Brazil, the increased production and circulation of mass media images contributed to active public debate and civic participation. With the progressive internationalization of entertainment markets that began in the 1950s in the modern cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires there was a dramatic growth in the number of film spectators and production, movie theaters

and critics, popular magazines and academic journals that focused on film. Through close analysis of images distributed widely in international media circuits I reconstruct and analyze Brazilian and Argentine postwar visual economies from a transnational perspective to understand the constitution of the public sphere and how modernization, Latin American identity, nationhood, and socio-cultural change and conflict were represented and debated in those media.

Cinema and the visual after World War II became a worldwide locus of production and circulation of discourses about history, national identity, and social mores, and a space of contention and discussion of modernization. Developments such as the Bandung Conference in 1955, the decolonization of Africa, the Cuban Revolution, together with the uneven impact of modernization, created a “Third Worldism” and “Latin Americanism” that transformed public debate and the cultural field. By researching “peripheral” nations, I add to our understanding of the process of the transnationalization of the cultural field and the emergence of a global mass culture in the 1960s and 1970s.

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For Leandro, *luz da minha vida*

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Introduction

Argentine film director and tango singer Hugo del Carril spoke about the crisis of the Argentine cinema to a homogenous audience mainly composed of young *cinephiles*, filmmakers, aspiring directors, and intellectuals in the Centro de Investigaciones Sociales Argentinas (Argentine Social Research Center) of the well-known and avant-garde Instituto Di Tella on October 20, 1966. It was a perfect occasion to talk about the subject to the large audience that anxiously awaited Del Carril's speech. The director started his talk with the following statement:

“Argentine cinema is not Argentine anymore in its essence and form. In order to survive, our [film] industry has copied or imitated features that are foreign to us. But that generated a reaction that was not what we expected. The public felt they were not being understood and interpreted, thus, they left the movie theaters. Argentine cinema has shown us [since its beginnings] a unique path, that is, the way of its authenticity”¹

Why this established film director and popular artist used concepts such as “authenticity” and “foreign” to assert a nationalist cultural identity that the public at the Instituto Di Tella surely did not adhere to? After all the Instituto was *the* place where artistic experimentation and innovation had occurred since its foundation in 1960. It was deeply connected to the art, film, music, theater, and social science scenes in the United States and Europe. This almost provocative attitude of the film director towards his audience at the Instituto possibly reflected the historical transformations that the film and cultural industries had endured during the 1960s in both Argentina and Brazil. There was

¹ Hugo del Carril, “Argentine Film is not Argentine Anymore in Terms of both, its Essence and Form,” *La Razón*, October 22, 1966.

an increasing modernization of the cultural and artistic fields alongside their politicization and a growing nationalism that led to blatant confrontations among intellectuals and artists regarding aesthetic and political choices.

Del Carril represented a nationalist position among directors linked to the populism of Juan Domingo Perón that had emerged in Argentina from 1946 on, and who privileged social and political films over commercial and cosmopolitan features. At the same time that this director belonged to a very particular national film culture, the values he tried to transmit to his young audience were part of a vast repertoire that transcended the national frontiers of the Latin American nations.

My dissertation, “Modernization and Visual Economy: Film, Photojournalism, and Transformations in the Public Sphere in Brazil and Argentina, 1955-1980,” explores the ways in which film and the print media played a prominent role in imagining the Argentine and the Brazilian nations. Film openly debated notions of national identity and history that became increasingly crucial in the late 1970s in both countries.

With particular attention to motion pictures and journalism, I ask how visual representations of modernization became a crucial element in the public sphere, foregrounding notions of development and underdevelopment, Third World(ism), Latin Americanism, and national popular culture. In opposition to the classic formulation of the public sphere, advanced by Jurgen Habermas, as a nineteenth-century print-bound milieu progressively degraded by the mass media and the cultural industries, I posit that the Argentine and Brazilian cases indicate how the production and circulation of images contributed to active public debate and civic participation.

The relatively sparse scholarly literature on the cultural sphere in Argentina and Brazil in the 1960s and 70s has three foci. A first group of heterogeneous works analyzes the development of the various film industries during the period. Those studies produced by film critics of that era constructed a linear periodization of film history based on a teleological succession of "phases" -the silent, the classical, the nationally-oriented/modern, and the postmodern film – or the sequence of political events – the populist, the democratic, the authoritarian phase and so on.² In more recent and sophisticated works, a non-chronological approach to film history establishes connections among film production, politics, and popular culture³ and cultural biographies of specific filmmakers.⁴ These studies identify key historical problems in order to destabilize the idea of “progress” and evolution present in the traditional narrative of film studies and incorporate new categories such as gender, race, and ethnicity. Despite the links established between cinema and modernism (especially in the Brazilian case), these studies do not specifically address the impact of the process of modernization in the production of images in a regional and transnational context. These works are also centered on the nation as a unit of analysis, overlooking the transnational as a site of creation and circulation of ideas.

² Jean-Claude Bernardet, *Cinema brasileiro. Propostas para uma historia* (Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das letras, 2009); Domingo Di Nubila, *Historia del cine argentino* (Buenos Aires: Cruz de Malta, 1959-1960).

³ Randall Johnson, *Antonio das Mortes* (Wiltshire: Flicks Books, 1998). Claudio España and Ricardo Manetti, “El cine argentino, una estética comunicacional: De la fractura a la síntesis,” in José Emilio Burucúa (ed.), *Nueva Historia Argentina: Arte, Sociedad y política*. Vol. 12 (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999) 280-310; Tal Tzvi, *Pantallas y revolución: Una visión comparativa del Cine de Liberación y el Cinema Novo* (Buenos Aires: Lumiere, 2005); Ismail Xavier, *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁴ Ivana Bentes, *Joaquim Pedro de Andrade* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 1996); Maria Silvia Camargo, *O que é ser diretor de cinema – Memórias profissionais de Cacá Diegues* (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2004); João Carlos Teixeira Gomes, *Glauber Rocha: Esse vulcão* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1997).

Taking a somewhat different tack, researchers in the area of film studies have developed two distinct but related fields. Scholars have developed studies of the so-called “Third Cinema” for almost three decades with diverse results. Since the late 1970s, the Latin American and African cinemas have had a special place in the field of film studies, creating a new *genre* that far from destabilizing the Eurocentric narrative of film studies, has contributed to its reinforcement. Africa and Latin America have been the reservoir of “political films”; their film production –in general- has been reduced to that stereotype and other important aspects of their production have remained barely visible.⁵ The second field of film historiography interested in works produced outside Hollywood and Western Europe has applied new concepts and perspectives that have facilitated the destabilization of the rigid boundaries between First and Third Cinemas. Transnationality and hybridity have allowed a different analysis of the production and circulation of images, decentering the nation as the core of cultural signifiers.⁶

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have studied culture and cultural production in Argentina and Brazil during the 1960s and 1970s, privileging the connection between intellectuals, students, and political parties and movements.⁷ Similarly, political and intellectual historians have investigated the impact of the Cuban Revolution and the

⁵ Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetic of Liberation* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979); Roy Armes, *Third World Film Making Questions of Third Cinema* (London: BFI, 1989); Julianne Burton, *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

⁶ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, *Transnational Cinema: the Film Reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁷ Carlos Altamirano, *Para un programa de historia intelectual: y otros ensayos* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2005); Marcelo Ridenti, *O fantasma da revolução brasileira* (São Paulo: UNESP, 1993).

formation of novel intellectual trends⁸ and the relationship between the politicization of professionals and artists and cultural production during the Cold War.⁹ These works assist me in building a bridge between cinema and political intervention and in understanding the role of intellectuals and the reconfiguration of the field of cultural production. Particularly useful in this regard is a group of works that shed light on the proliferation of artistic tendencies and movements, their popular roots, and their connection with national "modernisms"¹⁰

A group of cultural historians, art and film historians, and literary critics has examined different aspects of the cultural revitalization during the 1960s and 1970s, such as the expansion of successive aesthetic projects within new centers of modern art¹¹ the convergence of aesthetic avant-gardes and political vanguards¹² and the formation of the cinematographic "1960 Generation", Cine Liberación, Cine de la Base and Cinema Novo and Cinema Marginal. Most of these studies focus on cultural production and cultural products circulating among an expanding but still limited audience, and do not consider the broader political and aesthetic impact of the process of modernization, especially in the technical dimension of image production.

⁸ Silvia Sigal, *Intelectuales y poder en la Argentina. La década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2002); Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años sesenta. La formación de la nueva izquierda intelectual en la Argentina. 1956-1966* (Buenos Aires: El cielo por asalto, 1991).

⁹ Jean franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Cristopher Dunn, *Brutality Garden: Tropicalia and the emergence of a Brazilian counterculture* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹¹ Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Enrique Oteiza (ed), *Cultura y política en los años '60* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1997).

¹² Claudia Gilman, *Entre la pluma y el fusil: debates y dilemas del escritor revolucionario en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2003); Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán arde* (Buenos Aires: El cielo por asalto, 2000).

My dissertation contributes to the analysis of the relationship between cinema and public sphere. The first of two parts is defined by the time frame 1955-1968/9, covering the administrations of the modernizing governments of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961), the populist era of João Goulart (1961-1964) and the beginning of the dictatorship (1964-1968) in Brazil, and the administration of Arturo Frondizi (1958-1962) and the alternation of weak civilian governments and dictatorial regimes until the *Cordobazo* in 1969 in Argentina. Cultural modernization in both countries was the product of governmental policies and discourses, intellectual production in academic institutions, a renovated artistic production linked to new aesthetic trends and artists' political interventions, and the materialization of diverse aesthetic responses to populist and authoritarian tendencies. The second part covers the period 1968/9-1980, shaped by the consolidation of the cultural industry and the mass culture market in a moment of increasing political violence and repression from the authoritarian governments and the radicalization of the student movement and emergence of guerrilla warfare from 1968 on.

My work explores the emergence and consolidation of the modernization of the cultural field in a context of mass politics, rapid urbanization, consumerism, and rank conflict between populist and authoritarian options during the early 1960s. Buenos Aires became the epicenter of a cosmopolitan and international film culture that found its references in Italian Neorealism, the Nouvelle Vague, and other European cinematic trends. There was a growth in the number of movie theaters and film spectators during the early 1960s, even though what was starting to be called *national cinema* in both countries derived little benefit from those developments. In the midst of the international prestige acquired by the Brazilian Cinema Novo and notoriety that the Nuevo Cine

conferred on Argentine filmmakers, spectatorship and state protection against foreign films were pressing issues.

The avant-gardism of both cinemas resulted in a hyper-intellectualized film culture that grew incredibly isolated from the public. The obvious relationship between Cinema Novo and the Brazilian Communist Party also widened the distance between the filmmakers and the Brazilian public, as the PCB promoted an aesthetics based on the socialist realism that did not reflect the audiences' expectations. After the increasing political repression and censorship that followed the coup d'état in Brazil (March 31 1964), filmmakers from Cinema Novo started to rethink their role in the cultural industry.

Argentine filmmakers also endured troubled and turbulent political contexts. After the coup d'état against Juan Domingo Perón on September 16, 1955, a succession of weak civilian administrations and authoritarian military governments ruled for more than fifteen years. The conditions of filmmaking were difficult in that context, as directors and producers needed a clearly defined state policy towards the industry. The improbability of a stable economic and political situation led to the transitory constitution of film groups and projects. In that vein, the so-called *generación del 60* was ephemeral, as it could not survive financially or stylistically.

Chapter 1 examines the visual languages predominant in the early 1950s in Argentina, associated thus far with the populist culture and the regimes of Juan Domingo Perón (1945-1955) that stressed classical (Studios driven) film aesthetics. I show that by the mid-1950s, state and academic rhetoric of modernization and development, together with dramatic social and political transformations and economic growth, granted a dynamic political function to cinema and photojournalism, creating a new visual

language that was associated with modernization and cosmopolitanism by the press, critics, and intellectuals at the time. Cosmopolitan films worked also as the opposite of the Peronist experience linked to traditionalism and lowbrow culture.

Chapter 2 examines an expanded market's reception of political and art film in Brazil throughout the Sixties, analyzing also how cultural publications positioned film as a crucial element in political debates. Key images produced by films and photojournals on race, gender, class, and sexuality created a visual language that expressed the "alternative" Brazilian modern experience, showing rural poverty and urban marginality. I analyze how the political instability of the entire period, along with the manifest weakness of several democratic institutions, allowed the cultural field to become an actor with an authorized public, political voice. By the end of the decade, due to political radicalization and state repression, political filmmakers shifted to a more ethnographic perspective, creating a less conflicted visual representation of Brazil.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the promise of social transformation through populism grew increasingly dim, commercial, popular and folkloric cinemas, as well as a new modernized journalism struggled with the dilemma of whether Argentina and Brazil even had the historical potential to modernize based on models considered foreign, anti-popular, and imperialist. My dissertation analyses the relationship between these new nationalist ideas that permeated motion picture production, photojournalism, film criticism, and the nascent television industries and an expanding cultural industry and the consumption of cultural goods.

Brazil and Argentina went through similar historical circumstances during these years. These circumstances included increasing political repression led by authoritarian

regimes, an ongoing cycle of economic expansion, a growing cultural industry, and the progressive incorporation of the population to literacy. These conditions led to the formation of a public sphere dominated by a political dialogue conducted through visual discourses that proposed ideas about Latin American modernization.

I propose to reconstruct and analyze postwar film images in order to better understand the public sphere and its debates about national history, identity, and the negotiation of socio-cultural change and conflict. I understand visual economy as “a comprehensive organization, of people, ideas, and objects (visually represented)” that “move across national and cultural boundaries” and create notions of historicity and national identity.¹³ Produced by different media (e.g., cinema, photojournalism, television), at a moment of increasing prominence of visual culture, images circulated and acquired particular meanings through their intertextuality and reception. A new genre of film criticism proliferated in diverse print media contextualizing image productions and their relation to each other and to politics. These helped to shape discussion and response among audiences who experienced images in movie theaters, union halls, cultural centers, schools, and the home. I closely analyze how commercial feature-length films, newsreels, political films, fanzines, and photojournals retold national history in a language of “the people” in the 1970s.

The dissertation examines the reconstruction of the political and cultural networks of the 1960s and 1970s, connecting the producers of images and the debates around the role of the state in cultural production. In both Argentina and Brazil, filmmakers, artists, and journalists developed a sense of “making history” that led them to establish links to

¹³ Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: a Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8.

political parties and governmental agencies as well as to form artistic movements. There was a historical transformation of what was considered “art” and the producers of images had to adjust their own works to the new values of the field, incorporating political and social concerns (Bourdieu, 1993). Beatriz Sarlo asserts that being a public intellectual in the 1970s in Latin America meant an ample visibility and political participation in public debates, in sharp contrast to the practices of the previous decade (Sarlo, 2001). That did not necessarily imply a single, specific political position but rather a politicization of all cultural interventions. I look at mainstream photojournalists working with *Fatos e Fotos* and *Manchete* in Brazil and *Primera Plana* and *Gente* in Argentina in the configuration of visual notions of modernity/underdevelopment and democracy/authoritarianism, and their connections with the dictatorships during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The second part of my dissertation explores a new moment in the relationship between images and the public sphere. This section focuses on the themes of national identity, politics, and mass culture. I look at visual constructions of history and national identity as the cultural industry consolidated itself in a period of state repression and political violence.

Chapter 3 delves into the proliferation of historical films in Argentina. I posit that during the most conflictual period (1966/8-1976) there was an explosion of historical films made with the support of the authoritarian state, by conservative, progressive, and leftist filmmakers who sometimes reinforced an official pantheon of founding fathers, recreating nationalistic discourses about the nation. After 1968/9, political and cultural repression had the dual effect of intensifying national feelings among image-makers, stimulating the creation of a metaphoric visual language about the past that spoke directly

to the contemporary political situation. These films were extremely "didactic" as spectators learned national history and the meaning of being "Argentine" in the movie theaters. Evidently, contradictions surfaced between state expectations and the response of the public. The state-sponsored *Juan Manuel de Rosas* (Manuel Antín, 1972) created a broad discussion in the media as well as the open adhesion of leftist and guerrilla groups, as it expressed a "truly national" language. This chapter analyses the disputes around the meaning of the past and the political and intellectual positions regarding national history and identity.

Chapter 4 examines the transformations of the Brazilian film industry from 1968/1969 in association with the authoritarian state, which fostered an unparalleled expansion of the film market production and spectatorship, and significant aesthetic and narrative changes that, foregrounding notions of gender, sexuality and race, recreated the core of a national racial democracy myth. The *mulata* was embraced by filmmakers, the state, and the audiences as the national symbol *par excellence* to be consumed locally and exported abroad. Brazilians found their identity in that image that facilitated a "fun" and benevolent representation of the nation that once again was depicted as a non-racist paradise, in contradistinction to other post-slavery societies, especially the United States. In the *Conclusion*, I summarize the findings, linking the arguments of the two parts.

Chapter 1:

Love as in Rape: Modernization, Gender, and Sexuality in Argentine Cinema; 1956-1966.

Introduction

The Argentine fanzine *Idilio* published in January 1958 an article that announced, “by 1,541 votes out of 2,130, the couple of 1957 was Elsa Daniel and Lautaro Murua. Here is a picture of them smiling.” The gossip magazine reproduced in its pages the fans’ public recognition of actors Daniel and Murua, whose fame had emerged that year after the release of Leopoldo Torre Nilsson’s film, *La casa del angel* (The End of Innocence, 1957), in which they played the main characters.¹⁴

La casa del angel was a success at the box office and, at the same time, extremely well received by film critics. A total renewal in terms of aesthetics and content, “influenced by Wyler, Bergman, and Bardem,” the film was considered a watershed in Argentine cinema, at a moment when the once-popular classical model was totally finished.¹⁵ The press book of the production company –Argentina Sono Film– commented that Torre Nilsson’s feature was “thematically innovative, with original content and production, speaking with a naturalist language incredibly poetic (...) a film about adolescents, sexuality, and puberty.”¹⁶

Based on writer Beatriz Guido’s homonymous novel published in 1954, the film tells the story of young teen Ana (Elsa Daniel) who belongs to an aristocratic family in

¹⁴ *Idilio*, January 14, 1958, 53.

¹⁵ *Critica*, July 1957.

¹⁶ *Press Book, Argentina Sono Film*, January 1957.

1920s Argentina. Ana is growing up in a family with a despotic mother who is a religious zealot and a father who rules over the household but is loveless and distant from his wife and daughters. Despite her obvious sexual desire and curiosity, Ana is forcibly kept innocent of the nuances of sex and relationships, so when her father's best friend, the politician Pablo (Lautaro Murúa), starts to lust after her, she does not know how to handle the situation. Shattered and emotionally traumatized, the young woman is lonely and clueless, and terrorized by the mirrors and mournful statues scattered throughout the house, which remind her of the words of her nanny about sex and mortal sin.

La casa del angel put Argentina on the international film scene again. It was among the nominated films for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1957, where applause lasted for five minutes once the film ended; “a discovery and a surprise for the larger movie world,”¹⁷ chosen by the *Cahiers Du Cinema* among the best 20 films of 1957.¹⁸ Acclaimed as a ground-breaking feature by the *London Times*, *The New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, *the San Francisco Chronicle*, *Le Monde*, and many other major newspapers, *La casa del angel* and its director were considered part of an extended phenomenon of film innovation that began circulating worldwide in the 1950s and included the French New Wave, the Japanese Cinema of Ozu and Kurosawa, Brazilian Cinema Nôvo, and Ingmar Bergman, among others.

In a letter from Cannes to his father in Buenos Aires in May 1957, Torre Nilsson confessed, “I was so nervous (during the projection of my film). I sat behind [the critics], away from everyone. Beatriz [Guido] was on my side, such a companion for everything! The projection was over and they began to whisper. Suddenly, they turned around and

¹⁷ Mario Trajtenberg, “Torre Nilsson and his Double,” *Film Quarterly* 15:1 (Autumn 1961) 34-41

¹⁸ *Cahiers du Cinema*, February 1958 (80)

stared at me. I wanted to run away and I think I was already leaving when they started cheering for five minutes. I did not react so Beatriz dragged me to them. I thought they would ask for Rio de Janeiro and the gauchos on horseback. But none of that happened. André Bazin, who from 1945 has been the boss of all (film) criticism said, 'You are the revelation of the festival.' And Eric Rohmer talked incessantly and the only thing I understood was that *End of Innocence* was the best he had seen made in South America. No small compliment. Especially because they are crazy about American cinema.”¹⁹

The historiography on both Argentine and Latin American film identifies *La casa del angel* as the film that actually started a new phase in Argentine cinema, naming Leopoldo Torre Nilsson as both the father of the innovative *generación del 60'* and the one who modernized film language, introducing a more avant-garde aesthetics linked to the already named New Waves. In that vein, he and the main screenwriter of the vast majority of his films –and wife- Beatriz Guido were seen as cosmopolitan and modern by both friends and critics, praised and attacked because of their “existentialism,” the frank depiction of female sexuality, and the intimist approach of their films.²⁰

In this chapter I analyze the two faces of the modernization of the cultural field in Argentina during the late 1950s and the early 1960s. I show how film criticism changed from the previous period, becoming an intellectual profession in the midst of a print media renovation. Film festivals worked as a space of legitimization of Argentine film abroad. *Cineclubes* (art-film houses) and universities organized screenings of international film production and commercial movie theaters also showed more than

¹⁹ Monica Martín, *El gran Basby* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1993) 78

²⁰ Jorge Abel Martín, *Los filmes de Leopoldo Torre Nilsson* (Buenos Aires: Catálogos, 1980); John King and Nissa Torrents (eds), *Argentine Cinema: The Garden of Forking Paths* (London: Routledge, 1988); Agustín Mahieu, “Revisión crítica del cine argentino,” in *Cine Cubano*, 1984, 104.

American films, making Buenos Aires a locale for an intense film culture. Focusing on that venue, my intention is to map the film scene of Buenos Aires in the 1960s, putting together actors and locations that the current historiography has analyzed separately. Such a description will better explain the important transformations that led film production and reception to become part of a broad public sphere in the 1970s.

I also analyze how these Argentine films considered innovative because of their depiction of a supposedly free female sexuality, paradoxically involved representations of rape and sexual violence against women. I show how modernization meant both a challenge to the aesthetic parameters proposed to films made by the studio system and a growing cosmopolitan film culture, but also implied an ambiguous treatment of female sexuality. Women, whose strength and open sexuality were depicted by the young directors during the late 1950s and the early 1960s, suffered unspeakable violence on screen from their male counterparts as a punishment for their audacity and defiance of social conventions. In film after film, they were raped and marginalized. And the Argentine press did not fully grasp or register that phenomenon, focusing more on aesthetic innovations and international film awards.

The rebirth of the Argentine cinema signaled by *La casa del angel* and the subsequent features contrasted sharply with the loss of local and Latin American audiences experienced by Argentine films since the early 1950s, when the studios went into decline. Argentine films lost the popularity they used to enjoy in local and international markets starting in the late 1930s. In 1957, 16 films were released compared to the 55 produced in 1951 (a good year for the studios) and the 32 released in 1960. The good days were long gone since the Cannes Film Festival had recognized Mario Soffici's

film *La gata* (The Cat, 1947), and Luis César Amadori's *Almafuerte* (1949). In 1951, Daniel Tinayre's *La danza del fuego* (Dance of Fire, 1949), Lucas Demare's *Los Isleros* (The Islanders, 1951) and León Klimovsky's *Marihuana* (The Marijuana Story) were all nominated for the Palme d'Or.

Because of the previous financial success, most of the Argentine films made by the mid-1950s still tried to reproduce recipes that had made the studios rich and Argentine films popular since 1933: comedies, musicals, and melodramas that adopted the classical mode of representation. The formula, however, was no longer effective, and film critics and newspaper commentators clamored about the crisis of the Argentine cinema and the lack of financial resources, creativity, and imagination of the local film industry.²¹

The impact of 1957's *La casa del angel* should be measured against this background of low production and quality, tinged by nostalgia for the good old (studio) days, the "golden age" of the Argentine cinema. Torre Nilsson's film was, therefore, like a breath of fresh air in a rarefied atmosphere characterized by disputes between different sectors of the film industry and the lack of production and spectators. *La casa del angel* was also a "modern" film in its images and scope, working as a metaphor to illustrate a broader transformation within Argentine culture, as it indicated the path toward a more cosmopolitan film language and aesthetics, showing an equally cosmopolitan spectator who would soon become accustomed to Jean-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman, and Sergei Eisenstein.

²¹ "Crisis del cine argentino, *Clarín*, May 23, 1955; "Caen los espectadores," *La Prensa*, April 22, 1955; "Cine argentino: búsqueda infructuosa de su identidad," *La Razón*, August 30, 1955.

La casa del angel signaled the widely-lamented decadence of the studio system. Some films had already experimented with new aesthetic or narrative trends that differed from the classical cinema. Mario Soffici's *Barrio Gris* (1954), in that regard, expressed the social modernization of the nation developed during the Peronist years (1946-1955), incorporating some of the lessons offered by Italian neorealism. Soffici's film was, nevertheless, still reflective of some classical formulas, such as melodrama and the tango dramas.²²

Torre Nilsson's feature was a total rupture with the past, the living proof of a new beginning in terms of both production and consumption of films. It signaled a time of independent productions, the proliferation of *cineclubes* (art-film houses), film magazines, film journals, international films, in other words, the decade of a *cinophilia* nourished by a growing urban middle class in the capital city of Buenos Aires, and some other Argentine urban centers such as Rosario, Córdoba, and Neuquén.

The modern cosmopolitanism that made both this film and its director symbols of a new era of deep cultural transformations, integrated Argentina into a more international conversation on art production and intellectual development. It was also a time of modernization of the nation in cultural and economic terms, a process that the historiography attributes mainly to the Frondizi administration (1958-1962).²³ His economic policies (known as *desarrollismo* — "developmentalism") were based on industrial growth, foreign economic aid, and public investment in the petrochemical

²² See my article about this film, "With an Incredible Realism that Beats the Best of the European Cinemas: The Making of *Barrio Gris* and the Reception of Italian Neorealism in Argentina, 1947-1955," In *Global Neorealism. The Transnational History of a Film Style*, edited by Robert Sklar and Saverio Giovacchini. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010.

²³ Horacio José Pereyra, *Arturo Jauretche y el bloque de poder* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1989); Tulio Halperin Donghi, *Argentina en el callejón* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1995).

sector. Those policies paid off by 1961, when the administration earned the support of much of the nation's middle-class. *La casa del angel*, in that vein, contributed to the modernization euphoria, as it showed an image of female sexuality that sharply contrasted with the domestic female figure found in the films produced by the studios.

Argentine Films, the Studios, and the “Buenas Mujeres”

During the era of the studios, the film industry had promoted classical films *à la Hollywood* with its formulas and generic conventions. The popular classes, who enjoyed the genre films, mostly consumed Argentine movies and the melodramas produced by the studios.²⁴ Yet a tradition of realism had also been part of the Argentine cinema since the emergence of the talkies--for instance, in the early 1930s work of director Agustín “el negro” Ferreira, who had travelled with his camera across Buenos Aires recording its diverse peoples and varied neighborhoods.²⁵ Studio craftsmen, such as directors Mario Soffici, Daniel Tinayre, Lucas Demare, and Luis José Moglia Barth, incorporated into their stories the everyday life of the slums, working-class neighborhoods, and rural locales of Greater Buenos Aires. During the 1930s and 1940s Argentine studios also took Hollywood genres and integrated them with previous realist traditions, especially the ones imported from the popular theater and the radio soap operas.²⁶

²⁴Matthew B. Karush, “The Melodramatic Nation: Integration and Polarization in the Argentine Cinema of the 1930s” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 87:2 (1995), 293-326.

²⁵ His acclaimed *Puente Alsina* (Alsina Bridge, 1935) drew on both realism and melodrama and told the story of the building of a bridge that connected the capital city of Buenos Aires with its suburban area, while also narrating the romantic liaison of a dark skinned worker with the daughter of a businessman. On Ferreira see John King, *Magical Reels. A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1990). The Lumiton studio, in particular, exploited the realist format and delighted popular audiences.

²⁶ Tranchini, “El cine argentino y el imaginario de un cine criollista”, 101-169.

This Argentine studio system had been remarkably successful. Since the creation of Argentina Sono Film and Lumiton in 1933, the production of national films had increased remarkably – with the exception of the period during World War II when celluloid was scarce – reaching its height in 1950 with 58 releases. When the system started declining in 1952 because of its inefficiency and the excessive competition from Hollywood, 35 films were made. Five years later, in 1957, only 16 movies were released.²⁷

In the late 1940s, however, nobody would have predicted this crisis. In tune with the wave of realism that became popular after World War II, the studios promoted the making of social dramas with a touch of romance, such as Luis César Amadori's *Dios se lo pague* (God Reward You, 1948) loved by the public.²⁸ In that vein, Hugo del Carril's *Las aguas bajan turbias*, (River of Blood, 1952), León Klimovsky's *Suburbio* (Suburbs, 1951), Daniel Tinayre's *Deshonra* (Dishonor, 1952), Carlos Borcosque's *Pobres habrá siempre* (There Will Always Be Poor People, 1954), Lucas Demare's *Mercado de Abasto* (Supplying Market, 1954), and *Guacho* (The Bastard, 1954) were some of the big productions that combined love stories with social issues, making the popular classes and the places where they circulated more visible: the humble neighborhood, the market, the workplace, the street, the cabaret.

By the time these films were released, the second administration of Juan Domingo Perón (1952-1955) had consolidated the profound transformation started during his first presidency. His reforms resembled many of those implemented by the populist regimes

²⁷ Claudio España, *Cine argentino: industria y clasicismo, 1933-1956*, Vol. I and II (Buenos Aires: Fondo de las Artes, 2001) 22-121.

²⁸ *El Hogar*, March 3, 1950.

that emerged in Latin America from the 1930s on. Similar to Lázaro Cardenas in Mexico (1934-1940) and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (1930-1945 and 1951-1954), Perón launched a massive program of social reforms that included progressive legislation on social rights, a significant redistribution of wealth in favor of the popular classes, aid to national industries, and the building of federal systems of public health and education. The state assumed a leading political and economic role, improving the living conditions of the working classes and creating a new notion of citizenship that would include these social strata as a fundamental national component, in stark contrast to the early 1940s and, in fact, to the entire history of modern Argentina.²⁹

At the same time, the authoritarian populist style of the regime alienated the middle class and the intellectuals from political life, creating a fracture in Argentine society that would persist for decades. In his public utterances, Peron took pains to express his populist support of the popular classes and to delegitimize those who did not support his project. As he said in 1954, there were just two political groups in Argentina, “the people” and “the anti-people”.³⁰

Until recently, the historiography that delved into the relationship between the Peronist regime and the film industry canonized the notion that the authoritarian state had absolute control over film production, rewarding supporters and punishing opponents, in the vein of the Nazi and Fascist regimes.³¹ In fact, the film critics who opposed the

²⁹ Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

³⁰ Oscar Terán, *Historia de las ideas en la Argentina. Diez lecciones iniciales, 1810-1980* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2008), 256-279

³¹ Domingo Di Nubila, *Historia del cine argentino* (Buenos Aires: Cruz de Malta, 1959-1960); José Agustín Mahieu, *Breve historia del cine argentino* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1966); Alberto Ciria, *Política y cultura popular: la argentina Peronista, 1946-1955* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la flor, 1983); Claudio

regime during the Peronist years were precisely those who were responsible for the established historiography on the period. More recent analysis of the connection between Peron's populist administrations and the film industry reveals a more nuanced picture. Through legislation and regulation, the state –more precisely, Alejandro Apold, Undersecretary of Informaciones y Prensa de la Nación (Federal Secretariat of Information and Press) attempted to influence an industry carefully organized around the big studios' interests. Both Argentina Sono Film and Lumiton were favored through financial support. The state, furthermore, went above and beyond stimulating the production of national films in a market monopolized by American productions through a system of soft loans made by the state bank, the Banco Industrial, to different film producers. The state also “protected” national productions by implementing the compulsory exhibition of Argentine features, a common demand of directors and producers in Latin America after World War II. Finally, the regime meted out personal favors to directors and actors, which guaranteed a degree of control over the content of the films that provoked resentment, jealousy, and political opposition.³²

As Clara Kriger shows, censorship was not absolute. The state “would make suggestions” regarding scenes that were considered potentially critical.³³ Even films made by friends, such as Hugo del Carril's *Las aguas bajan turbias* (River of Blood, 1952), had some scenes cut, because they were too “inflammatory.”³⁴ Afraid of not receiving financial support from the state, directors and producers also often censored

España, *Cine argentino: industria y clasicismo, 1933-1956*, Vol. I and II (Buenos Aires: Fondo de las Artes, 2001) .

³² Clara Kriger, *Cine y Peronismo: El estado en escena* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2008).

³³ Kriger, *Cine y Peronismo*, 103.

³⁴ *Set*, December 1952; *El mundo radial*, September, 1952.

themselves, avoiding possible criticism of the regime. A paradoxical situation emerged because of the government's desire not to alienate the most popular filmmakers: while there was no space to openly oppose the regime in the field of cultural production, neither could the government implement a cultural policy that gave it total control over the production of films or cultural artifacts in general. As historian Oscar Terán has recently suggested, there was some space for artistic creation outside the regime's ideological preferences.³⁵

In this way, the most powerful members of the film industry took advantage of the relative independence they enjoyed under the Peronist administrations, offering in exchange a timid public support of the regime.³⁶ Although censorship did operate during those years, fictional films did not have to endure rigid control; the state was more interested in intervening in the production of institutional documentaries that were to emphasize the good new times, the effectiveness of social reforms, and the happiness of the popular classes.

Much of the film industry went along with the program. The pinnacle of this collaboration between the state and the private sector was the Festival Internacional de Cine de Mar del Plata (Mar del Plata International Film Festival) organized by the government in 1954.³⁷ This event was both an attempt to show the strength of the “national” film industry in a moment of a legitimization crisis of the regime, as well as an

³⁵ Terán, *Historia de las ideas en la Argentina*, 256-279.

³⁶ Of course there were cases of open and enthusiastic support of the Peronist regime in the film industry. Directors such as Luis César Amadori and Hugo del Carril were forced into exile or blacklisted after the anti-Perón coup of 1955 because of their absolute identification with Peronism. Most directors, actors, and producers even those who had showed some degree of support to the regime, did not have a problem. See Di Nubila, 67.

³⁷ Kriger, *Cine y Peronismo*, 80-81.

effort to display features of “cosmopolitanism” by a regime accused of being uncultivated and provincial by the middle classes and intellectuals.

There was not a single indication of cosmopolitanism in the depiction of women during the film studios hegemony. In fact, women faithfully corresponded to the image promulgated by the Peronist ideology: *pobre, pero honrada* (poor, but honorable).³⁸ Stars Tita Merelo, Mecha Ortiz, Zully Moreno were always portrayed as women with no sexuality at all or with a repressed sexual desire contained within the limits of happy marriages.³⁹ The characters who were on the verge of being bad women redeemed themselves through love and motherhood.

The filmography produced by the studios coincided with the proliferation of fanzines such as *Set*, *Sintonía*, and *Mundo Radial* that reproduced the gossip and love life of the stars. Major newspapers such as *La Nación*, *Clarín*, *La Razón*, and *La Prensa*, had weekly columns dedicated to film comment that explained the plots and remarked on whether the film was worth seeing; only in exceptional cases was film criticism considered a professional activity. The *rara avis* was the magazine *Gente de Cine*, created in 1943 by critic Nicolás Mancera. It was one of the first film publications that accompanied its articles with screening and public discussion of the films released in Argentina. In 1947, the personnel involved in *Gente de Cine* created an art-film house that became the origin of the *cineclubista* movement in the capital city.

³⁸ “Mercado de Abasto. Una lección de amor materno,” *El Hogar*, December 11, 1954; “La familia es lo primero,” *Clarín*, October 22, 1955; “Ser pobre no es un delito, según Borcosque,” *La Nación*, August 11, 1954.

³⁹ Valeria Manzano, “Las mujeres y la Mujer en el cine del primer peronismo,” in Paula Halperin and Omar Acha (eds), *Cuerpos, géneros e identidades. Estudios de historia de género en Argentina* (Buenos Aires, del Signo, 2001).

The Film Scene in Buenos Aires and the Generación del 60

After the Military coup against Perón in September 1955, the film industry changed substantially. Many of the filmmakers who were not appreciated by the deposed regime thought they could find means to work again. There was also hope that the new authorities would create more modern legislation that would address the film industry's needs, in particular the lack of financial resources and the competition against American films.

Military president General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu created the Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía (National Film Institute) in March 1957.⁴⁰ This entity did not mean a substantial change in terms of financial support for the industry, but it did guarantee that those films that showed high quality standards would receive monetary awards that would partially refund the costs of production.⁴¹

With regard to which directors and actors could and should work, however, the situation was starkly different. As Andrea Giunta has established, in the case of the visual arts, those artists who were censored and banned from the artistic public life during the Peronist decade faced extreme difficulties in returning to their previous activity. Times had changed and a generational transformation was about to occur.⁴²

In the case of the film industry, that shift was evident. A new generation of filmmakers had moved to the fore of film production, and this was the product of cultural but also very political circumstances. The narrative constructed by the filmmakers of the so-called *generación del 60'* (the 1960s generation), nevertheless, avoided

⁴⁰ Decreto 62, Presidencia de la Nación, March 1957.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

acknowledging the political components involved in its emergence, focusing instead on aesthetic and cultural elements as the explanation of its emergence as a group. For these filmmakers, their development as a group and style was the result of the concerns and influences they shared with the innovative cineastes of the Nouvelle Vague and other young filmmakers worldwide. The Argentine filmmakers remember themselves as seeing French and Italian films and reading the *Cahiers du Cinema* before anything else. They adopted a super critical position of the films produced by their predecessors.⁴³ They also enjoyed a strong *cineclub* culture rooted in the capital city of Buenos Aires, which filled their spirit with the images of European, Japanese, and Russian films since the late 1940s. *Gente de Cine* periodically organized film series on Italian neorealism, Japanese and Russian film, Renoir, Bergman, and Buñuel. The Cine Club Núcleo, on the other hand, started to screen all kind of films by the 1950s. These were two key places where film students from the Universidad de La Plata (in the capital city of Buenos Aires state) had access to the most interesting discussions about film, theory, and criticism: Nicolás Mancera from *Gente de Cine* and Salvador Samaritano from *Núcleo* were also prominent film critics.⁴⁴

The young directors, who did not have previous careers as technicians or assistants in the film industry, started in the profession directing short films. David José Kohon, Manuel Antín, Ricardo Alventosa, Rodolfo Kuhn, and Simón Feldman made films whose central problems were human relations, the alienation of urban and modern life, and the impossibility of middle-class youth finding happiness. All of them

⁴³ David José Kohon, "Qué es la generación del 60," *Confirmado*, April 12, 1962. Simón Feldman, La generación del 60

⁴⁴ Memoria del cineclub Núcleo, Museo del Cine, 1992; *Gente de cine*. Número especial, March 23, 172.

recognized Torre Nilsson –older and with a vast experience in the industry since the 1950s- as their inspiration and mentor.⁴⁵

The 1960 census revealed just how dramatically Buenos Aires had grown as an urban center. The city concentrated now accounted for 30% of the nation’s population, that is to say, 6 million people. The number of college students attending the public Universidad de Buenos Aires had doubled from 1955 to 1960, and the university had created EUDEBA in 1958, a publishing house that issued a hundred thousand volumes in 1961.⁴⁶

In that venue, the consumption of cultural goods increased significantly. More movie theaters were created. In Buenos Aires alone, there were 35 located in the downtown area, 10 more than in 1955.⁴⁷ In that environment, a vast *cinophilia* rapidly grew and diversified throughout Argentina’s main urban centers. European films became synonymous with sophistication and cultivation. As director Ricardo Alventosa remarked, "We are Europeans; Argentines are naturally Europeans. Our civilization, our culture, is of European origin. We [filmmakers] are Europeans, yes, for our training. It is obvious. Against this idea, there are those who summon false nationalisms to criticize this obvious truth."⁴⁸ That feeling was widespread among those filmmakers who started directing in the early 1960s. It was also present in the kind of film culture that emerged in that decade, which was relatively diverse, but had European film as a key point of reference.

⁴⁵ Rodolfo Kuhn, "Mi cine y el de Torre Nilsson," *La Nación*, October 12, 1962; "Nuestras influencias," *Clarín*, September, 13, 1963.

⁴⁶ Censo 1960, INDEC; Anuario Universidad de Buenos Aires, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1961.

⁴⁷ *El Herald*, March 24, 1961.

⁴⁸ Ricardo Alventosa, "Nuestro cine," *Tiempo de Cine*, March 1962.

In 1957, the Cinemateca Argentina (Argentine Cinematheque) organized a retrospective of Swedish Film, where the films of Victor Sjöström, Mauritz Stiller, Ingmar Bergman, Alf Sjöberg were shown.⁴⁹ Alan Resnais, Ingmar Bergman, and Luchino Visconti were favorite directors of the cineclub crowd during the early 1960s. “*Hiroshima, mi amor* provocó tempestad,” said the critic, stressing both the novelty of Resnais’ film style and the excitement of the Argentine public.⁵⁰ The film was released in April 1960, creating a true commotion in the film scene. Film series proliferated throughout the city. Alan Resnais’ *La Guerre est finie* (1965/66) was exhibited for six months in the Cine Libertador, in downtown Buenos Aires.⁵¹ Also Alain Resnais’ *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961) was shown for four months in Cine Arte from April to July, 1966.⁵² Journalists from mainstream newspapers praised the Nouvelle Vague as a major film style, and “as an example our filmmakers should follow right now.”⁵³ The movie theater Lorraine was the first to publish booklets about national and international filmmakers and their work. The booklets included critiques by renowned intellectuals, interviews, and snapshots of the directors’ main films. The issue about Ingmar Bergman, published in March 1964, sold ten thousand copies.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Cinemateca Argentina, *Retrospectiva de Cine Sueco*, April 23-April 30, 1957. The Cinemateca Argentina has been a private institution that worked as an archive and art-film house since 1949. It had a key role promoting alternative cinema before the massive diffusion of European, Russian, and Asian film during the 1960s. In 1967, the Cinemateca became Fundación Cinemateca Argentina, organizing jointly activities with the government of the capital city of Buenos Aires, such as film series and public debates. See *Journal of Film Preservation*, November 2007.

⁵⁰ *Correo de la tarde*, March 12, 1960; “Ante Hiroshima, Mon Amour y su mundo,” *La Nación*, April 12, 1960; *La Prensa*, April 24, 1960.

⁵¹ Booklets Cine Libertador, March-August, 1966.

⁵² Booklets Cine Arte, April-August, 1961.

⁵³ “La Nouvelle Vague agudiza el ingenio,” *La Nación*, July 27, 1961.

⁵⁴ Agustín Mahieu, *Bergman Angustia y Conocimiento* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Lorraine, 1964)

There were retrospectives of American (Orson Welles, John Huston, John Ford, Stanley Kubrick), Japanese (Akira Kurosawa, Ozu) Russian (Sergei Eisenstein), and Nouvelle Vague films every month in the Buenos Aires' movie theaters Rex, Loire, Lorca, Lorraine, Arte, Callao, Ocean, Libertador, among others. The Cine Metro –with two thousand seats- organized an Ingmar Bergman retrospective that lasted six months and was commented on by all major newspapers.⁵⁵

Film also became one of the favorite subjects of new magazines that circulated widely from 1962. *Primera Plana* was a political magazine created in November 1962 by Jacobo Timmerman, an experienced journalist who used *Time* magazine as a model for this innovative publication. *Primera Plana*'s staff was young and cultured. The magazine had an exclusive relationship with *Le Monde*, *L'Express* and *Newsweek*. As the historiography on this publication has shown, the magazine that invoked modernization as its guiding principle was powerful enough to play a major role in the overthrow of the elected president Arturo Illia on June 18, 1966. *Primera Plana* considered film as a key symbol of cultural sophistication, and its writing staff included Tomás Eloy Martínez as its most important film and culture critic.

Tiempo de Cine was published for the first time in August 1960 as the natural and expected outcome of the work pursued by the Cine Club Núcleo.⁵⁶ While the magazine lasted until 1968, it had to suspend publication on several occasions due to the nation's repeated economic crises that impeded its efforts to achieve consistency and continuity. Despite all the mentioned difficulties, *Tiempo de cine* was the only film magazine that achieved prestige in Argentina and abroad, because of the high standards of its critiques.

⁵⁵ Retrospectiva *Cine Ingmar Bergman*, March-August, 1964.

⁵⁶ *Tiempo de cine*, August 1960.

The magazine played a key role in the promotion of the films made by the *generación del 60* and other Argentine filmmakers.

In that environment, many different aesthetic options flourished, leading to a diversity of film styles generically called Nuevo Cine Argentino.⁵⁷ I examine the *generación del 60* here because of the paradox created by their films. The majority of the historiography that examines those films has treated them as symbols of modernization in terms of both aesthetics and narrative.⁵⁸ There is an extensive scholarship on their films and the relationship between them and the trends that were common at that time, such as psychoanalysis, existentialism, and second-wave feminism. Yet there has not been a comprehensive and historical analysis of their films regarding the modernization they claimed to represent and their reception by the critics. That is the topic of the next section.

Girls who Dare Suffer so Much. Representation of Women in Argentine Films of the 1960s

When Leopoldo Torre Nilsson released his film feature *El secuestrador* (The Kidnapper, 1958) in September 1958, the local press responded with uniformly flattering remarks about this film that narrated the misadventures of a group of children in a poor neighborhood in suburban Buenos Aires. The film was considered a masterpiece because of its photography, performances (the actors were mainly children), mise-en-scene,

⁵⁷ Ana M. López, "An 'Other' History: The New Latin American Cinema," In Robert Sklar and Charles Musser (eds). *Resisting Images: Essays on Cinema and History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990) 308-330.0

⁵⁸ Silvia Sigal, *Intelectuales y poder en la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Catálogos, 2002).

montage, and cinematography. The renowned critic Calki said it was “a wonderful film, comparable to [Carol] Reed’s marvelous features”; other newspapers commented on the bold depiction of a childhood that was anything but sweet. In fact, the critics did notice the increasing violence committed by the children themselves against each other in an environment where adults were barely present.⁵⁹

What the press did not mention, however, was the flagrant scene where two men rape the young female Ana (María Vaner) in a cemetery. It is not clear what happens to her next or what kind of consequences such an act has in her future life. We just see her crying with her boyfriend afterwards and that is pretty much it (1:23:32”).

La Patota (The Gang), was a Daniel Tinayre film released on August 11, 1960. It tells the story of a recently graduated young and attractive teacher, Paula Vidal Ugarte (Mirtha Legrand), who agrees to take a position to teach Philosophy at a night school located in a marginal area of Buenos Aires. Members of a gang in the neighborhood see her walking the streets and viciously rape her, only to find out the very next day she is the new teacher at their school. From that moment on, an absurd story of redemption builds up, as Paula comes closer to the violent students, changing their lives through the power of knowledge and love. The film was so popular that the newspaper *La Razón* published a *fotonovela* of the story with snapshots of the film during twelve consecutive weeks.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Calki, “Alrededor de los últimos estrenos,” *El Mundo*, September 29, 1958; “Polémica segura,” *La Razón*, September 26, 1958; King, *El Mundo*, September 29, 1958; “La infancia y sus mitos en un film local,” *La Nación*, September 20, 1958.

⁶⁰ Fotonovela is a pamphlet with photographs combined with dialogue bubbles. They were very popular in Latin America during the 1940s and 1950s; *La Razón*, September 1 to November 30, 1962.

Critics agreed that even though it was a violent film *La Patota* had a happy ending, after all.⁶¹

Leopoldo Torre Nilsson's *Fin de Fiesta* (The Party is Over, 1960) was based on a novel written by Beatriz Guido in 1958.⁶² Released on June 23, 1960, the film narrative is set in 1930s Argentina. It tells the story of a patriarch and corrupt political caudillo, who rigidly controls his grandchildren. The drama is set in motion when the young grandchildren defy the big man's authority. The youngest, Adolfo (Leonardo Favio) is the most rebellious, despite the many material things he enjoys as the relative of a powerful man. In one of the first scenes, in what the press saw as a strong love scene, Adolfo rapes a maid.⁶³

Finally, *Prisioneros de una noche* (Prisoners of One Night, David José Kohon, 1962) tells the story of Martín (Alfredo Alcón) and Elisa (María Vaner) who meet by chance and share their life as part of the urban poor in Buenos Aires. Martín is a false bidder in land auctions during the day and an employee in the food market at night. Elisa is a "dancer for money." They fall in love and want to get married, despite Elisa's *profession*. It is not clear in the film whether she is a prostitute. She decides to quit her job to live happily ever after with Martín, but a jealous suitor (Elisa's ex-lover?) chases her and she finally kills him. Her life-style is the cause of the couple's unhappiness and final separation.

The press in general loved the film. *Tiempo de cine* highlighted the sadness and melancholy of Buenos Aires' streets, the truthful portrait of the marginal people of the

⁶¹ *La Nación*, August 12, 1960; *La Razón*, August 12, 1960.

⁶² Beatriz Guido, *La mano en la trampa* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1958)

⁶³ *La Nación*, February 2, 1960; *Clarín*, January 31, 1960.

city, the urban loneliness of the characters.⁶⁴ Newspapers acknowledged the film as the highest point of the *generación del 60'* production.⁶⁵ There were no comments regarding the insurmountable obstacles to Elisa having a life with the man she chose.

Other films made in early 1960s Argentina depicted female sexuality through violence. Rodolfo Kuhn's *Tres Veces Ana* (Three Times Ana, 1962), Torre Nilsson's *La mano en la trampa* (The Hand in the Trap, 1961), Manuel Antín's *La cifra impar* (The Odd Number, 1962), followed the same pattern as the many films commented on in this chapter. They were innovative in the opinion of directors, the press, and the intellectuals, as these films exercised new aesthetics and filmmaking techniques—crosscutting, discontinuous editing, depth of field, jump cuts- and they were part of an international conversation on film. *La Patota* competed in the Berlin Film Festival in 1960, Torre Nilsson's films in Cannes Film Festival in 1957, Venice Film Festival in 1958, Santa Margherita in 1960. *Prisoners of One Night* participated in the Acapulco Film Festival in 1962 and in the Berlin Film Festival of the same year.

The obvious signs of their modernization as cultural artifacts overtly clashed with the gender representations they presented. Following film historian Molly Haskell in her analysis of American films during the 1960s, I posit that these cosmopolitan and modern Argentine films analyzed in this chapter created a symbolic world that could not cope with the real demands that women started to assert in real life. The promises of modernization were uneven, as they touched the aesthetic aspects but left gender relations far behind.. What the press called love was often manifested as violence against the feminine body, which expressed the anxieties of the process of modernization and the

⁶⁴ *Tiempo de cine*, March 1962, 23-25.

⁶⁵ Agustín Mahieu, "Una obra prima," *Clarín*, March 23, 1962; *La Nación*, March 23, 1962.

uncertainties of an unstable political situation characterized by the alternation of weak civilian administrations and military dictatorships.

The pseudo-cosmopolitanism of Buenos Aires film culture hid a still conservative vision of gender relations that would start to change by the end of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when another New Argentine Cinema emerged. New films with a similar theme appeared then, but the gender relations they displayed were substantially different. Leonardo Favio, *Crónica de un niño solo* (Chronicle of a Lonely Child, 1965) and *El romance del Aniceto y la Francisca* (The Romance of Aniceto and Francisca, 1967), proposed a much more interesting approach to the issue of female sexuality. Hugo Santiago's *Invasión* (Invasion 1969) openly proposed free love as the key to resolving problems of love and sexual relations, as did Alberto Fisherman's *The players vs. ángeles caídos* (The players vs. Fallen Angels 1968). Juan José Jusid's *Crónica de una señora* (A Lady Story, 1973) openly talked about female infidelity and abortion. This was, however, a different moment, when political radicalization led to a radicalization of film in a significantly increasing cultural production.

Final Words or the Other New Latin American Cinema

The leftist filmmakers, who started their careers as witnesses of the social injustices committed by the military after the coup against Perón in 1955, accused the *generación del 60* of being a fake copy of a European model, without real content. The true national cinema was either about gauchos and *the people* or openly political. The accusation of "Gallic" and "inauthentic" that the cinema of the *generación del 60'* had to endure, became a commonplace in the analysis of the work of these filmmakers reproduced by the historiography on political film in Latin America.

In that vein, the “modern” 1960s gave birth not only to an avant-guard and “Europeanized” generation of filmmakers; political films emerged as an option to tell the truth about the events occurred in Argentine during those years. After all, it was in 1955 when a young Fernando Birri founded the *Instituto de Cinematografía de la Universidad Nacional del Litoral* (Film Institute –National University of Santa Fé). The *Instituto* collectively made a semi-documentary about an impoverished village in the environs of a railroad line; *Tire Die* (Gimme a Dime, 1956/7), it achieved an astonishing success among the critics and the public. In 1959, Birri also made *Los Inundados* (Flooded) that narrated the lives of the poor in the Argentine state of Santa Fé. Fernando Birri's film was carrying “authentic” Argentine themes and forms under the influence of Italian neorealism “against the imported film forms developed by the *generación del 60*.”⁶⁶

This confrontation was limited to a few publications, manifestos, and magazines where both groups occasionally wrote. During the early 1960s, the social repercussions of these cultural conflicts were not as important as they would become in the following years. In the late 1960s, the constant political repression that the successive military coups imposed over the population in general and the artistic field in particular aggravated the political situation. The implications of that were multiple.

On the one hand, the regular channels of political discussion were suppressed. Political parties, unions, universities were strictly watched by the repressive forces, making open political dissidence difficult and dangerous. But, on the other hand, the field of cultural production assumed a new role, becoming part of a public sphere where

⁶⁶ Universidad del Cine del Litoral, *Por un cine nacional auténtico*, March 1962.

cultural artifacts transcended their previous place and turned into vehicles of political discourse and confrontation.

Even though the process of cultural modernization faced by the population of Buenos Aires was significant in the early 1960s, it was still incipient during those years. The economic expansion at the end of the 1960s and a noticeable growth of consumption of cultural goods in those years also contributed to giving film a new meaning. Politics and economy changed the face of the film industry at the end of the decade in Argentina. That is the subject of chapter 3.

Chapter 2

We are the Firsts to Say the Truth: Cinema Nôvo and modernization in Brazil During the 1960s

Introduction

In December 1962, the CPC – the Centro Popular de Cultura da União Nacional dos Estudantes/UNE (Cultural Popular Center of the National Students Union) released the film *Cinco vezes favela* (Five Times *Favela*). The common backdrop of the five episodes that composed the film was the hardships faced by people living in slums on the hills of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.⁶⁷ Even though the film addressed Rio's shantytowns and its peculiarities, that is to say, it was a *local* film, it captured the media's attention throughout Brazil, generating a vast debate about a feature's political concerns and formal innovations.

The traditional Rio daily, *Jornal do Brasil*, discussed the significance of the film for several weeks. Critics, intellectuals, journalists, and what were called *personalidades do âmbito da cultura* (personalities of the cultural field) foregrounded a variety of issues regarding *Cinco vezes favela* that spoke more broadly to the cultural and political situation of Brazil at that moment. They highlighted the feature's formal strategies such as a neorealist approach to people's everyday lives, its reliance on non-professional actors, the use of direct sound, and a more modern editing and lighting, which spoke to the overt dialogue that Brazilian culture had established with film production worldwide

⁶⁷ The UNE was created in 1937. In the 1960s, the student movement grew significantly, which led students to improve their organization. They established their core directories for students (DCE) and academic directories (AD). With the left back into power, the UNE openly supported the campaign in favor of the possession of president João Goulart, and strengthened its action in the field of culture by creating the CPCs (Center for Popular Culture) and UNE Volante, both aiming to promote awareness through film, theater, and music.

(e.g. Italian Neorealism, Third World Cinema, Japanese Film, and so on).⁶⁸ The fact the feature was founded and promoted by the CPC/UNE established a different conception with respect to filmmaking, as “it wasn’t the result of a (film) school or academia, but the product of a cultural movement that is mostly political,” said the newspaper of the National Students Union *Movimento*, adding, “(the film is) a gesture of rebellion against the traditional production modes.”⁶⁹

Critics from different print media also noticed how the politicization of art and film, in this case, had a double effect. On the one hand, despite *Cinco vezes favela*’s technical innovations and criticism of the language of the classical Brazilian films of the 1940s and 1950s, it could not go beyond an overtly realist language that reflected conceptions about art and aesthetics promoted by the Brazilian Communist Party, which had a great deal of influence over the CPCs’ initiatives and the field of cultural production in general by that point in time.⁷⁰ On the other hand, as early as 1962, it was clear that political films were not succeeding at the box office, a fact that was lamented by the film critic Mauricio Gomes Leite, who commented on *Cinco vezes favela* as well as previous features made by the evolving Cinema Novo.⁷¹

The movement had a vast impact on the Brazilian cultural scene and even repercussions abroad, as it was a dramatic rupture with the past film industry related to the studio system and the famous *chanchadas* produced from 1935 on by the Rio de Janeiro company, Cinédia.⁷² These early *chanchadas* were often seen as emulating the

⁶⁸ *Jornal de Brasil*, December 1962

⁶⁹ *Movimento*, February 6, 1963.

⁷⁰ Mauricio Gomes Leite, *Correio da manhã*, December 3, 1962.

⁷¹ Mauricio Gomes Leite, *Correio da manhã*, Ibid.

⁷² Alice Gonzaga, *50 anos de Cinédia* (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1987).

Hollywood musicals of the era. Most of those films starred performers of contemporary music like the internationally acclaimed Carmen Miranda and Orlando Silva. From 1941, the company Atlântida –also founded in Rio de Janeiro- would elaborate and perfect the conventions of *chanchada*, promoting carnival music and popular musicians and comics, such as the widely praised Oscarito and Grande Otelo, creating a picaresque and festive image of the everyday lives of the Brazilian popular classes.

The *cinemanovistas* would construct a genealogy of their movement as an opposition to what they regarded as superficial, commercial, and simplistic entertainment – characteristics attributed to the above-mentioned film musicals and comedies - as well as the folk/costume dramas promoted by Studio Vera Cruz in São Paulo. In their own accounts, the young rebel filmmakers of the Sixties sought to trace their origins back to 1952, when the Primeiro Congresso Paulista de Cinema Brasileiro (First Paulista Congress of Brazilian Cinema) and the Primeiro Congresso Nacional do Cinema Brasileiro (First National Congress of Brazilian Cinema) provided occasions for directors and producers to gather and discuss the role of film production in times of industrial development, the relationship between film industry and the state, and the need to innovate in terms of aesthetics and language during what was considered a period of crisis for Brazilian cinema in terms of both creativity and financial profits.⁷³

An active participant in those meetings was Nelson Pereira dos Santos, who released *Rio, 40 graus* (Rio, 100 Degrees F) in March 1956. The film expressed the anxieties wrought by crisis and an acute need for change, working as a landmark that

⁷³ José Mário Ortiz Ramos, *Cinema, estado e lutas culturais* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e terra, 1983); Pedro Simonard, *A geração do cinema novo. Para uma antropologia do cinema* (São Paulo: Mauad, 2006); Paulo Cesar Saraceni, *Por dentro do cinema novo* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova fronteira, 1993); Jean-Claude Bernardet, *Cinema brasileiro. Propostas para uma historia* (Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das letras, 2009);

ushered in the wave of neorealist cinema in Brazil. Cited as a key example of language renewal by the Cinema Novo filmmakers, *Rio, 40 graus* chronicled a day in the life of five peanut vendors from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, and was one of the first Brazilian films to address the issues of racism, poverty, and class differences, demystifying the image of Rio –and Brazil- as the tropical paradise pictured by the chanchadas.⁷⁴

Cinco vezes favela established an open dialogue with dos Santos' 1955 feature, as both used the previously invisible space of the shantytown as a stage for their stories about the city. In fact, these films constructed a continuum between the landmarks of Rio and the favelas, showing how the *cidade maravilhosa* (Marvelous City) praised in carnival songs and commercial films was a space constituted by critical social contradictions. The foregrounding of those inequalities was the trademark of the *cinemanovista* films, and the press, critics, and public acknowledged that gesture very early on.

In that vein, Brazil in the early sixties witnessed a wave of aesthetic and narrative challenges to classical cinema style. As I showed in chapter 1, during this decade film innovations were a matter of public discussion and the meanings of filmmakers' work in both Argentina and Brazil were tied to the nation's development and modernization. In this chapter I examine an expanded market for both political and art films in Brazil throughout the entire decade, analyzing how cultural publications positioned film as a key element in political debate. Rather than building a narrative about the much-studied

⁷⁴ *Rio, 40 graus* was considered the single most important Brazilian film of the 1950s. In a time when film production in Brazil was dreamily striving to become an "industry" controlled by big or medium-sized studios (especially Vera Cruz in São Paulo and Atlântida in Rio) with international majors (Columbia, Fox, WB) getting the biggest share of profits at the distribution end, Nelson Pereira dos Santos produced his first feature independently, using a cooperative system -- 59 friends shared the cost (and later the profits) along with the 76 people who worked in the film for free (or peanuts). He borrowed a defective old camera from the INC (National Institute of Cinema,).

phenomenon of the Cinema Novo, I trace the emergence of a new space constituted by critics, cultural and political magazines, photojournals, and Brazilian and international film festivals that positioned film as an element to discuss publicly the process of modernization that began in Brazil during the 1950s. In that sense, the institutionalization of Cinema Novo as an authorized public voice to speak loudly about the inequalities generated by the process of modernization in Brazil was the result of the interaction of several elements –their film aesthetics and narratives, but also the proliferation of film criticism, the creation of national film festivals, the international public opinion expressed through film magazines and festivals- that merged in a moment of political instability in Brazil characterized by the manifest weakness of democratic administrations alternating with authoritarian military regimes.

Filmmakers used the language, technology, and aesthetics of cultural modernization –lighter cameras, direct sound, non-classical editing, social-realism, existentialism, manifestos – to criticize ideas on development and modernity, creating a new version of what “modern” meant in the context of an *underdeveloped* Latin America. Films created a visual language that expressed an “alternative” Brazilian modernity, showing rural poverty and urban marginality.

Paradoxically, although Cinema Novo films were already synonymous with political commitment, artistic innovation, international approval, and national pride at the height of their production during the 1960s, spectators were not really part of the conversation the filmmakers sought to establish with the public. The intellectualized film output of this vast group –the historiography on the period barely recognized any other film production besides the *cinemanovistas*’ and never questioned the hegemony of Rio

de Janeiro film culture over other *ciclos regionais*⁷⁵ – designated them as the eyes that would allow the Brazilian popular classes to see the reasons for their misery and alienation, thereby intervening in the transformation of Brazilian society. The popular classes, however, were not interested in the gloomy films produced by the Cinema Novo adherents, and continued going to the movie theaters to see *caipira* comedies and American films.

Instead of analyzing the entire production of this era, I intend to summarize the most important changes occurring in the sphere of film production and criticism in 1960s Brazil to better understand the expansion of the cultural industry and the expanding public sphere constituted by films and the print media during the 1970s.

Modern Times, Modern Films, Modern Critics

Modernization was underway in Brazil during the 1950s in multiple forms. Projects of economic growth and development were central themes in public discussion and were a key element in the platform of the democratic administration of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961). The construction of a new capital city during his administration reunited modernist urban planner Lúcio Costa, architect Oscar Niemeyer, and landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx. Brasília was built from 1956 to 1960, becoming a symbol of modernization on a grand scale and of a utopian future.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ There was an interesting film production in other states than Rio de Janeiro during this moment. The film *Aruanda* made by Lindarte Noronha in 1960, started the so-called Cinema de Paraíba that launched documentaries and some fiction films that showed the poverty of the area. It lasted until 1979.

⁷⁶ Angela de Castro Gomes, ed., *O Brasil de JK* (Rio de Janeiro: CPDOC, 1991) 3

Cultural production also flourished during the 1950s. As historian Mônica Velloso has observed, “The spirit of the *new* and mostly a desire to experience changes were lived deeply. The emergence of an urban public and a mass culture modified Brazilian society.”⁷⁷ The vaudeville, the *chanchadas*, and carnival parades expressed the euphoria about the new era of prosperity and change, the so-called *golden years*. Musicals and comedies showcased popular characters living their everyday life with enthusiasm and humor. The *ufanismo*⁷⁸ of the decade permeated mass culture products. Films expressed a nationalist spirit embedded in a deep belief that Brazil could develop and be as modern as any First World nation.

In the midst of the then so popular ideas on modernization, writers associated with the Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros – ISEB (Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies) were “united in the political and intellectual project of creating an ideology that would stimulate Brazil’s development.”⁷⁹ This institution created in 1955 as an academic center linked to the Ministério de Educação e Cultura-MEC (Secretary of Education and Culture) inspired political parties, unions and the media to take up its nationalist and developmentalist project.⁸⁰

The Kubitschek administration’s ideas grew in that environment and his developmentalist objectives were expressed in his *Plano de Metas* (Plan of Targets) launched in 1956, which meant a greater opening of the national economy to foreign

⁷⁷ Mônica Pimenta Velloso, “A dupla face de Jano: romantismo e populismo,” in Angela de Castro Gomes, *ibid*, 123

⁷⁸ Ufanismo (patriotism) is an expression to name the attitude or position taken by certain nationalist groups that enhance the potential of Brazil, its natural beauty and wealth. Used to talk the Kubitschek years, but mostly the period of the last military dictatorship (1964-1985).

⁷⁹ Caio Navarro de Toledo, “ISEB Intellectuals, the Left, and Marxism”, *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 25 1, (Jan., 1998) 109

⁸⁰ Mônica Pimenta Velloso, *A dupla face de Jano*, 122.

capital. The national state invested large sums in infrastructure and production units, ultimately issuing more currency to cover skyrocketing expenses, which led, in turn, to escalating inflation and devaluation of wages.

If Kubitschek could claim, by the end of his tenure as president, an 80% increase in industrial production, it was also true that the inflation rate had edged up to 43%. By early 1961, economic crisis and political instability were material realities. After Jânio Quadros' resignation of the presidency (his brief interlude as chief executive lasted from January 31 to August 25 1961) the Congress was reluctant to give vice-president Jão Goulart—designated by the Constitution as Quadros' successor--the full presidential mandate. This was mainly due to military opposition to Goulart's allegedly left-wing tendencies, and the fact he was the political heir of Getúlio Vargas and advanced nationalist and populist policies.

The Goulart administration, which ended with a military coup d'état on March 31 1964, established closer ties to center-left political groups, and clashed with more conservative sectors of the society, specifically the União Democrática Nacional –UDN (National Democratic Union) and the Catholic Church.

Goulart also led Brazil in the drive for social reforms; his *Reformas de Base* were a cluster of social and economic measures of nationalist character that called for expanding state intervention in the economy. They included an education reform in order to combat adult illiteracy, employing Paulo Freire's pedagogic methods; a tax reform that limited profit remittances by multinational corporations; an electoral reform that would extend voting rights to illiterates and low-ranking military officers; and a controversial

land reform, which established that properties larger than 600 hectares would be expropriated and redistributed to the population by the government.

An environment of social transformation, populism, and politicization of civil society characterized Brazil in the early Sixties. The founding of Cinema Nôvo, in that vein, was related to the process of artistic and political creativity that emerged in the early 1960s in the Brazilian cultural field. There was a very important expansion in cultural production such as cinema, theater and painting alongside political activism. Film aesthetics and narratives sought to represent the masses and to communicate with them. Simultaneously - linked with the already mentioned experience of modernization and nationalism during the late 1950s, especially in the Kubistchek years – an artistic discourse/practice evolved around the creation of a truly national art. In other words, in the early 1960s, the artistic field intersected with the political commitment of the authors and their work, the emergence of *realismo social* (realism) as an aesthetic language, and *the people* as a topic.⁸¹

In the midst of this nationalist spirit, the Cinema Nôvo project shared elements with several filmmakers working abroad who challenged their national cinema's status quo during the early sixties – the Nouvelle Vague, the New Cinema in England and the Third Cinema in Africa and Latin America. The *cinemanovistas* accompanied the production of their films with oftentimes-overt political gestures. The *Eztetika da Fome* (aesthetics of hunger) -the artistic manifesto written by filmmaker Glauber Rocha-

⁸¹ In the specific case of cinema, the construction of a realist film language in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile and other LA countries and in Senegal and Nigeria was the product of a transnational phenomenon. In other words, by the 1960s all the directors or groups who wanted to innovate in their national motion picture market created a language that we cannot be called exclusively “national”. This explains the sense of community in aesthetic terms that flourished among the different groups at that time.

opened fierce discussions about the meaning of national and underdeveloped films in the *Rassegna del Cinema Latinoamericano* in Geneva (Retrospective of Latin American Cinema) in January 1965. The text was also chosen as a key piece to be published by the Brazilian leftist *Revista Civilização Brasileira* in July of the same year.⁸² It had a wide-ranging influence on the Brazilian intellectual and artistic field and captivated Third Cinema filmmakers as well, because of its resemblances to what was considered the principles of Italian neorealism, its compelling call to construct a specific Third World aesthetics, and the legitimacy of the use of violence as a political weapon, following the ideas of Frantz Fanon.⁸³

The key point of the manifesto was, however, the urgent need for Brazilian filmmakers in particular to focus on the acute social issues present in their society, which had been neglected by the *chanchadas* or exoticized by European films such as Marcel Camus' *Black Orpheus* (1959). Rocha and the cinemanovistas were committed to the *de-exoticization* of Brazil and to denouncing misery and alienation, in opposition to the flamboyant image created by previous Brazilian films. From the start, the cinemanovistas elaborated a complex idea of cultural and economic marginalization, elements they considered as essential problems of the popular classes. In that vein, Brazilian Cinema Novo was part of a transnational discussion about the relationship between film and nation building, in the context of poverty and underdevelopment.⁸⁴

Even though the term Third Cinema wasn't conceived until October 1969 when Fernando Solanas issued his manifesto, *Hacia un tercer cine* (Towards a Third Cinema),

⁸² Glauber Rocha, "Eztétika da fome," *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, July, 1965

⁸³ *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, July 1965.

⁸⁴ Glauber Rocha, *Cartas ao mundo* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997).

Rocha's ideas were similar to the ones expressed by filmmakers from Cuba –Tomás Gutierrez Alea; Argentina –Fernando Birri's *Tire Dié* (Gimme a Dime, 1956-7); or Senegal at that time.⁸⁵ Rocha's manifesto urged Brazilian artists to adopt an independent and oppositional stance towards commercial genre and *auteurist* cinemas emanating from the more developed, Western capitalist world. That is why he called for an aesthetic that expressed the poverty and sorrow of the Third World countries, showing the failure of the modernizing projects. Rocha and the other cinemanovistas were also aware of the inherent power of cinema, as a modern medium of communication, to effect sociopolitical transformation within nations.⁸⁶

In that vein, a substantial historiography on 1960s Brazilian film and culture has noted that filmmakers were desperately searching for *the Brazilian man* (o homem brasileiro) and *the people* (o povo) when making films. They sought their national roots and the authentic character of Brazilian culture, staging their dramas in the impoverished backlands of the Brazilian northeast and inner cities within the great urban areas, proving that the very existence of the wretched and excluded was the ultimate sign of failure of

⁸⁵ Fernando Solanas, "Hacia un Tercer Cine. Apuntes y experiencias para el desarrollo de un cine de liberación en el Tercer Mundo," *Tricontinental*. La Habana: OSPAAL, October 1969.

⁸⁶ Nancy Berthier, 'Memorias del subdesarrollo' in Alberto Elena and Marina Díaz-López, *The Cinema of Latin America* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003) 99-107; Michael Chanan, *The Cuban Image: Cinema and Cultural Politics in Cuba* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Octavio Getino and Susana Velleggia, *El cine de las historias de la revolución: aproximación a las teorías y prácticas del cine político en América Latina. 1967-1977* (Buenos Aires: Altamira, 2002) 125-68; John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London and New York: Verso, 2000) 65-72, 84-88; Michael Martin T., ed. *New Latin American Cinema, Volume One: Theory, Practices and Transcontinental Practices* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997); Mariano Mestman, "La hora de los hornos" in Alberto Elena and Marina Díaz-López, *The Cinema of Latin America* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003) 119-29; Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World" in Michael T. Martin, ed., *New Latin American Cinema, Volume One: Theory, Practices and Transcontinental Practices* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997) 33-58; Robert Stam, "Third World Film and Theory" in *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 92-102; Tzvi Tal, *Pantallas y revolución: Una visión comparativa del Cine de Liberación y el Cinema Novo* (Buenos Aires: Lumiere, 2005) 59-73.

the modernization project. They also rejected the representation of the popular classes as routinely portrayed in the light comedies of Atlântida or the dramas made by the studio Vera Cruz.⁸⁷

Also fueling the cinemanovistas critiques of the depiction of the popular classes promoted by the classical cinema was the CPC's concept of *arte popular revolucionária* (revolutionary popular art), which urged artists to identify themselves with the *essence* of the popular classes.⁸⁸ That was the starting point through which artists could have an accurate knowledge about the production of revolutionary art. On the one hand, the relationship between artists and popular classes could not have mediations. The direct and immediate connection between them guaranteed the genuine representation of the popular classes' concerns in the artistic production. On the other hand, works of art could not be a commodity. Cinemanovistas assumed that popular art should not be integrated into a commercialized cultural industry.

Those points were made when Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Vidas secas* (Barren Lives, 1963) was released in Rio de Janeiro on December 21, 1963. The film tells the story of a family of five: Fabiano, the father; Sinhá Vitória, the mother; two sons (just called boys) and their dog called Baleia (whale) in the poverty stricken and arid state of Alagoas, in the Brazilian nordeste. Adapted from Graciliano Ramos 1938 novel of the same name, *Vidas secas* was praised by the Brazilian film critics Alex Vianny, Ely Azeredo, A. Moniz Vianna, and Cláudio Mello e Souza, among many others, as offering an innovative

⁸⁷ Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, eds., *Brazilian Cinema* (Rutherford: New Jersey, 1982); Glauber Rocha, *Revisão crítica do cinema brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: 1963).

⁸⁸ The ideas about art and revolutionary commitment are expressed in *Anteprojeto do Manifesto do Centro Popular de Cultura* (Rio de Janeiro: Movimento, 1962).

narrative and aesthetics that expressed the reality of a Brazil previously inaccessible to most of the population.⁸⁹

Critics instantly recognized the film –together with the already mentioned *Cinco vezes favela*, Glauber Rocha's 1963 *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (Black God, White Devil), and Cannes Film Festival winner *O pagador de promessas* (The Given Word, Anselmo Duarte, 1962)- as exemplary of a Brazilian film language which tried to encompass the other forms of expression of Brazilian culture, particularly the most innovative and creative trends in narrative, drama, the plastic arts and music. Cinema Nôvo, in that sense, was more than the making of political or social film. It meant the modernization of film language and narrative, perceived and reinforced by a whole universe of intellectuals, film journals and magazines that would accompany its evolution in Brazil and abroad, creating a trademark that endured for decades, allowing many of the cinemanovistas to gain access to financial resources and influence in EMBRAFILME - the state production company- in the 1970s.

In the same way that the *generación del 60'* implied the technical and stylistic renewal of Argentine cinema discussed in the previous chapter, Brazilian Cinema Nôvo was a sign of a truly new relationship between the incipient Brazilian cultural industry and the international film scene that acknowledged Brazil as one of the most interesting avant-gardist film production locales of the time.

In that vein, the Brazilian press was thrilled about the fact that two films were chosen to represent Brazil in Cannes in 1964.⁹⁰ When the 17th Cannes Film Festival was

⁸⁹ Alex Vianny, *Última hora*, December 22, 1965; A. Moniz Vianna, *Correio da Manhã*, 22 August 1963; Ely Azeredo, *Correio da Manhã*, 27/28 August 1963; Cláudio Mello e Souza, *Estado de Minas*, 20 October 1963; Ely Azeredo, *Tribuna da Imprensa* (Rio de Janeiro), 6 April 1964.

launched in May of that year, *Vidas secas* and Glauber Rocha's *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (Black God, White Devil) astonished the festivalgoers. These screenings marked the official beginning of the international boom of Cinema Novo. As one press book of the festival noted, "Brazil explodes onto the scene, ready to conquer the world."⁹¹ French and American critics were ready to integrate Brazilian Cinema as one of the most interesting contemporary film experiences.⁹²

Deus e o diabo na terra do sol indeed included elements that spoke directly to the more cosmopolitan film culture that was emerging worldwide in those years, combining apparently traditional/folkloric elements with a critique of modernity. In an attempt to show his popular roots, Rocha recovered a traditional cultural expression of the Brazilian Northeast, the so-called *literatura de cordel*,⁹³ traditional chapbooks that tell the stories of the local heroes. That element in the film inspired a heterodox Western that was edited with Eisenstein's montage technique. The backdrop of the narrative was the problem of underdevelopment as faced by the people of the nordeste, the alienation present in popular forms of religiosity, individual rebellion, and an absent federal state in the region. Rocha combined the social documentary style influenced by the Italian neorealist films with the introspection of Stanislavsky and the didacticism of Brecht; the soundtrack

⁹⁰ Luis Alipio de Barros, *Última Hora*, March 18, 1964; *Jornal do Brasil*, March 22, 1964; *Última Hora*, March 20, 1964.

⁹¹ Press book, Cannes Film Festival, May 1964.

⁹² Raymond Lefèvre, "Vidas secas," *Cinéma*, November 1965; Leo Murray, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, March 1966; Ernest Callenbach, "Comparative Anatomy of Folk Myth Films: *Robin Hood* and *Antonio das Mortes*," *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1969/70; "Un cinéma en transe," *Image et Son*, January 1968; Interview to Glauber Rocha with M. Delahaye and others, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, July 1969.

⁹³ Popular and inexpensive printed booklets pamphlets containing folk novels, poems and songs, the literature de cordel became widely popular in the Northeast during the 1920s and 1930s. The booklets are still produced and sold nowadays in fairs and by street vendors.

combined the folkloric melodies of the region and the “Bachianas brasileiras” of Heitor Villa-Lobos.⁹⁴

Another Cinema Novo feature, Paulo Saraceni’s *Porto das Caixas* (Port of Boxes, 1962), bore the overt influences of the Nouvelle Vague, focusing on a woman’s life to show the inner city where she lives and the increasing decadence of her surroundings. The abandoned factory, a convent in ruins, and an empty amusement park are the symbols of the failure of the modernization process and its promises and also the causes of Irma’s solitude and frustration, as she cannot find happiness and sexual freedom in her oppressive marriage and unpleasant environment.

Praised or attacked, these films became the focus of discussion by a whole constellation of intellectuals, publishers, and critics who formed an environment in which Brazilian film conquered a “national” place, symbolizing at the same time, the integration of the nation into an international cultural network. The making and exhibition of these Brazilian films with a critical message was attended by magazines that incorporated film critique in their pages as a novelty and sign of cosmopolitanism. Published for the first time in March 1952 by Bloch Editores, *Manchete* magazine had *Paris Match* as an inspiration, using photojournalism as the primary form of language. The most widely circulated national magazine until the late 1980s, *Manchete* played an important role in promoting and/or demoting Brazilian cinema, reaching a broader audience than the more specialized publications.

⁹⁴ Robert Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 66.
66; Ismail Xavier, *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 56-121

The innovative monthly photojournal *Realidade*, created in January 1966 by Editôra Abril, used photography as the central element of its articles. Prominent photographers and filmmakers such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Geraldo Azevedo, and Mauricio Telles frequently contributed their work to this publication. *Realidade* was a watershed in Brazil's photojournalism, as it combined surveys about hot social issues (abortion, sexism, drugs, racism, domestic violence), articles that expressed the particular opinion of the journalists and writers, and an innovative design. Extremely popular – especially during its first phase from January 1966 to January 1969 – *Realidade* promoted the films produced by Glauber Rocha, Nelson Pereira, Carlos Diegues, Wladimir Carvalho, and Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, reproducing snapshots of their films to depict the *real* Brazil.⁹⁵ In this magazine, Cinema Novo features worked as a visual document of the severe social problems of the nation⁹⁶

New film journals and magazines emerged. The most influential was *Filme & Cultura*, an initiative sponsored by the federal government through the Instituto Nacional de Cinema Educativo-INCE (National Institute of Educational Film) “to contribute to the debate and information about the diverse issues related to film –in a broad sense- and its dialogue with other cultural artifacts.”⁹⁷ The publication emerged at the height of the

⁹⁵ *Realidade*, January 24, 1966; *Realidade*, March 27, 1966; *Realidade* August 22, 1967.

⁹⁶ “O qué é o Nordeste,?” *Realidade*, September 26, 1966; “A verdade sôbre a pobreza no Brasil,” *Realidade*, April 22, 1966.

⁹⁷ Flávio Tambellini, “Editorial,” *Filme & Cultura*, March 1965, 3. The INCE was created in 1936 during Getúlio Vargas administration with the purpose of producing educational films to be exhibited mostly in schools. It belonged to the Ministry of Education and Public Health, whose minister was Capanema. The Institute functioned for 30 years and went through seven different administrations: Getulio Vargas (1937-45); General Gaspar Dutra (1946-51); Getulio Vargas (1951-54); Juscelino Kubitschek (1955-61); Jânio Quadros (1961), João Goulart (1961-64) and Castelo Branco (1964-67). In 1966, the INCE became the INC-Instituto Nacional de Cinema (National Film Institute) leaving behind its educational purpose and mostly producing commercial films. See Anita Simis, *Estado e Cinema no Brasil* (São Paulo: Annablume, 1996); Carlos Roberto de Souza, *Catálogo de filmes produzidos pelo INCE* (São Paulo: MINC, 1990).

Cinema Novo's prominence. From its founding until 1969, the magazine was divided between the necessity of making commercial films –a position supported by a group of critics who had been connected to the defunct Vera Cruz Studio- and the kind of production proposed by the cinemanovistas. When EMBRAFILME was created in 1969, the magazine became the official voice of Cinema Nôvo.

Another novelty in terms of print media was the newspapers' cultural supplements. Founded in the midst of the cultural modernization of the 1950s, these publications incorporated film critique as a central piece of what they offered to their readers. *Folha de São Paulo*, *O Estado de São Paulo*, *Última Hora*, *Jornal do Brasil*, *Tribuna da Imprensa*, and *Correio da Manhã* created specialized columns that consolidated film criticism as a legitimate profession and elevated the film critic to the authoritative role of public intellectual, as they did not talk just about aesthetics or entertainment; they used films to reveal *the* national reality that had been obscured by the modernization euphoria (and they talked about other pressing issues).⁹⁸ Figures such as critics Alex Viany, Jean Claude Bernardet, Ely Azeredo, Nelson Motta, Maurício Gomes Leite, and Antônio Moniz Vianna, among others, used Brazilian film as a platform to discuss everyday life and politics.

In 1959 filmmaker and critic Alex Viany published *Introdução ao Cinema Brasileiro*, a book about the history of Brazilian cinema issued by the Instituto Nacional do Livro-INL (National Book Institute). The fact that an official institution published a book about cinema elevated the status of film as a socially relevant activity, leading to the

⁹⁸ Juarez Bahia, *História da Imprensa Brasileira* (São Paulo: Ática, 1990); Sérgio Luiz Gadini, *A cultura como notícia no jornalismo brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Prefeitura da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro/ Secretaria Especial de Comunicação Social, 2003).

recognition of filmmaking as a fundamental occupation. A comprehensive examination of Brazilian cinema history, Viany's book listed the names of all the professionals –from technicians to actors, from directors to extras – who had ever worked in Brazilian films. Viany endorsed films previously despised by the critics – an intellectual gesture that underscored his attempt to valorize and praise what he called *cinema nacional*.⁹⁹

His fate as a leftist intellectual and critic was inextricably tied to Cinema Novo's, which had in Viany one of its most important supporters. Viany famously said that "Cinema Nôvo is a matter of [speaking the] truth (...) during the present situation in Brazil, I think that critical realism is the answer [to the issue of film language]."¹⁰⁰ Viany wrote hundreds of articles during his career in praise of the new generation of filmmakers, publishing the 1965 pamphlet called *Quem é quem no Cinema Novo* that listed more than 1,500 people from filmmakers to technicians who belonged to the movement and thus, were part of "the revolution."¹⁰¹

Critic Claudio Mello e Souza also shared his enthusiasm for the films produced in the early Sixties when writing about the above mentioned *Porto das Caixas*. In the pages of the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil*, Mello e Souza paid tribute to this particular film and the new generation that "would completely transform Brazilian cinema, showing how important we can be in terms of film production and how proud we are to show our films abroad."¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Alex Viany, *Introdução ao Cinema Nôvo* (Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1959); Arthur Autran, "Panorama da historiografia do cinema brasileiro," *Alceu*, 7 14, (January/June 2007) 17-30;

¹⁰⁰ Alex Viany, "O Cinema Nôvo," *Novos Rumos*, April 1962.

¹⁰¹ Alex Viany, "Quem é quem no Cinema Novo," *Vozes*, April 1964.

¹⁰² Claudio Mello e Souza, *Jornal do Brasil*, October 23, 1962.

Many critics shared Mello e Souza's enthusiasm for the young filmmakers. Renowned intellectual and critic Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes, who also had an important role in the construction of the legend of Cinema Novo, wrote profusely about the movement's films during his years as an active contributor to the *Suplemento Literário* (Literary Supplement) of the *Estado de São Paulo* -published between October 6, 1956 and December 17 1966.¹⁰³ He created and directed the film library of the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo, which subsequently led to the emergence of the Cinemateca Brasileira (Brazilian Cinematheque). In 1965, Salles Gomes organized the first university course on film at the University of Brasília. As a result of his film showings in the city, the Brasília Festival of Brazilian Cinema was born in 1965.

Rio and São Paulo were not the only locales for film aficionados. A spirited *cinophilia* emerged in Minas Gerais during 1950s that had its coordinates in the Centro de Estudos Cinematográficos-CEC (Center of Cinematographic Studies) and the magazine *Revista de Cinema*, published by the CEC between 1954 and 1964.¹⁰⁴ One of the editors, Maurício Gomes Leite, became a key film critic in the newspapers *Correio da Manhã* and *Jornal do Brasil*, whose articles praised the first films made by the cinemanovistas during the late 1950s and very early 1960s.

Domestic film festivals were privileged spaces to promulgate and publicize Cinema Novo nationally. The *Jornal do Brasil* and the modernity-icon department store Mesbla organized the JB-Mesbla Film Festival during the 1960s, which became a traditional point of Cinema Novo, and a motivation for filmmakers beyond Rio de Janeiro to produce amateur and art films. The *mineiro* (native of Minas Gerais) Joaquim Pedro de

¹⁰³ Elizabeth Lorenzotti, *Suplemento Literário. Que falta ele faz* (São Paulo: Imprensa Oficial, 2007).

¹⁰⁴ The CEC was one of the first *cinelubes* (art-film houses) in Brazil founded on September 15, 1951.

Andrade's made *O padre e a moça* in 1965, a film that was nationally as the revelation of the year and one of the highest points of Cinema Novo.¹⁰⁵

The JB-Mesbla Film Festival was held in the Cinema Paissandú in the traditional neighborhood of Flamengo, Rio de Janeiro. Since December of 1960 the movie theater served as the epicenter of screenings of Cinema Novo, Nouvelle Vague, and Italian neorealist films. The traditional cafés and bars of its surroundings –such as the Lanchonete Oklahoma, the Bar Cinerama, and the Café Lamas - made the place a hot spot where filmmakers, intellectuals, and artists gathered to talk about art, history, culture, and politics.¹⁰⁶

The Festival de Cinema Brasileiro de Brasília (Brasilia Festival of Brazilian Cinema), which originated as an initiative of Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes, was an important event that provided a space where critics, filmmakers, students, and moviegoers gathered to discuss and see Brazilian films. Organized in the city that served as a symbol of national modernization, the festival awarded films produced exclusively by cinemanovistas for almost 15 years from the time of its founding. Finally, in 1984, Murillo Moreira Salles' *Happier Than Ever* won the Candango Trophy (Best Film Award). indicating a generational and stylistic change from the Cinema Novo hegemony.¹⁰⁷

Cinema Novo was, thus, more than a film style, school, or movement. It was the creation of filmmakers, political activists, intellectuals, and critics who elevated it to the

¹⁰⁵ Catalog *I Festival de cinema amator JB-Mesbla*, 1965, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

¹⁰⁶ Jaime Rodrigues, "Senador Vergeiro 35, o endereço de uma geração," *Filme Cultura*, August 1986, 98-99.

¹⁰⁷ Press Book Festival de Cinema Brasileiro de Brasília, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1971, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984.

category of emblem of Brazilian cultural development. And yet Cinema Novo films were not popular at the box office. In 1960, for example, of the 786 film features exhibited in Brazil, 37 were made locally and 749 were foreign. Those Brazilian films got just 22% of the box office that year, indicating the enduring gap between national and international film exhibition in the Brazilian market.¹⁰⁸ Even in 1964 Brazilian filmmakers were responsible for just 49 films against 500 that originated abroad, and the share of the box office for these domestic films was smaller than in 1960, reaching a mere 17%.¹⁰⁹

The popularity attained by Cinema Novo in the Brazilian media and the project these filmmakers advanced would change after the coup d'état on March 31, 1964. The already mentioned failure at the box office, an increasing control by the new military authorities over cultural production, and the constant disagreements among intellectuals about the relationship between aesthetics, culture, and politics caused an important transformation in the field of film production. The immediate years after the coup brought uncertainty and tension among the filmmakers and critics. Some opted to criticize the previous project, making films that used allegory as a way to criticize the earlier use of an aesthetics of realism and the preceding political choices, especially the formal and informal ties established between filmmakers and the Communist Party. Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Fome de Amor* and *Como era gostoso o meu francês*, Glauber Rocha's *Terra em transe*, and Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's *Macunaíma* were instruments of such auto-criticism. That is the topic of the next section.

¹⁰⁸ Boletim Informativo do SIP, Nro. 32, Arquivo Nacional, March 1971.

¹⁰⁹ Boletim Informativo do SIP, Nro. 32, Arquivo Nacional, Ibid.

The Allegorical Turn or how Tasteless was my Little Box Office

In March 1965, a year after the military coup, the editorial of the first issue of the political journal *Revista Civilização Brasileira* noted “Brazilian people are now facing a major new challenge. Will they be able to overcome the forces that oppose national development through democratic and independent practices? (...) We think so. We also think that it is mainly a task for the intellectuals to pursue.”¹¹⁰ Although the journal issued by the renowned publisher Ênio Silveira was closely linked to Marxist thinking, it did not restrict the focus of its attention to politics and the economy, incorporating as well a wider range of topics such as cinema, literature, theater, music, and visual arts. This publication endorsed the works of authors embraced by the New Left throughout Latin America during the 1960s, including Lucien Goldmann, Herbert Marcuse, and Antonio Gramsci.¹¹¹ Furthermore, *Revista Civilização Brasileira* had the privilege of disseminating the first Portuguese translations of articles written by Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse, marking the entry of the Frankfurt School in Brazil and signaling more strongly the humanist orientation of the publication. Alex Viany was in charge of the cinema section, but it also attracted Carlos Diegues, Glauber Rocha, Gustavo Dahl, and Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, who published in the journal the most significant documents produced by the *cinemanovistas* during those years. The already mentioned *Eztétika da fome*, Gustavo Dahl’s *Cinema Nôvo e estruturas económicas tradicionais*, and *Cinema*

¹¹⁰ “Própositos e princípios (Apresentação da revista),” *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, March 1965, 3.

¹¹¹ See José Aricó, *La cola del Diablo. Itinerario de Gramsci en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Puntosur, 1988); Raúl Burgos, *Los gramscianos argentinos. Cultura y política en la experiencia de Pasado y Presente* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2004); Carlos Nelson Coutinho, *Gramsci. Um estudo sobre seu pensamento político* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1999).

Nôvo, origens, ambições e perspectivas, among others, showed that filmmakers and critics were aware of the new political times.¹¹²

These filmmakers and commentators restated the political and aesthetic principles that Cinema Nôvo had proclaimed since its origins, that is to say, the documentary-style of their films, the necessity of an artisanal –as opposed to industrial- cinema, and the aesthetics of hunger, which legitimized the scarce financial and technical resources to produce films. But, for the first time, they addressed the issues of spectatorship and financial revenue as problems to confront. For director Gustavo Dahl, the explanation for the lack of spectators was the existence of divergent interests between producers and exhibitors, with the latter preferring to screen American over Brazilian films. For critic Jean Claude Bernardet, on the other hand, the problem was that films produced by the *cinemanovistas* were made for *plateias convencidas* (already persuaded audiences), which meant that most of the “normal” spectators could not comprehend the reality that Cinema Nôvo films were trying to depict. Taking *Cinco vezes favela* as an example, the Bernardet contended that there were two problems with most of the Cinema Nôvo films. On the one hand, many features showed an oversimplified reality displayed throughout a bare realism that did not allow the filmmakers to present a more nuanced picture of Brazilian social relations. On the other hand, some other films that openly rejected the the realist aesthetic, opted for a hermetic language that likewise alienated the spectator. Both

¹¹² Gustavo Dahl, “Cinema Nôvo e estruturas económicas tradicionais,” *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, March 1966, 5/6; Alex Vianny, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Glauber Rocha, “Cinema Novo, origens, ambições e perspectivas,” *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, March 1965, 1.

kinds of film did not allow the audiences to actively elaborate what they saw and connect the film narratives with their own experiences.¹¹³

In that vein, director Gustavo Dahl wondered, “Is there a lack of spectators for Cinema Nôvo?” And he answered, “no, Cinema Nôvo has its spectators. It is constituted by students, professionals, artists, and intellectuals (...) there are fifty thousand people in Rio de Janeiro [who see our films], even though much of our public is not totally happy with those films.”¹¹⁴ Dahl concluded that Cinema Nôvo films made in recent years, which had abandoned such an obscure language (Walter Lima Jr.’s *Menino de Engenho/Plantation Boy* and Carlos Diegues’ *A grande cidade/The Big City*), had a better reception among audiences and were more profitable (but less interesting and faithful to the original Cinema Nôvo proposals).

In any case, the most renowned cinemanovistas reluctantly acknowledged the problem, while trying to maintain their international fame. In a famous interview published in the same issue in which Bernardet addressed the scarcity of Cinema Nôvo spectators, directors Carlos Diegues, Gustavo Dahl, Paulo César Saraceni, David Neves, and critic Alex Viány informed their readers of the immense success their films had enjoyed in the already mentioned first *Rassegna del Cinema Latinoamericano* in Geneva in 1965. The article stressed how the judges of the festival selected Nelson Pereira dos Santos’ *Vidas Secas* as the best film and how the FIPRESCI (Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique) also honored the Cinema Nôvo trajectory, as their films

¹¹³ Jean Claude Bernardet, Para un cinema dinámico, *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, May 1965, 1.

¹¹⁴ Gustavo Dahl, “Cinema Nôvo e seu público,” *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, December 1966/March 1967.

expressed “the authenticity of a language capable of easily interpreting the human and social reality of a nation.”¹¹⁵

Even when the international acknowledgment was still intact for those Brazilian directors, the signs of the crisis were starting to show. After the military coup, the relationship between the political movements and artists and filmmakers was not as articulated as it used to be. Films were more exposed to market mechanisms that in previous years. Even though there was a period of increasing political radicalization from 1964 to 1968, filmmakers were now more eager for financial support, given the lack of revenue earned by their films and the scarcity of state aid for film production. The censorship mechanisms also started to complicate the panorama, as the military created institutions to directly control film production, distribution, and exhibition.

In that vein, the creation of the INC-Instituto Nacional de Cinema (National Film Institute) in November 1966 had as a major goal the “protection” of national cinema against the “avalanche” of foreign films.¹¹⁶ In practical terms, however, the INC meant a more direct ideological control over film exhibition, given that the permits for that purpose were now issued by the federal government instead of individual state officials. Further, it was also the federal government that decided which films would compete in international festivals, a direct confrontation with the *cinemanovistas* who had been very critical of the military government.

It was also clear that many of the principles that the *cinemanovistas* said they still supported were not evident in their films. When Glauber Rocha and the production team

¹¹⁵ Gustavo Dahl, Carlos Diegues, David Neves, Paulo César Saraceni, and Alex Vianny “A Vitoria do Cinema Nôvo. Gênova 1965,” *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, May 1965.

¹¹⁶ Decreto-lei nro. 43, Criação do Instituto Nacional de Cinema, November 18, 1966.

of *Terra em transe* met intellectuals and journalists to discuss the film at the Museu da Imagem e do Som in Rio de Janeiro on May 18, 1967, the debate revolved around the anxieties manifested by the articles published in the *Revista Civilização Brasileira* and other print media that seriously addressed the future of Brazilian cinema.¹¹⁷ Rocha openly insisted that “This is not a political film. It is [a film] about politics and its promoters.”¹¹⁸ Fernando Gabeira, a journalist and future member of the guerrilla group that kidnapped the American ambassador in 1968, criticized Rocha’s political positions as presented in the film. Gabeira thought there was “an abysmal distance between allegorical Eldorado - the fictional/symbolic country where the action takes place in the film - and the Brazilian and Latin American reality -a reality that the journalist claimed as politically revolutionary, intersected by social movements and successful armed struggle.”¹¹⁹

The discussion focused on the key character of the film, the intellectual Paulo Martins. Whereas legendary cinemanovista producer Luis Carlos Barreto and the entire production team defended the complexities of the film’s aesthetic language and the expression of the metaphoric failure of the politicized poet Martins, Gabeira believed in the necessity of exploring a more direct and politically compelling message. In other words, Gabeira and other critics tied to the Brazilian Communist Party claimed the film needed a less sophisticated and more “blatant political language.”¹²⁰

The heated debate at this meeting expressed the difficult position in which the cinemanovistas found themselves by the late 1960s. The relationship between art and

¹¹⁷ “Para onde vai o cinema brasileiro,?” *Correio da manhã*, May 23, 1967; “Terra em transe sem espectadores,” *Jornal do Brasil*, May 12, 1967.

¹¹⁸ “*Terra em Transe* em debates no Rio,” *Folha de São Paulo*, May 19, 1967.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Estado de São Paulo*, May 12, 1967.

politics they endorsed since the foundation of the movement at the end 1950s was not viable anymore, if they wanted to make films for an audience broader than the fifty thousand people recognized by Dahl as the Cinema Novo fans. Making films about successful guerrilla movements was not an option for Glauber Rocha and the other members of the group, who were trying to cope with what they thought were the defects of an excessive artistic avant-gardism or a poor realism.

Even though the cinemanovistas adhered to the first editorial of the *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, which demanded an active political role for Brazilian intellectuals, the films they started to produce after 1965/66 showed a progressive moderation regarding the filmmakers' role as a vanguard. *Macunaíma* (Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, 1969) and Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Como era gostoso o meu francês* (How Tasty was my Little Frenchman, 1971) -made after Institutional Act no. 5 (AI-5), which sharply restricted political rights and free expression in the late 1960s- evidenced how Brazilian filmmaking was entering a new, less overtly political and challenging phase, searching for a more commercial venue that incorporated, at least partially, elements present in Brazilian mass culture.¹²¹ The press also pushed filmmakers to pursue that enterprise, urging the filmmakers to join the cultural industry.¹²²

The weekly magazine *Veja*, founded in 1968, published a series of articles on Brazilian cinema that called for a modernization of visual language and narratives. Referring to the visible technological innovation forged by the TV network Rede Globo, the journalist said, "we [Brazilians] need to be competitive when making films. Our TV

¹²¹ I talk more extensively about the AI-5 decree and its consequences in chapter 4.

¹²² Ely Azeredo, "Fazendo filmes para o povo? Macunaíma e o problema da linguagem," *Jornal do Brasil*, November 24, 1969.

is recognized worldwide because of its high technological standards. We have nightly news that reaches the entire country. How come we still make films in black and white with direct sound and non-professional actors?”¹²³

Final Words: Tropicalism and a New Image of Brazil

As we have already seen, the negative commercial (as opposed to critical) reception that the cinemanovistas' works had received --along with the political suppression of the left -- produced a significant transformation in the conception of the cinema and its role in politics and culture. Analyzing the transformation within the Brazilian cultural world during the late 1960s, Christopher Dunn defined post-1968 culture as the moment of *tropicalismo*, “an exemplary instance of cultural hybridism that dismantled binaries that maintained neat distinctions between high and low, traditional and modern, national and international cultural productions.”¹²⁴

Glauber Rocha's *Terra em transe*, Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's *Macunaíma* and Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Como era gostoso o meu francês* were, in that vein, a transition from an avant-garde, revolutionary consciousness, and leftist moment to a more politically resigned and more anthropological (as opposed to sociological) project but also to a closer relationship with the cultural industry, a position applauded by most of

¹²³Os paradoxos do Cinema Novo, *Veja*, March 22, 1969.

¹²⁴Christopher Dunn, *Brutality Garden: Tropicalia and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 15. See also Randall Johnson and Robert Stam, *Brazilian Cinema*, *Ibid*; Randall Johnson, *Antonio das Mortes* (Wiltshire: Flicks Books, 1998); Robert Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

the mainstream press.¹²⁵ These films also attempted to break with the previous artistic and aesthetic conceptions that favored *auteurism* over commercial films. In that regard, they were moving closer to Dunn's definition of *tropicalismo*, a place where high and low engaged and gave birth to Brazilian popular culture.

Macunaíma adapted Mario de Andrade's 1929 homonymous classic novel that explored the theme of an allegorical personage with no fixed racial or cultural identity who changed repeatedly throughout the film. Born to an old indigenous woman in the Amazon, Macunaíma is a black child –performed by popular actor Grande Otelo, well known as a central character of Brazilian chanchadas -who comes face to face with a spring that turns him white. With that change, he and his two brothers move to the big city facing bizarre and comical situations. Macunaíma meets and marries the guerrilla member Ci, who using violent tactics, supposedly fights for a better world. The film was intended to be both a synthesis of the myth of the three races so ubiquitous in Brazil popular culture and a criticism of the turmoil during times of military rule. Macunaíma is always lazy, flamboyant, and a liar, represented as an archetypical Brazilian character.

The press welcomed the film as a sign of a new beginning for Brazilian Cinema. Intellectual Luis Carlos Maciel said, “Macunaíma is a true novelty in Brazilian modern cinema, thus, it is great for the development of Brazilian culture. Macunaíma discarded the dialectics –that was the characteristic of all Cinema Novo since its earliest films- to represent the structure of Brazilian society (...) that is the reason for its success.”¹²⁶ The newspaper O Globo said, “Macunaíma amazed all those people who used to despise

¹²⁵ “Qual transe? Fim da utopia de Glauber Rocha,” *Manchete*, June 22, 1967; *Fatos e Fotos*, April 20, 1967.

¹²⁶ Luis Carlos Maciel, “Macunaíma somos todos nós,” *Última Hora*, November 19, 1969;

Brazilian films (...) it is a really popular film, people go to see it, and it is not a copy of American films.”¹²⁷ Critic Orlando Fassoni thought the film was incredibly successful because it did not intend to be a masterpiece, but a popular film that could translate with high technical quality what Mário de Andrade wrote at the end of the 1920s.¹²⁸ The fact that the film was also a success abroad made the press optimistic about the future of Brazilian cinema. *Macunaíma* won the Best Film Award in the Mar del Plata Film Festival (Argentina) in 1970, and international critics and scholars praised it.¹²⁹ [Though Joan Dassin wrote an interesting essay noting that foreign critics tended to emphasize the picaresque aspects of the film and missed its social criticism]

In the venue of *tropicalismo*, Cinema Novo also developed the (metaphorical) issue of cannibalism, a key theme of Brazilian Modernism in the 1920s, as a complex variant of pop culture in an underdeveloped country. Film scholar Robert Stam argued that “the negative pole of the cannibalist metaphor, meanwhile, made cannibalism a critical instrument for exposing the exploitative social Darwinism implicit in savage capitalism and bourgeois civility,” while highlighting elements present in Brazilian mass culture. Nelson Pereira dos Santos’ *Como era gostoso o meu francês* tells a story, set in colonial Brazil, of a Frenchman who is first captured by the Portuguese and then by the Tupinambás after they attack and kill a group of Portuguese in 1594. Rival Portuguese and French settlers used indigenous peoples as allies in their struggle to establish control over the land and its wealth. In the film, indigenous Tupinambas and Tupiniquins practice cannibalism as a sign of power over their enemies. The Frenchman is allowed

¹²⁷ *O Globo*, October 6, 1969.

¹²⁸ Orlando Fassoni, *Folha de São Paulo*, September 17, 1969.

¹²⁹ “O herói de Mar del Plata,” *Fatos e Fotos*, March 1971; J. R. Molotnik, “Macunaíma: Revenge of the Jungle Freaks,” *Jump Cut*, December 1976, 22-24

free run of the village area, is eventually provided with a "wife," and adopts traditional Tupinamba attire in place of his Western clothes, but is still eaten by the Tupinambas in a celebration of their defeat of the Tupiniquins in battle. The movie ends with a postscript that reveals that the Tupinambas were mercilessly exterminated shortly after they ate the Frenchman.

Cannibalism became a persistent feature of some films during this phase and was used as a tool to criticize the economic modernization imposed by the military, paying a tribute to Brazilian popular culture, as well. The metaphor of "Brazilian being devoured by Brazil," worked in films such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos' and Arnaldo Jabor's *Pindorama*, partially successful at the box office.¹³⁰ According to Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, the image of the rich devouring the poor, the poor devouring each other, and everybody devouring everybody, all to the beat of carnival music, was the perfect expression of the cannibal metaphor deployed to question the image of Brazil as a "modern country" circulated by the dictatorship from the late sixties on.¹³¹ At the same time, cannibalism allowed the filmmakers to incorporate some features of Brazilian popular culture that made their films more commercial and attractive for mass audiences. All these films used color (instead of the previously *de rigueur* black and white) and had famous popular singers on their soundtrack. These filmmakers were also extremely careful with the historical reconstruction of their films, the cinematography, and the photography.

¹³⁰ Randal Johnson, "Tupy or not Tupy: Cannibalism and Nationalism in Contemporary Brazilian Literature and Culture", in John King, *On Modern Latin American Fiction* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 23

¹³¹ During the Venice's Festival in 1969, Joaquim Pedro explained that his film was a metaphor against the Brazilian economical miracle. Press Book of Macunaíma, Venice Film Festival, 1969

The *tropicalismo* presented in their films was, however, gloomier, less hopeful, and more critical than what was expected by the press. Governor Carlos Lacerda thought *Macunaíma* was too polemical to be successful; he claimed it was the product of a “childish leftism” and also not technically perfect,¹³² an opinion shared by other commentators, who would be key promoters in the new phase of Cinema Novo and the cultural industry during the 1970s.¹³³ The breakdown of (semi) democratic politics in 1964 and the lack of a local market for their films filled these filmmakers with a certain pessimism that progressively faded as they became part of the cultural industry in the subsequent decade.

It was in the 1970s when many of those filmmakers, intellectuals, journalists, and film critics would intervene much more directly and successfully in the public sphere, triggering heated debates about topics that would reach broader audiences and many more film spectators. Their films truly spoke the language of modernization, as they established an open dialogue with TV and popular music and literature, finally achieving success in their search for the *homem brasileiro*.

¹³² Carlos Lacerda, *Macunaíma é de chorar*, *Manchete*, 1969

¹³³ João Carlos Monteiro “Macunaíma, o ‘nôvo’ cinema,” *O Estado de São Paulo*, October, 1969; Theresa Cesário Alvim, “Macunaíma é indomável,” *Correio da Manhã*, August 31, 1969; Jaime Rodrigues, *Diário de Notícias*, November 5, 1969; Ely Azeredo, “Mário de Andrade e o cinemanovismo,” *Jornal do Brasil*, November 6, 1969.

Chapter 3:

History on Celluloid: Historical Films in Revolutionary Argentina. 1968 - 1973

Introduction

The wind blows freely over the deserted pampas; no natural or human obstacle stops it. Slowly, a backward tracking shot shows the extension of blurred plains that becomes more and more distinct as the camera moves back. A sad melody composed by the folklorist Ariel Ramirez sounds in the background. It is the first minute and 30 seconds of Torre Nilsson's *Martín Fierro*, released on July 4, 1968 in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Juan goes to a *pulpería* to have a drink. The owner tells Juan that he owes him money. The *pulpería* owner is clearly lying. Juan, after a long discussion, kills him. Juan goes to jail, escapes, and becomes an outlaw. He is Juan Moreira, popular hero, hero of the poor (*Juan Moreira*, Leonardo Favio, 1973, 03:00)

These two films represented a crucial period in the relationship between culture and politics in recent Argentine history. They span a time when the meaning of well-established notions such as culture, art, or even film was blurred as never before. In the early sixties, intellectuals and artists had an alleged autonomy when producing cultural artifacts. Public intellectuals emphasized the political commitment assumed by the individuals instead of the aesthetic choices that generated the creative process or artistic product. By the early seventies, personal commitment would not be enough anymore. The work of art in itself ought to be politicized, and in many cases, revolutionary, a

transformation on intellectuals' and artists' positions related to the revolutionary process in Cuba and the active political role expected for them to perform.¹³⁴

The impact of the revolutionary process in Cuba was vast, as it also altered and reinvented the narratives regarding the Latin American past and present. After a decade of the Modernization Theory that stressed the absolute necessity of social progress and development following the First World countries' path and half a century of an evolutionary Marxist discourse that addressed modernization and industrialization as prerequisites for socialist revolution, Cuba showed the possibility of radical change in a nation where social and political structures had not followed the "phases" advocated by the most positivist analyses. In that vein, it became the inspiration for many intellectuals from the left to more nationalist positions, who saw the possibilities of radical transformations in poorly industrialized nations with large rural populations.

The intellectual field, thus, integrated new versions of radical criticism that eschewed the most orthodox versions of Marxist analysis. A transformation of the Marxist interpretations coincided with the emergence of a new generation of intellectuals who had left the Communist and Socialist Parties, due to their rigid versions of history and the future unfolding from that history.¹³⁵ In tandem with the changes that Marxist

¹³⁴ Silvia Sigal, *Intelectuales y poder en la Argentina. La década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2002), 149-172; Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años 60. La formación de la nueva izquierda intelectual en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: El cielo por asalto, 1993). Both authors explicitly talk about how the Cuban Revolution changed the expectations about the public role performed by intellectuals and artists in the political arena. See also the Cuban classic made by Tomás Gutierrez Alea *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment, 1968). The film clearly establishes how intellectuals must be fighting with the people in the streets, leaving aside any other bourgeois activity.

¹³⁵ There is an extensive bibliography on the new interpretations of Marxism and the introduction of Gramsci in Argentina and Latin America. See José Aricó, *La cola del Diablo. Itinerario de Gramsci en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Puntosur, 1988); Raúl Burgos, *Los gramscianos argentinos. Cultura y política en la experiencia de Pasado y Presente* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2004); Carlos Nelson Coutinho, *Gramsci. Um estudo sobre seu pensamento político* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1999).

ideology had experienced worldwide during those years, intellectuals, students, and artists incorporated features of a more humanist leftism—certainly influenced by a rereading of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* – that used Antonio Gramsci’s work to better understand the Latin American reality – considered similar to the Italian situation, with its stark contrast between a poor south and a rich north.¹³⁶

A new perspective on the historical process that integrated anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, third-worldist, and nationalist elements spoke directly to the path that Argentina had followed since the emergence of the Peronist regime in 1946 and its subsequent fall in 1955. As Oscar Terán has suggested, “to an extended vision that exceeded the intellectual field and was permeated by anti-colonial feelings, *Europeanism* was a category that disqualified those who analyzed Argentine society” without understanding the national specificities, including the populist phenomenon.¹³⁷

The print media –despite its relative conservatism- wasn’t an exception to those influences. It echoed the impact of the revolution in Cuba, the decolonization of Africa, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) founded in 1961, providing readers with a different perspective on the role that Latin America would play in a bi-polar world rigidly structured around American capitalism and Soviet socialism. The possibility of a new path besides those two options contributed to the formation of a new image of Latin America and a reconsideration of the place that Argentina had in the continent.¹³⁸

The Sixties were also years when intellectuals and artists would deeply reconsider their place in the world and their social practices in both Argentina and Brazil. As we saw

¹³⁶ Beatriz Sarlo, *La batalla de las ideas. 1943-1973* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2003); Oscar Terán *Historia de las ideas en la Argentina. Diez lecciones iniciales, 1810-1980* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2008).

¹³⁷ Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años sesenta*, Ibid, 98

¹³⁸ Silvia Sigal, *Intelectuales y poder en la Argentina*, Ibid; Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años sesenta*, Ibid.

in chapter 1, the immediate national past, particularly populism and its long-term consequences for the social structure and the political dynamics of the nation were present in public discussions in Argentina. Internal turmoil –characterized, among other things, by a lack of political and civil rights- and the turbulent political movements that were occurring in the so-called “Third World” provided the context that would nurture projects of national and continental liberation.

In the light of those events, a historiography that revised the official narrative of the national past flourished in Argentina. As many scholars have pointed out during the last two decades, many revisionist schools –including academic and non-professional historians – emerged during the late 1950s in Argentina, offering insurgent challenges to the longstanding liberal-historical narrative regarding the origins of Argentina and Latin America.

In this chapter, I examine historical films made during 1968-1975 in Argentina. The historical genre that blossomed during the late 1960s and the early 1970s participated in the construction of an Argentine identity that had national history as its main element. Historical films were made by a variety of directors of conservative, nationalist, and leftist backgrounds. They adapted national literary “classics” –such as *Martín Fierro*- or chronicles of the lives of the Argentine *próceres* (Founding Fathers). Their work would trigger a debate about national identity and a dispute regarding the veracity of the “official” national history. Many of these films integrated characters who were previously marginal, and even the more conservatives features would incorporate some popular historical individuals or literary archetypes.

These films offered an alternative pantheon of national heroes, promoting many times oppositional narratives of national history that challenged the versions in school textbooks. They offered the viewing public powerful symbols of courage, sacrifice, and personal dedication that fed the popular imagination regarding social change. Widespread images of armed struggle, so in vogue in those times, were present in films of all ideological tendencies. Cultural artifacts, especially literature and film were infused with the image of the masculine hero who expressed the *real* national essence and/or fought against injustice, thereby changing the course of history.

Historical and folkloric films had been made before that period. There was the 1915 release of the silent film *Nobleza Gaucha* (Gaicho Nobility), directed by Eduardo Martinez de la Pera and loosely based on *Martín Fierro* by José Hernández, as well as *Santos Vega* by Rafael Obligado. Both depicted the good national traditional values linked to the rural population, which was already disappearing in the face of European immigration and modernization. In general, films made during the early decades of the twentieth century adopted a nostalgic perspective on the gaicho and his moral values.¹³⁹ During the 1930s and 1940s, historical films were made sporadically, always enhancing conservative values and vindicating the classic national heroes.

I contend that the heterogeneous cinematographic corpus that emerged from the late 1960s on expressed the complex political and cultural scene more than any other historical films made in previous years and certainly more than other features made in the same period. Just as racial relations were the way to speak about national identity in

¹³⁹ Ana Laura Lusnich, *Civilización y barbarie en el cine argentino y latinoamericano* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2005)

Brazil, in Argentina history served as a privileged trope that revealed diverse –and often opposite- notions of “Argentinidad.”

The Argentine film industry during this period had a contradictory relationship with the state, symbolized by the strong interventionism practiced by the authoritarian governments of General Juan Carlos Onganía (1966-1970), General Roberto Levingston (1970-1971), and General Alejandro Agustín Lanusse (1971-1973). Through the financing and decrees of the Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía (INC – Film National Institute), the government maintained ideological control guided by the concern to promote “national cultural values.” Filmmakers, scriptwriters, and producers had to deal with more control and censorship than they had in previous periods, more even than during the authoritarian regime of Juan Domingo Perón¹⁴⁰.

The increasing political repression of Onganía’s *Revolución Argentina* differed from that of the authoritarian military regimes that had held power since the coup against Juan Domingo Perón on September 16, 1955. Persuaded that culture carried the essence of a truly national identity –and could also bear anti-national ideas- the General and his administration targeted all cultural expressions. Cultural associations, universities, film and theater productions, the literary field, and the visual arts were now closely watched, and often severely repressed. Reactions from the cultural and artistic fields were almost immediate. For the first time, college students, professors, intellectuals, and artists –in other words, a significant portion of the middle classes- would be active politically,

¹⁴⁰ A new perspective between the relationship between the state and the film industry during the Peronist years could be found in Clara Kriger, *Cine y peronismo. El estado en escena* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2009). Kriger acknowledges Perón’s authoritarian policies towards the intellectual and cultural field, but establishes a more complex picture when analyzing the relationship between the film industry and the state.

opposing the regime fiercely and radicalizing themselves. Politics and culture, thus, were two spheres that increasingly intertwined, transforming the social meaning of any cultural artifact.¹⁴¹

Film production not only was no exception to this process; it was the cutting edge where the relationship between culture and politics became most evident. Despite the “crisis del cine Argentino” repeatedly decried by almost all members of the film industry and the print media, Argentine films were still popular, and the regime knew how important it was to guarantee that films “did not undermine the cultural tradition of the nation.”¹⁴² To avoid such a thing, Onganía’s administration implemented laws and Presidential decrees that guaranteed a minimum of 14 weeks for exhibition of national films and distributed soft loans to promote films that reproduced the much-vaunted “national values”.

Historical films seemed to achieve that task. In the space of seven years more than twenty films with historical and/or folkloric themes were made, many of them attaining great box office success and contributing to the financial recovery of the Argentine cinema touted by the media and the administration.¹⁴³ Many of the filmmakers responsible for these features were aware of the great success achieved by historical productions in Buenos Aires, such as the re-release of Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevskiy* (1938) in 1969 –compared to Torre Nilsson’s *Martín Fierro* by the local press- the two parts of *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, 1958) in 1968, Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* in 1960,

¹⁴¹ Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde. Vanguardia estética y vanguardia política en el 68’ argentino* (Buenos Aires: El cielo por asalto, 2000); Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁴² *La Prensa*, June 16, 1967.

¹⁴³ *Gaceta de los espectáculos*, May 29, 1973. 147-166.

William Wyler's *Ben Hur* (1959), and other, historical films. Argentine filmmakers knew they needed substantial financial support to make mega productions, and many relied on state aid for that, ultimately promoting some of the symbolic values endorsed by the successive military administrations.

In this chapter, however, I establish that those films were not simply the result of the ideological “manipulation” of the filmmakers by the state. Nor were the directors co-opted by the government. Instead, I view them as part of a sometimes-heterogeneous public imagination that tied the rewriting of a historical past to a national identity.

From *Martín Fierro* to *El Santo de la Espada* (The Knight of the Sword, Torre Nilsson, 1970) and *Los Hijos de Fierro* (Sons of Fierro, Fernando Solanas, 1975-1984) the trope of national history implied *Argentinidad*. Not only did the content of those films openly revisit the past; many of their titles referred explicitly to the *patria* (homeland), e.g. *Argentino hasta la muerte* (Argentine til Death, Fernando Ayala, 1971) *Argentinísima I* (Fernando Ayala and Héctor Olivera, 1972), *Argentinísima II* (Fernando Ayala and Héctor Olivera, 1973), *Bajo el signo de la patria* (Under the sign of the homeland, René Mugica, 1971) and so on.

The scope of the meaning of *Argentinidad* or Latin Americanism was not new. Argentine and Latin American literature and then film had explored the topic of the nation and regional identity in particular moments of rising nationalism since independence –i.e. during the consolidation of the nation state throughout the nineteenth century, the periods of increasing European immigration during the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, the emergence of a conservative nationalism in the 1930s. Film in our period, however, –and literature through the broad movement termed *Latin American*

Boom- made the masses, the popular classes, and the workers central elements within narratives of national history. Now, the *people* were direct protagonists of the story/history of the nation. These narratives distanced themselves from the official story created by Bartolomé Mitre in the nineteenth century that had great men (*grandes hombres*) as exclusive makers of the national destiny.¹⁴⁴ Instead, they formed part of, and fueled a rising popular nationalism.

Such a narrative of the national past also treated historical events such as the Mayo Revolution (symbol of the onset of the Independence fight against Spain in 1810) or the Caseros battle (led by a coalition that defeated caudillo Juan Manuel de Rosas and organized a centralized government) as historical emblems of the supremacy of Buenos Aires over the interior, the triumph of civilization over barbarism (identified with the poor, the Indians, the gauchos, the interior, the dark-skinned), and the integration of “Argentina” into the world market. This was the *liberal* historiography, with “liberal” being a derogatory term coined by a variety of revisionists to signify an *anti-national* position based on a free market ideology, on a *Europeanized* cultural model, and a neglect or disdain of any popular expression.

In many senses, these films generated an alternative popular historiography that without following a particular revisionist tendency was the summation of many “alternative” narratives about the past. Such a visual notion of Argentine and Latin American history did not form a coherent cultural movement, as there were multiple filmmakers with diverse political and aesthetic backgrounds. Nor did it follow any

¹⁴⁴ Bartolomé Mitre Martínez (June 26, 1821 – January 19, 1906) was an Argentine statesman, military figure, President of Argentina (1862-1868), and the author of the first narrative on Argentine history. His *Historia de Belgrano* (which its fourth edition was written in 1887), and the three volumes of the *Historia de San Martín* (1887, 1888, and 1890) were considering founding works of the national “official history.”

particular school of academic or political revisionism. Rather, it created multiple –and often contradictory- alternative versions of the past, the power and strength of which resided in the massive circulation that the visual had in those times and in the ability of these directors to make modern movies: these films used images that were seen in other media, such as popular photojournals that circulated broadly, and spoke to the people’s knowledge about national history as well.

Following Hayden White, I would argue that a *historiophoty*¹⁴⁵ was born, that is to say, a historiography captured in visual terms. Its representations of national history would be as strong as those of the alternative historical and political narratives that originated in academic and political institutions. This chapter explores the connections among those heterogeneous discourses and the public sphere created by the interaction of those films with the multiple political magazines and photojournals. Weekly political magazines such as *Primera Plana*, *Confirmado*, and *Panorama* –all born during the 1960s, the moment of “cultural modernization” in Argentina- used those films to spoke to the nuances of the current political situation. Photojournals *Gente*, *Siete Días*, and *Semana Gráfica* intended to *show* the films to the reader, using both original footage and pictures extracted from textbooks to illustrate the historical veracity of the features. *Crisis*, *Envido*, *Cuadernos de Cultura*, -magazines more directly attached to political groups or parties- used their pages to speak for people who could not convert their points of view freely due to the censorship. Finally, newspapers such as *Clarín*, *La Nación*, *La Prensa*, *La Opinión*, *La Razón* had their specialized critics talk about both film and politics.

¹⁴⁵ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 11-17.

“Aquí me pongo a cantar”... Martín Fierro, Don Segundo Sombra, and Folklore in the Big City

Leopoldo Torre Nilsson could not have been more excited when he presented his film *Los Traidores de San Angel* (Traitors of San Angel, 1967) during the 10th Mar del Plata Film Festival in March 1968. His enthusiasm, however, wasn't really about the film, which had been shot in Mexico and financed by the American producer Andrés Du Rona,¹⁴⁶ and shown in the festival. He was excited instead about his adaptation of the Argentine classic *Martín Fierro*, which was already in production and would be released four months later, on July 4, 1968.¹⁴⁷ As the veteran director would confess to the media on several occasions, he wasn't kidding when he said how terrifying this project turned out to be. “I know I am adapting an *untouchable* work of our literature and there are 22 million Argentines who won't forgive me if I fail or mislead us in such a venture.”¹⁴⁸ “Argentina,” Torre Nilsson continued, “has a film market in deficit and only exceptional enterprises -in other words, extraordinary box office successes - can break even in terms of costs of production (...) we will give it a try by making a spectacular *Martín Fierro*.”¹⁴⁹

With these comments, the director was addressing a crucial aspect of the Argentine film industry during the late Sixties, the aggravated problem of the (lack of) profitability of and spectatorship for national films, in part due to the intense competition

¹⁴⁶ Jorge Miguel Couselo, *Torre Nilsson por Torre Nilsson* (Buenos Aires: Fraternal, 1985).

¹⁴⁷ *La Nación*, March 12, 1968.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

from Hollywood films, in part due to the growing popularity of television.¹⁵⁰ Only 10 to 15 of every 100 films shown in Argentine movie theaters were made locally (40 were made in Hollywood). Fifty-five percent of the revenue from film exhibition came from movie theaters located in the Federal Capital and Greater Buenos Aires, where 70 percent of Argentine spectators were concentrated. Argentine films, however, were more appreciated in the interior of the country, which meant that between 50% and 90% of their public was outside of the capital.¹⁵¹ The implications were clear: less profit for the directors and producers, as well as decreasing possibilities of state financial support, because the INC provided credits calculated according to the box office revenue of successful films to very few directors, after the release of their films.

Torre Nilsson's comment went even further as he alluded to the possibility of making a blockbuster out of the epic poem *Martín Fierro*, written by José Hernández in 1872.¹⁵² He noticed there were at least seven previous attempts to adapt the literary classic - a touchstone of Argentine national identity- to the big screen. The production and distribution companies La Plata Group AIA, Artistas Argentinos Asociados, Miguel Machinandiarena and Roberto Garcia Smith, Argentina Sono Film, Enrique Faustín,

¹⁵⁰ Data about TV in Latin America for the period is scarce and not totally reliable. Following *El Heraldo*, by the late 1960s, Argentina had a population of 22 million people; 3,300,000 had TV sets, which meant that approximately 13, 100,000 had access to TV, more than 50% of the population. In Brazil, on the other hand, just 5 million people had TV sets, which meant that less than 25% of the population in that country had access to TV sets (Brazil had a population of 93 million people by 1970. See *Estatísticas do século XX*, IBGE, 2006).

¹⁵¹ As we have said in previous chapters, the box office and number of spectators of Argentine films vary depending on the source consulted. Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish a single reliable source of information. See *Gaceta*, January 26, 1971; *Gaceta* April 6, 1971. *Memoria del Instituto*, Ibid.

¹⁵² The *Gaucheo Martín Fierro* was written in 1872 and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* in 1879. Both pieces functioned as a protest against the Europeanizing and modernizing tendencies of Argentine president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. As well, the poems supplied a historical link to the gauchos' contribution to the national development of Argentina, for the gaucho had played a major role in Argentina's independence from Spain. The poem, written in a Spanish that evokes rural Argentina, is widely seen as the pinnacle of the genre of "gauchesque" poetry (poems centered around the life of the gaucho, written in a style that evokes the rural Argentine ballads known as *payadas*).

CinematográficaV, and Tacuara Films had tried unsuccessfully in the past to buy the rights and make it.¹⁵³ The question is, then, why now? And why Torre Nilsson, whose career was associated with the modernization of film language, avant-garde experiments, existential and psychological plots, and urban sets? This film did not seem to fit with his career, leaving aside the fact that the film's subject was seen as too conservative a topic for him. But, as he would say on several occasions, the only film adaptation of *Martín Fierro*, shot in 1923, had failed miserably; the Argentine public did not want to see it. Despite the “dangers,” he wanted to take the risk.¹⁵⁴

Clever enough to perceive the cultural changes that Argentina was going through by the late 1960s -especially a rising nationalism present in all cultural artifacts- Torre Nilsson “gave up his loyalty to his own work” when making *Martín Fierro*.¹⁵⁵ Leaving behind his “intimist” phase, he was aware of some of the elements that would make films popular in that moment: folkloric music and historic settings. In fact, the film was one of the biggest box office hits of the period under study, providing a much-needed boost for the local film industry. About ninety films were produced in Argentina between 1967 and 1970, but the INC covered 100 percent of the production costs of just nine. Two of them were *Martín Fierro* and *El Santo de la Espada*, made also by Torre Nilsson in 1970, a year before his third historical film, *Güemes, la tierra en armas*.¹⁵⁶

Hernández's *El Gaucho Martín Fierro*, tells the tale of an impoverished gaucho who has been drafted to serve at a border fort, defending the Argentine frontier against

¹⁵³ These production companies are diverse in terms of financial power and the time they lasted in the market. The important issue that both the director and the journalist were addressing was the multiple and heterogeneous attempts to make the film.

¹⁵⁴ See *La Nación*, March 15, 1968. Alfredo Quesada II and Josué Quesada made the 1923 version. It was a total box-office failure.

¹⁵⁵ “Elogio de la dignidad,” *Primera Plana*, July 9, 1968.

¹⁵⁶ *Gaceta*, January 21, 1971.

the Indians during the final decades of the nineteenth century, before the so-called *campaña del desierto* (desert campaign) that decimated the Indian population in the Argentine south in 1879. His life of poverty on the *pampas* is somewhat romanticized; his military experiences are not. He deserts and tries to return to his home, but discovers that his house, farm, and family are gone. He deliberately provokes an affront to honor by insulting a black woman in a bar; in the knife duel that ensues, he kills her male companion. The narration of another knife fight suggests by its lack of detail that it is one of many. Fierro becomes an outlaw pursued by the police militia. In one battle with the police, he acquires a companion: Sergeant Cruz is inspired by Fierro's bravery to defect and join him. The two set out to live among the natives, hoping to find a better life there.

The sequel *La Vuelta de Martín Fierro* narrates Fierro's bitter disappointment with his subsequent situation of marginality and poverty. The Indians take Cruz and Fierro for spies, and even though the *cacique* (chief) saves their lives, they become in effect prisoners of the natives. In the sequel Hernández presents another, and very unsentimentalized, version of rural life. The poem narrates an epidemic, the horrible, expiatory attempts at cure, and the fatal wrath visited upon those, including a young "Christian" (presumably ethnically European) boy, who is suspected of bringing the plague. Both Cruz and the *cacique* die of the disease. Shortly afterward, Fierro leaves the Indians and encounters his two surviving sons (one has been a prisoner, the other the ward of the vile and wily Vizcacha), and Cruz's son (who has become a gambler). At the end, Fierro speaks of changing his name and living in peace, but it is not entirely clear that this will happen.

Hernandez's *Martín Fierro* had had an uneven reception and popularity in Argentina throughout the twentieth-century. Successful among the popular classes when published in 1872, it circulated through *folletines* (feuilletons) and periodical publications; the urban masses found it compelling, as they enjoyed popular theater and other public spectacles that portrayed the same nostalgic view of a harmonious rural life from the perspective of those involved in the turmoil of urbanization and modernization. During the 1910s, the intellectual and literary field was divided around the sociological reality of the gaucho and *Martín Fierro* as representative of a truly national identity. After World War I a literary/aesthetic avant-garde emerged and took up the question of how representative of "our national identity" *Martín Fierro* and the gaucho were. At that time, writers on opposite sides of the aesthetic and political spectrum, such as Jorge Luis Borges and Leopoldo Marechal, addressed the topic. The publication of Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra* in 1926 further stimulated the debate. The views that prevailed about the gaucho were, however, contradictory. While the popular classes consumed it as a symbol of freedom from a labor market that imposed discipline, the state used it to promulgate a vision of the obedient gaucho who served on the border in the battles against the Indians as part of a civilizing mission.¹⁵⁷

The poem, thus, had had an uneven response in terms of its past popularity. Torre Nilsson's film didn't. It was seen as unquestionably representative of the national soul, most likely because it linked the national character to the experience of the popular classes (without naming or referencing the Peronist era) through a non-academic text that was a cultural artifact of mass consumption. To create a relatively simple plot, the film

¹⁵⁷ Alejandro Cattaruzza, *Los usos del pasado. La historia y la política argentina en discusión. 1910-1945* (Buenos Aires: Lahipatia, 2010) 122-128.

director conflated elements of both parts of the original poem into one unified narrative, highlighting the nationalist elements that situated Fierro as an archetype of the popular classes, and constructing a compelling imagined community –with insiders and outsiders- that defined the meaning of being Argentine during the turbulent late nineteenth century and the contemporary Sixties.

The print media recurrently reproduced the director’s words–taken from the press book released in early 1968 by his production company *Contracuarto*- about how he had found the clarity and inspiration for adapting this poem to the screen while living in the US, far from his *patria* (a term that was not part of Torre Nilsson's vocabulary in previous years.) Being far from Argentina allowed him to understand better the problems he would face in adapting Martín Fierro to the screen. It helped him “to make a hundred percent Argentine film.”¹⁵⁸ Following such noble feelings, he consulted some well-known industry figures such as Edmundo Eichelbaum, Hector Grassi, Ulisses Petit de Murat, Beatriz Guido, and Luis Pico Estrada, all of whom helped him adapt Hernández's work to the big screen.¹⁵⁹

Torre Nilsson and the screenwriters made key changes to Hernández's poem. The most striking was the temporal sequence in which the events are shown in the film. Torre Nilsson’s *Martín Fierro* –played by handsome film star Alfredo Alcón- starts narrating

¹⁵⁸ Press book of *Martín Fierro*, 1968.

¹⁵⁹ I already talked profusely about Beatriz Guido in chapters 1 and 2. Ulises Petit de Murat (January 28, 1907 — August 19, 1983) was an Argentine poet and prolific screenwriter. He wrote more than 60 film scripts, including classics such as *La Guerra gaucha* (The Gaucho War, Lucas Demare, 1942), *Pampa Bárbara* (Savage Pampas, Lucas Demare, 1945), *Suburbio* (Suburbs, León Klimovsky, 1951), and Torre Nilsson’s *El Santo de la espada* and *Güemes, la tierra en armas* (Güemes, Land in Arms, 1971). Edmundo Eichelbaum (June 9, 1923 – April 13, 2002) was a film critic, screenwriter, and professor of Aesthetics. He organized one of the most important art-film houses in Buenos Aires, the Cineclub Gente de cine, in 1942. He co-organized the Mar del Plata Film Festival for years. Hector Grossi (August 25, 1921 – August 1, 2002) was a screenwriter and film critic.

events presented in line 166 of Hernandez's poem, when Fierro comes back to what remained of his ranch after deserting from the southern frontier of Buenos Aires, where he had been drafted to fight the Indians. Fierro can't find his wife and two children; his home has been destroyed, the animals are gone (3:28"). After a moment of reflection about the humiliations his family has faced, the camera makes a slow tracking shot, leaving the dark and dirty rancho and moving to a bright open space. A voiceover of Fierro narrates through a flashback (line 23) what seems to be a better time, when he had a happy family life and could make a living from his land. It is a recounting of gaucho life: the dressage, horse races, castration of bulls, and the *pulperia*.¹⁶⁰ All that is soon gone, as the film shows Fierro being conscripted by the *juez de paz* (judge) while drinking with acquaintances in the local *pulperia* (13').

Torre Nilsson arranges the sequence of events to emphasize the contrast between the simple but happy life of Fierro before he serves as a soldier in the frontier -the source of his misfortune- and the violence he faces once he leaves his family. From that moment on, he is so mistreated by a corrupt military and state that he becomes an outlaw. His character changes; he becomes a bully. The violence of his surroundings turns him into a thug. In that vein, the senseless and extreme poverty of life on the frontier lead him to desert, and he ends up a captive of the Indians, who are also cruel, poor, and arbitrary. He finds, however, friendship and male solidarity in another deserter, Sargento Cruz –played by Lautaro Murúa – who, seeking shelter, joins in Fierro's misadventures in the desert.

The scenes shot in the *tolderías* (tents) are the most intensely violent in the entire film, as they accentuate the ferocity of the Indians through several takes involving slaying

¹⁶⁰ The *pulperia* was a local market, a mix of bar and grocery store located in the rural areas. It was mostly a male socialization space where men played cards, drunk, and sang the *payadas*.

of animals (1:15:12”), a close-up of a severed head of an ox that lasts 7 seconds (1:17:20), and the drowning of a captive white boy (*gringuito*) in a pool of water by four Indians, as the boy is blamed for causing the smallpox epidemic that devastates the tribe. The scene is remarkably graphic and totally unexpected; the boy is talking to Fierro about a little boat he built that reminds him of the one that brought him from Europe, when he is suddenly seized by the Indians and killed (1:23:15”).

Torre Nilsson clearly wanted to stress not only the brutality of the Indian toward white society; but also the barbarism of their everyday life, overshadowing any other type of violence and affirming their otherness. Paralleling the most conservative versions of the past that neglected the presence of the Indians as an element of Argentine culture, Torre Nilsson’s account of Indian culture converged with the official narrative that dated the origin of Argentine civilization from the end of the Campaign of the Desert. In other words, the imagined community of Argentina offered in the film is popular, but reproduces the stereotypes presented in the most conservative tales about the “origin” of the nation.

This adaptation and its subsequent vision about the nation led to an extensive string of criticism by the media and intellectuals. Some said the film was far too literal, in that Torre Nilsson used the exact verses from the original poem; others thought it was not accurate enough, since the director did not follow the temporal sequence as narrated in the poem, and was superficial in his depiction of the popular classes. Regardless of the nature of the criticism, it is evident that what was at stake in the critical polemic was not only the film’s fealty to Hernández's work, which constituted a critique of the form of the film, but also the representation of “the nation” and Argentine history.

“So much violence, too dirty, far from the real story!” the ultra conservative newspaper *La Prensa* declared.¹⁶¹ The same newspaper reported that more than a million people had seen the film in the first eight weeks of exhibition in Argentina, confirming the bad taste of the masses. The numbers were totally exaggerated, as there were relatively accurate statistics on tickets sold only for movie theaters in the capital city.¹⁶² The “unbearable” violence that made the film a poor adaptation of Hernández's poem according to *La Prensa* led *Primera Plana* to insist that the film was historically accurate and showed the reality “of our times.”¹⁶³

Torre Nilsson's *Martín Fierro* would incite a true battle over both the meaning of realism in film production and the representation of the historical past. In addition, it drew a line between the different ways that film directors chose to represent the past and in so doing, to talk about contemporary politics. In a society fractured by the persistence of the Peronist phenomenon - because of Perón's exile, the proscription of the Peronist Party, the prosecution of Peronist political and union leaders, and “the prohibition of ideological affirmation or Peronist propaganda” imposed by the presidential decree 4161 in November 1956¹⁶⁴ - any cultural artifact that foregrounded the nation became “political,” taking into account the increasing politicization of the cultural sphere, also influenced by events occurring worldwide such as the decolonization of Africa, the Cuban Revolution, and the Vietnam War.

Far from being part of the militant cinema discussed in previous chapters, most of the historic and folkloric films made in the period were not even strictly speaking

¹⁶¹ *La Prensa*, July 5, 1968.

¹⁶² *La Prensa*, August 29, 1968.

¹⁶³ *Primera Plana*, July 9, 1968.

¹⁶⁴ *Decreto 4161*, *Agenda de Reflexión*, Septiembre 2003.

political. They had, however, a peremptory sense of History as a tool for social change. It was time to narrate the history of the nation from another point of view; the perspective of the "others" who had remained outside of the official narrative. In that sense, both genres drew direct inspiration from the Italian neorealism so popular in late 1960s Latin America¹⁶⁵. Yet, the historiography of Argentine cinema that focuses on the period only recognizes that influence when talking about militant films and analyzes historical and political films separately¹⁶⁶.

I posit that even though Torre Nilsson and Solanas -among others- were on opposite sides of the cultural and intellectual spectrum, their films shared a concern about the meaning of the nation premised on an alternative historical narrative that expressed the political anxieties of their time.¹⁶⁷ Solanas' *La hora de los hornos*—which, as we have seen, was the point of origin and the life and soul of the ultra political *New Latin American Cinema*- was edited from newsreel materials composed of interviews and news pieces; a documentary that spoke truth to power. Using an editing style imported from TV commercials, he and his *Cine Liberación* sought to construct an alternative narrative to recount recent events in Argentina, linking contemporary political violence to the successive military coups, the proscription of Peronism, and the surrendering by

¹⁶⁵ Paula Halperin, "With an Incredible Realism that Beats the Best of the European Cinemas': the Making of Barrio Gris and the Reception of the Italian Neorealism in Argentina. 1947-1955," in *Global Neorealismo. The Transnational History of a Film Style*, edited by Robert Sklar and Saverio Giovacchini (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

¹⁶⁶ See César Maranghello, *Breve historia del cine argentino* (Buenos Aires: Laertes, 2005) 179-194; Claudio España, *Cine argentino, modernidad y vanguardias. 1957-1983* (Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las artes, 2005).

¹⁶⁷ In fact, the holistic narratives of Argentine cinema tend to divide films on genres –i.e. political film, avant-guard, folkloric, "youth" films, new wave, and so on- without building bridges between them. In the case of the films made in the period, historians and critics stick to those classifications as they reproduced uncritically the political positions and quarrels that confronted filmmakers and intellectuals had at that time.

illegitimate governments of the “national” legacy to American imperialism.¹⁶⁸ *Martín Fierro*, on the other hand, was a commercial, naturalist film that came to be one of the most popular films of 1968 by using popular actors,¹⁶⁹ screenwriters deeply committed to the film industry for decades, and an important production company.¹⁷⁰

In that vein, Torre Nilsson’s feature and other historical films of the period would incorporate a dialectical relationship between “the people” and the male leader –i.e. Fierro, Juan Manuel de Rosas, Juan Moreira, San Martín and so on - in their depictions of the national past, relationships that spoke to the then current political situation, when even the dictator Juan Carlos Onganía was seen as a nationalist *caudillo*.¹⁷¹ The founding father, social bandit, folkloric character would bring into public discussion a complex dynamic to represent the “making” of national history, incorporating elements that circulated during the period and nourished the national-popular imagination.

Martín Fierro represented, “at the bottom of it, the history of the *cabecitas negras* in times of the border, the spoliation, and injustice.”¹⁷² The words of Beatriz Guido, co-writer of the film, writer, wife of Torre Nilsson, and a publicly rabid anti-Peronist expressed the tenor of what was being discussed. Labeled a “middle class” intellectual by many national-popular and pro-Peronist thinkers,¹⁷³ Guido shared a vocabulary that ten

¹⁶⁸ Mariano Mestman, “La exhibición del cine militante. Teoría y práctica en el Grupo Cine Liberación (Argentina),” in *Cuadernos de la Academia* (VIII Conference of AEHC), edited by Luis Fernández Colorado (Madrid: Academia de la Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográficas de España, 2001) 443-463.

¹⁶⁹ The crew included film star Graciela Borges –muse of the so-called New Argentine Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, Lautaro Murúa, a leftist Chilean-born Argentine actor, film director, and screenwriter, and Nilsson’s fetish theatre and film actor Alfredo Alcón who played leading roles in Torre Nilsson’s films.

¹⁷⁰ 135,000 spectators saw *Martín Fierro* in 4 movie theaters of the capital city of Buenos Aires during the first 12 weeks of exhibition. That was a total record-breaking, as Argentine films rarely surpassed the 20,000 spectators during the first 12 weeks.

¹⁷¹ Liliana de Riz, *La política en suspenso. 1966-1976* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2000).

¹⁷² *Confirmado*, January 25, 1968.

¹⁷³ Arturo Jauretche wrote a groundbreaking book in 1966 about the flaws of the middle class, dedicating an entire chapter to Guido as a symbol of the frivolity, anti-Peronism and mediocrity that characterized that

years before had been used exclusively by those identified with the Peronist regime and the popular classes.

That people like Beatriz Guido and Torre Nilsson – whose trademark had been an open cosmopolitanism considered basically as “foreignish,” anti popular, Europeanized, and liberal by the nationalist left - used the term *cabecita negra*¹⁷⁴ with a positive undertone said about both the new forms of validation sought by intellectuals and filmmakers in the field of cultural production alongside a national-populism that permeated Argentine society; a nationalism that placed “the people” or the masses at the center of its very definition.¹⁷⁵ Following Raymond Williams, such a national-populism was a “social experience in solution;” the culture of this particular historical moment, “a common set of perceptions and values” shared by a generation, and was most clearly articulated in particular artistic artifacts, film being the most visible.¹⁷⁶

That explains Torre Nilsson and Guido's wish to be on “the people’s side” when making *Martín Fierro*. It also sheds light on the criticism registered by Peronist and leftist cultural magazines that “such an anti-popular and cosmopolitan group of people with clearly anti-popular ideas” could not make a film based on a poem that expressed

social group in Argentina. Guido writing became a trademark of depoliticization and middle-class themes, such as sexuality and existential problems. Arturo Jauretche, *El medio pelo en la sociedad argentina. Apuntes para una sociología nacional* (Buenos Aires, Peña Lillo, 1966)

¹⁷⁴ The term “*Cabecita negra*” (literally, little black head) referred to a popular classes’ background and the historical experience of racism and social exclusion accentuated by the Peronist regime that made the popular classes more visible. It is an oft-used, historic racist term in Argentina. The word was coined after the Spanish name of a native bird, the Hooded Siskin. It is used to disparage a somewhat nebulous sector of society associated with people that have black hair and medium-dark skin, belonging to the working class. The term originated in Buenos Aires during the 1940s, when a large internal migration started from the rural northern provinces towards Buenos Aires and other large urban centers. The impetus for the migration was the newly created factory jobs that came about as a result of industrialization in Argentina. The Argentine author Germán Rozenmacher (1936-1971) wrote a well-known short story in 1961 titled: “*Cabecita negra*” which depicted everyday racism in Argentina with stark reality.

¹⁷⁵ Sarlo, *La batalla de las ideas*, 38.

¹⁷⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Birmingham: Blackwell, 1971)

feelings of “the Argentine people.”¹⁷⁷ Even though Torre Nilsson was a precursor who had been “the first to promote (the historical cinema) (...) and his intentions were to seek out the national essence,” he “had failed,” said a critic connected to the Communist Party. “The film is a succession of snapshots that lacked any socio-political analysis and artistic relevance.”¹⁷⁸

For the engaged intellectuals, only directors who were close “to the people” and reflected the thinking of national populism and the left had the right to film popular topics. Certainly neither Torre Nilsson nor Guido were considered part of that chosen crew. The sarcastic tone of the interviewers Horacio Salas –poet and writer -, the well-known theater advocate and critic Kive Staiff, and the writer Osvaldo Seiguerman, reflected the contempt towards Torre Nilsson.¹⁷⁹ They emphasized the contrast between the filmmaker’s previous films and *Martín Fierro*, inquiring about the reasons for the transformation. Torre Nilsson stoically answered the questions, saying that a “concern about the meaning of the nation” was what led him to make the film. “*Martín Fierro* (the poem) has a remarkable effect, a great depth; I always wanted to establish a dialogue between characters and society (...) the dialogue of a man up against the status quo.”¹⁸⁰

All this criticism from the media and intellectuals did not prevent the public from flocking to the movie theaters to see the film. That spoke to a revalorization of folklore similar to the upsurge during the nationalist 1920s and 1930s in Argentina, when the realities of a modernizing and more complex society – the result of a burgeoning urban

¹⁷⁷ Ariel Posadas, “Leopoldo Torre Nilsson: la venganza de las vacas.” *Envido*, November 1970.

¹⁷⁸ Carlos Verllanti, “El actual cine histórico argentino,” *Cuadernos de Cultura*, September-October, 1970.

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¹⁷⁹ *Análisis*, July 8, 1968.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

population due to European immigration and rural migration -led to a strong policy favoring the collection of folkloric materials. Songs, tales, and diverse cultural artifacts were incorporated into the public school curricula by the federal state in order to achieve a more homogenous national culture.¹⁸¹ During the late 1960s and the 1970s, popular songs and dances, stories, and cultural artifacts that embraced the “pueblo” and the “real” origins of Argentina were increasingly consumed. A new wave of folkloric music swept the region: the Chilean *Nueva Canción*, performed mostly by Los Jaivas, Inti-Illimani, Violeta Parra, Victor Jara, and Quilapayún, the Argentine singers and folklorists Mercedes Sosa and Atahualpa Yupanqui, the Uruguayans Daniel Viglietti, Alfredo Zitarrosa, and Los Olimareños, among many others, created the sense of a Latin America seeking its common cultural roots.

The public in the capital city of Buenos Aires was for the first time eager to consume songs and films that integrated the interior of the country into the national identity, embracing what they thought were the moral values of generosity and solidarity of the countryside. For many years, the official historical narrative had as a central value the supremacy of Buenos Aires over the provinces as the principal factor of the national order.¹⁸² The capital city was identified with progress and civilization and the interior with barbarism (gauchos, caudillos, and Indians). Ever since the publication of Sarmiento’s literary classic, *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie en las pampas argentinas* (1845) that dichotomy had been at the center of discussions of the national past.

¹⁸¹ Cattaruzza, *Los usos del pasado*, 60.

¹⁸² Fernando Devoto and Nora Pagano, *La historiografía académica y la historiografía militante en Argentina y Uruguay* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2004); Alejandro Cattaruzza and Alejandro Eujanian, *Políticas de la historia argentina. 1860-1960* (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 2003).

Historical and folkloric films questioned that polarity, or at least made *the other* more visible. Torre Nilsson's film was the first to evince that transformation. Following the success of the film, the Kraft publishing house produced a booklet five weeks after the release of the *Martín Fierro*, with Alfredo Alcón on the cover. "Every Wednesday from today on and over the next 16 weeks, Kraft will provide the reader 16 consecutives installments of *Martin Fierro*, conceptualized and made journalistically to be seen, read, and collected (...) At this point in our personal and collective evolution as a people and as a nation, it is not enough to read José Hernández's poem, even though it is still alive (). The author's (Hernández) life is essential for finding an explanation that has not been given or has not been convincing enough. At the same time, our national cinema provides a new point of view and brings to light issues that we have not seen before. It all leads to that self knowledge that Argentines have been seeking for a long time, perhaps too long."¹⁸³

Promoted by Torre Nilsson, the publisher reproduced Hernández's poem alongside a bio of his life as a politician and writer "committed to the poor" ("as opposed to many contemporary writers"), the script of the film, snapshots, critiques, and articles written by Torre Nilsson about his experience making this truly "national film."¹⁸⁴ The success of the film also led the financially broken Cinemateca Argentina to publish a complete guide to the movie: slides, snapshots, press releases, interviews with the scriptwriters, and with the director and critics.¹⁸⁵ Social injustice and the struggles of the poor against an arbitrary state—represented in the film by the military—were the basis of

¹⁸³ *Martín Fierro*, Kraft, August 14, 1968, #1.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ *Martin Fierro*, Ediciones de cine, Cinemateca Argentina, 1968. 1967.

the national identity that made Torre Nilsson's *Martín Fierro* so popular in the late 1960s.

Torre Nilsson's *Martín Fierro* showed how highly contemporary the topics broached by the film were. In order to make the film an accurate version of the book the director asked the internationally acclaimed Argentine folklorist and composer Ariel Ramírez to do the music for *Martín Fierro*, and the soundtrack ended up being one of the most praised elements of the film.¹⁸⁶ He also asked ranch owner Juan Carlos Neyra -who wrote an essay in the 1979 edition of *Martín Fierro* published by the ultra nationalist Librería Huemul – to help in the making of the film, especially by providing the tools that the Indians used, the *ginebra* (gin) bottles the gauchos drank from in the *pulperías*, the appropriate horses, knives, and other traditional elements. Neyra had seen Torre Nilsson's previous feature, *Un guapo del 900* (A Bully in 1900) and thought it had been a good film, "but it was sad that the director had made mistakes when choosing (improper) horses and the slow use of the knives by some characters."¹⁸⁷ Considered an "expert" on *Martin Fierro* and an ally of the nationalist intellectuals -he wrote the prologue of Jauretche's *Los profetas del Odio* – Neyra was behind Torre Nilsson in every scene to guarantee historical accuracy. Despite this effort, the film could not avoid denunciations for its lack of realism and authenticity.¹⁸⁸

"Did it have to be done?" *La Nación* wondered.¹⁸⁹ "Sacred and untouchable" for some and urgently doable for others, this critic thought it was too complicated to make a filmic version of the poem. For him, the director could not express "the deep themes

¹⁸⁶ *Clarín*, April 14, 1968.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ "Cine: Los cien millones del Martín Fierro," *Primera Plana*, February 20, 1968

¹⁸⁹ *La Nación*, July 5 1968.

developed in the poem. He had an external perspective, purely anecdotal, and give it a visual expression. It was not realistic enough.”¹⁹⁰

A year after that, a more “genuine” gaucho reappeared on the big screen. Director Manuel Antín-also well known for his avant-garde films- brought to the movie theaters Ricardo Güiraldes’ classic, *Don Segundo Sombra*. Before its release on August 14, 1969, one of the major newspapers in Argentina commented that, “Besides the constant profits the land creates, the country (campo) has another harvest. Wheat, meat, minerals are the results of a rich reality that made a country wealthy. But there is another wealth, the counterpart of agriculture, which creates a positive balance in the account of a community, a people, a race. It’s literature, which from its telluric roots accompanies men to their destiny. It’s the imponderable aspects of the popular soul, materialized into poems that interpret the spirit of the times, with the endurance of permanence, loyal to the significance of the individuals who form the environment. *Martin Fierro* emerges from the heroic clay that we Creoles are made of. He reflects all the types that converge in the gaucho prototype. *Sombra* emerges from the mysterious and barbarous pampas, counterpoising progress and the dint of guitar and melancholy.”¹⁹¹

Ricardo Güiraldes’ *Don Segundo Sombra* was loosely inspired by the real life of Segundo Ramírez, a native of the town of San Antonio de Areco in the province of Buenos Aires. The book is principally about the relationship between the small herdsman Fabio, an orphan eager for affection and wisdom, and the intelligent and silent gaucho Sombra, who teaches his young apprentice about friendship, loyalty, and rural customs. Though educated in Paris, the writer knew about life in the rural fields of Buenos Aires

¹⁹⁰ *La Nación*, Ibid.

¹⁹¹ *Clarín*, May 17, 1969.

since he came from a very wealthy family of landowners. A member of the literary avant-garde of Buenos Aires in the 1910s and 1920s, Güiraldes divided his life between the intellectual worlds of Paris and Buenos Aires and the family ranch. His book reflected those divided loyalties, as Fabio at the end of the novel becomes cultivated and rich, but still appreciates the moral values learned during the good old times he spent with Sombra.

Manuel Antín meditated about his own artistic journey as a filmmaker and the meaning of this particular film. He could make this film because he had learned his lesson, he said, making films that increasingly failed at the box office. He had realized since his last film in 1966 (*Castigo al traidor* – Punishment to the Traitor) that cinema was not just about art; commercial appeal was also fundamental. He realized that his previous films based on Julio Cortázar short stories were not profitable, just art for the few. With a different kind of cinema in mind, he chose not to adapt Güiraldes book. He followed the original work literally, using the novel itself as a script.¹⁹² One reporter, amazed by this approach, asked the director why he had decided to go that way “Because the book embodies the “essence” of the gaucho,” the director responded.¹⁹³

Thus, according to Antín, the film turned out to be more authentic than the screen version of *Martin Fierro*. “It was made using 'natural' settings, the same ones in which the book took place: Areco, Capilla del Señor, Ranchos, General Belgrano, San Clemente del Tuyú,” cities in the interior of Buenos Aires.¹⁹⁴ The film also followed “the climatological pattern proposed in Güiraldes’ book,” shooting key scenes in the same

¹⁹² *Clarín*, August 3, 1969

¹⁹³ *La Razón*, July 1, 1969.

¹⁹⁴ *La Nación*, August 10, 1969.

seasons in which they took place in the book. Anticipating criticism regarding his painstaking faithfulness to the original book –or a debate about authenticity, such as the sparked it around Torre Nilsson’s *Martín Fierro*– Antín preemptively stated, “I don’t know if we made a magnificent film. What I can say is we fulfilled our intentions of fidelity and authenticity.” The book exudes solidarity, embodied by the spirit of the man of the countryside.¹⁹⁵

To capture that spirit, the film was launched on August 8, 1969 in San Antonio de Areco. An *asado* (traditional barbecue) was organized, alongside a *payada*, and there were gauchos running all over the movie theater. *Clarín* said it was the opposite of Hollywood glamour. It was really “our” event, because it highlighted the characters that make up our national folklore, instead of the usual film stars. The Güiraldes family was there and old mates of “the real Sombra, Don Segundo Ramírez.”¹⁹⁶

Furthermore, a fellow traveler of Güiraldes’s and an even more polemical intellectual guaranteed the authenticity of the film during that era of increasing populism. As a guest of honor at the event, aristocrat avant-garde writer, publisher, and fervent anti-Peronist, Victoria Ocampo took the stage to say how “deeply moved” she was by the feature.¹⁹⁷ She wrote to the newspapers noting that she had been in San Antonio de Areco

¹⁹⁵ *La Nación*, Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ *Clarín*, August 8, 1969

¹⁹⁷ Victoria Ocampo Aguirre (April 7, 1890 – January 27, 1979) was an Argentine intellectual, described by Jorge Luis Borges as *la mujer más argentina* ("the most Argentine woman"). Best known as an advocate for others and as publisher of the magazine *Sur*, she was also a writer and critic in her own right. In Buenos Aires, she was a lynchpin of the intellectual scene of the 1920s and '30s. Perhaps of greater significance than her own writing, she was founder (1931) and publisher of the Argentine magazine *Sur*, the most important literary magazine of its time in Latin America. In 1953, Ocampo was briefly imprisoned for her open opposition to the regime of Juan Domingo Perón. She was made a member of the Argentine Academy of Letters in 1976 (the first woman ever admitted to the Academy; she formally took her seat on June 23, 1977). The "cultural dialog", initiated in 1977 by the *de facto* government but organized by UNESCO, was held in her home, Villa Ocampo, in San Isidro, Buenos Aires; she eventually donated the house to UNESCO. Personalities like Igor Stravinsky, André Malraux and Rabindranath Tagore had been her guests

twice. The first time, when “they” buried “Ricardo” (Güiraldes), leaving him in his “forever land.” The second time was when she went to her grandfather's ranch nearby. In an impeccable literary gesture, Ocampo quoted the last paragraph of Güiraldes’ book while staring at the landscape: “who owns the pampas more than a cowboy (*resero*)? The very thought of so many ranchers stuck in their houses afraid of the cold or the heat, makes me smile ... owners of what? Some rural areas could be listed as their property, but these God’s pampas had been mine, because their things were my friends by right of force and expertise (*baquía*).” She thought of her own grandfather, a landowner, who even though he hadn’t tamed any mustangs, had certainly tamed rough fields (*campos brutos*).¹⁹⁸

Ocampo –a traditional intellectual- was blessing the movie from her position of expertise; she knew “Ricardo” very well and she could perceive the congruence of the book and the film. In that sense, she testified to the authenticity of the film, as Antín’s work was faithful to the original text. There was, however, something more at stake. When she talked about the film, she didn’t mention only the gaucho, but also a social class that was its opposite, that is to say, the rural oligarchy personified in the character of her own grandfather, that was also the same class to which Güiraldes belonged. With those associations, she tried to legitimize her class and an aesthetically avant-garde and politically conservative type of intellectual, which certainly was not very popular during those times. It was a clever move, because by linking their own point of view of modern Argentina (achieved through a rural metaphor) with the mass culture represented by the

there. Graham Greene dedicated his 1973 novel *The Honorary Consul* to her, "with love, and in memory of the many happy weeks I have passed at San Isidro and Mar del Plata".

¹⁹⁸ Victoria Ocampo, *La Prensa*, August 13, 1969.

film, Victoria Ocampo – a thousand times labeled as highbrow and elitist by the left and the national-populism- legitimized the film and in doing so, legitimized herself.

In comparison to Torre Nilsson’s *Martín Fierro*, the critics better received *Don Segundo Sombra*, especially the ones with more conservative perspectives in terms of aesthetic choices –from the traditional left linked to the Communist Party to the politically conservative newspapers *La Prensa* and *La Nación*. It was considered more faithful to the original as “it followed the smallest detail in terms of the chronology presented in the novel.”¹⁹⁹ Another critic stipulated that “the success of the film has confirmed what until now was just a presumption: the [positive] response of the audiences to “our” works/oeuvres, which addressed our topics, our traditions, our human archetypes.”²⁰⁰ The “exceptional” director (Antín) commented exclusively to *La Razón*: “the success of the film expresses, most of all, the extraordinary cultural situation of the Argentine audiences. But it is not just that. It is the significant existence of a vivid national feeling, something very subjective, almost religious. How could we otherwise explain the applause at the end of every screening of *Don Segundo Sombra* in every movie theater, every day?”²⁰¹

Cuadernos de Cultura, an important cultural magazine linked to the Communist Party that advocated socialist realism, thought that the film –in contrast to Nilsson’s *Martín Fierro*- was not only an interesting one; it was a “cultural success,” because it was “faithful to the essence and language of the novel, the meaning of its images and metaphors.” In that sense, “Antín bested Torre Nilsson” as *Don Segundo Sombra*

¹⁹⁹ *La Nación*, August 15, 1969.

²⁰⁰ *La Nación*, September 8, 1969.

²⁰¹ *La Razón*, September 6, 1969.

reflected the true gaucho spirit.”²⁰² *Cuadernos de Cultura*’s article signed by the well-known communist writer, poet, editor and intellectual Raúl González Tuñón established that novel and film were faithful to the costumes and traditions of the rural men. Tuñón admired the avant-gardism represented by Güiraldes (and shared the anti-Peronism of the *Grupo Sur*), vehemently opposing the opinion expressed by nationalists - from the left to the right -that both novel and film had a clear oligarchic character, closer to landowners than the gauchos.

In that sense, the box office success of Antín’s and Torre Nilsson’s films turned out to be problematic for certain newspapers and magazines. The disputes in the political and intellectual field about the meaning of Argentine history was not limited merely to what elements –heroes, battles, and so on - were used by historians or filmmakers to determine the legitimacy of a discourse about the past. Political groups demanded an exclusive use of certain symbols. Because Leopoldo Torre Nilsson was identified with the avant-gard and cosmopolitan cinema that was openly anti-Peronist (and for many, anti-popular), nationalist and Peronist intellectuals did not think he was apt to address certain topics that were fundamental in the construction of Argentine the national being (*Ser Nacional*).

Diverse intellectuals –and even politicians- used historical or mythical figures to establish the truth of the national narrative. The Peronist and revisionist “historians” Fermín Chávez and José María Rosa, the “Izquierda Nacional” (National Left), intellectuals Abelardo Ramos and Rodolfo Puigrós, and Ortega Peña and Eduardo Duhalde, who belonged to the “Peronismo Revolucionario” (Revolutionary Peronism)

²⁰² *Cuadernos de Cultura*, 1969, 95-100.

claimed different aspects of the lives of José de San Martín, Juan Manuel de Rosas, and “the” gaucho –such as *Martín Fierro* or *Sombra*- to legitimate their discourse and claim their place in the sun. Other nationalist sectors, such as the ones represented by the Onganía regime or the nationalist rightist *Cabildo* magazine, took those characters as their own. In the sections below, I analyze the height of this dispute embodied in two films, Torre Nilsson’s *El Santo de la Espada* and *Juan Manuel de Rosas* (Manuel Antín, 1972) and how these two films constructed a language of militarism, anti-colonialism, and national pride that was embraced by a broad cultural and political spectrum.

The Argentine Military and Los Padres de la Patria (the Founding Fathers)

The making of Torre Nilsson’s *El Santo de la Espada* (released on March 25, 1970) aroused more expectations than any of his previous films, especially because it was the first feature that dared to tell the personal and political history of one of the most important Argentine founding fathers, and did so during the bicentennial of his birth. Undisputed leader of the independence movement in Argentina, San Martín’s figure operated as a symbol of the freedom and opposition to colonial power in Latin America, feeding the imagination of popular unity among the peoples of the hemisphere.²⁰³ After

²⁰³ Born on 25 February 1778 in Yapeyú, Corrientes in San Martín left his mother country at the early age of seven and studied in an aristocratic school in Madrid, Spain, where he met and befriended Chilean Bernardo O’Higgins. In 1808, after joining Spanish forces in the Peninsular War against the French, and after participating in several battles such as Battle of Bailén San Martín started making contact with South American supporters of independence of Spain. In 1812, he set sail for Buenos Aires from England, and offered his services to the United Provinces of South America (present-day Argentina). After the Battle of San Lorenzo of 1813, and some time on command of the Army of the North during 1814, he started to put into action his plan to defeat the Spanish forces that menaced the United Provinces from Upper Perú, making use of an alternative path to the Viceroyalty of Perú. This objective first involved the creation of a new army, the Army of the Andes, in the Province of Cuyo, Argentina. From there, he led the Crossing of the Andes to Chile, and prevailed over the Spanish forces at the Battle of Chacabuco and the Battle of

the making of *Martín Fierro* –and its great box office success- Torre Nilsson decided to go bigger and prepared a mega production. The media, which covered every day of the shooting in Buenos Aires, Mendoza, the Andes, Chile, and Perú, took note of his intentions.

“Se filma en los Andes la epopeya de América. Granaderos, sables y cañones,” announced the title of an article that witnessed the “spectacular” production of the film. Amazed, the anonymous journalist of the popular photojournal *Semana Gráfica* said the production “was using 450 soldiers from the mountain infantry regiment and 85 grenadiers”.²⁰⁴ The four pages’ article reinforced visually the idea of *grandeza* (grandeur) regarding San Martín, showing Alfredo Alcón –Torre Nilsson’s San Martín- always on his horse, staring at the horizon. The captions under some photos said, “Snow, Wind, Cold, and Grenadiers,” “Moments of Extreme Danger,” emphasizing the harsh conditions of the Andes crossing (similar to the ones faced by the real San Martín and his army) to liberate Chile from the Spanish soldiers. It was a “mega production” and also very meticulous in its attention to details, such as the “real” cape of San Martín, the Royalist flag, period furniture, silverware, and so on. Alcón remarked how “hard” it was to be an actor, as if he and the cast were exposed to real danger.²⁰⁵

The article suggested –and the print media echoed it several times- that everything done in the feature would guarantee historical accuracy, and make it an excellent film. In

Maipú (1818), thus liberating Chile from Royalist rule. Then he set sail to attack the Spanish stronghold of Lima, Perú, by sea. On 12 July 1821, after seizing partial control of Lima, San Martín was appointed *Protector of Perú*, and Peruvian Independence was officially declared on 28 July 1821. A year later, after a closed-door meeting with fellow *libertador* Simón Bolívar at Guayaquil, Ecuador, on 22 July 1822, Bolívar took over the task of fully liberating Perú. San Martín unexpectedly left the country and resigned the command of his army, excluding himself from politics and the military, and moved to France in 1824. The details of the 22 July meeting would be a subject of debate by later historians.

²⁰⁴ *Semana Gráfica*, October 24, 1969.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

the same vein, *Clarín* talked about the “magnificent” sets, and the natural “elegance” of the historical furniture, reproducing Alcón’s words: “This is not fiction. I have never been so proud in my entire life,” adding “and so scared.” Argentine sweetheart Evangelina Salazar -cast as Remedios de Escalada, San Martín’s wife- said that a strange fear of facing national history and the myth (of the founding father) had taken hold of her, as well. “I have read all the documentation about Remedios. I am so happy and moved.”²⁰⁶

The vicissitudes of filming in Tupungato, Mendoza, were enormous. The cold was terrible, the lack of comfort an everyday problem. The press drew parallels between the real crossing of the Andes in 1817 and the difficulties of making the film. The photojournal *Gente* acknowledged the strength and power of “the San Martín narrative” and how the film would complement history textbooks to teach national patriotism. Narratives of Alcón’s behavior as an actor were constantly compared with San Martín’s. He did not behave like a star. Stoicism was his main characteristic. He was one more among all the people in the crew. “He is like him (San Martín (...)) and he really tried to beat the cold and roughness of the Andes”²⁰⁷

The film opens, in fact, with a frozen image of the Andes, as a clear symbol of grandiosity and geographical connection among the Latin American nations. With captions printed on the picture of the snowy high peaks, viewers read, “Banco de intercambio regional de la República Argentina (Argentine Regional Exchange Bank) founded in 1898. A private national company at the service of the Nation’s grandeur adhering to the bicentennial of General Don José de San Martín’s birth, and highlighting

²⁰⁶ *Clarín*, July 7, 1969.

²⁰⁷ *Gente*, October 30, 1969.

the virtues of the great argentine hero and prominent character of national history.” (00:00:45”). With those words and images Torre Nilsson echoed the sentiments the press expressed during the shooting, as he put his hero at the center of a national narrative, also giving him the role of cementing regional unity.

By emphasizing San Martín/Alcón's stoicism, as well as the harsh conditions of the shooting, the bad food the crew had to endure, the cold and so on, the press, director, the crew and at some point the film itself were drawing on the military's portrayal of itself, even if the various discursive actors were not fully aware of their contribution to this image building. The endurance of pain or hardship without a display of feelings and without complaint, the self-sacrifices that military men faced, linked San Martín with Bartolomé Mitre's historical work, as well as with nationalist Ricardo Rojas' canonical *The Knight of the Sword*, written in 1933, the original book Torre Nilsson used to make the film.

The glorification of the military and its authority was established with Onganía's words when taking office by June 29, 1966: “Argentines, I have assumed the Presidency of this nation, which has been given to me by a unified armed forces, because the national situation imposed mandatory obligations on us. I accept this exceptional responsibility, persuaded that we must produce a fundamental change, a true revolution that returns to all Argentines their faith, confidence, and pride.”²⁰⁸

With these words, the new President sought a double effect. On the one hand, he wanted to show the citizenry how much the country had deteriorated under Arturo Illia's previous elected administration, and he wanted to justifying the military coup against

²⁰⁸ Discurso Presidencial Juan Carlos Onganía, 29 de Junio 1966, Archivo General de la Nación.

Illia.²⁰⁹ He was positioning the military forces as the guardians and restorers of a moral order and national pride.²¹⁰ Onganía also wanted to show a coherent representation of the military forces, veiling the fact that they had been extremely divided by ideological and political differences until recently.²¹¹ In any case, alluding to these men who had lived a century before, the print media and films built an image of strong and morally irreproachable men of the armed forces, that projected itself onto contemporary times.

In that vein, and in an obvious metaphor, the scene after the opening credits shows an old San Martín coming back to Mendoza to rest after many battles against the Spaniards throughout Latin America. A young soldier, Olazábal, approaches him, “My General, we beg you to come back! We need you now more than ever.” “I come back to Mendoza to end my days as a plowman,” San Martín responds. Olazábal replies, “General, I am sorry, but we believe you have another task to finish” (2:25”). Even *against their will* the military, thus, had a civic duty to perform during the nineteenth century and in the 1970s.

The press, moreover, highlighted the active participation of actual military personnel in the shooting: “grenadiers, known for their courage, work as doubles,” an

²⁰⁹ See Lilianda de Riz, *La política argentina en suspenso*, 13-42.

²¹⁰ Discurso Presidencial Juan Carlos Onganía, 29 de Junio 1966, Archivo General de la Nación.

²¹¹ The Blues and Reds were the two military factions clashed in the heart of the Argentine Army in 1955 after the overthrow of President Juan Domingo Peron by the self-styled *Revolución Libertadora*, regarding the participation of Peronism in the social and political life of Argentine society. The Blues were to agree to allow limited access to some Peronist leaders to elections, in order to achieve institutional standards while fighting left-wing groups. The Colorados, in turn, assimilated the Peronist movement to communism, and advocated to eradicate them completely. By 1962 each side struggled to gain control over all armed forces and thus be able to exercise supervision over the government and set the course to be followed by national policy. In a first stage, the fighting focused on seeking support from the lower-ranking military. Since the overthrow of Arturo Frondizi March 29, 1962, General Juan Carlos Onganía, head of the Blues, decided to actively confront the Reds. On 22 September of that year, the Air Force bombed a Red base in San Antonio de Padua, Buenos Aires, and both sides met at Constitution Square and parks Chacabuco and Avellaneda, in the capital city. Finally, the Red command surrendered and President José María Guido appointed Onganía as commander-in-chief.

article in *Gente* observed.²¹² There was also a “military advisor, the Coronel Fernández Centoya!”²¹³ The different military men involved had been “extremely courageous and helpful.”²¹⁴ Torre Nilsson, in fact, openly compared San Martín with Onganía, emphasizing the key role the government had played in both inspiring and funding the film.²¹⁵ *Gente* and *Siete Días*, as a matter of fact, published snapshots of the film that showed Alcón/San Martín repeating a classic school textbook image. Meanwhile, the militarization of Argentine life was becoming a palpable reality that went beyond the models offered by the successive military dictatorships during the period. On May 29, 1970, the Peronist guerrilla group the Montoneros, made their public debut by kidnapping and assassinating General Pedro Aramburu –the military official responsible for the coup against Perón in 1955. The Montoneros now openly proclaimed the absolute necessity of an armed political organization in order to move the nation onto the path to the revolution.²¹⁶ Torre Nilsson’s San Martín could be recognized as a military figure that could fit into many definitions of heroism, from the right to the left of the political spectrum. What made the film a blockbuster was, in part, Torre Nilsson’s emphasis on the military side of San Martín.

Following the military euphoria of Torre Nilsson’s film, René Mugica’s successful feature about the life of Manuel Belgrano -*Bajo el Signo de la Patria* (Under the Sign of the Fatherland, 1971)- “was imagined as a film during a dinner party to honor

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ *Semana Gráfica*, October 24, 1969.

²¹⁴ *La Nación*, November 16, 1969.

²¹⁵ *Gente*, December 12, 1968.

²¹⁶ See Richard Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón: Argentina's Montoneros* (London: Clarendon Press, 1982).

the brigadier Arturo Pons Bedoya.²¹⁷ On that occasion, Mugica shared his dinner with several distinguished military officers as well as two members of the Instituto Belgraniano –an institution that preserved the memory of the general who was part of the anti-colonial war against Spain in the nineteenth century. In the course of the conversation, the idea came up. “We wanted to show the Belgrano that we all dreamt and learned about at school. He is our real founding father, a man no one can criticize. He was a real military man; a hero. And we couldn’t have made the movie without the military. The film will make people feel more Argentine than ever.”²¹⁸

The critiques some left groups made of the aforementioned historical films targeted some elements but not the emphasis on the military. The pro-communist *Cuadernos de Cultura* responded to the immense office box success of *El Santo de la Espada* which was seen by almost half a million people in the first 12 weeks of exhibition.²¹⁹ The critic acknowledged the cultural importance of historical film as a genre, establishing that it had allowed Argentine cinema to recover from a terrible financial situation.²²⁰ At first, the genre was surrounded by an intellectual halo, but, according to the *Cuadernos* critic, Torre Nilsson’s *El santo de la espada* provided only the official history of the military and did not even respect the heroic and romantic narrative in the original Ricardo Rojas’ book.²²¹

Gente organized a meeting between Torre Nilsson and some leftist young film students to view the film and talk about it. The magazine said that there were mixed

²¹⁷ *El Heraldo*, May 1971.

²¹⁸ *El Heraldo*, May 1971, *ibid.*

²¹⁹ *El Heraldo*, April 1 1970.

²²⁰ *Cuadernos de Cultura*, Sept/Oct, 1971.

²²¹ *Cuadernos de Cultura*, Sept/Oct, 1971, *ibid.*

opinions about the film, despite its popularity. Most of the students characterized the film as pompous, and criticized the artificial acting, the primary school version of History, described as an (epic) Hollywood formula chasing financial success. Torre Nilsson defended himself: “I have changed the topics I used to focus on, because I have been interested in 'national reality' during the last ten years.”²²²

While some leftist groups saw nothing more than a conservative tale in this film about San Martín, the director was very vocal about how “the pre-production time of this film allowed me to understand some issues, such as the meaning of being a colony, the meaning of a national identity, and the desire for emancipation,” feelings that he regarded as very contemporary nowadays.²²³ Even more, “the last years lived abroad led us to value some symbols; I think that what is called patriotism makes sense when treated as a vivid reality,” in a progressive, “non-conservative meaning.”²²⁴

Conservative or not, the film received praise from the right-wing media. The Catholic magazine *Criterio* was extremely happy with this version of San Martín’s life and the newspaper *La Prensa* said “the merit of the film is to depict the magnificence of [San Martín’s] historical figure without diminishing his emotional side. It shows how devoted San Martín was to his family and the high personal price he paid for of the liberation of America. He is not only the knight of the sword – as Ricardo Rojas called him - but also a man who loved his wife and daughter and could not stop worrying about

²²² *Gente*, April 28, 1970.

²²³ *La Nación*, November 16, 1969.

²²⁴ *La Nación*, November 16, 1969, *ibid.*

the destiny God had set for him.” For *La Prensa*, it was not just about politics, “the film is not just the linear story of the liberation campaigns”.²²⁵

When asked why his 1970 film was so popular, Torre Nilsson responded that a key factor was its authenticity, adding “I think spectators had the feeling of watching real facts, not made up ones. (They were watching) the truth about Argentina and Latin America.”²²⁶

El Santo de la espada was a film about Latin America, but with a hegemonic Argentine vision. It brought into play an imagined role of Argentina in Latin America. As an exceptional young nation with outstanding military leaders, it would export the Independence struggle and freedom throughout the continent. All the historical and folkloric films of the period, in that sense, were profoundly local and reproduced the vision Buenos Aires had regarding the rest of the country; their rhetoric was the self-contained discourse of the Argentine nation. Significantly, there were few attempts to export these films to the rest of the continent or even present them in international film festivals.²²⁷ In that sense, the political film movements, such as Solanas’ *Cine Liberación* and Gleizer’s *Cine de la Base*, were more “Latin Americanist.” They participated in Latin American and European film festivals and their films were actively shown abroad.²²⁸

Most of the historiography on historical films not only analyzes them separately from the more political oriented productions, but also characterizes them as conservative,

²²⁵ *Criterio*, April 1970; *La Prensa*, March 26, 1970.

²²⁶ *La Nación*, November 6, 1968.

²²⁷ The exception was Torre Nilsson’s *Martin Fierro*. The film participated and won the Best Film Award in the II Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival in Brazil, 1969

²²⁸ Pesaro, Viña del Mar and La Havana, after de 1976 coup.

because of their traditional topics, their emphasis on militarism, and their empty didacticism, as they openly sought to teach national –and nationalist– history through film. Certainly *Martín Fierro*, *El Santo de La Espada*, *Don Segundo Sombra* and others had conservative aspects and were also sponsored by the then military governments. Other historical films were, however, open to other (more radical) interpretations, as some of their heroes were speaking a contemporary language that could also be claimed by more leftist groups.

Antín's *Juan Manuel de Rosas* (1972) and Leonardo Favio's *Juan Moreira* (1973) were, in that sense, paradigmatic films as they showed a much more polemical version of the Argentine nation, closer to the revisionist schools, whose polemics were becoming increasingly contentious.

That is the topic of our next section.

Juan Manuel de Rosas, Argentine Intellectuals, and “The People”

Red-clad horseman gallop all across the pampas. There are hundreds, maybe thousands. They are *federales*; everyone can tell.²²⁹ Then, a tilt up shows the roof of a room in a colonial house. Over that still image, captions reproduce a letter that San Martín wrote to the governor of Buenos Aires, Don Juan Manuel de Rosas, on May 6,

²²⁹ *Federales* was the name under which the supporters of federalism in Argentina were known, opposing the *Unitarios* that claimed a centralized national government with clear hegemony of the Buenos Aires province over the rest of the territory and with no participation of the other provinces of the custom taxes benefits of the Buenos Aires port. The *Federales* supported the autonomy of the provincial governments and the distribution of external commerce taxes among the provinces. In general, the *Federales* were provincial governors and leaders, some of which became caudillos, such as Facundo Quiroga, leader of La Rioja. The several armed conflicts between *Federales* and *Unitarios* that started after the Revolución de Mayo (against colonial power) in 1810 diminished with Justo José de Urquiza –governor of Entre Ríos– defeat over Juan Manuel de Rosas at the Battle of Caseros in 1852, and ended in 1862 when Bartolomé Mitre was named president.

1850: “As an Argentine, it fills me with pride to see true prosperity, inner peace, order and honor restored to our beloved country: and all the progress made under circumstances so difficult that few states have ever confronted them. For the good you have done, I sincerely congratulate you and also the whole Argentine Confederation. May you enjoy good health and may your public life end with the full of recognition of all of Argentina. These are the wishes of your passionate friend and fellow now and forever TKYH "(That kisses your hands), Don José de San Martín.” The first four minutes of Manuel Antín’s *Juan Manuel de Rosas*, released on March 16, 1972 in the capital city of Argentina, set the tone for the rest of a historical narrative that will rehabilitate the governor of the Buenos Aires province (1829-1832 and 1835-1852), while associating him with the more universally accepted San Martín.

Compared to previous historical films of the period, Antín’s feature triggered a much wider debate about national history because of the ongoing polemic around the main character of the film, Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877).²³⁰ As governor of Buenos Aires, Rosas led the *Partido Federal*, portraying himself as a man of the people who could relate to the plebeian class of gauchos and Afro-Argentines. He tried to unify the nation through pacts with caudillos of the Argentine provinces. Virulent and often authoritarian, Rosas made many enemies during his lifetime, especially the so-called *Unitarios*, a group of literati, military men, and politicians, such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Esteban Echeverría, Bartolomé Mitre, Juan Bautista Alberdi, and José María

²³⁰ During the government of Rosas most Unitarians fled to neighbor countries, mostly to Chile, Uruguay and Brazil; among them we can find Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who wrote *Facundo* while living in Chile. *Facundo* is a critic biography of Facundo Quiroga another federalist caudillo, but Sarmiento used it to pass many indirect or direct critics to Rosas himself. Some members of the 1837-generation, intellectuals such as Esteban Echeverría or Juan Bautista Alberdi, tried to generate an alternative to the federalists-federalists antagonism, but had to flee to other countries as well.

Paz. Beginning with Bartolomé Mitre's writings, the official narrative about the construction of the nation portrayed Rosas as a tyrant and a villain, uncultivated and uncivilized, a barbarian.

During the early 1970s, however, Rosas was widely acclaimed as a major nationalist figure in revisionist accounts from the right to the left of the intellectual spectrum. He was the true incarnation of a broad national feeling that embodied diverse – and often antagonistic – characteristics, depending on the intellectual or political party that claimed him as a referent. According to historian Julio Stortini, the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas Juan Manuel de Rosas, founded by journalists and lawyers in 1938 with the purpose of producing a new version of Argentine national history that included rescuing Rosas as a major historical character, had a very limited scope during its first two decades. But during the 1960s and 1970s, when there was a convergence between Peronism, revisionism, and national populism, Rosas grew more prominent within the media and the Instituto played a more important role in the public sphere, challenging the *mitrista* version of the national past. In that environment, who was Antín's Rosas? Why was this film so popular?

The spectator gets some clues as soon as the film starts. After San Martín's letter appears on the screen, the camera tilts down to a corridor in the house. A servant opens a double door, and a group of men advance, guarded by *federal* troops standing on both sides of the corridor. The viewer can tell these are prominent military men. They walk toward the opposite end of the hallway, where Rosas, a bishop and other military wait, undaunted and defiantly. *Viva la patria* is shouted many times, accompanied by the sound of fireworks, both coming from outside the frame; there is some kind of popular

celebration in the streets. While walking through the corridor, those men move closer and closer to us and we realize their uniforms are different from Rosas' and their cohort. They are probably foreigners. The camera zooms to a close-up of Rosas' face, and a voice over reveals his thoughts to us. "I never thought politics was my destiny." A long flashback of his previous life begins, that will ultimately disclose the meaning of the encounter we are watching (04:36").

Antín took sides in the debate when he asked José María Rosa to participate in the film as a screenwriter, associate, and main historical consultant. "After reading a lot about Rosas, I contacted the historian José María Rosa in October 1970. I did that for two reasons. First, he is one of the most knowledgeable authorities on the subject, and second, I wanted to have someone with me who worked with the same passion [that I did]."²³¹ José María Rosa, a lawyer and public intellectual born in 1906, was indeed passionate about history and became a fervent nationalist at a young age. He was known publicly for his active decades-long participation in the Instituto de Investigaciones Historicas. Identified with Perón's regime from 1946 on, Rosa spent some years in Uruguay and Spain after the 1955 coup. Totally committed to defending Rosas' figure publicly, he enjoyed a broad popularity in the media, which recognized him as a public historian. As such, Rosa drew on his own work to write the script, especially his 1970 book *Rosas, nuestro contemporáneo*, which narrated the twenty years of Juan Manuel de Rosas' second administration as the governor of Buenos Aires province.

The book had a great impact on public opinion, as it openly contested Mitre's version –and subsequent accounts– of Rosas' tyranny and tried to show how

²³¹ *La Opinión*, December 23, 1971.

contemporary Rosas was, almost a hundred years after his death. The caudillo was a true leader of the popular classes and was also a fervent patriot, imbued with an anti-colonial spirit.²³² Those elements are in the centerpiece of the depiction of Rosas in the film. His authoritarian style is attenuated –or even ignored- by his close relationship with the popular classes, gauchos, Indians, Afro-Argentines, and his fight against the British and French imperial powers that were eager to invade the port of Buenos Aires with their foreign goods.

In that vein, the emblematic scene at the beginning of the film that shows the gentlemen walking towards Rosas meant nothing other than a national victory over the British power, which had tried to blockade the port of Buenos Aires, in order to force people to buy British and French products. The film shows how Rosas was, beginning in his youth, a powerful but just and merciful landlord who had become a politician *reluctantly* at the request “of the people” (10:09”). He is basically depicted as a nationalist popular caudillo, committed to anti-colonial struggle. His brilliant and sarcastic phrases throughout the film make him seem more like a Third World statesman of the twentieth century than a nineteenth-century political leader. His style is remarkably similar to Perón’s.

Newspapers, photojournals, and magazines covered the making and the repercussions of this film after its release. None of them missed the celebratory tone of the movie, which seemed to blatantly argue that Rosas was worthy of being considered a hero of the fatherland. One reporter who was interviewing Antín asked, “from what you have been saying, one can deduce that you want to endorse Rosas as a key historical

²³² José María Rosa, *Rosas, nuestro contemporáneo. Sus veinte años de gobierno* (Buenos Aires: La Candelaria, 1970).

character, is that right?" The director denied that, explaining that his purpose was to bring a different perspective than the official that denied Rosas any valuable place in Argentine history. For that purpose, Antín and Rosa used new historical sources (other than Mitre's work), such as San Martín's letters, Rosas' letters, the memoirs of Lavalle (a declared *Unitario*). The journalist wondered if it was right to make a film about Rosas at such a complicated political moment, "when we (?) are trying to unite the Argentine people."²³³

What unity was the reporter was talking about? As we saw, beginning in the last years of the Onganía administration, the so-called *Revolución Argentina* had been in a permanent crisis. The guerrilla movements had grown unstoppable; the working class resistance against the proscription of Peronism was stronger than ever, and state repression had intensified. To decompress tensions and stop increasing political violence, the then de facto president, General Alejandro Agustín Lanusse had launched the GAN – Gran Acuerdo Nacional (Great National Pact), announced in early July 1971. It proposed an agreement between the main political forces in order to restore the rules of the electoral and democratic political system, making a broad-based call to all citizens to participate actively in that process. For the military, the GAN meant the possibility of finding an honorable exit path for the *Revolución Argentina*, even though many political tendencies –especially the Peronist movement- saw the GAN as a way of maintaining military control over the next elected government. Despite Lanusse's efforts, it did not work, as Perón –still exiled in Spain- personally opposed it.

The frequently mentioned "national unity" was, therefore, an empty expression, and Antín's financially successful film that rehabilitated Rosas was vivid proof of divided

²³³ *Clarín*, June 17, 1971.

opinions about the Argentine past (and present). Antín, going along with the times, affirmed repeatedly that “my movie is a peacemaker and points toward national unity”²³⁴ He repeated several times that if “we accept Rosas as an historical character, we can assume all the contradictions that are part of our nation.”²³⁵ “Neither angel, nor devil. In that sense, the film has an uncontroversial meaning,” Antín said. He meant he wanted to promote a dialogue between opponents, to contribute to political harmony.²³⁶ Which did not happen; in fact, it was quite the opposite. And the film director knew it long before the release of his feature.

Driven by a desperate search for authenticity, Antín had decided to shoot his film in the small town of Chascomús in Buenos Aires province, the epicenter of a civil and military movement called *Los libres del Sur*, an 1829 rebellion against Rosas. Antín wanted to shoot part of his film in a museum that had been built to commemorate the victims of Rosas. The entire town rose up against Antín and the shooting. The film crew was threatened. Local radio programs broadcast 24 hours a day asking the director to leave. School kids, who had learned that Rosas killed their ancestors, organized a public demonstration against the film. Actors needed 24-hour police protection. Finally, the mayor intervened, helping Antín and Rosa to finish the film, while denouncing them as “revisionists.”²³⁷

And they certainly were. Taking a closer look at the situation of the revisionist school during those years, the film could have been its most popular expression.

Historian Alejandro Cattaruzza suggests that although revisionist versions of the

²³⁴ *Clarín*, June 17, 1971, *ibid.*

²³⁵ *Panorama*, July 13, 1971.

²³⁶ *La Opinión*, October 14, 1971, *ibid.*

²³⁷ *Siete Días*, August 20, 1971.

Argentine past emerged almost at the same time as the institutionalization of the historical profession at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was after the coup that overthrew Perón in 1955 that the Peronist movement created a narrative in which Rosas and Perón –and other caudillos and military leaders, such as Facundo Quiroga and San Martín – became part of the same historical (popular) tradition. The element that blended together such a heterogeneous group of men in a unique narrative was a vague "national project" that opposed the surrender of national resources by oligarchic groups and their leaders to foreign interests.²³⁸

These men were, thus, metaphors of anti-colonialism and populism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, transcending the borders of the Peronist movement, which meant that other nationalist political groups, Catholics, the nationalist left, and conservatives claimed many of these figures as the backbones of their narratives. As Omar Acha posits, even if there were important differences among the revisionist schools and even if their versions of the past varied, some characters, such as Rosas, were a constant in all the revisionist narratives.²³⁹

Many personalities interviewed during the shooting expressed their opinions about the fact that such a polemic topic was being projected in commercial movie theaters. The conservative Julio Irazusta –one of the first revisionists and more fervent *Rosistas*- said that the fact that a movie about Rosas was being made meant that Argentina was developing a more mature historical consciousness, and “that is the reason

²³⁸ Cattaruzza, *Políticas de la historia argentina*, 143-182.

²³⁹ Omar Acha, *Historia crítica de la historiografía argentina. Las izquierdas en el siglo XX* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2008).

that led a liberal filmmaker to be interested in such a topic.” The newspaper *Clarín* called Irazusta –with contempt- “rosista.”²⁴⁰

The polemic reached new heights when Antín told the media that Colonel César Perlinger, a nationalist leftist and co-founder of the IDEPO – Izquierda Democrática Popular (Popular Democratic Left) was also involved in the making of the film. The Colonel accepted to participate in the featuring of the film, because he knew it would bother the liberals, who had always lied about Rosas. The Conservative newspaper *La Razón*, speechless about the whole affaire, surveyed the crew to discover who was a Rosista and who wasn't, concluding that Rosas' admirers were in the minority.²⁴¹

La Prensa took a predictable right-wing side in the debate incited by the film about history and contemporary politics: “It is nothing more than a political venture, [one] which used profuse financial support to achieve the enormous publicity that cinema provides. For those who venerate the spirit of *Mayo* (the Mayo Revolution)-- which was born with Moreno, reached the sky with Echeverria, recovered with Caseros' splendor, was built from the “*Bases*” of Alberdi and the fight of Sarmiento, Mitre and others, and was reborn in September 1955 [date of the coup against Perón]--these attempts to vindicate the sinister character of the first tyrant could be puzzling, aggressive, blasphemous. He was the symbol of oppression, of the denial of freedom, the denial of *Mayo*; what has been done is such a lie as a historical narrative, so childish as an assertion, so inconsistent as a message, so clumsy in its offenses to its opponents the Unitarios, and so poor as cinema, that the possible outrage is overshadowed by the failed

²⁴⁰ *Clarín*, June 17, 1971.

²⁴¹ *La Razón*, October 4, 1971.

attempt. From the first scenes we can become aware of the so-called historical revisionism and its lies.”²⁴²

The response to this criticism came in an interview with José María Rosa by the Peronist intellectuals Rodolfo Ortega Peña and Luis Eduardo Duhalde. The circumstances of the interview expressed what was at stake, as it brought together Ortega Peña and Duhalde -lawyers of political prisoners, active militants, and intellectuals- with Rosa, one of the most important Peronist public historians. It was a convergence of a militant position towards history –and a political commitment to *the* historical truth- and a more academic viewpoint. The discussion focused on Rosas. For the two interviewers, the film was too cautious in its treatment of the Unitarios. Both pressured José María Rosa, arguing that the film did not denounce the anti-popular Unitarios as explicitly as it should have. At the same time, the three of them criticized Torre Nilsson because his historical films were not ”popular”—that is, they did not reflect the people’s experiences.²⁴³

In Antín’s opinion, his film was extremely popular (in the sense of reflecting the sensibility and perspective of “the people.”) even though it was expensive to produce, because historical reconstruction -if one seeks historical accuracy- requires resources. Comparing himself to Torre Nilsson, Antín felt he was a much better filmmaker because he “chose to develop a non-traditional topic (Rosas); I participate in a new kind of cultural project.”²⁴⁴ “Why end the film with the outcome of the British blockade?” Antín

²⁴² *La Prensa*, March 17, 1972.

²⁴³ *Clarín*, October 14, 1971.

²⁴⁴ *Clarín*, March 16, 1972.

wondered. “We wanted to finish with the victory of our national army. Not to mystify, but to help the Argentine people find happiness and feel confident.”²⁴⁵

Final Words

When Leonardo Favio decided to release his *Juan Moreira* on March 24 1973, he had every reason to expect that the movie would be successful. After all, the following day Héctor Cámpora, the Peronist candidate, would assume the Argentine Presidency, ending eighteen years of Peronist proscription and opening the way for Perón to return to his country after a long exile in Spain.

Favio was aware of the moment he lived in. “Yes, I expect a big box office (...) (because) Juan Moreira was the armed wing against injustice,” said Favio adding, “(he was) a popular leader, whose actions are still valid. The people are looking for men such as Moreira who fought against oppression.”²⁴⁶ He was indeed, filming the story of the rebel gaucho Juan Moreira, who had lived during the nineteenth century and presumably died in 1874. Moreira was a folk-hero, one of the more renowned Argentine rural bandits whose deeds circulated widely among the popular classes during the first decades of the twentieth century. In the early 1970s, at the dawn of a new popular government, it was hoped that a film with such a theme would reach a broad public.

More than two million people flocked to see the film during the first two months of exhibition, showing that “history reflected the present,” to quote *Clarín*.²⁴⁷ Conservative and liberal media, national-popular and leftist magazines and newspapers

²⁴⁵ *ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Clarín*, March 23, 1972.

²⁴⁷ *El Heraldo*, May 12, 1973.

celebrated this movie that seemed to express the euphoria that the new Peronist government widely inspired in its first few months. In that sense, there were no disputes over the film similar to those aroused by previous historic and folkloric features a few years before. Even though Favio was a recognized Peronist, he was also known as a very talented and creative film director. Conservative and anti-Peronist media acknowledged this, with the result that the film was highly praised even by the non-Peronist media. “This film is an honor,” said the conservative photojournal *Gente*, adding, (it) expressed the national feeling of all Argentines.”²⁴⁸

Juan Moreira, along with other historical films analyzed in this chapter, dramatized diverse versions of national history that incorporated many popular assumptions or revisionist versions of it, integrating a hard militarism –that could be claimed by both the right and the left of the political spectrum-, a dialectic between a strong leader/caudillo and the people/masses in order to explain the historical process, and a completely masculine version of Argentine history.

In that sense, historical features and political films have more in common than the historiography on Argentine film is willing to accept. *Martín Fierro*, *El santo de la espada*, *Juan Manuel de Rosas*, *Juan Moreira*, Solanas’ *La Hora de los Hornos* and *Los hijos de Fierro*, and Jorge Cedrón’s *Operación Masacre* (Operation Slaughter, 1973) all have as central character a male hero who carried the story and made national history possible. These male heroes reigned in the public sphere: the street, the battlefield, the factory, the union, and the political meeting. Women are present in these stories as the *compañeras* who -from the private sphere- support their men and make them stronger,

²⁴⁸ *Gente*, May 29, 1973.

but always hoping that their heroes will come back home and resume a “normal” domestic life. Thus, the disputes over the meanings of national history coexisted with certain agreements in terms of representation that were visibly manifested with regard to gender relations. Those were outside of any political controversy; it was agreed that the hero was a man, in the vein of the Military and/or the guerrilla leaders.

As I showed, that did not mean that there was an agreement about everything represented in those films. Disagreement, conflict, and ideological contradictions were always present at the release of historical films and they were always an occasion for intellectual polemics. Ulises Petit de Murat, *Martín Fierro* scriptwriter and a man of the film industry, said that he regretted that Hernández's poem hadn't been part of the canonic literature or school textbooks, because it was considered, for a long time, too popular. “It is truly national and a real challenge for the national cinema.” He -who had been so criticized by the left and Peronist groups as anti-popular, elitist, and pro dictatorship – was not only publicly rescuing a figure that was part of the popular cultural imagination in the 1970s. Petit de Murat, that *liberal* intellectual, financed and supported by the Onganía regime, was also creating a mass consumption cultural artifact that had as its central character a gaucho exploited by an authoritarian state.²⁴⁹

Populist intellectuals protested harshly to the appropriation of a popular culture classic by *liberal* intellectuals, such as Petit de Murat, Torre Nilsson, and others. The modernist magazine *Primera Plana* –that went through a Peronist phase during 1971 and 1972- dedicated several issues to the centennial of Hernández' *Martín Fierro* in 1972. In May of that year, the cover of the magazine portrayed a *guerrillero* Martín Fierro,

²⁴⁹ *La Gaceta*, July 14, 1968.

carrying a modern rifle.²⁵⁰ From that issue on, all the Peronist and national populist writers, historians, and public intellectuals wrote there. They claimed the poem was theirs and they would not allow the *liberals* to claim it. “In the catacomb of the official Argentina, they are celebrating the Centennial of Fierro with blood-red wine (...) in the real nation, there is no place for the spotlights of [no 20th]Century-Fox, because Hernández’ Centennial is a celebration for the masses.”²⁵¹

Antín’s *Juan Manuel de Rosas* created a similar controversy. While the deep nationalism and anti-imperialism attributed to Rosas in the film unified sectors of the right and the left (who, just a few years later, would end up attacking and in some cases killing each other), other aspects of the film generated a sharp division among the media and intellectuals. This is understandable give that one of the most popular chants at Peronist demonstrations during 1972 and 1973 was “military, military, military made of cardboard, real military is ours: San Martín, Rosas, Perón.” This new version of national history joined San Martín, hero of the official narrative, with Rosas, icon of the revisionist version, creating a genealogy for the Peronist movement.

It is important to note that politics were not, in the first instance, the motive for the turn to historical features. Film directors were pressured by the lack of spectators for Argentine films and this led to the transformation of their own work, and their decision to make these historical mega-productions that so much resembled Hollywood movies. Also, they were aware of the growing disagreements in the cultural fields that determined who had the right to film certain topics and who did not. The frantic search for authenticity pursued by the filmmakers-and claimed by critics, audiences, and

²⁵⁰ *Primera Plana*, May 9, 1972.

²⁵¹ *Primera Plana*, August 1, 1972.

intellectuals- reflected both concerns—the need to make money and the desire to be a legitimate producer of historical narratives.. Public historians and journalists praised the historical reconstruction –clothing, make-up, set- qualities that were prerequisites for a good film, “accurate” historically speaking and successful at the box office. Of course, sets and wigs were not enough for some major films. It did not matter whether Rodolfo Bebán resembled Rosas; the polemic about the film went well beyond the cinematography, pointing out to how legitimate was someone’s voice in the cultural and intellectual field to produce historical narratives.

These were the Argentine contradictions of those years, when the centrality of past and present led national cinema (and its viewing public) to embrace issues that had been considered unprofitable for many decades. And yet, nine months after the release of *Juan Moreira* filmmakers and critics announced the end of historical and political films as successful commercial enterprises. At the end of 1973, the newspaper *La Opinión* expressed its disappointment, as they perceived a declining of political and historical films success, in comparison with the previous years. Because of the emergence of the new Peronist government the journalist wondered why people were beginning to tire of those films. And he concluded, “(maybe) they would have attracted more people in previous years. When the national political struggle (against the dictatorship) was at its height.”²⁵²

Historical films, thus, worked in a moment of political struggle between the dictatorship and the cultural field. They were vehicles to find the meaning of the Argentine imagined community. But, after the long-awaited return of Perón to the

²⁵² *La Opinión*, December 7, 1973.

presidency on October 13, 1973, the right and the left were involved in almost daily-armed conflicts. Blatant political violence escalated in Argentina. The public did not want to see historical films anymore –they probably had enough with their turbulent everyday life and it became increasingly difficult to celebrate the patria in the midst of so much real violence. Audiences turned to more intimate features, which focused on personal plots. New directors born to the industry during the late 1960s made successful films that told small stories about middle class women with sexual issues.

Political filmmakers linked openly to the left and guerrilla movements (such as *Cine Liberación* and *Cine de la Base*) were hypercritical of those films and ultimately, of films of any kind, as they thought the time for cultural artifacts not totally committed to the revolution had passed.²⁵³ For one reason or another, few historical films were produced after 1973. Many filmmakers, in fact, decided to leave the profession, as they thought there was no purpose or meaning in making films anymore, and many ended up joining the guerrilla or exiled or assassinated in the dungeons of the dictatorship that seized power on March 24, 1976.²⁵⁴

In that sense, the unprecedented confluence between intellectuals, militants, military men, and directors in the making of historical and political films ended when the only thing that really mattered was the present counted in days and hours. The dream of the revolution meant many things, some of them contradictory, authoritarian, cruel, and marvelous. In the field of film production, it meant that several talented filmmakers

²⁵³ Cine Liberación, “Hacia un tercer cine,” *Tricontinental*, no. 13 (1969)

²⁵⁴ It is the case of Pablo Szir, Quique Juárez, Jorge Cedrón, and Raymundo Gleyzer. See Fernando Peña and Carlos Vallina, *El cine quema: Raymundo Gleyzer* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la flor, 2000); Fernando Peña, *El cine quema: Jorge Cedrón* (Buenos Aires: Museo del cine, 2003). A great film about the particular journey of Raymundo Gleyzer is Virna Molina and Ernesto Ardito’s *Raymundo* (2002).

abandoned their craft or they did not care about the preservation of their work, lost forever. The transcendent meaning that cinema had, got lost in the mist of a more urgent and immanent mission where there was neither time nor space for art.

Chapter 4:
“Xica, Flor, Gabriela: Race, Gender, Sexuality and the Making of a National Identity in the 1970s Brazilian Visual Media”

Introduction

She bursts into the big hall, interrupting the meeting between the deputy mayor, members of the local elite, and João Fernandes de Oliveira, the new Governor of Mining, an emissary of the King of Portugal. She tells the sergeant—her owner—how his son José took sexual liberties with her, all the while glancing sideways at João Fernandes, who is the true representative of power in the room. She wears a loose white blouse that contrasts with her black skin. As she rips her clothes off to show the alleged signs of victimization on her body, she smiles coyly, describing those liberties in detail. A circular tracking shot shows her half-naked body. João Fernandes, bewitched, also smiles. A popular song by singer Jorge Ben Jor explodes over the dialogue, repeating: *Xica da, Xica da, Xica da Silva, iê!*²⁵⁵ The camera moves from Xica’s shiny eyes and teeth—highlighting her blackness—to the colorful fruits, rugs, furniture, clothes, and back to her again. She laughs. João Fernandes is lost.

This is one of the first sequences of *Xica da Silva* (Carlos Diegues, 1976), a film that tells the story of the slave Francisca da Silva de Oliveira (c. 1732-1796), who lived in the city of Diamantina, province of Minas Gerais, the epicenter of diamond mining in eighteenth-century colonial Brazil, and the epitome of its baroque culture. Chica da Silva,

²⁵⁵ MPB was a genre developed during the mid-1960s that consisted in a constellation of updating traditional Brazilian music styles, combining urban styles -like pop and rock and roll, with the more traditional samba and bossa nova- that launched to stardom popular figures such as Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Gal Costa, João Bosco, João Gilberto, Maria Bethania, Jorge Ben Jor among others. In this specific case, Jorge Benjor’s ubiquitous “Xica da Silva” theme song reverberated in the city of Rio de Janeiro for over a year, reinforcing the connection between the film and popular/mass culture.

the popular legend says, was a slave who uses her sexual “abilities” to win favor with the white masters who successively cross her path, empowering herself and escaping from the vicissitudes of slavery, and finally being granted manumission by her lover João Fernandes de Oliveira. Fernandes de Oliveira oversaw the tightly regulated diamond district in Diamantina until he was called back to the Court to face charges of moral degradation and economic corruption, though not before amassing a sizable fortune for himself through his position.

A great deal of buzz preceded the commercial release of *Xica da Silva* by March 3, 1976, when the renowned Brazilian film producer Jarbas Barbosa and EMBRAFILME together invited a selected public to the exclusive premiere of the film. Audiences had been waiting so long for it that Carlos “Cacá” Diegues, the director, already knew it would be a major hit. The press kit outlined the basic plot, featuring statements such as: “You are the happiness, the people’s sun, and without you, their freedom is of no use. As long as there is love, Xica...”; “A revolutionary love lived with sensuality, humor, and extravagance during Brazilian colonial times...”; it was framed as “the good-humored story of an extraordinary woman, the fantastic slave who became the Queen of Diamonds, an eternal symbol of love and freedom.”²⁵⁶ Adorning the front flap of the invitation was a reproduction of the “Golden Law,” the decree that abolished slavery in Brazil, which had been signed into law by Princess Isabel on May 13, 1888. This symbol—in tandem with the advertisements and articles about the movie, the hundreds of interviews given by the director, the producer, and the main actors, the press kits and pamphlets circulating before and after the release—disseminated discourses and

²⁵⁶ Press kit of the film produced by EMBRAFILME; “Convite,” March 3, 1976, Jarbas Barbosa Produções.

representations of national history, cultural identity, and the “popular.” It also showed the dramatic changes that had occurred in the Brazilian cultural industry since the previous decade, especially in the field of film production, and how the traditional leftist filmmakers were repositioning themselves in terms of aesthetic and narrative choices—leaving behind avant-garde experiments such as those of *Cinema Novo*, analyzed in Chapter 2—and instead making blockbusters for broad audiences.

The film (one of Brazil’s most successful domestic box office hits of all time)²⁵⁷ generated—as some other films had done in the previous decade—a wide-ranging public debate for months around the significance of national history, identity, and race relations. It tested, once again, intellectuals’ and artists’ knowledge about cultural authenticity, questioning, in turn, the 1960s assumptions about the relationship between popular and mass culture.²⁵⁸ It also raised issues about the construction of a Brazilianness deeply rooted in notions of gender, race and sexuality. Finally, the discussions confronted the myths of the three races and racial democracy as the very foundation of the imagined community of “Brazil”—a question made more pressing by the emergence of a contemporaneous significant Afro-Brazilian political movement in the 1970s.²⁵⁹

This feature film was a watershed in Brazilian cinema. Starring the Afro-Brazilian actress Zezé Motta, the feature film’s success reflected the general trajectory of the national film industry in the 1970s, as Brazilian cineastes sought more “modern” ways to

²⁵⁷ 2, 338, 289 people saw the film between its release in August 6 1976, and July 1977. Until mid-July 1977, *Xica da Silva* was the third most seen film in Brazilian cinema history.

²⁵⁸ See Robert Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, eds., *Brazilian Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

²⁵⁹ See George Reid Andrews, *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888-1988* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). The MNU (Movimento Negro Unificado) was founded in São Paulo in September 9, 1978. Black Soul was one of the many cultural movements that blossomed in Rio and São Paulo connected to different black manifestations, especially music and art.

make national films, integrating new aesthetic trends and narrative structures that would travel from the popular *novelas* produced by the powerful TV network Rede Globo to the big screen.²⁶⁰

Xica da Silva is the starting point of this chapter. It allows me to illuminate the process by which other major popular feature films reflected changes in Brazil in the 1970s, especially in the second half of the decade. These movies, through the display of black, mulata, and white female sexuality, projected a national identity rooted in the racialized feminine body that was part of the popular culture. Stereotypical representations of gender, sexuality, and race formed this identity that had an impact in both the domestic context and abroad during that decade. In this vein, I show how Brazilians and foreign audiences—such as Americans, who functioned as a cultural “other” in Brazil—saw in movies starring Motta, Sônia Braga, and Betty Faria, the sensuality and joy that characterized Brazil and its jubilant people. This complex juxtaposition of images of these popular actresses’ performances on the big screen and their private lives as recounted in photojournals, fanzines, and newspapers, created and reaffirmed the imagining of Brazil as a tropical/sensual paradise.

According to Gail Bederman, gender and race have played a major role in constructing notions of civilization and nationhood.²⁶¹ She argues that it is historically ineffectual to analyze discourses and practices about the nation without establishing the connections between them and gender and racial representations. In that vein, I posit that

²⁶⁰ Miriam Hansen, “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film As Vernacular Modernism,” *Film Quarterly* 54:1 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 10-22. The notion of modern film used here refers to Miriam Hansen’s work on Shanghai films during the 1920s, films whose aesthetic and narrative elements on the screen spectators could associate with their own experiences of modernity.

²⁶¹ Gail Bederman. *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

racialized cinematic images of women in Brazil in the 1970s were significant in defining both national inclusion and exclusion and functioned as cultural signifiers representing the nation.

The promotion of those images took place during the final year of the repressive rule implemented during the administration of general Emílio Garrastazu Médici (the so-called *anos de chumbo* from 1968 to 1974) and during the process of *distensão* promoted by general Ernesto Geisel (1974-1979).²⁶² Representations of race, gender, and sexuality constituted a “brand” that was used to sell *Brazilianness* at home and abroad. Through EMBRAFILME, the government could distribute, publicize, and even exploit those images in the midst of a period of military rule.²⁶³ The needs of the military to show a benevolent and more modern – therefore, exportable – representation of Brazil met both a social imaginary that placed joy, sex, and colored feminine bodies as registered trade of nationality and a significant change in the field of film production.

As we saw in chapter 2, films such as *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (*Black God, White Devil*, 1964) or *Cinco Vezes Favela* (1962) had been hailed by domestic and international critics as emblems of a new Brazilian/Latin American filmmaking projecting a less stylized image of the Brazilian nation than the one conveyed by the Cannes Film Festival winner *O Cangaceiro* (1953) or less festive than Marcel Camus’ *Black Orpheus* (1959). From 1970 on and certainly after the release of *Xica da Silva* and

²⁶² The process of “distensão” meant a gradual relaxation of authoritarian rule. It would be, in Geisel words, “the maximum of development possible with the minimum of indispensable security.”

²⁶³ As we saw in previous chapters, Randal Johnson reminds us that the authoritarian state emerged in Brazil in 1964 had an unprecedented policy of direct intervention in the cultural field, creating the Conselho Federal de Cultura in 1966, the INC (Instituto Nacional de Cinema) in 1966, EMBRAFILME in 1969, Fundação Nacional das Artes in 1975, and the Conselho Nacional de Cinema (CONCINE) in 1976. See Randall Johnson, *The Film Industry in Brazil: Culture and the State* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987).

other similarly popular film features, most of the successful Brazilian filmmakers left behind many of their political, independent, and *auteur* standards to embrace what was considered the “popular” (more financially successful formulas), related to both the significant expansion of the Brazilian consumption market and the emergence of a globalized mass culture industry. The new rules in the game of cultural production dictated that those directors who had been reluctant to consider color film, professional actors, commercial distribution and profit were now making films for an audience broader than “sociology majors”, as Jarbas Barbosa put it during the IX Festival de Cinema de Brasilia (1976), where *Xica da Silva* won awards for best film, best director (Carlos Diegues), and best actress (Zezé Motta). They were resolved to make commercial films *for export*, which in reality meant high quality films (dictated by Hollywood standards), for mostly domestic but also foreign audiences.²⁶⁴

Filmmakers strove to achieve marketable success and attract massive audiences seeking both state funding and regulation for film distribution and exhibition. Since the mid-1950s –as we have seen in chapter 2- Brazilian filmmakers’ had launched a long-running campaign demanding state protection to film production. Through EMBRAFILME, the Brazilian state financed major films projects using censorship to keep the “leftist” directors on track. At the same time, the ways in which the directors thought about and made films, producers obtained financial support for their enterprises, the tools the state used to distribute films locally and abroad reflected both the delicate balance between the military interests and the changing policies of EMBRAFILME and the always difficult relationship between intellectuals and the state.

²⁶⁴ *Última Hora*, March 3, 1976.

Through the depiction of the characters of the already mentioned Xica, and Dona Flor, Gabriela, Iaba, and other sensuous women, the filmmakers would launch a cacophonous conversation about skin color, race and racism in the public sphere. The very words “race” and “racism” were virtually taboo in the national vocabulary as racial democracy was one of the most essential and distinctive features in Brazil as an imagined community for much of the twentieth century and a crucial element in the construction of Brazilian exceptionalism. These films would recreate the myth, which would be fueled by images of female sexuality on the big screen, consumed locally and abroad.

Why Our Slavery Was Not So Bad

The "economic miracle" (1969-1974) was the name given to the era of exceptional economic growth during the military dictatorship—virtually the same time span known as the *anos de chumbo* (years of lead) by those who would foreground political repression under the Médici administration. This period of economic development witnessed, paradoxically, an increase in inequality and the concentration of income, together with a government campaign to stimulate pride in "Grande Brasil." The federal government continually pumped out propaganda spreading mottos of dubious meaning or merit: "Brazil, love it or leave it," "Go Brazil," "Nobody can stop this country." It was precisely at the tail end of this process of optimism and fulsome nationalism²⁶⁵ that *Xica da Silva* was made.²⁶⁶ "Xica da Silva was just one among many black slave women who served several white masters of Arraial do Tijuco", the press kit

²⁶⁵ Carlos Fico, *Inventando o Otimismo: ditadura, propaganda e imaginário social no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1997).

²⁶⁶ The shooting started on August 1974 and ended on June 1976.

goes, “Popular tradition says that she was ugly, unattractive. But Xica had a mysterious charm, a magical and indomitable way about her. Ambitious, she decided to conquer the powerful nobleman [the commodore João Fernandes]. Making use of the most extravagant tricks, she provoked, seduced. And the commander could not resist the exuberance of the black woman [negra] and fell in love with her”.²⁶⁷

Even if the film did not openly adhere to the historical genre analyzed in chapter 3, it was full of representations of the Brazilian nation that embodied a widespread notion of Brazilian exceptionalism. Its narrative was sustained along by a series of scenes about all the sexual favors the flamboyant Xica generously provides to many white men and how that gives her privileges—luxurious clothing, wigs, perfumes, servants—and visibility. However, underneath this “simple” and “inexpensive” film²⁶⁸—classified as a “comedy” by the production company and the media—there is an understanding of both the meaning of slavery and contemporary Brazil racial and gender relations. Displaying the black Atlantic female stereotypes, the cinematic narrative and the articles written during the shooting and immediately after the premiere, reduced Xica as a fictional character and Zezé as an actress to their bodies and aggressive “black” sexuality.²⁶⁹ Typical was this comment from photojournal *Fatos e Fotos*: “Zezé Motta transformed herself completely into Xica da Silva, a woman who, like her, always gets what she wants. The only thing missing was to discover the secrets that allowed the slave from Ouro Preto [Xica] to conquer her lovers. But in that field, it is easy to see that she [Motta]

²⁶⁷ Press Kit EMBRAFILME.

²⁶⁸ Diegues declared to all the major newspapers that *Xica da Silva*'s cost was below US\$ 200,000, less than any mid-sized Hollywood production at the time.

²⁶⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

does not have anything to learn.”²⁷⁰ Said the article about the film, while showing colorful film shooting of a topless *Xica da Silva* and pictures that showed a suggesting Zezé. “Her [Xica’s] physical skills, so goes the story, were not uncommon among the black slave women, and she got what she wanted through an almost professional sexuality. Like Zezé, she knew how powerful her body was.”²⁷¹

The overt description of feminine blackness links it with prostitution and feeds Brazilian fantasies about black women’s sexuality, which had gained scholarly endorsement with the publication of Gilberto Freyre’s *Casa Grande & Senzala* (The Masters and the Slaves) in 1933. Xica is always eager to sleep with all the white men; she is perpetually available, enjoying, even initiating each and every sexual encounter. The violence and sexual coercion used against black women in every known slave society was totally absent, also reinforcing Freyre’s ideas about miscegenation in Brazil as a more harmonious and consensual mixing of the white (Portuguese) master and the black slave woman, especially if compared to the US, with the result being a positive element of national culture. In fact, when the controversies around *Xica da Silva* reached their height, Freyre openly pronounced the movie excellent and acknowledged that his work had inspired it.²⁷²

“I think,” Motta declared, “that after Xica many people will believe that this slave who then became João Fernandes’s lover had some kind of black woman’s secret spell to make men crazy...”²⁷³ The film was about love more than anything, praised the media.

²⁷⁰ *Fatos e Fotos*, August 22, 1976. There are hundreds of articles on interviews during the last months of 1976 that depict her as a “black bombshell” in the context of *Xica da Silva*.

²⁷¹ *Tribuna da Imprensa*, September 7, 1976.

²⁷² *Diario de Pernambuco*, December 18, 1977.

²⁷³ Heloneida Studart, “Xica da Silva é a alegria do povo,” *Manchete*, August 28, 1976.

And for Motta, Diegues, and much of the press, Xica's sexual uses of her body empowered her. As Franz Fanon and Stuart Hall argued, however, the white fascination with the black body, and consequently its representation in the visual since the time of slavery, typically confirms the stereotype about black people as pure natural essence.²⁷⁴ Xica, and implicitly Zezé, were bodies that they could not quite own; bodies that nevertheless, in the then collective imagination about black women, gave them power, freedom, and wealth, showing the material possibilities of agency and transforming a negative stereotype into a positive one. For Brazilian audiences and media, the feminine black body depicted in such a way did not represent both the reality of Xica's oppression and the objectification of a young actress who strived to succeed in a tough film environment for black Brazilians. It represented strength, love, and freedom. The film's positive reception among the movie-going public, the mainstream media, and at least some professional critics reflected the representation of Xica's "rebellion" against slavery through "love" and passion.²⁷⁵

By portraying Brazilian slavery as benevolent and, thus, radically different from the North American case, *Xica da Silva* found its way into the core imagination of Brazilian exceptionalism. When the media described the story and the "facts" that supported the film, they would refer to the limited historical corpus of works on slavery available at the time, most of which were literary—in nature and based in oral tradition—rather than the result of scholarly research. Newspapers, magazines, and the director often invoked the *Romanceiro da Inconfidência*, an epic published by the poet Cecilia

²⁷⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London; Thousand Oaks: Sage & Open University, 1997) 38-45.

²⁷⁵ *Jornal do Brasil*, August 13, 1976; *O Globo*, August 15, 1976; *O Estado de São Paulo*, October 7, 1976.

Meireles in 1953; the text *Memórias do Distrito Diamantino*, by Joaquim Felício dos Santos (apparently the lawyer for Xica's heirs and an ancestor of the scriptwriter of the film), published in 1868; Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters and the Slaves*; and the book *Xica da Silva*, written by scriptwriter José Felício dos Santos while shooting, published in the same year that the movie was released. We can also include in the potential source material a portion of the historiography on Brazilian slavery produced by historians, sociologists and leftist intellectuals, which was broadly influenced by the works of Freyre and his ideas about racial democracy. The press and the makers of the film completely ignored the literature on slavery that, beginning with the 1950s UNESCO project that commissioned to Florestan Fernandes, had taken a critical position on Freyre's work.²⁷⁶

Far removed from the scholarly discussion, *Xica da Silva* triggered notions deeply rooted in the popular imagination about Brazilian exceptionalism that was based, as said earlier, on the collective belief in a softer slave past and, thus, a less racist present. In that vein, the film incited so much controversy about gender and race that it eventually prompted academics and cultural analysts to use the print media to discuss popular culture, national history, and racial and class relations in Brazil. As a result, a major dispute took place in the pages of the hard-hitting magazine *Opinião* during the last months of 1976.²⁷⁷ Writing about the film, a historian and Black activist Beatriz

²⁷⁶ There were some historiographical pieces that became the “common sense” about a more “benign” slavery in Brazil (always in a comparative perspective to the same process in the United States), such as Richard Graham, *Slave Families on a Rural Estate in Colonial Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976); Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1946). But, most historians and sociologists, such as Emilia Viotti da Costa, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Otávio Ianni, and Florestan Fernandes, had already published very different interpretations of Brazilian slavery.

²⁷⁷ *Opinião*, October 15, 1976. *Opinião* was a cultural/political and non-academic publication founded in 1971 by the major editor Fernando Gasparian in Rio de Janeiro. The military government in 1977 shut it down. During its trajectory, it worked as a space of discussion and cultural politics, resisting the censorship and repression of the dictatorship.

Nascimento, writer Antonio Callado, sociologist Carlos Hasenbalg, and anthropologist Roberto da Matta, initiated a broader discussion that would culminate in the famous 1978 debate on “ideological patrols.”²⁷⁸

Hasenbalg and Callado characterized the movie as a manipulation of cultural expressions linked to what was considered “the popular” at the time—the music, the food, and religion—to make the film more profitable. They accused the director of having shifting his preferences into “pornoanchada,” a harsh allegation against Diegues who had once been a leftist student leader, a member of the CPC, and regarded as a cultivated intellectual.²⁷⁹ Both, in addition, deeply criticized what they regarded as a racist depiction of Afro-Brazilians, although they did not say a word regarding the actual narrative of slavery promoted by the film.²⁸⁰ The Afro- Brazilian historian Nascimento was outraged because of what she perceived as a distortion and impoverishment of the work of the “eminent” Gilberto Freyre—especially *The Masters and the Slaves*. She contended that the central problem of the film was the excessively stereotypical depiction of whites and blacks.²⁸¹ The masters were kind and generous; the blacks, regardless of their situation (there was no distinction drawn in the movie between slaves and maroons)

²⁷⁸ The term “ideological patrol” became frequent in the Brazilian press from 1978. First appeared in August of that year, in an interview with the filmmaker Carlos Diegues in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, reproduced just after in the *Jornal do Brasil*. For many months the existence or not of patrols was discussed in intellectual circles.

²⁷⁹ “Pornoanchada” was the name given to a genre of sexploitation films produced in Brazil that were popular during the 1970s and early 1980s. Its name combined *pornô* (porn) and *chanchada* (light comedy). They were initially produced in the downtown quarter of São Paulo that was nicknamed “Boca do Lixo” (“Garbage Mouth”). The genre was usually seen as a part of low-budget films produced there, collectively known as cinema da Boca (“movies of the Mouth”). Later, there were productions in Rio de Janeiro as well. Pornoanchadas were generally in line with “sex comedies” produced in other countries, but also featured some Brazilian peculiarities. They were vulgar but ingenuous movies about sexual encounters, not showing explicit sex scenes.

²⁸⁰ All the comments, with the exception of da Matta’s, emphasized the opposite stance on slavery and race seen in the director’s earlier movies.

²⁸¹ Beatriz Nascimento, “A senzala vista da casa grande,” *Opinião*, 20-21.

were depicted as passive, stupid, irrational, inconsistent, and most of all, smiling and thankful for the goodness of their masters. As she put it, “the ethos of the Portuguese colonizer is one of humanity and acknowledgment of black people. [It’s] Slavery as enjoyable and fun.”²⁸² This commentary was consistent with the way the movie was promoted by its press kit and production team: “a comedy about slavery.”²⁸³

Having had a Brazilian born –and magnanimous- emperor during the nineteenth century was another crucial element in Brazilian exceptionalism. *Xica da Silva*’s invitation for the release of the film had a reproduction of the “Golden Law” indicating that abolition was being imagined as something granted by the Portuguese/Brazilian nobility rather than the result of slave resistance or as a victory of the abolitionist movement. With a narrative saturated with anachronistic elements – there is a 80 years’ gap between Chica da Silva’s life time and the abolition – the film also promoted the idea of an homogenous history of Brazilian slavery. Such a benign picture of the entire period also said that slavery was not only finished and something left in the distant past; it barely left marks in the then current Brazil’s racial relations.

That perhaps explains why Nascimento’s article generated a strong critical reaction that tried to disqualify the author and the publication as “old Left,” “traditional,” and “elitist.”²⁸⁴ On the opposite side of that spectrum, and claiming to interpret the true popular sensibility, the anthropologist Roberto da Matta appeared as a dissenting voice.

²⁸² *Opinião*, *ibid*. In this article, the historian has a contradictory position. Even though she claimed the film distorted Freyre’s positions, her critiques to the film could have been applied to Freyre’s own work. The reason may be that it was extremely difficult to publicly criticize Freyre, not only he established the “common sense” concerning racial relations in Brazil, but also due to his support to the dictatorship.

²⁸³ Caption present in the Press Kit and announcements in the major newspapers during 1976 and 1977.

²⁸⁴ The articles in *Opinião* generated a violent reaction from the media that reflected the views of the director, Diegues, the filmmaker Glauber Rocha, and most of the critics of the major newspapers, who characterized the critiques as ridiculous and “too intellectual.”

Whereas the others condemned it as a racist depiction that alienated the humanity of the black characters and reduced them to stereotypes, he perceived the movie as being about popular class agency, “the empowerment of the weak,” and the triumph of intelligence to use whatever means someone has to survive, especially if a person is black and a slave (and a woman).

This idea would prevail as the accepted interpretation of the film over the next few decades. Some other black intellectuals, such as the one provided by the founder of the MNU and scholar Lelia González introduced variations. Amazed and pleased that Diegues had made a film whose main character was a black woman (“the filmography of this ‘racial democracy’ called Brazil, with very few and honorable exceptions, is characterized by the reproduction of stereotypes”), González seem to praise the agency and the “subversive character of her sexuality” that Xica displayed through the story, her rebellion through “happiness” and “pleasure.” González did observe that the film was “reformist,” since Xica did not care about her “slave brothers and sisters.” Her key point, however, was that *Xica da Silva* and its director had showed that, “to fight for the construction of a new society does not mean that pleasure, the joy of living, must be repressed. Very much to the contrary. And it is exactly here that one encounters the essential meaning of the film. After all, and after many centuries, no one is here to sacrifice themselves in a fight that would end by establishing a republic based on Platonic ideals. I’m not joking.”²⁸⁵ With this final statement, González not only reaffirmed the idiosyncrasies of Brazilian society, trapped between authoritarianism, sex, and samba; she was also slapping traditional leftist intellectuals in the face, alongside their political

²⁸⁵ Lelia González, “Xica da Silva”, manuscript written at the end of 1976.

models. This discussion about film aesthetic and narrative would be the starting point of an ideological and political discussion among major artists and intellectuals at the end of the decade.

Xica da Silva therefore, promoted a contested introspection of race relations in Brazil, reinforced by heterogeneous artifacts such as the then current literature (e.g., Jorge Amado novels), the *telenovelas*, and the declarations of some intellectuals and scholars. Da Matta 's vision of the film, for instance, was completely coherent with his subsequent work on race relations in Brazil. In *O que faz o Brasil, Brasil*, published some years after the movie, he explained the particularity of Brazilian-style racism as something different (and certainly milder) than its North American counterpart due to the very existence of the mulatto as a representative of cultural and biological mixture, something that would be unacceptable in “binary” societies like the United States or South Africa.²⁸⁶ The hybridity of Brazilian society, though masking its stark hierarchies, turned racial prejudice into something more manageable and tolerable for people who suffered discrimination, especially if those peoples were mulattos.

In that vein, the elements that could be “rescued” from the film and integrated into Brazilian cultural identity were the ones that best fit that scheme: a relatively benign slavery linked to a softer (contemporary) racism, the mixing of Portuguese and black and its resulting product, the mulatto; the cultural expressions related to Africa, such as food, religion, or music as something enjoyable – and less dangerous that they used to be – now integrated into a national culture. In that sense, everything African was represented in the film as part of a carnival performance: an explosion of bright colors, lavish

²⁸⁶ Roberto da Matta, *O que faz o Brasil, Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1986).

costumes, exotic meals. The spectator had the feeling that those cultural expressions were components of a Carnival parade, easily integrated into a coherent national identity. Such cultural artifacts and practices were no longer persecuted and oppressed by white society—as they were well into the twentieth century—but celebrated as part of a national cultural festivity.

Xica da Silva, at the same time, exposed some of the contradictory elements present in Brazilians' relationship with their contemporary racial reality. Starting in late 1977, Zezé Motta—as her fame receded as a result of the lack of roles available for her in a hostile and discriminatory environment—began stressing her political militancy as a black advocate, denouncing the open prejudice that black actors suffered, especially on TV, emphasizing her own past of hard work and material deprivation, and the difficulties she faced on her road to fame. According to her own account of her life, everything she had achieved was entirely through study and perseverance—a narrative that contradicted the previous recounting of her life as glamorous and flamboyant, and somehow paralleling *Xica da Silva*'s path to success.

Through the story of her own racial awakening, she created a counter myth about her personal trajectory, which included a story of a trip to the United States in 1969 to stage the theatrical production *Arena conta Zumbi*, directed by the famous dramaturgist Augusto Boal. Zezé recalled she met with black actors in Harlem who did not consider her “black” enough because she dressed and styled her hair like a white woman.²⁸⁷ This story allowed her to denounce both the existence of white beauty standards in Brazil as well as Brazilian racism. She would from that moment on, openly perform her blackness,

²⁸⁷ *Jornal do Brasil*, March 27, 1977.

“enhancing” her black features, cutting her hair very short, using black lipstick, and wearing African clothing, rejecting any white ideals of beauty.

What was seen as an aggressive femininity made her a difficult icon to consume and export. The mulata, instead, embodied the national myth much more comfortably as an emblem of the success of racial democracy in Brazil. The body of the mulata symbolized many of the characteristics present in *Xica da Silva*, without the challenging elements that Zezé Motta and other black actresses had brought to the fore. Sensuality, joy, beauty, and tradition found their place in the figure of the actress Sônia Braga, who would give a face and a name to Brazilian cultural identity both at home and abroad.

Gender, Sexuality, and Race: The “Real” Brazil; or, Why Everybody Loved the Mulatas

The 1967 constitutional reform included the incorporation of the Afonso Arinos Law, first promulgated in 1951 that punished racial discrimination in public places. Two years after that, the Medici administration and the Bahian state government started a campaign – as the anthropologist Jocélio Teles dos Santos shows –to rehabilitate certain symbols associated with blackness—capoeira, Bahian food, candomblé— by removing the elements that were regarded as part of the African heritage and transforming them into mulatto, hence national, emblems.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁸The anthropologist Jocélio Teles dos Santos explains how the last Brazilian dictatorship decided to “transform” certain cultural practices such as capoeira into “national” and “mestiça”. See, Eduardo Teles dos Santos, “Nação Mestiça: Discursos e práticas oficiais sobre os afro-brasileiro,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 36:1 (1999), 19-31.

On July 14, 1972, the State of Guanabara²⁸⁹ created the Empresa de Turismo do Estado da Guanabara—RIOTUR. From the outset, RIOTUR followed a plan of action to promote, institutionally, the marketing of Rio de Janeiro as a tourist destination, in Brazil and abroad. One of RIOTUR’s major responsibilities and successful enterprises was the organization of carnival festivities in the city, and the agency elevated the mulata to the central attraction of those commemorations. Some months later, the nightclub entrepreneur Oswaldo Sargentelli created the show Oba-Oba, which would do a world tour in the 1970s and 1980s, promoting “his” famous mulatas - “as mulatas do Sargentelli” - as a representation of Brazilianness. Less than two years later, the TV director Walter Avancini launched *Gabriela*, one of the most successful *novelas* of the time, adapted from the Jorge Amado novel and starring the *morena*—lately converted into *the* archetype of Brazilian sensuality —Sônia Braga as the protagonist.

Sounds, smells, and tastes blended in the representation of the mulata, a figure that was previously familiar to Brazilians, but one whose visibility reached new heights during the 1970s. The state’s determination to intervene in the film industry—through its policies, legislation and financial resources—established the conditions to convert this female character into the quintessential Brazilian symbol, both in the local market and abroad.²⁹⁰ Never before had the photojournals *Manchete* and *Fatos e Fotos* published such a variety of articles connecting the Carnival in Rio, tourism, mulatas, and the racial peace prevailing in Brazil—all in constant comparison with the political and male-

²⁸⁹Through an administrative reform, the city-state of Rio de Janeiro and the State of Guanabara became the State of Rio de Janeiro in 1975.

²⁹⁰ Paralleling the efforts made by the state in financing films that reinforced the mulata as the perfect example of racial democracy in the country, the print media used all their power to promote Braga as a national symbol.

oriented racial “war” in the United States.²⁹¹ The mulata offered everything that was truly national—joy, sensuality, and racial harmony—in a feminine guise. She helped to “beautify” the image of Brazil, tarnished by an authoritarian and repressive regime.

Brazilians went in massive and unprecedented numbers to the movie theaters, looking at themselves in those popular national films singing, cooking, dancing, making love. They also read in their local newspapers and saw in their TV ads how the “gringos” enjoyed and consumed these images. And, a major part of the film industry had the opportunity to make this symbol its aesthetic icon and a source of financial success, establishing a dialogue with the prevalent popular culture. The outcome of this process was tied to the suppression or mockery of the black elements present in Brazilian culture. The huge popularity of Zezé Motta was also exceptional and ephemeral, as the mulata Braga shined at the expense of the black female Motta.

The story goes that Zezé Motta became unexpectedly famous after the release of *Xica da Silva*. She was recognized in the street, she gave several interviews and saw her own face again and again in newspapers, magazines, and TV shows. After the success of the feature film, she drew the attention of all eyes in the street. People wanted to touch her. She became part of the carioca folklore: an attractive woman, charming, black. One journalist wondered if she had cast “a new form of beauty.” “No,” said Zezé, “blacks have always existed. It’s just that now people have to accept us the way we are. Not

²⁹¹ *Manchete* was the most popular photojournal during the 1970s and 1980s, and was also known as a strong supporter of the Brazilian dictatorship. In its pages, journalists constructed negative images of racial struggle, the Black Panthers and black power in the US. Most of these reporters expressed their concerns about the problems that that kind of “violence” generated in terms of national unity, the lack of those kind of expressions in a non-racist country like Brazil, and the savage masculinity performed by the black American male.

everybody does it.”²⁹² In another popular magazine, at the bottom of the page and next to a picture of Motta naked, we read, “during the making of the movie, Zezé Motta became Xica da Silva, a woman like her who always gets what she wants. She just had to find out the secrets that the slave of Ouro Preto hid to seduce her lovers.”²⁹³ Throughout 1976, Motta told the press how hard she had worked before Carlos “Cacá” Diegues had called her at the beginning of the year, asking, “Hey, is this Xica?” putting her on the map of Brazilian stardom. She told newspapers and magazines how her career as an actress had changed and how happy she was.

A year later her tone in interviews had changed. In one she mentioned how executives of a magazine “for men” invited her to pose nude but had suddenly withdrawn the invitation because they decided she was not what they were looking for. She did not care, saying, “There is the mulata type, who straightens down her hair, etc. I am not a mulata. I am black. And I will keep being it.”²⁹⁴ Motta also referred in an interview to a very sensitive issue that had affected thousands of Afro-Brazilians for decades: in Brazil, because of her dark skin color, she was repeatedly prohibited –by doormen- from taking the main elevator whenever she visited friends, using, inevitably, the service elevator intended for maids and deliveries. When in Buenos Aires to perform as a singer, Motta explained how racist Brazilian TV was (the powerful Rede Globo, implicitly) and the artistic field in general. “Look at *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*, for instance. She [Sônia Braga] is “mestiça”. Both of us were offered roles in *novelas* [soap operas]. But central roles were always given to Sônia. I was always relegated [to the supporting cast].”

²⁹² *Manchete*, April, 22 1977.

²⁹³ *Fatos e fotos*, August 22, 1976.

²⁹⁴ *Última Hora*, August 22, 1977.

Once the success of *Xica* had faded, Motta started to speak up about her experience with racism and her political commitments. She also adopted a different narrative of her artistic life, emphasizing her desire to be a singer long before she became an actress. For Zezé, the field of music was far less racist than cinema or TV. She was tired of being a maid in the *Globo* novelas.²⁹⁵ She had the need to reinvent herself and erase her reputation of highly aggressive and sexualized female. “I don’t have anything (similar) to Xica da Silva”, said Zezé, and the journalist added, “it is true, Maria José Motta is a very delicate person, sweet. She speaks softly, she’s very moderate. And, trying to be more successful in other area than film, Motta finished saying, “I have always been a singer.”²⁹⁶

Through a turn in her career and public image, Motta became an active militant of the MNU and created the CIDAN—Centro de Informação e Documentação do Artista Negro (Center of Information and Documentation of Black Artists), which aimed to publish a catalogue to promote black talents.²⁹⁷ Commenting on the *Xica da Silva*, which was released in the US on September 10, 1982, the *Black Film Review* said, “In a society where black actresses still lack opportunities available to “mulatas” such as Sonia Braga, Motta got a rare chance at a lead role in a film with XICA,” and quotes Motta, who said, “I am part of the MNU (...) I think I am the only person in show business in this particular group.”²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵ *CB*, November 21, 1976.

²⁹⁶ *O Globo*, July 21, 1980.

²⁹⁷ *Tribuna da Imprensa*, July 22, 1986.

²⁹⁸ *Black Film Review*, September 1985.

Sônia Braga, in contrast, refused to talk about politics or social issues (“politics?” she asked, “I am not here to guide people!”²⁹⁹). Born in the town of Maringá, in the southern state of Paraná in 1950, she starred in two big hits during the 1970s that were adaptations of works by Jorge Amado—the popular *novela* (soap opera) *Gabriela* in 1975 and Bruno Barreto’s *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* (Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands, based on an Amado novel published in 1966) released on November 22, 1976—successes that eventually transform her into the embodiment of the elements associated with the tropical cities of Rio de Janeiro and Bahia: sex, food, and music.

The press –especially print media and TV- made Braga the new (sex) symbol of Brazil. According to Braga, before coming to Rio, “I had very fair skin: once, (Carlos) Dolabella [an actor that worked with Braga in soap operas such as *Saramandaia* and *Espelho mágico*] thought I was wearing white stockings.” In Rio de Janeiro, said the journalist, Braga realized that the brown skin matched her type better. And she never again abandoned the sun.³⁰⁰ “Fair or morena,” the journalist continued, “Sônia was never invited to play the part of a rich girl (*moça rica*).” And Braga finished saying, “blond and lean actresses are always chosen [to play rich girls], they use imported clothing from the US; ‘women of medium height, with thick lips, black eyes wear *chita* [clothing]” referring to a type of colorful fabric that represented Brazilian culture.³⁰¹

Indeed, from the time the media took notice of her in the early 1970s to the making of *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*, there was a debate about Braga’s skin color.

²⁹⁹ “Bonita e gostosa.” *Veja*, Ibid.

³⁰⁰ “Sônia Braga. Uma mulher cheia de fantasia.” *Revista Nova*, October 1976.

³⁰¹ “Sônia Braga. Uma mulher cheia de fantasia.” *Revista Nova*, Ibid. Chita, a colorful with floral design fabric, made out of cotton, that from India has traveled throughout Brazil since its colonization. Chita appeared in the north of Brazil dressing the working class women in the twentieth century. In the 1970s, it will be dressed wealthier women and considered as a “national” emblem.

Why had the director Glauco Mirko Laurelli chosen a “white actress” to represent a “mestiça” in his 1970’s film *A Moreninha*? Why not use a real mulata for the main role of the TV soap opera *Gabriela*? In response to the complaints of critics and actors, author Jorge Amado, and director Walter Avancini, insisted: “Sônia Braga had the right requirements to play *Gabriela*, and the skin color was not one of these. She had a portion of black blood, as any good Brazilian does.”³⁰² Amado’s and Avancini’s words addressed that color was not key to play these very *Brazilian* characters. They were aware that Braga had what it took to perform them better than anyone else. When asked if she liked being naked all the time (as the popular fantasy imagined Amado’s females), Braga said that, “the Indians were right, not the colonizers. With this tropical weather, why to wear so much clothing?” The journalist did note that she was not “a radical;” between being naked and dressed, she chose clothes, “as long as they are chita; [I wear] clothing that refers to Brazil. I am Brazilian to the bone.”³⁰³

The re-making of Braga as a morena/mulata had just started. The sequence of successful soap operas broadcasted by the powerful TV network Rede Globo and the making of expensive and well-publicized film features gave her a projection that other actresses –such as Zezé Motta - did not have. In *Gabriela*, --her title character--a sweet and sensuous *nordestina* (a woman from the impoverished Brazilian northeast) made her a national figure; by then Rede Globo was broadcasting the soap opera throughout the nation. Even though she had to dye her skin everyday, Braga was chosen over the mulata Ana Maria Magalhães, muse of the Cinema Novo who had previously been considered

³⁰² “Uma mestiça chamada Sônia Braga,” *Última Hora*, January 31, 1974; “Brasileira até a raiz,” *Última Hora. Suplemento Especial de Sábado/Domingo*, April 1-2, 1978.

³⁰³ “Brasileira até a raiz,” *Última Hora. Suplemento Especial de Sábado/Domingo*, Ibid.

for the role. The 1976 soap opera *Saramandaia* – which used “Magical Realism” to set the story of Bole-Bole, a small town in the state of Bahia full of picturesque characters, made her a familiar face for the audiences. From May 3 to December 31, Brazilians could nightly watch Braga as Marcina, a “morena” who was so hot and intense, that she burned everything and everyone she touched. In 1977 the novela *Espelho Mágico* would cast her as Cynthia Levy, an actress who did whatever it took to succeed. *Tigresa*, the famous song written by Caetano Veloso and sung by Gal Costa, would play every time Cynthia had a scene, moving the media to call the actress Tigresa.”³⁰⁴ Through interviews and articles, Braga’s origins as a southern (white) Brazilian were slowly fading away. At the end of the 1970s, Braga would come to symbolize both the cities of Rio and Bahia as well as all the female Jorge Amado characters. The lack of a sex symbol “of color” in Brazil also helped her to become famous overnight, as she would fill that space.³⁰⁵ During the 1970s domestic audiences would recognize her as a national emblem, prompting the government to export her image to Latin America, Europe, and the United States.

The Brazilianness of Braga was, in consequence, a collective construction of the cultural industry. Regarding the much-anticipated premiere of Barreto’s film, a female journalist wrote, “The great virtue of Flor is to accept things as they happen, without sorrow or resentment, without trying to change an inevitable flow. Brazilian beauty: that is all.”³⁰⁶ A year after the release of the feature, one journalist—one of the many males fascinated with Braga’s physical attributes—noted: “She is 1.60 m tall, she has fantastic 95 cm hips and 88 cm of pure breasts; she hardly looks like an American or European

³⁰⁴ The song says, “A tigress of black nails and iris color of honey/a woman, a beauty, who happened to me/rubbing her skin golden brown of her body against mine/she says that evil is good and the good, cruel.”

³⁰⁵ “Bonita e gostosa.” *Veja*, October 5, 1978.

³⁰⁶ Susana Sondermann, “Dona Flor-Mulher,” *Correio do Povo*, April 17, 1977.

starlet—she is far shorter, she is “*cadeiruda e pernuda*” [ample hips and thighs], she has a narrow waist, and abundant lips. And she is brown, of course. Anyway, she is a *Brasileirinha*. She lacks precisely all of the attributes of unreachable beauty. Sônia Braga today is the common dream of Brazilian males.” Yet another observed, “Sônia Braga is essentially the woman who a Brazilian man likes to hold, without a bone in sight. A complete success.”³⁰⁷

Several newspapers, magazines, and popular fanzines expressed what they thought was the “real” Brazil during the 1970s: feminine brown beauty embodied in Braga’s sensual, available, and docile body. In *Dona Flor*, she represented a lower/middle-class housewife from Bahia, married to the bohemian, unemployed, drunk, gambler, and white *Latin lover* Vadinho.³⁰⁸ In the first 65 minutes of the film, the audience learns the details of the lifestyle of the now-deceased Vadinho, who passed away because of his dissolute habits. The depiction of him as the classical *malandro* (trickster/scoundrel) aroused laughter and approval in the audience,³⁰⁹ especially in the cinemas located in the northern suburban areas of the city of Rio, where the movie scored its greatest success.³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ “Bonita e Gostosa,” *Revista Veja*, Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Sônia Braga (Dona Flor), José Wilker (Vadinho), Mauro Mendonça (Teodoro), and Nelson Xavier (Mirandão) were actors well known for their performances in the telenovelas. Barreto, and most of all, the producer of the film, Luis Carlos Barreto (his father) chose these actors because of their increase popularity in TV.

³⁰⁹ *Malandragem* is a Brazilian Portuguese term for the bohemian lifestyle—an ethos of idleness, fast living, and petty crime. It emerged in the 1920s as the typical character of Rio de Janeiro, in opposition to a laborious São Paulo. Traditionally celebrated in samba lyrics, especially those of composer Noel Rosa during the 1930s, the *malandro* has become significant to Brazilian national identity as a folk hero. In 1978, the popular composer Chico Buarque wrote and staged the *Opera do Malandro* based on a free theatrical adaptation of Bertold Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*, depicting *malandragem* in the bohemian neighborhood of Lapa in Rio.

³¹⁰ There is no information about box office sales regarding movie theaters, but some major newspaper used to collect information about the number of spectators for cinemas. The *Jornal do Brasil* calculated that

Jorge Amado's novel was set in Salvador, capital city of Bahia, during the 1940s, as was the film. Both the locations and the characters' subjectivity, however, imprinted a feeling of contemporaneity for the 1970s moviegoer. The streets with their unmistakable inclines, the churches, and the markets were as contemporary as Flor's sexuality, the food she prepared, or the Carnival she attended. It was not only that the scriptwriter and director staged a modern subjectivity in a bygone era. There was also a sense of the perennialness of a culture and society that—neither giving up its modernity nor embracing tradition totally—had maintained the same essential features for a considerable time.

As the anthropologist Livio Sansone argues, Brazil throughout the twentieth century had the tendency to export (and produce for domestic consumption) black/mestiço objects and cultural products that had an aura of tradition, even though in the context of modern social relations: in this case, “tropicália”—Rio and Bahia together—as a symbol of national identity.³¹¹ This helps explain the audience appeal that both *Xica da Silva* and *Dona Flor* had, given the elements they have in common: a complacent and always-available female body, the appeal to the senses through symbols considered Brazilian, such as music, Carnival, the food, and colonial cities and landscapes that remain intact, not having suffered the “damage” of modernization, such as Ouro Preto, Diamantina, Salvador, Porto Seguro; cities also linked to the ‘splendorous’ colonial past.

60% of the people who had seen the film in the city of Rio belonged to the northern suburbs: Madureira, Vila Isabel, Tijuca, lower middle class and working class areas.

³¹¹ Livio Sansone, *From Africa to Afro: Use and Abuse of Africa in Brazil* (Amsterdam: SEPHIS, 1999).

Dona Flor encouraged the spectator to appreciate the attractive features of Brazilian women. As Roberto da Matta popularized in his foundational essay, “Dona Flor, um romance relacional,” Amado’s heroines represent the very essence of what Brazil means. While, according to da Matta, US society has a dominant code that rules all spheres of social life, Brazil has specific codes for each sphere. “We are one in the home, other in the street, and another in the church, ‘terreiro’ or ‘centro espírita.’ Our logic is relational in the sense that we are always trying to maximize the relations of inclusion (as opposed to Anglo-Saxon structures that always exclude), thus creating areas of ongoing ambiguity.”³¹² Such an ambiguity makes Brazilian society ambivalent, less rigid towards racism and other social relations. In that arena, the feminine characters of Jorge Amado assume “a basic relational aspect in the Brazilian ideological structure,” mediating between all the spheres of social life, with their “poderes dos fracos” (weapons of the weak): their body, their seasoning, their food, etc.³¹³

In that vein, Flor accepted and “took life as it came” -as I commented above. She was extremely “domestic”: she cooked, she sewed, and she was a perfect hostess, qualities enumerated by Flor’s mother to the man who would become her second husband. And she was also an ardent lover. The occasionally aggressive will that Xica displayed as a character and the political opinions that Motta expressed in interviews and public appearances were absent from Braga’s public and on-screen personas. Zezé Motta was more difficult to integrate, somewhat less “Brazilian”; she was blacker, and more assertive and rebellious than Braga or any other actress to date.

³¹² *Tempo Brasileiro*, July-September, 1983, No. 74

³¹³ *Tempo Brasileiro*, *ibid.*

In a different category was the blond, “branquíssima” (totally white) and extravagant actress Elke “Maravilha,” (her real name was Elke Giorgierena Grunnup). Elke achieved fame and recognition at about the same time as Motta and Braga, but was perceived in a totally different way. Born in Leningrad in February 22, 1945, Elke migrated with her family to Brazil when she was six. She worked as a model during the 1960s, starting her film career in 1970. Even though she participated in Reginaldo Faria’s *Os machões* (The Big Shots, 1972) and Diegues’ *Quando o carnaval chegar* (When Carnival Arrives, 1973) Elke would gain national celebrity because of her performance as a judge in the popular TV talent contest “A buzina do Chacrinha” and her role as a woman from the colonial elite, racial and culturally the opposite of Zezé Motta, in *Xica da Silva*.

Her European origin, her skin color, and her public persona led her to be called “cultura” (cultivated) and intelligent to the point that the writer Clarice Lispector -who had conducted a serie of interviews with “personalities” of the Brazilian cultural world- interviewed Elke for the magazine *Manchete* in 1976. Elke was always asked about the books she read and the (nine) languages she spoke. The media said that her intelligence scared men, who were reluctant to approach her. Sophisticated, beautiful, and sexy, she defended the feminist movement as “a wake-up call” for all of humanity, much needed for a better relationship between men and women.³¹⁴ A supporter of free love and an opponent of the objectification of women that was so “typical” in Brazil, Elke Maravilha was angry about the beauty standards imposed by the cultural industry, especially TV

³¹⁴ *Última Hora*, São Paulo, September 2, 1973.

shows, where she mostly made her living.³¹⁵ She was also white to be considered beautiful or attractive.

Like Motta, Elke was living proof of the “openness” of Brazilian society in terms of racial relations: a “branquela” (pasty white) and “estrangeira” (foreigner) could be famous and desired by men. She was not, however, the representation of Brazilian sensuality and domesticity that Braga incarnated so well especially in her performances as Amado’s heroines. Braga was more “beautiful.” Her beauty feminized her, turning her into a more fragile public figure than Elke, feminist and independent, or Motta, who was more determined, muscular, and “less attractive.”³¹⁶ As Heloneida Studart, a well-known journalist and feminist, later a federal deputy for the Brazilian Workers Party (PT), introducing Zezé Motta to her readers, observed, “Cacá Diegues chose this quasi-ugly girl to play the role of a woman that—according to the stories of Diamantina—was so beautiful that she could outshine the sun.”³¹⁷

Women’s magazines such as *Revista Claudia* and *Mulher* presented Motta as “attractive,” “ethnic,” and “sexy,” but never beautiful. “Blacks, when beautiful, become mulatos,” said an ironic Zezé.³¹⁸ Braga, instead, was a real Brazilian beauty, the model of what every Brazilian woman wanted to be.³¹⁹ The fact that the American and the

³¹⁵ *Folha de São Paulo*, February 13, 1977.

³¹⁶ Xica/Zezé were stronger and fiercer than Flor/Braga. But, the price she paid was a physical transformation that turned her into a more masculine figure. The interviews and articles from 1977 on showed Motta’s figure as progressively blacker and less feminine.

³¹⁷ Heloneida Studart, “Xica da Silva é a alegria do povo,” *Manchete*, August 28, 1976.

³¹⁸ *Mulher*, September 30, 1984

³¹⁹ *Mulher*, March 13, 1984; *Claudia*, April 9, 1977 and March 9, 1977.

European press hailed her physical appearance reverberated in the local media, reinforcing a nationalist sense of pride.³²⁰

“Brazil’s biggest heat arrives on time to warm the city,” was the title of The New York Times’ article about *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*, two weeks after its release in the Paris movie theatre in New York City. “Exotic tropical blossom,” the reporter called Sônia Braga. He also informed Americans that twenty million Brazilians had seen the movie so far, a number certainly provided by Luis Carlos Barreto, the producer of the feature and father of Bruno.³²¹ *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* was very popular in New York, playing for more than four months and allowing Braga to begin the “American” phase of her career.

The echo of that success immediately resounded in Brazil. The release of the film in the US was, in fact, part of Luis Carlos Barreto’s project to “conquer” the American market. The Brazilian media emphatically announced there were rumors that the film would be considered for the Oscars. Braga, in turn, modestly insisted that that the fuss around the film was not her doing; she saw it more as a collective project to launch Brazilian films in the US. She also insisted, of course, that she wanted to stay in Brazil. She wanted Brazilian cinema to be exported, to succeed abroad, in the US especially, more than individual fame and recognition.³²²

On the cover of the Sunday magazine of the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil* before the premiere of the box office hit, Neville D’Almeida’s *A dama do loteação* (Lady on the

³²⁰ *Jornal do Brasil*, February 27, 1978; *Estado de São Paulo*, August 3, 1979; and *Estado de Pernambuco*, January 8, 1982; *Playboy* (U.S. ed.), October 1984.

³²¹ *The New York Times*, March 10, 1978.

³²² *Jornal de Santa Catarina*, April 9, 1978.

bus, 1978),³²³ Braga stared out at Brazilians in a sexy red dress with her shoulders bare, a plunging cleavage and very red lips, openly emulating Marylyn Monroe. On the inside, she appeared in the picture that would become her trademark, which showed her in the same dress, holding one breast with her hand. The article explored her modest background, her fight to become an actress, her “natural” sensuality. “If someone sees my character as a feminist, I want to make it clear that I do not believe in such a movement. I believe in [social] movements where the masses participate. There, women are liberated and not competing with men nor trying to ‘seize’ their place.”³²⁴

Far from the feminism and closer to beauty, docility, and compliance, these were the components that marked Braga’s performances during the 1970s, even when she played a highly sexualized character. In *Dona Flor*, Flor’s love for her deceased husband Vadinho is explained at the outset: it was because of his abilities as a lover. However, he was also a wife-beater. And a cheater. But Amado/Barreto implied that everything comes in a package, and a Brazilian woman—a mulata—should accept that fact. After Vadinho’s death, Dona Flor remarries a formal, respectable, boring pharmacist who provides security and standing, but no passion; she misses Vadinho so much that she wills him back from the dead, and thus finally has the husband she wants: the two halves of one “perfect” man, providing both stability and the good sex she appreciated so much. But, as an angry critic noted sarcastically, despite of the spicy (*picante*) topic, the film doesn’t go beyond of what is allowed, “no one is offended by what they see (...) the main character (Braga) never goes beyond the limits permitted by our domestic morality.”³²⁵

³²³ *Jornal do Brasil. Revista de domingo*, April 16, 1978.

³²⁴ *Jornal do Brasil. Revista de domingo*, *Ibid.*

³²⁵ Oswaldo Mendes, “A Dona Flor versus telenovela,” *Última Hora*, São Paulo, December 21, 1978.

In *A dama do loteação* Braga once again was polemically hypersexual, transmitting at the same time, a feeling of deep guilt because of her behavior. The film is based on a short story written in 1952 by the prominent playwright Nelson Rodrigues – who wrote the screenplay. Braga plays Solange, a young, ingenuous, and virginal woman from the Brazilian elite who is deeply in love with Carlos -her husband - but cannot consummate her marriage because of her lack of sexual desire; she is “frigid”. During their honeymoon, her husband rapes her, destabilizing her emotionally and leading to several sexual encounters with strangers that she picks up on the bus, the place where “things happen” in Brazilian popular fantasy.³²⁶ The men she chooses as her lovers -bus drivers, construction workers, and all kind of males from the popular classes– are depicted as physically unpleasant, ugly, dirty, old, sharp contrasts to Braga’s class position and delicate features. To understand the “causes” of her “disease”, she sees a therapist who is a perfect caricature of a psychoanalyst: glasses, beard, and pipe. The result of her ‘misbehavior’ is total unhappiness for herself and her husband. The analyst doesn’t help her at all, being their meetings sexual conversations for a voyeuristic spectator. The result is a parody of psychoanalysis intertwined with a criticism of (female) sex outside of marriage, and a conservative view of interclass relationships.

The male magazine *Homem* dedicated its April 1978 issue to reproductions of the more erotic photos from the film. The article praised Braga as a “good” and “expressive” actress, while showing pictures of her half-naked body and her having sex with different

³²⁶ Rodrigues was a very conservative author that expressed as nobody else the popular roots of Brazilian culture. He is considered to be Brazil's most important playwright. In addition, he wrote hundreds of short stories during the 1950's in a column entitled “A Vida Como Ela É (Life As It Is).” His stories were published several times in the following decades and have been highly influential in Brazilian theater, television and cinema.

partners; *Fatos e Fotos* highlighted the aesthetic qualities of the “national” language of the film, naming Solange “our *Belle du Jour*,” referring to Luis Buñuel 1967’s film.³²⁷ The cover of the magazine, however, displayed a picture of the very bourgeois and happy wedding of Solange and Carlos.

Both the director and Braga thought that a Nelson Rodrigues story would give the film a patina of cultural sophistication. While working in *Espelho Mágico* and before the release of *A dama do loteamento*, Braga told the press that she thought the critics would be kinder with it than they were with *Dona Flor*: “this fantasy of Nelson [Rodrigues],” she said, “will be treated differently by the professional critics, because they have prejudice against mass/popular culture works [in reference to *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*].”³²⁸ Also, before the release of *A dama do loteamento*, D’Almeida would be a frequent guest in Nelson Rodrigues’s column for the newspaper *O Globo*. There, they would “philosophize” about the film. In an interview in the political magazine *Veja*, Rodrigues said that, “this is by far the best cinematographic adaptation of my work. Sônia Braga? She is better than Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse, the best actresses in the entire world.”³²⁹

Professional critics related to art cinema did not think so. They were aware of the dramatic change occurred in film production in Brazil in less than one decade, describing

³²⁷ *Fatos e Fotos*. March 21, 1977.

³²⁸ “Uma tigresa chamada Sônia Braga.” *Última Hora*, July 27, 1977. It is important to notice that Jorge Amado’s novels written during the first phase of his career (from the mid-1930s to 1955) were not financially successful but praised by the critics, who considered his novels real pictures of the state of Bahia and its social and racial conflicts. His career shifted dramatically when he published *Gabriela, cravo e canela*. in 1958. The critics interpreted Amado’s work from that moment on as literary poorer and part of the cultural industry.

³²⁹ “Almas gêmeas,” *Veja*, April 19, 1978.

this paradigmatic feature as a boring erotic film, soft porn, a luxury *porno chanchada*,³³⁰ “where ‘motel music’ was replaced by Caetano Veloso’s; where instead of the “vedettes” (vaudeville dancers popularized by the 1950s *chanchadas*) of Avenida São João, we have Sônia Braga as the star; and most important, the narrative of an anonymous illiterate is replaced by one of the most prominent contemporary dramatists.”³³¹ They were astonished by the mediocrity of the script. “Hit me, insult me’ - it is the only thing Braga says in the film - one of the worst based on Rodrigues’ stories,” said a critic.³³² “Pornô Cabocla [mestizo porn],” another journalist called it, “Sônia Braga, in this vein, will end up as our Linda Lovelace.”³³³ Braga did not regard that as a problem. She was happy that, ultimately, she discovered her body and sensuality while still young, so she could exploit it.³³⁴ “It is an erotic film,” Braga announced, “and I think that’s great.”³³⁵

EMBRAFILME was also comfortable with that, as the formula brought “the public back to the movie theaters,” as Braga hoped. From April 1978 to June 1979, more than 6 million people went to the movie theaters in Brazil to see *A dama do loteação*. Apparently, locals were more eager to see Solange naked than the adventures of King Kong, Jaws, and the nostalgic Grease, as the EMBRAFILME advertisement bragged about it. Published in the main Brazilian newspapers, the ad proudly announced, “We are winning: the house is ours,” a rhetoric similar to the slogans of the “Brazilian miracle,”

³³⁰ Roberto Mello. “O velho nojo do sexo,” *Jornal do Brasil. Revista de domingo*, Ibid.; *Isto é*, April 19, 1978. Nelson Hoineff, *A Notícia*, April 18, 1978.

³³¹ Nelson Hoineff, *A Notícia*, Ibid.

³³² Jairo Ferreira. “Lixo do luxo,” *Folhetim. Folha de São Paulo*, April 16, 1978.

³³³ *Última Hora*, April 22, 1978.

³³⁴ *Jornal do Brasil. Revista de domingo*, Ibid.

³³⁵ *O Globo*, March 25, 1978.

launched a few years earlier by the government, one that praised a victory of national over American films in the circuit of exhibition.³³⁶

The state agency invested financial and human resources to produce press kits, fund the participation of these films in international festivals, and promote them at national festivals (e.g., Brasilia Festival), as well as to publish propaganda in major newspapers, run TV ads, and engage in public relations. Popular magazines and specialized critics were, once again, on opposite sides. The latest commentaries not only railed at the film, but also reviled EMBRAFILME's policies on production and distribution. Yes, the film was the most popular to date, as two million people saw it in two weeks. But, because every nation has the cinema it deserves, while masterpieces such as Fellini's *Casanova* (1976) or Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), "were languishing in the desk drawers of the censors," the protectionist policies of EMBRAFILME "forced Brazilian spectators to swallow (and to finance), grotesque porn films such as this 'Lady.'"³³⁷ "The institution would clearly support a type of cinema they said they are against, just to make profit," said one outraged critic.³³⁸

"Sex is ugly and psychoanalysis – the favorite target of the playwright [Nelson Rodrigues] – is confused with meanness or, at best, with a confessional," said critic Roberto Mello, trying to explain the conservative character of the sexually explicit *A dama do lotação*.³³⁹ "No wonder the film is so traditional," he continued, "the dramatist [Nelson Rodrigues] who once was a revolutionary in terms of artistic and aesthetic creation, "has been proclaiming his *machismo* for years, his childhood fears (sex=sin),

³³⁶ *Estado do Paraná*, June 22, 1980.

³³⁷ *Última Hora*, May 1, 1978.

³³⁸ Hoineff Nelson, *A Notícia*, Ibid.

³³⁹ Roberto Mello, "O velho nojo do sexo." *Jornal do Brasil. Revista de domingo*, Ibid.

and his rabid conservatism in statements with commercial effect.”³⁴⁰ “Anti-feminist and anti-psychoanalysis” cried critic and film essayist José Carlos Monteiro, trying to explain this profoundly *machista* and biased film.³⁴¹ Critics focused their attacks equally on Rodrigues and the director Neville D’Almeida, as the advertising around the film used the prestige of the playwright to promote it. They complained that the film was biased and extremely limited, as Rodrigues “has been repeating formulas ad nauseam.”³⁴² In fact, during the shooting, Rodrigues himself had stepped up his attacks on psychoanalysis, declaring that the movie explored universal problems that man “should bear alone, because no psychoanalyst can account for our ghosts.”³⁴³

“Variety, in terms of love, leads you nowhere,” said Nelson Rodrigues in an interview with Sônia Braga. “Chastity is by far, the best option,” he kept going, “the great tragedy started when men separated sex from love.”³⁴⁴ His conservative statements about sex, feminism, psychoanalysis, and adultery would only reinforce the opinion that the most eminent critics had about the film. In an overly revealing statement, Rodrigues asked Braga, “Have you ever known a really kind woman? I have. My mother. My mother was as beautiful as ‘Nossa Senhora’ (Virgin Mary).”³⁴⁵

Rodrigues’ assertions, Braga’s performances, the interviews with Amado, the Barretos, D’Almeida, Diegues, Motta, among others, the local and international reception of the films, illuminate the contradictions in Brazilian society at a time of high nationalism, the decline of the “milagre brasileiro” and an expanding cultural industry.

³⁴⁰ Roberto Mello, “O velho nojo do sexo,” *Jornal do Brasil. Revista de domingo*, Ibid.

³⁴¹ José Carlos Monteiro, *O Globo*, April 19, 1978.

³⁴² *Isto é*, Ibid.

³⁴³ *Fatos e Fotos*, March 3, 1977.

³⁴⁴ “Nélson Rodrigues versus Sônia Braga,” *Manchete*, May 1978.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

Film –in dialogue with TV- was an artifact that expressed those contradictions like no other cultural product. The cinematic representation of female sexuality, Ultimately, had a conservative aspect consistent with the values that the authoritarian government was interested in promoting. In that vein, the agency these fictional women had regarding the sexual partners they chose, their sexual appetite as well as the extreme frequency of their sexual encounters, was a comment on the “liberation” of women and their power over their bodies. At the same time they mainly reinforced existing moral standards founded on the assumption that female sexual pleasure was acceptable only within marriage, and the price to pay for non-marital passion was domestic violence, neurosis, and/or profound unhappiness.

Braga was, in that sense, a symbol that incarnated those “modern” and “traditional,” “conservative” and “advanced” representations of gender, sexuality, and race that were possible at that time: female pleasure within certain limits (constrained by marriage or madness), the attributes that come with female gender roles (patience and resignation towards male violence and abuse), and a skin that was not “ethnic”, but national. “I think I am the result of a mixture of a Caramuru Indian, Portuguese, and African,” Sônia informed her adoring public.³⁴⁶ She was so popular by the late 1970s that the influential *Veja* said that she was tempted to be the “madrinha” (godmother) of the Brazilian World Cup soccer team in 1978.³⁴⁷ And Gilberto Freyre, that arbiter of Brazilian racial and sexual customs, announced, “she is ‘the’ perfect Brazilian woman.”³⁴⁸

³⁴⁶ “Brasileira até a raiz,” *Última Hora. Suplemento especial de sábado/domingo*. April ½, 1978.

³⁴⁷ “Bonita e Gostosa,” *Veja*, Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Press Kit of *A dama do lotação*.

Braga was an established star in Brazil and well known abroad when she starred in Arnaldo Jabor's *Eu te amo* (I Love you), released in Brazil on April 13, 1981. Naked for almost the entire film, Braga played the role of Maria, a middle class woman abandoned by her married lover. She and the new man she meets, Paulo, desperately search for true love, through sex and endless existentialist conversations. But the film was also about the end of the "Brazilian Miracle" in "a funny way"; it stressed the contradictions between modernity and underdevelopment that constituted the director's vision of Brazilian culture and society. Paulo goes on and on about how crappy everything is in Brazil, how everybody wants to emulate American modernity with the result being a parody. Paulo himself is a bankrupted industrialist due to the collapse of the "miracle". But, as in many of the films of the so-called "cinemão" (blockbuster) variety at that time, the theme is of inevitable failure mixed with touches of comedy; this is the way Brazil has been since the beginning and it will be like this forever. Or to paraphrase a popular saying: "Brazil is the country of tomorrow and always will be."

The end of the film is a fitting epilogue for such sentiments, with Maria and Paulo -emulating Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire- dancing and singing to the 1931 Lamartine Babo tune³⁴⁹ "Canção para Inglês ver" Providing the background for the scene are the bright windows of closed shops on the streets of downtown Rio de Janeiro at night. The choice of song could not have been better. The lyrics are a mixture of English and Portuguese that stress the aspirations, frustrations, and picaresque underdevelopment of Brazil, laughing about it, accepting it.

³⁴⁹ Lamartine Babo, "Lalá" (Rio de Janeiro, 1904-1963) was one of the most important popular composers in Brazil. He wrote carnival songs (marchinhas) characterized by a refined humor and irreverence.

With this film, Braga and Brazilian cinema were firmly established in the American market. Sônia Braga became a regular at Studio 54 every time she visited New York, “the” place to be in the 1980s. Americans “love her,” the Brazilian press noted. Much was made of an October 1984 American edition of *Playboy* that had an article about her, even though she had refused to nude for a men’s magazine. “Does anyone remember Carmen Miranda?” a reporter for *Screen International* asked; “now, comes another Brazilian bombshell, Sonia Braga, the most popular film star in Brazil.” The American press saw her as the embodiment of Brazilian sexuality, emphasizing her “wild personality, luscious looks, and astonishing sexuality.”³⁵⁰

“She won’t come back Americanized,” remarked one Brazilian reporter when commenting on the success of Braga. This was, in part, an allusion to the accusations made against Carmen Miranda when she visited Brazil in 1940 and was heavily criticized for giving in to American commercialism and projecting a false image of Brazil abroad. Miranda responded with the Portuguese language song *Disseram que Voltei Americanizada* (They Say I’ve Come Back Americanized).³⁵¹ The comparisons with Miranda reinforced Braga’s Brazilianness even more. Braga insisted, “I want more than international stardom for myself. I want Brazilian cinema to become a star.”³⁵²

After the release of Bruno Barreto’s *Gabriela* (1983), Amado admitted to *Veja*, “sometimes, when I think about Gabriela, I recall Sônia Braga’s face.” The enthusiastic reporter added that Braga was well suited for her role of “embaixatriz do Brazil” (Brazil’s ambassador), as she was so closely identified with the Amado characters she performed

³⁵⁰ *Screen International*, May 14, 1983.

³⁵¹ *O Dia*, January 9, 1983.

³⁵² *Screen International*, *Ibid.*

in soap operas and film features during those years. The reporter made a final comment, noting that “girlfriend, lover, wife, or maid? Ultimately, being a little bit of all these feminine roles has been Sônia Braga’s specialty,” which expressed the Brazilian women to perfection.³⁵³

Aesthetic Changes, the State, and “Ideological Patrols”

In a long interview given to *O Estado de São Paulo* on August 31, 1978, Carlos Diegues drew a balance sheet of Brazilian film production, from the creation of the *Cinema Novo* to the “new” phase during the process of *distensão* and the then recent *abertura*. The experience of those directors that had made films from the late 1950s to the late 1960s was, according to Diegues, an attempt to make a modern Brazilian cinema that was innovative in terms of language and film techniques, using lighter cameras, direct sound, etc. He refused to consider, however, any ideological, aesthetic, or political elements that gave the movement a coherent program. He himself was far removed from that era, especially after *Xica da Silva* and his subsequent film, *Chuvas de Verão*, released in April of that year.³⁵⁴

There was a lack of creativity he perceived in the Brazilian cinema of the 1970s, Diegues continued, that could not be blamed just on censorship and repression, but on the persistence of the ghost of *Cinema Novo* that was still hovering over the filmmakers’ heads, and that prevented them from being original and bold. It also prevented young filmmakers to start their careers making innovative films targeting broader audiences. He

³⁵³ “A mulher do Brasil.” *Veja*, Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Paola Vurtuck, “Cacá Diegues: por um cinema popular sem ideologias.” *O Estado de São Paulo*, August 31, 1978.

repeated the same assumptions over and over. “*Xica da Silva*, for instance, was seen by almost ten million Brazilians, won awards, had almost unanimous (positive) reviews in Rio, São Paulo, all of Brazil, even abroad. The ones who challenged it are exactly that minority that hoped for defeat against success.”³⁵⁵ His remarks were assertions about what he regarded as the constant surveillance conducted by leftist intellectuals – indirectly, the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) -over cultural production. “I have no desire to punish anyone anymore in a movie theater,” he concluded; “I have no desire to teach anyone in a movie theater. A movie theater is not a place to torture, or a classroom. As Brecht said, the social function of spectacle is to amuse.”³⁵⁶

These statements made immediately after the release of his seventh feature film triggered a wide-ranging debate in the print media over the next two years –the list of newspapers and magazines involved in such a debate included *O Estado de São Paulo*, *Folha de São Paulo*, *Jornal do Brasil*, *Veja*, *O Pasquim*, *Última Hora*, *Status*, *Tribuna da Imprensa*, *Isto é*, *O Globo*, among others. In the pages of these publications, artists, journalists, filmmakers, and activists discussed “Cacá” statements on artistic creativity in general and film in particular. It also opened a door -probably closed by the repression and censorship prevalent during the previous period - to talk about the role of intellectuals after the defeat of the left and the end of its revolutionary dreams, and the “true” meaning, once again, of popular culture, and the relationship between intellectuals and/or filmmakers with (in this case the authoritarian) state.

As we saw in chapter 2, the field of film production experienced a transformation with the creation of the INC in 1966 and EMBRAFILME in 1969. These entities

³⁵⁵ “Cacá Diegues: por um cinema popular sem ideologias.” *O Estado de São Paulo*, Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

represented the fulfillment of a longstanding demand by filmmakers who had been clamoring for state support for at least twenty years. Since the 1950s, filmmakers had been seeking both financial support from the state to produce films and state restrictions on the importation of foreign features, especially from the U.S. As Tunico Amancio's and Ortiz Ramos' works show us, from 1972 to the beginning of 1975, EMBRAFILME distributed resources according to market demand and likelihood of financial success when producing films, leaving aside any artistic consideration or issues such as the prestige of the director. That would explain why in that era, the state agency produced so many *pornochanchadas* that had no artistic merit but were certainly profitable.

As we also analyzed in chapter 2, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s could be characterized as a moment of transition in terms of the relationship between intellectuals/filmmakers and the state. EMBRAFILME was created during the six-year period of the dictatorship most repressive phase (1968-74), which through the promulgation of the infamous Institutional Act no. 5 enacted new means of political and artistic repression, including the temporary closure of the parliament, federal intervention into the state governments, the strengthening of artistic and film censorship, and the suspension of habeas corpus and the right of assembly. That period witnessed increasing tension between the state's concerns regarding cultural production and the filmmakers' needs, as the *cinemanovistas* were trying to cope with a double defeat: their own as artists and intellectuals previously committed to the search for *o homem brasileiro* ("the" genuine Brazilian man) and the broader political demise represented by the repression of the left and the end of democracy.

A new phase began in 1974/5. It was the result of a profound transformation in both the political orientation of the government and the conversion of the filmmakers' political, aesthetic, and artistic positions. This was the moment when the *cinemanovista* director and producer Roberto Farias took over the direction of EMBRAFILME. The confluence between state and filmmakers' needs was the product of two political and cultural projects: the state PNC - Política Nacional de Cultura (National Cultural Policy) and the filmmakers' PBC - Projeto Brasileiro de Cinema (Brazilian Cinema Project).

The PBC was the product of the First Congress of the Brazilian Film Industry (Primeiro Congresso da Indústria Cinematográfica), held in October 1972 and sponsored by the National Institute of Cinema (INC). It became evident on that occasion that the field of film production had significantly changed. All the sectors (*classes*) of film production, including technicians, actors, and critics were organized in unions or cooperatives, responding to the emergence of a new state entity ready to consider their demands. It was also evident that the big producers –who were “independent” in the 1960s – were now leading the field, displacing the directors and most of all, the powerful exhibitors. The producers –led by Roberto Farias and Luis Carlos Barreto – issued a document that would be the founding text of the future PBC. It openly addressed the necessity of forming an alliance between the state and film producers to guarantee quality cultural goods in a market where American films were hegemonic. In that sense, this project sought to harmonize the much-needed modernization of film language with a nationalistic project. The producers wanted to create an image of Brazil that, without giving up their search for *o homem brasileiro*, would be successful locally and exportable

abroad.³⁵⁷ They also proposed a restructuring of EMBRAFILME's system of production, distribution, and exhibition that would allow a significant increase in films made by directors of quality, leaving aside the *pornochanchada*. The document led to Roberto Farias –at that time president of the National Film Industry Organization – being appointed to the directorship of EMBRAFILME two years after.³⁵⁸

In his influential study of Brazilian intellectuals and the authoritarian state, Sergio Miceli uses the notion of cooptation to understand that relationship. In opposition to this view, and in line with Daryle Williams analysis of state/intellectual relations during the Vargas regime, I posit that even though the post 1964 state promoted institutional policies to control the film industry, leading producers had a principal role in the setting of the cultural agenda.³⁵⁹ By the same token, the emergence of the producer as a major figure — rather than the director—and the production companies' significant expansion, further demonstrated the shift from a cinema focus on artistic expression and social concerns to a more commercial industry.³⁶⁰ Amâncio notes that when Farias became the manager of EMBRAFILME, the state agency shifted its priorities to the big production companies, such as those of Herbert Richers, Luis Carlos Barreto and Jarbas Barbosa, the last two being the producers of *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* and *Xica da Silva*.

³⁵⁷ Minutes of Primeiro Congresso da Industria Cinematográfica, October 22-26, 1976. For the first time, there was an organization of different groups of activity and interest (directors, producers, technicians, actors, etc.) in “classes”. In that congress, the open confrontation was between producers and exhibitors. The former asked for the protection of the state not only in terms of financing but also demanding a more strict legislation that obliged a quota for Brazilian movies. The exhibitors, on the contrary, would show their faith on the free market and the belief that Brazilian “people” liked American films, so the quota would be anti-economic.

³⁵⁸ Minutes of Primeiro Congresso da Industria Cinematográfica, Ibid. Ortiz Ramos, J.M. ,Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Daryle Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil: the first Vargas Regime, 1930-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

³⁶⁰ Tunico Amâncio shows how with the new management of EMBRAFILME in the 1970s, most of the resources to fund film projects went to big production companies or producers with a long trajectory in the industry, giving the producers more power than ever. Tunico Amâncio, *Artes e manhas da EMBRAFILME: Cinema estatal brasileiro em sua época de ouro; 1977-1981* (Niterói: UFF, 2000).

In that vein, EMBRAFILME's press kit for *Dona Flor e sus dois maridos* left aside the director and actor's voices, instead devoting three full pages to Barreto's statements regarding "the new momentum of Brazilian film," his conversations about this issue with Glauber Rocha –an important name to drop- and the need for a national project.³⁶¹ Barreto's dream came true, as EMBRAFILME' successfully went from a mere distribution company to one that devoted its resources to production, energized by a nationalistic void that led it to promote films based on "national" novels, such as those by Jorge Amado and Nelson Rodrigues.

The key role that film had played since the birth of Cinema Novo as a representative of Brazil abroad– only matched by the impact of the *Bossa Nova* and *Tropicalismo* – and the national project the producers presented had a decisive influence over the PNC. Driven by the new perspectives that the tenure of the Minister Jarbas Passarinho brought to the Ministério de Educação e Cultura (MEC) during the period 1969-1974 - characterized by a nationalistic turn with respect to cultural production that oriented all the cultural institutions created in that period, e. g. FUNARTE, EMBRAFILME, etc.- the PNC had as a major goal the search for a national identity. Still looking for *o homem brasileiro*, this document specified how Brazilian identity was the harmonious mix of "the three human groups" (not races or ethnic groups).³⁶² Although recognizing the regional pluralism that characterized the Brazilian nation, the document openly asserted that pluralism as such tended to blur into nationality. There was a common spirit, which despite apparent differences made the Brazilian man's experience the same in all regions of the country.

³⁶¹ Press Kit *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*.

³⁶² Política Nacional de Cultura, Departamento de Divulgação e Documentação, MEC, Brasília, 1975.

The values that both documents shared were also present in the discussion initiated by Diegues at the end of August 1979. He emphasized once again, how removed he had been –during the 1960s – from the “people,” how much he now understood popular culture, and how little he understood it in the past. He affirmed vehemently that “the project of *Cinema Novo* is dead.” What he failed to note in those statements was that from 1974 on, many of the filmmakers and producers who were the beneficiaries of EMBRAFILME policies in the Brazilian market and abroad had been major figures in *Cinema Novo*, including the producers mentioned above, and directors such as Diegues, Valadão, Jabor, and Khouri, among others. In that sense, scholarly analyses of EMBRAFILME agree that the government mission of creating a commercial Brazilian cinema suitable for export and controlling “leftist” intellectuals converged with the filmmakers’ desire to get state financing and support (in terms of distribution and exhibition).³⁶³

Diegues’ statements to *O Estado de São Paulo*, thus, reflected all these transformations occurring in those years in the field of cultural and film production, which meant both a significant growth in the production of films and in the number of viewers of national films. In 1969, two hundred million Brazilians went to 3,000 movie theaters to see 53 national films. By 1978, in contrast, 101 films were seen by six hundred million viewers in almost 4,000 theaters.³⁶⁴ *Xica da Silva*, *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*, *A dama do loteação* among other Brazilian feature films made by well-connected directors and producers garnered larger audiences, as the table shows. This boom in

³⁶³ Randall Johnson, *ibid*; Tunico Amâncio, *ibid*; Ortiz Ramos, *Ibid*.

³⁶⁴ *Filme Cultura*, March 12, 1977. These figures may not impressed the scholar on American Film, but in the case of the Brazilian film market, the growing of spectators and films produced over the 1970s was significant.

Brazilian films, which were truly popular for the first time, has to be understood in terms of their construction of images of Brazilianness, as discussed above with respect to *Xica da Silva* and *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*.

Thematic and aesthetically, these films that “we can say, without exaggerating, are stereotypical (of Brazil). (They are) adaptations from Jorge Amado that became also very popular on TV novelas. The film language used was very conventional and looked just for a big commercial success.”³⁶⁵ Aesthetics, narrative, and political choices in the 1970s were discussed publically in tandem with the emergence of the entertainment industry and the mass production of culture. Many filmmakers embraced major shifts in technological and aesthetic practices, mostly influenced by the popularity of the telenovelas. When Diegues affirmed that he was tired of the leftism (which in his vision implied elitism) of Brazilian intellectuals, and that his real concern was with “popular” taste, or when he later remarked that “every thing I know about cinema I learned watching American films,” he was talking not only about financial success; he was also praising the aesthetic changes he (and others) adopted, as exemplified by *Xica da Silva* and *Chuvas de Verão*.³⁶⁶

Not all the *cinemanovistas* were on the same side of the debate. Joaquim Pedro de Andrade considered that, “the evolution from the ‘aesthetic of hunger’ to the ‘aesthetic of flower’ is premature in Brazil.”³⁶⁷ This “premature evolution” meant the dramatic increase in the use of color film (instead of the very 1960s black and white); the rejection of unconventional modes of editing—such as the Eisenstein model, so evident in Glauber

³⁶⁵ Ismail Xavier in Malu Moraes. *Perspectivas estéticas do cinema brasileiro* (Brasília: Universidade de Brasília; EMBRAFILME, 1986).

³⁶⁶ *O Globo*, November 14, 1982.

³⁶⁷ *Jornal do Brasil*, November 27, 1979.

Rocha's polemical *Terra em Transe* in 1967 (Land in Distress); the adoption of the "transparent" Hollywood mode; the routine use of professional actors, particularly those whose popularity had grown as a result of their performances in the TV novelas; and last but not least, the adoption of depoliticized melodramas as the main narrative options. All of these trends indicated the shift that Brazilian cinema underwent due to this collaboration between filmmakers/producers and the state as well as the obvious aesthetics exchange between cinema and TV.

A new sense of modernity was born as Brazilian film adopted an aesthetic style considered global. As Ismail Xavier affirmed, "everybody knows that Brazilian modernization had, in its own way, a process of validation of television as a source of ideology and an imaginary of national integration."³⁶⁸ In the same vein, one critic remarked that viewers, "tired of *telenovelas* . . . could leave their favorite chair in their living room and go to a movie theater to see *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*. Afterwards, they could come back to watch TV without any changes in their aesthetic appreciation (...) Bruno Barreto's film is suitable to maintain the superficiality that characterizes Brazilian television..."³⁶⁹ Glauber Rocha, who had been mainly working in Europe since the making of *Cabeças Cortadas* (Cutting Heads) in 1970, also made an association between cinema and novelas, this time in the context of the debate over *Patrulhas Ideológicas*, noting that the vast majority of directors, actors, scriptwriters who had been linked to the Brazilian Communist Party ended up working for Rede Globo, at the zenith of the Medici dictatorship.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ Ismail Xavier, *ibid.*

³⁶⁹ Oswaldo Mendes, "A Dona Flor versus telenovela," *ibid.*

³⁷⁰ Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda. *Patrulhas Ideológicas Marca Reg.* (Brasiliense: São Paulo, 1980).

The field of filmmaking had become more standardized. As Carlos Diegues had observed, *Xica da Silva*'s premiere was the first time that a Brazilian movie had been released nationally—meaning simultaneously in several major Brazilian cities—indicating the novelty of more efficient distribution and exhibition networks, a more professional model of doing business, and the very existence of a national cultural market.³⁷¹ Foreshadowing the changes to come, Diegues wondered in an article written in 1973, “Why do Latin American films have to be ugly? Just because they are from the Third World? What is the problem with financial success? Why should we remain tied to the traditional points of view of the 1960s?”

Chuvas de Verão was the perfect example of these changes and it served as the trigger of the debates that became known as the “Patrulhas Ideológicas.” Set in a lower-to middle-class suburban neighborhood in São Paulo, the film was unpretentious, as it told small-scale, personal stories: love, not politics; personal redemption, not historical epics; everyday life, not revolution. Such a combination of films—first, *Xica da Silva* and then *Chuvas de verão*—aroused the ire of Diegues’s fellow travelers from the 1960s, such as the former communist leader Carlos Estevam, who reminded Diegues about his participation as a leftist intellectual in the Centros Populares de Cultura (Culture Popular Centers) linked to the Brazilian student movement and their belief that *realism* was the only aesthetic language to communicate with “the people.”

The final bizarre depths of the debate were reached when conservative politicians who worked at the Ministerio de Educação e Cultura supported Diegues’s positions, calling the Left “authoritarian.” It was the official death of the *Cinema Novo*. Diegues

³⁷¹ *Jornal do Brasil*, December 3, 1976.

and other key figures of that movement, such as the powerful producer Luis Carlos Barreto, had let all of Brazil know that they finally felt free in terms of artistic creation and embraced commercial success.³⁷² As the critic and admirer of Cinema Novo Nelson Honeiff said, “it does not matter if the film is brilliant (...) if *Dona Flor* contributes even a little to creating a coherent language for the new moment in the [film] industry,, then it will have accomplished a lot toward the creation of a new Brazilian cinema, strong, meaningful, and, visibly successful.”³⁷³

Final Words

The opening of Marcel Camus’ film *Black Orpheus* (1959) shows black and mestiço bodies singing and dancing frantically, reinforcing what Brazil has meant for domestic and foreign audiences for decades. Paradoxically, what is shown in Camus film - and in many 1940s and 1950s *chanchadas* - was deeply criticized by filmmakers and intellectuals during the 1960s, when the Brazilian essence was a matter of dispute in the cultural field, and not a certainty embraced by the media, the state, the intellectuals, or the artists. By then, the heated discussions were not only about the “locus” of the nation—rural poverty vs. the modern urban experience, popular vernacular culture vs. cosmopolitanism—but also about the legitimate technical and aesthetical means to make movies.

By the 1970s, however, a combination of censorship, state intervention in cultural production, economic growth and expansion of the cultural industry, technical and artistic

³⁷² *O Estado de São Paulo*, September 10, 1978; Press Kit of *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* produced by EMBRAFILME, 1976; *Última Hora*, April 28, 1978.

³⁷³ Nelson Honeiff, “Uma função de Dona Flor para o novo cinema,” *Última Hora*, December 14, 1976.

innovations, and the transnationalization of film and popular consumption led to the construction of a more unified idea about the meaning of “Brazil,” promoting the previously rejected idea of Brazil as a tropical paradise. That consensus was also the product of a debate in the public sphere. A major part of the media, the film industry, and the artists arrived at a more homogeneous notion of the meaning of Brazilianness unified around the idea of racial democracy as an essential element of the imagined community.

Repression, however, had an ambiguous effect. Despite censorship, commercial films became political during the 1970s, as they allowed intellectuals and activists to address crucial current issues such as race relations in Brazil and the value of the national past to understand the present. In that sense, the relative consensus reached about those topics was the outcome of an engaged public opinion that used cultural artifacts to debate and express its point of view. One of the compelling reasons for this phenomenon was the strong connection that film established with Brazilian popular culture. The incorporation of certain elements that circulated widely at the time and that had been neglected previously by the *cinemanovistas* because they were “alienating”—popular music, samba dance, religiosity, national cuisine, and above all, the mulata—into the very core of film narratives and aesthetics implied, for the first time, a “true” dialogue between filmmakers and the masses.

That certainly did not mean that the convergence between popular culture symbols and the representations created by the visual media led to a critical culture, or a more democratic one. However, the fact that the old guard of the film industry abandoned the notion that everything popular was alienating, coopting, or “imposed” allowed them to make films embraced by broader audiences. A range of contradictions surfaced in this

new phase. On the one hand, the cineastes were popular enough to create archetypes that became part of the national culture, such as the proverbial mulata. On the other hand, they collaborated in the reinforcement of certain racial and gender stereotypes that were also circulating at that time.

In that sense, the mulata played a central role as a national symbol because of the gender and racial ambiguities that her body revealed, reinforcing authoritarian values and providing, at the same time, elements that highlighted the national sensuality related to Brazilian popular culture. It also reinforced the idea –stronger than ever in the 1970s –of Brazil as a multi-racial society, opposed to the bi-racial –and more “racist” United States. That would explain the importance of Braga’s popularity in the US for Brazilian TV and movie audiences.

Contradictions bloomed with such images. Where the military saw a morally accepted display of feminine sexuality, moviegoers enjoyed the exhibition of the female body, an object of voyeuristic appreciation in times of censorship. All perspectives converged, however, on the notion that brown skin was the distinct trademark that made Brazil unique, reinforcing the nationalist discourses circulating in the 1970s, obliterating the more political and conflictive black body as representative of the nation as tropical paradise.

In that vein, blackness and all the meanings connected to it could not be taken as an expression of Brazilian culture, especially because of its implicit controversial character. Even though *Xica da Silva* was a mild narration of Brazilian slavery, the actress that embodied her was difficult to control because of what she represented: a past

of exploitation and a present of discrimination. As the black Brazilian actor Antônio Pitanga put it, “the real enemy of the black in Brazil is not the white, but the mulatto.”³⁷⁴

On the other hand, the process of modernization led by the military meant an exchange with international cultural markets that pushed for the modernization of Brazilian visual culture, in spite of the dictatorship’s idealization of the “traditional.” The “modern” implied a greater demand for plots and images related to sexuality and tropical beauty. The white Sônia Braga, transformed into a morena over the course of a decade, fulfilled the expectations of domestic and foreign audiences’ by displaying—through her body—all the modern and traditional characteristics that made Brazil “Brazil.”

³⁷⁴ *Jornal do Brasil*, April 4, 1978; *O Globo*, March 3, 1978. *O Estado de São Paulo*, July 3, 1978.

Conclusion

The central goal of this dissertation has been to grasp the public impact that films had on Brazilian and Argentine social life during the 1960s and 1970s. In a moment when influential and somewhat conflicted ideologies about modernization and progress, development and third-worldism circulated widely in academic and political circles, in the mass media and the streets, film shifted away from its image as mere popular entertainment, a position preached for two decades by the commercially-oriented studios. Cinema became the locus of public discussion of the very processes that both nations endured from the 1960s on.

Even though there were complex differences between the Peronist and Vargas regimes in terms of ideology and the scope of social reforms, it is nonetheless the case that in both countries the transformations that the populist regimes pursued led to political and social turmoil for several decades. From the mid-1950s on Argentine and Brazilian societies experienced a period of “modernization” euphoria alongside political violence, economic instability, and institutional weakness.

In that environment, the arts in general, and film in particular, played a key role in advancing public discourses about the social issues that became urgent to address in both nations. Films, thus, were important elements in the public sphere. Directors became intellectuals, sometimes against their wishes. Spectators became participants in the construction of discourses about the nation they lived in. Journalists became film critics. The print media positioned film as an element to discuss politics. Even the most commercial films and directors could not escape this deep transformation occurring in the film industry and in the general perception of what cinema had become.

Certainly the cinephilia that had grown during the 1960s worldwide contributed to this transformation. But *national* cinemas—as they were called in both countries starting in the early Sixties—became such an important matter in the construction of imagined communities precisely because of their ability to foster debates that contributed to a broadening of the public discussion in a time of political repression.

In the first part of my dissertation I showed how a still developing film scene dealt with the anxieties of the process and ideologies about modernization in both countries during the first years of the 1960s. Filmmakers in Argentina, in that sense, wanted to surpass the productions of the studio system and try new formulas based on auteur cinema and European aesthetics. They were called modern and avant-gardist despite their traditional point of view about female sexuality and gender roles. In a society that considered itself “European” and cultivated, the process of cultural modernization in Argentina showed its other face as women were punished with rape and exploitation in those films that were seen as cosmopolitan and modern.

Meanwhile, an emerging cohort of filmmakers flatly rejected the process of modernization in Brazil, politicizing their narratives and aesthetics to show the other face of Brazilian progress. They were accompanied by an enthusiastic press eager to show both the nation and the international film scene the high quality of those films and how *modern* they were. In that sense, Cinema Novo films participated in a real process of modernization of Brazilian culture that helped them to emerge and consolidate as a powerful actor for a period of at least twenty-five years.

The process of economic expansion alongside the political radicalism of the middle class and the repression of the military dictatorships in both countries set a

different scenario during the late 1960s. The cultural industry expanded significantly at a time that witnessed the suppression of institutional channels of civic participation and political debate. In that vein, film was a key actor during this period. The second part of my dissertation, thus, delves in the complexities of a public sphere that had cinema as a key component.

I explored the ways in which different kinds of nationalism fueled historical films in Argentina during the late Sixties and the early Seventies. Historical films went beyond their traditional scope, that is to say, to represent a vision about the nation. These films created a real debate about which narrative better represented the past –and the present– in an Argentina marked by growing political violence and intensifying intellectual disputes. Filmmakers from diverse backgrounds came to understand that the making of such films implied both a public intervention and financial success. Historical films were popular in two different ways. They captivated the eyes and souls of spectators and they also tried to represent “the people” on the screen, intentions previously manifested by political filmmakers who, despite their claims of making movies for “the people,” never reached the audiences that these historical films did. Watching and discussing historical films became a massive and public experience that allowed many Argentines to speak about politics in a time of political repression. The Argentine nationalism that developed during those years was both fed by and nourished those films that also allowed a brief recuperation of the national film industry.

Similar conditions led to the expansion of the cultural industry in Brazil and a deep transformation in the ways films were regarded, made, seen, and discussed. Filmmakers who had previously pontificated about the inherent alienation of popular and

mass culture, captured the audiences, the critics, and state financial support through the making of films that played with elements that circulated in TV novelas and best-selling fiction, such as Jorge Amado's novels. Popular films recreated the myth of racial democracy as a central characteristic of the Brazilian nation. The old and rejected vision of Brazil as a tropical paradise created by the chanchadas and foreign films was now repackaged and regarded as more successful, patriotic, and *authentic* than the formulas used to call for the revolution during the previous years. In a moment of increasing political repression, these films allowed intellectuals and militants to openly engage in discussions about politics, gender, and race.

In future research, to enrich my idea of visual economy I intend to analyze further the exchanges among major actors during the period of my investigation. I would like to deepen my analysis about how photojournals, TV popular shows, and films shared a common visual language about the nation and its visciditudes. I will also elaborate on the professional and cultural networks created in the different fields that allowed a filmmaker to become a photographer, a film actor a journalist, and a TV star a film actor. That will allow me to better substantiate my argument about the key role that a common visual language played in disseminating and understanding political discourses during those turbulent times.

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