

# Revisiting the Argentine Political Documentary of the Late 1950s and Early 1960s

by  
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*Criticism has tended to see the pioneer documentaries of the New Latin American Cinema in the late 1950s and early 1960s as reproducing what they denounced. Close analysis of the formal strategies of three classic Argentine films of the period—Fernando Birri's *Tire Dié*, Humberto Ríos's *Faena*, and Raymundo Gleyzer's *Ceramiqueros de Traslasierra*—suggests, instead, that the questions and contradictions in these political documentaries are illuminated by the desire to imagine and address a new audience as an agent of social change.*

*La crítica ha tendido a ver los documentales pioneros del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano de la década de 1950 y comienzos de 1960 como la reproducción de lo que denunciaban. Un análisis más detallado de las estrategias formales de tres clásicos del cine argentino de la época—*Tire Dié* de Fernando Birri, *Faena* de Humberto Ríos, y *Ceramiqueros de Traslasierra* de Raymundo Gleyzer—sugiere, en cambio, que las cuestiones y contradicciones en estos documentales políticos son clarificadas por el deseo de imaginar y dirigirse a una nueva audiencia entendida como un agente de cambio social.*

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In 1965 Raymundo Gleyzer filmed his documentary *Ceramiqueros de Traslasierra* in a small mountain village in Córdoba, Argentina. For 25 minutes we follow the lives of the craftsmen who sell their pottery to tourists as we listen to an interview with Alcira López about her craft. At the very last minute, the relation between the militant filmmaker and his audience is abruptly thrown into crisis: the potterymaker is asked, "Alcira, do you believe that we can help you with this film?" The next shot is a still image, seen from Alcira's point of view, of the film crew filming. This still image transforms the filming into a "past" event, making the film part of history.

In 2002 an activist picketer from the Movement of the Unemployed in Lanús, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, watches an Indymedia militant film crew filming the unemployed in the neighborhood and asks to borrow the camera for half an hour. When crew member Rodrigo Paz Paredes (quoted in de la Puente and Russo, 2007: 65; see also de la Puente, 2009) watches the film made by the youngster, it is a "revelation": "For us it was terrible, because we asked ourselves: What are we doing filming documentaries about these people? Who must make these documentaries?"<sup>1</sup>

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Forty years separate these two episodes, but Gleyzer and Paz Paredes ask similar questions: "What are we doing filming here?" "Who has to film and for whom?" Put otherwise, what is the relation of militant cinema to its privileged audience, those whose voices it attempts to rescue? It is no coincidence that Argentina's new militant cinema—emerging after the country's 2001 financial collapse—sees itself in continuity with the 1960s and finds its ancestors locally in figures such as Fernando Birri, Humberto Ríos, and Raymundo Gleyzer. Similarly, at the international level it finds inspiration in the work of the Cuban documentarist Santiago Álvarez and in the legacy of Soviet experimentalists of the 1920s such as Dziga Vertov. Vertov's practices have even been reappropriated to name current documentary practices.<sup>2</sup>

Given the political differences between the 1960s and our own historical moment, these claims of ancestry incite us to revisit the cinematic dilemmas posed by the 1960s, whose central problematics may also be reemerging now. This reexamination can begin by closely analyzing the militant films of the period, a task that needs to be undertaken thoroughly by critics. The 1960s reopened the radical rift initially exposed by the Soviets in the 1920s between militant documentary and social reality. This rift redefined the relationship between film and politics by placing "the film's truth in the film's mode of address," to borrow Michael Chanan's (1990: 45) expression. Militant films of the 1960s were less concerned with the distance between actuality and its representation on screen or, for that matter, with the social critique implicit in questioning the relationship between actuality and representation than with the distance between the representation of reality and the positing of political alternatives to change the reality "documented" by the camera and tape recorder. This cinema was intended to resist commodification and to raise consciousness—which is why not all artistic avant-gardes qualified as "political." For the presentation of political alternatives, the filmmakers had to consider their audiences as possible agents of change (rather than passive consumers of spectacles)—a crucial concern in the regional political manifestos of the period.

This essay contributes to the reconsideration of the Latin American activist cinema of the 1960s by analyzing some of the dilemmas generated by the "political desire for an address" appearing in the formal strategies of three early Argentine militant documentary films: Birri's 1958 *Tire Dié* (Toss a Dime), Ríos's 1960 *Faena* (Slaughter), and Gleyzer's 1965 *Ceramiqueros de Traslasierra* (Potterymakers of Traslasierra). I argue that the political desire to address the audience and the ways in which this audience was imagined can illuminate some of the formal paradoxes of the films of this period. To address its audience, militant cinema paradoxically had to negotiate with conventional cinematic language to convey its unconventional messages. To imagine its audience as the site of social change, it had to conceive it both as in need of a vision and as already having a vision. The films I analyze present early expressions of these dilemmas on screen. They oscillate between hope for and skepticism about an audience; they imagine a dual audience: part of the audience has a voice but is in need of enlightenment and part is already enlightened but is in need of a voice. I first comment briefly on the critical reception of militant films and their connection to the global tradition of militant cinema and then proceed with a close analysis of the three films.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY CINEMA OF THE EARLY 1960s

The need to engage with the language of its privileged audience added a complexity to militant cinema that was often lost in the scarce criticism that welcomed it. Critics often argued that this cinema formally reproduced what it wanted to denounce. For example, the Colombian filmmaker Jorge Silva saw the early militant documentaries as naively reproducing “objectivity,” wanting to “capture reality and nothing more, make reality manifest. Afterwards this formulation began to seem insufficient” (quoted in Chanan, 1990: 38). Likewise, Julianne Burton (1990: 77) read Birri’s call to “show things as they are—not as we might like them to be” as reflecting a “naïve faith in the direct and incorruptible communicability of a pure and passive truth that merely awaits capture by the right agency.” Techniques such as the voice-over were thought to undermine the movement’s mission to grant a voice to those without voice (as in direct cinema or cinema vérité), instead giving voice to the filmmakers.<sup>3</sup> This critique, however, granted univocal authoritarian meanings to the strategy of the voice-over and thus replicated what it denounced. Likewise, critics invariably opposed these films to a constructed “other”—inevitably a univocal Hollywood. Thus it was easy to denounce them as risking a reproduction (through parody or collage) of mainstream strategies.

The subtext of these critical gestures is that the new militant cinema wished to be militant but failed.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, a purist critique underestimates this cinema’s need to address the audience, which compelled it to use and subvert rather than avoid the mainstream strategies to which its audience was habituated.<sup>5</sup> It also overlooks the values that all projects for social change share with existing social arrangements in that they are all modern; they may posit different versions of social and political equality, but they still belong to the epistemic paradigms that rule autonomous modern society.<sup>6</sup> The double thrust of the 1960s was to document reality and at the same time to negate it, as Birri’s 1962 Manifesto of Santa Fé put it: “In giving testimony about this reality . . . documentary negates it. It rejects it. It denounces, judges, criticizes, dismantles it. Because it shows things as they are, irrefutably, and not as we would want them to be or as they want us to believe, in good or bad faith, that they are” (Birri, 1964: 13). Rather than a naïve call to document “things as they are,” this was a call to address the audience’s fictions: to undo dreamed or imposed fictions and awaken the desire to see differently.

For alternatives to emerge, the call to document reality was a call not only to embed cinematic practice in social struggles for change through the circulation and distribution of films but also to represent those without voice and to construct an agent of change within the structure of the films themselves. In the same manifesto Birri considered representing those without voice by “affirming the positive values of the people: their reserve of force, their works, their happiness, their struggles, their dreams” (Birri, 1964: 13). But the fine line between affirmation and celebration had to be avoided, since the heroism of the dispossessed (their resilience, their resistance) also had to awaken the desire for change. As the 1960s advanced, militant cinema chose more often to represent the people as the already awakened agent of change in organized struggles against oppression.

Rather than being new, the dilemmas of the 1960s with respect to the audience as the true site of change belong to the history of militant cinema from its inception in the Soviet 1920s. In fact, they belong to foundational narratives of the left such as the *Communist Manifesto*. Leftist tradition has explained the historically existing social formations but at the same time seen in them the germ of a future. To put it in Étienne Balibar's (1994: 94) words, the proletariat is both a historical reality and a category leading to political change: the problem is to "make the proletariat coincide with its concept." One of the cinematic expressions of these debates in the Soviet 1920s was the polemic about spectatorship that pitted Eisenstein's fictional approach of a "cinema of attractions" against Vertov's documentary "camera as weapon," an expression borrowed by the militant cinema of the 1960s. The former assumed a passive spectator; the latter granted the spectator and "real life" the power to mold the camera's work. John MacKay has argued that Vertov's thoughts about the spectator embrace the polemics about the proletariat as a revolutionary mass: for Vertov the audience was both a reservoir of valuable experiences and a passive receptor in need of enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> Vertov's camera was committed to "catching life unawares," but it also had to expand vision; documentary had to be (in 1960s terms) "negated." The revolution in form was to be brought about by the mechanical nature of the "kino-eye" (the camera), which would act as the equalizer universalizing vision, and by the socialized production of film. In 1922 Vertov started to give cameras to the Young Pioneers so that they could become "kinoks" and publish their own photographs. We may consider that Vertov's hesitations with respect to spectatorship reemerged among the Latin Americans in the 1960s, with some added complexities. The Latin Americans faced a more divided audience in terms of class, for example. From the point of view of militant cinema, the upper classes might have a voice but no desire for vision; the dispossessed had no voice but might have a vision or at least a desire for one. Films were intended to enlighten those who had a voice and at the same time grant voice to those who had vision, that is, "strengthen the revolutionary consciousness of those who already have it" (Birri, 1999: 163). Messages could misfire: if the film had to "improve spectators" (192), was the film also to improve those who were represented on screen?

The three films I analyze below reflect the above dilemmas. They construct two audiences: one in no need of enlightenment but in need of a voice and one in no need of a voice but in need of enlightenment. Because their audience is split, their filmic language is heterogeneous rather than a reproduction of what it denounces. The unenlightened audience is constructed through a geographic displacement: a voyage outside of the middle-class city (represented by either images or modes of knowledge and vision) and into the world unseen by the city. This voyage avoids becoming a voyeuristic objectification by providing a framework for dialectical thinking. But, as we shall see, the three films honor the polemics about the audience by stopping short of imposing a message on the objects of their films—the dispossessed—or of constructing them as the necessary collective agent of change. These films rather seek to grant a voice to those who need it through self-reflexive strategies.

## FERNANDO BIRRI'S *TIRE DIÉ*

Birri's 33-minute *Tire Dié* starts with an aerial view of the city of Santa Fé. Then the camera descends to the ground at the city limits, and we follow interviews with the residents of a slum. In this second part we watch children waiting for a train to arrive from the city, which eventually we will see them racing after while the middle-class passengers toss dimes through the windows.

Critics usually focus mostly on the second part of the "filmed social survey," as Birri called the film, but its bipartite structure is crucial to understanding that this "social survey" is not just a naive recording of (a forgotten) reality. The initial geographic displacement puts the city and its marginalized others in opposition. However, they are unified and differentiated at once by the agora constructed by machines: a plane takes us out of Santa Fé city, a train takes passengers to and from Santa Fé, and the "kino-eye" follows the moving machinery into the slum. The camera is the eye that presents a *dialectical totality* in the confrontation of two modes of vision: instrumental reason (numbers, statistics, linearity of progress represented by the plane flying forward) and documentary singularity (faces, interviews).

The first part of the film plays ironically with the conventions of a travelogue. A voice-over that accompanies the aerial view of Santa Fé explains that the city was founded in 1573 by Juan de Garay with the purpose of "opening portals to the interior" at the confluence of the Salado and Paraná Rivers. The irony of the Spanish "opening" is the expropriation of indigenous people's land at its root (indeed, Santa Fé had to be moved a few kilometers away 80 years later because of indigenous people's attacks). The voice-over continues to jam up the machinery by which we understand this expansion: it gives us statistics about the city's modern achievements in a manner that dismantles any objectivity assigned to statistics while rendering the meaning of "modern progress" unclear. We learn, for example, that people consume 32,800,000 glasses of beer each year; that the major newspaper has a daily circulation of 54,000 to 55,000; that 400 cows are killed every day at the abattoir; and that 200 beauty parlors are among the city's marvels. As the plane reaches the city limits, the voice-over announces that "statistics become uncertain. There are many—how many? too many—huts in which families live. . . . Here we have filmed between four and five of an afternoon in the spring, summer, fall, winter, of 1956, 1957, 1958." The geographic displacement is an epistemic displacement: exact numbers will not account for the outskirts. The last aerial shot cuts to a close-up of a child looking at the camera, a camera that will pose now as "catching life unawares."

This shift leading to the second part, as I have mentioned, is often seen as the camera's naive confidence in filling "a gap in knowledge": "The image's power to register authorizes the presentation of the documentary as counter-hegemonic information: no less objective than official information" (Bernini, 2004: 157). Nonetheless, the bipartite structure of the film has already put in question any thesis about the objectivity of the image. A detail immediately follows our entrance into the register of the image and helps us notice the editing at work: at the human level, the camera slightly disorients us as to onscreen movement and direction. We see the first child to be interviewed turn to his right, then a cut, after which he walks to his left; then we see the children going toward

the train following an adult, but after a cut we see them coming toward the camera with the adult being led by the children. If we have lost the linearity of numbers, we have lost also the linearity of cinematic narration.

In spite of all the shots with fixed axes that make us believe we are viewing reality, the structure of the film questions this visibility: the presentation of the children on screen depends on the presentation of the previous statistical information, thanks to which they acquire signification. The bipartite structure of the film exposes the partiality of each register of reality (instrumental reason and singular stories), offering us a total vision and a dialectical type of reasoning. If the counterinformation of the images does not deny the objectivity of statistics, it denies the *claim to totality* of the epistemic strategy of statistics. One could say that it works against their reification. In the same way, the aerial shots deny the claim to totality of the epistemic strategy of registering reality at the human level. No strategy is enough: the clash between the two puts them in crisis and shows the process by which they are produced.

The limitation of these strategies is further dramatized in scenes of partial spectatorship. The staged montage of the encounter between the train and the children makes evident the film's thesis that only the camera can repair the partiality of vision. Here, because the camera is everywhere—inside the train, outside the train, below the train, along the train, above the train—the viewer realizes the partiality of any point of view. The passengers who see the children from inside the train interpret what they see according to their own limited perspectives. For example, one passenger says, "They don't want to work" (the text of this voice-over was scripted), while another one closes the window. The shot of the neck of a passenger who is reading the newspaper is the epitome of this partiality. The audience does not see his face, and he does not see the faces of the children: he only sees the fiction of objective knowledge that the newspaper presents, as do the statistics of the first part of the film.

The film's expansion of vision serves to lay bare the partiality of vision rather than to add what statistics miss. The meaning assigned to the type of vision exposed at first—statistics and newspapers—will later be negated. Of the newspapers, for example, first we hear that they are read by a great number of people, representing the objective logic of statistics; later we hear that Angela's son does not read but sells newspapers, that a boy they call "the Chilean" only reads the comics and reports of robberies, and that Doña Balbina sells rags to the newspaper *El Litoral*. The newspaper is a floating signifier in different chains of signification: it is information, it is entertainment, it is work, and it is exploited work. In fact, the editing of the interviews composes a veritable theory of capitalist labor emerging from the dispossessed, who need no enlightenment about exploitation. Practically all of the interviews are about work; anticipating the passenger's comment mentioned above, one of the slum dwellers says, "We are willing to work, as long as they don't want to exploit us." Perhaps the coup de grâce is a sentence that sums up the city's dependence on exploited labor: "We who built the great buildings of the city can't even construct a shack."

While the film's dialectics are addressed to the middle-class passengers, the question is what address the film envisions for the interviewees. Reviewers of the film at the time of its release complained of a celebration of slum life,

addressed to the “protagonists” but “informing them of what they already knew” (Orell García, 2006: 97). Birri, instead, thought that the “only truly revolutionary” thing about the film was the integration of the audience: he used viewer opinions for the final version of the film and brought viewers from all walks of life into the same auditorium to watch it (Birri, 1999: 204–208). For Birri (1999: 192), this was mostly achieved through the “collective expectation” generated by the film and all the photo-documentaries that the students of the school had published before. The germ of a future was there. I pause at the word “expectation”: if anything is more structurally fundamental to the film than its bipartite form, it is the image and idea of expectation. In the film, expectation is visualized as the arrival of the train (of modernity, of the airplane, of the camera) and addressed to all audiences, on and off screen, at once. In draft scripts this is also Birri’s guiding idea: the wait for the train will bring “change”—that is, “small change,” the coins that signify change (192–202).

At one culminating point in the scene of the train’s passage through the slum, the camera shows children at the same level as the train and the train moving at a human pace. There is a complex disjointed set of temporalities resulting from the opposition between the children’s expectation of the train, pointing to the future when they will be at the same level of the train, and the stagnation of unemployment in which the adults are stuck. The children follow the train with excitement and an excess of energy; the dynamic montage contrasts here with the fixed images of settings in which we have previously seen the interviews or the aerial view at the beginning. The last image of the film condenses this disjointed temporality: a steady close-up of a child, held in stagnation by the mother, who says he is too young, waits for a future excitement. We know, though, that stagnation comes in again, for the “change” is small change and as such repeats a cycle. But the energy radiates life: a desire, perhaps to resignify change. When the train arrives, the camera itself has changed, becoming excessive, turning into a true “kino-eye” that equalizes spectators by allowing them to see from all possible angles. The fulfillment of the expectation in the film is the realization of the visual agora (integration) of the camera: it is the excess produced by a montage that yields total vision, the assembly of many points of view, the dialectical vision of reality equalizing all spectators. While slum dwellers already possess the vision that allows them to see their exclusion as the cost of the city’s modern progress, they are reintegrated inside the fortress from which they have been excluded to share in the expectation created by the presentation of the film’s allegory of totality to those who lack total vision.

### HUMBERTO RÍOS’S FAENA

In *Faena* Ríos similarly performs a geographic displacement that aims to bring about a change of episteme. He leaves the city and takes his camera to the Swift slaughterhouse outside of the La Plata city limits. Rather than striving to recover the voice of the workers inside an abattoir, his 20-minute film juxtaposes the quick pace of city life with the monotonous pace of work inside the slaughterhouse, posing two disturbing questions: Who should see this film? And does the camera have the ability to expand the vision of any audience?

Ríos's film is also bipartite in structure, and its opening sequence is essential: a montage of images of the pace of the city, caught unawares, soon leads us to the city's guts. Not only do the images of the city appear in opposition to the slaughterhouse but the voice-over narrative, enunciated alternately by a male and a female voice, has a poetic tone in dissonance with the brutal cruelty of the scenes inside the slaughterhouse. With these dissonances the film inverts our usual perception as consumers: normally we do not see the slaughter that precedes consumption, nor do we associate slaughters with poems. Ríos's slaughterhouse is made visible as the invisible center that supports the city, a visibility that has several allegorical layers for any Argentine viewer who will associate the geographic displacement with the nation's history.<sup>8</sup>

Ríos's camera captures in close-ups and medium shots the full process of meat production, from the arrival of the animals in trucks to the washer area to the killing machine inside. The images show workers as they kill and cows as they die; the montage depicts the monotonous machinery of killing in its mechanical as well as its manual aspects. It is a procession of shots of iron machines, cattle, instruments, levers, hands, assembly lines, dead cows being dragged across the floor and lifted up by hooks as they drip blood, men skinning animals, extracting their guts, and bleeding them and later during their lunch break sitting on benches, and machinery breaking animal skulls and then setting up the cans for the receipt of the final products. The meaning of the film is condensed in several still shots halfway through, one of them the famous close-up of the throbbing eye of an animal immediately after being killed, an eye that looks at us from death—a shot that is quoted in Solanas and Getino's 1968 *The Hour of the Furnaces*. This is followed by several stills of the man who lifted the hammer and killed that cow with a blow, edited to the soundtrack of a heartbeat. This bovine "kino-eye" from beyond the grave unveils the continuity between the living animal and the dead one we will consume.

This continuity is stressed again through close-ups of a man peeling off the head skin of a cow hanging already dead from a hook; we see a close-up of the cow's skull and the blood running through it. This unveiling is twofold; it is the killing and the industry all at once—capitalist consumption. The workers are seen as performing a job but have no humanized stories attached to them as they do in the famous predecessor of this film, Georges Franju's 1948 *The Blood of the Beasts*. Ríos does not interview the workers, we do not hear their conversations, and we do not see them socializing except for a glimpse at lunch break. (These shots will be quoted in sequences of political protest in Gleyzer's 1971 *Swift*.)

Though the bipartite structure of city and slaughterhouse could be considered as "negating" both the reality of city dwellers and of the workers who sustain the city, for Ríos the biggest negation is self-reflexive and comes with the voiced poem, where he meditates upon his kino-eye and his search for an audience. Through the voice-over we learn about statistics, hours, and working conditions as the camera exposes the opposition between industrial production and consumption. The female voice-over summarizes it as we see a shot of a man eviscerating a cow hanging from a hook: "Here is the power of efficiency, wise hands separated from the body, industrial abyss." As she ends asking "What for?" the male voice-over clarifies what is ostensibly the thesis of the

film: "Others cut, label, work, for us. We had to know them." By the end, when we again see images of "normal" city life, including some of the shots we have seen at the beginning (car, theaters, people in the streets), the male voice-over asks, "Is this what we want, the small freedom, the hands clean?"

The "we" in the text are the people in the city leaving the movie theater, opening the door of a car, walking the streets. But did "we," the city dwellers, know "them," the workers? Only at the very end, and as images of the city continue, the crucial question of the film is posed by the voice-over, which hesitates about the role of the filmmaker: "Was it worthwhile to put one's own hand on the gear, to believe that one was putting it there? Was it worthwhile to throw some images at the quick pace of the others?" The film ends with the close-up of the cow skull covered in blood and with its skin hanging that we saw before, as the voice-over reaffirms: "This is what we are, death every day." Writing about the representation of real death in bullfighting, André Bazin (2003) singled out the passage from dying to death as the best expression of cinematic specificity as an "art of time." Ríos's self-reflexivity may have shown precisely this: "cinematic specificity." We have seen an allegory of our potential death through the representation of the real death of the animals. Ríos *negates* this reality with the unifying montage that juxtaposes this passage of deadly time with capitalist production and the blindness of the city dwellers: in the killing the animals on the assembly line and those who kill them are in the end interchangeable cogs in the same machinery of consumption. But the voice-over makes us return to the cinematic specificity of death: short of condemning the system, it asserts "This is what we are." Ríos's geographic displacement has served the purpose of dialectical thinking, but his camera does not share Birri's integrationist hope, nor does it place hope in the voice of the dispossessed, as Gleyzer's will. Ríos's is a meditation in search of an audience: Will there be a privileged subject for change? Will the camera find it?

### **RAYMUNDO GLEYZER'S CERAMIQUEROS DE TRASLASIERRA**

Like Birri's and Ríos's films, Gleyzer's 25-minute documentary also starts with a geographic displacement outside the city. In the ethnographic tradition, it seeks to film the everyday life of potters in a small community in Mina Clavero, 170 kilometers southwest of the city of Córdoba via the Camino de las Altas Cumbres (Highway of the High Peaks) in a valley called Trasla Sierra (literally "behind the mountains"). This geographic displacement will also posit the possibility of dialectical thinking, especially in the encounter between city and mountain dwellers. In fact, as Gleyzer films in the area, he shows tourists buying the very crafts his film is documenting.

The film begins with the camera's detailed register of the environment. The camera surprises us by shooting at ground level throughout the film: at the beginning we see the pottery through the legs of a chicken; in the middle of the film we see the piles of pots being fired through the legs of a woman; and at the end the camera sits on the ground and makes the film's final statement as it shows its subjects from below. The expansion of vision here takes place not only because the camera will recover what is invisible in the city—this place is

hidden behind the mountains, as the title of the film clarifies—but also because of the unusual position from which the camera chooses to see the world.

Combined with a sound track of local music, while the camera catches life unawares we hear the interview that organizes the film, between Ana Montes and Alcira López de López about Alcira's work. The interview is interrupted only twice by a male voice-over whose tone is objective and explanatory but who will be corrected by the voice granted to those without voice—also presaging the film's final visual statement. After Alcira tells us her name, the male voice-over talks about her and her people, explaining where and how they live and how their craft keeps the memory of this Indian craft alive. Immediately afterwards, the film grants the voice to Alcira, who gives her version. Asked whom she learned her craft with, Alcira tells us that her teacher was her mother; asked where she has seen the turtles she crafts, she says she has not seen them, there are no turtles there: "I just make them up out of my head. I know what turtles look like." It is Alcira who knows; the voice-over does not. Alcira does not even need to see; it is the filmmakers who need to see.

The camera and the interview complement each other with the two themes that pervade the film: historical and personal memory and the manual production of a commodity. The conversation takes up the theme of memory, the camera, the theme of work, with the exception of two sets of still images introduced as the site of conjunction of history and work. The male voice-over speaks of the Indians and brings to mind the Spanish conquest just as Alcira voices a memory passed down from mother to daughter. While we listen to the conversation, we see close-ups of the working materials, hands, clay, pots, and the rock table by the road where the pots are put out for tourists to buy them.<sup>9</sup>

Two moments announce a temporal disjunction to come. The first is a close-up of tools over a newspaper on a table. The tools signal the past; the newspaper ad reads: "Job position with a future: doctor, chemical or industrial engineer." The second is a set of still photos of the oldest craftsmen and women, who live higher up in the mountains. These stills disrupt the flow of Alcira's interview and are signs of history: as the photos are shown to us, we hear Alcira say, "Who knows? It is said that all this comes from the Indians." Here she corroborates the male voice-over narration of the beginning but through an appeal to popular memory. The past is associated with the hands that make the pots; the hint of a future of industrial work appears when the male voice-over interrupts Alcira's conversation for the second time to explain that two men, Oviedo and Rafael Pino, whom we see on screen, have gone to serial production with a mold. The camera shows these molds; asked if she uses the mold, Alcira says she has rejected it, so as not to repeat herself.

Alcira's world is unique, irreproducible, before the age of mechanical reproduction: life caught unawares. With the past set against the future and manual labor set against industrial labor, we are now ready for the next opposition: producers and consumers. Two scenes with tourists show their lack of vision, granting the audience that has seen them and the producers total vision. A car passes by but does not stop: these are tourists who do not see the craft or their makers. The camera shoots a detailed close-up of each unique handmade product. A second car stops: these are consumers who see only the pots they want to buy. The camera treats these smiling tourists with irony.

Furthermore, the film's final reflection on production is a truly self-reflexive one. From the medium shot of consumers the camera cuts to a medium shot of Alcira, sitting looking at the camera. In a masterstroke, Gleyzer reverses the whole film and unveils the audience he has had in mind from the start, asking, "Alcira, do you believe that we can help you with this film?" His next cut transforms his camera and himself into *historical footage* by inserting two still shots of the film crew while filming. One of these stills is shot with the camera at the level of Alcira's face, while the other is shot with the camera at ground level. In this sense, the film crew is questioned, and this is done from Alcira's point of view. Alcira's final response will put the entire practice of filmmaking in doubt: "Maybe . . . until now nobody has helped us."

Gleyzer neither offers answers nor represents *the people*, but his strategy is more radical and complex than those of Birri and Ríos. The camera, which has allegedly documented reality, is now itself transformed into a piece of documentation. Seeking to register history, it is itself transformed into history. It is put in question by the same subject whose voice it has apparently recovered. It matters little that the filmmaker has dialectically related two visions of the world: manual versus industrial craft, production versus commodification. Rather than condemning this, Gleyzer addresses those whose craft will disappear: what does Alcira think would be best? With respect to industry and commodity, Alcira has stated her position: her work is unique, unrepeatable. Now Gleyzer poses the same question to her with respect to the camera, which in a sense will also reproduce her work.

Gleyzer registers the uniqueness of a craft that refuses to become capitalist as he himself refuses to produce a commodity by filming a travelogue, instead posing a question for the very audience in whom he places the possibility of an answer. The most disturbing question is whether his film has been transformed into history, which would mean that rather than it being the dispossessed who need to be awakened by the camera, it is the camera that must be awakened by the dispossessed. However, the still image of the film crew on the ground suggests that the camera ultimately awakens to the realization that this film craft belongs to the past. Gleyzer's position hereafter will be to document, in the sense of embedding film in the political action of organized groups.

## CONCLUSION

The three Argentine militant films discussed here can be seen as early formal codifications of some of the dilemmas inherited from the tradition of revolutionary filmmaking. They follow the impulse both to document and to negate the document as they attempt to revolutionize form and content, questioning dominant modes of vision. In that process they are caught between the imperative to rescue the vision of the dispossessed and the imperative to enlighten their indifferent audience. Their allegory of totality addresses their double audience, whose languages appear codified on screen. What siding with the dispossessed means for them is not the representation of a collective subject of change but the exposure of the difficulty of constructing an audience that synthesizes the demands of the left. However, while Birri's confidence in the integration of the audience contrasts with Ríos's self-reflexivity, Gleyzer grants the dispossessed the last word as to who the audience should be.

Birri (quoted in de la Puente and Russo, 2007: 151) reflects on something that Gleyzer once said to him in Rome: “‘Fernando, we have to start at the end.’ What did he mean by that? We can’t begin by thinking how to produce the movie, we must begin by thinking about the audience.” Arguably, the ultimate solution was that of Vertov, namely, to distribute cameras to “kinoks”: just as Birri gave the camera to his students and Paz Paredes gave his to the unemployed youngster in Lanús, Gleyzer would perhaps have given the camera to Alcira.

## NOTES

1. All translations are mine.
2. A worker’s newsreel is called *Kino—Nuestra Lucha* (*Kino—Our Struggle*); there is *Ojo Obrero* (*Worker’s Eye*) and *Cine-Ojo* (in reference to Vertov’s “kino-eye”); there is a section entitled “Kinocs” (Vertov’s term for members of his activist documentary group) in the 2008 issue of DOCA, the magazine of the association of documentary filmmakers. The compilation of interviews with members of the movement honors Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* in its title, *The Comrade Who Carries the Camera* (de la Puente and Russo, 2007).
3. See Burton’s (1990: 51–54) discussion of the technical difficulty with the recording of voice that led Birri’s film crew to use a voice-over.
4. Some recent assessments tend in the same direction. See Emilio Bernini’s (2004: 161) evaluation of Solanas and Getino’s *The Hour of the Furnaces*.
5. To engage their audiences some filmmakers chose fiction over documentary. See Mariano Mestman’s (2001: 16) comment on Gleyzer’s 1973 film *The Traitors*.
6. I use Cornelius Castoriadis’s (1998) distinction between autonomous and heteronomous societies, the former of which do not rely on external agents such as divinities to rule their destinies.
7. For the polemics between Eisenstein and Vertov, see Tzivian (2004). For examples of Vertov’s oscillation in his writings see Michelson (1984). I thank John MacKay for sharing his unpublished paper (2008), from which I am adapting suggestive formulations on the problem of the audience. Though I have no room here to develop the connections between the Latin American 1960s and the Soviet 1920s, I plan to devote a future paper to the topic.
8. On the one hand, *El matadero* (*The Slaughterhouse*) is the title of a landmark nineteenth-century novella by Esteban Echeverría about dictatorial power; on the other, meat production defines the livelihood of the country, even as its ownership has traditionally been controlled by foreign capital.
9. As Alcira answers questions about her craft, others are introduced, with their names printed on each shot: Américo, María, Cuello, Maximiliano, Clavero.

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