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ANTARCTIC AFFAIRS



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Antarctic Affairs is the academic magazine of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) and Agenda Antártica, which aims to publish and disseminate the most prominent and influential research in relation to Antarctica. The journal publishes articles, reviews and official documents in English and Spanish. The purpose of this publication is also to stimulate research that contributes to environmental protection of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean.

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The Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) was founded in 1978 by five environmental organizations in the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand, promoting a World Park vision for protecting Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. ASOC has worked since 1978 to ensure that the Antarctic Continent, its surrounding islands and the great Southern Ocean survive as the world's last unspoiled wilderness, a global commons for the heritage of future generations. ASOC is an invited observer to the meetings of the Antarctic Treaty and CCAMLR. The Secretariat of the ASOC, which includes 21 organizations in 11 countries, is based in Washington, D.C. For more information about ASOC, visit: www.asoc.org

Cover Photo *Photographer: Gabriel Rojo. Title: Confrontation Among Antarctic Fur Seals on Deception Island, Antarctica. 2006.*

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FOLLOWING THE FILM FOOTPRINTS OF ANTARCTICA: COMPREHENSIVE PROJECT FOR THE RESCUE OF ARGENTINE ANTARCTIC CINEMA

Pablo Fontana and Andrés Levinson

ABSTRACT

Antarctica has been the protagonist and setting for numerous Argentinean film productions, some of which are now unknown. This represents a vast audiovisual heritage of profound documentary value, allowing us to access various national representations of this continent. Here, we provide a brief overview of the most prominent titles in this cinematography, much of which has been preserved since 2018 through a joint project between the Argentine Antarctic Institute and the Pablo Ducrós Hicken Film Museum in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. We delve into the general aspects of this “Comprehensive Project for the Rescue of Argentinean Antarctic Cinema,” which involves the rescue, preservation, research, digitization, and accessibility of Argentine films made in Antarctica throughout the 20th century. Each film holds immeasurable value because the images captured in every frame constitute an essential part of Antarctic memory. The effort to preserve them, in a very basic sense, is about making them visible.

KEY WORDS

Antarctica, Argentina, Film, Heritage

ANTARCTICA AND ARGENTINE CINEMA

Argentine cinema, especially documentaries and current affairs films, has often turned its gaze towards Antarctica. This is not surprising, given various unique aspects of the relationship between Argentina and Antarctica. Argentina was the first country to establish a permanent presence in Antarctica on February 22, 1904, at the Laurie Island observatory in the South Orkney Islands, four decades before other nations. Argentina has maintained this continuous and uninterrupted presence in the area for over a century. Today, it is the country with the most research bases in Antarctica, one of the original twelve signatories of the Antarctic Treaty, and one of the seven nations recognized as claimants of territory under the Treaty.

The Argentine Republic administratively includes the territory it designates as Argentine Antarctica, which extends from the 25th to 74th meridians West, and from the 60th parallel South to the Geographic South Pole, as part of the Province of Tierra del Fuego, Antarctica, and South Atlantic Islands. Argentina also boasts a rich Antarctic history with epic events such as the rescue of the Swedish Antarctic Expedition in 1903 by the corvette ARA Uruguay, under the command of Lieutenant Julian Irizar, the Antarctic exploits of renowned figures like José María Sobral, José Manuel Moneta, Hernán Pujato, Mario Luis Olezza, and Edgard Leal, among many others, as well as major expeditions, including those that reached the South Pole, and continuous scientific activity for over a century.

Since the late 1940s, after formalizing its Antarctic claim in 1942, Argentine Antarctica has been included in school textbooks and official Argentine cartography, thus becoming part of the nation's social representation of territory. Consequently, a significant portion of Argentine society had its first encounter with Antarctica during their early education. Argentine Antarctic cinema is, in some ways, a product of these issues, but it has also influenced the way Antarctica is perceived by Argentine society, serving as both a result and an agent of the nation's Antarctic history.

RESCUING AUSTRAL CINEMA

Until a decade ago, much of the Argentine Antarctic cinema from the 20th century was relegated to institutional or private archives, far from public access, with film copies in various states of degradation, affected by processes such as vinegar syndrome, biological damage, warping, and discoloration, among other afflictions. Some of these films were at risk of being lost forever, as had happened with the earliest moving images of Argentine Antarctic cinema. In recent years, efforts have been made to reverse this situation.

One of the project's early steps was the rescue of the film 'Entre los hielos de las islas Orcadas,' shot by Argentine Meteorological Service technician José Manuel Moneta in 1927, who spent four non-consecutive winters at the Laurie Island observatory in the 1920s (Moneta, 1939). Historian Andrés Levinson recovered this film as part of his work as curator of the Museum of Cinema's archive (Levinson, 2016). This was followed by the rescue of some reels from the private collection of Argentine Army Antarctic explorer Gustavo Adolfo Giró Tapper during the rescue of family films. These reels depict dogs being dropped with supplies from an aircraft near Belgrano I Base in early

1966. In 2018, during the sale of the historic headquarters of the Argentine Antarctic Institute (IAA), one of the authors, historian Pablo Fontana, Coordinator of the Social Sciences Area of that institution, along with other IAA staff, rescued several film copies of various Antarctic films that were in that building. Subsequently, the two authors of this article decided to embark on a cooperative project between their respective institutions to comprehensively rescue all Argentine Antarctic cinema. Project members also include audio-visual technician Leandro Listorti (Museum of Cinema) and sociologist Matías Belinco (IAA), with the participation of conservation volunteers. Like much national cinema, some of these films are lost to researchers and interested audiences. Some are barely listed in inventories, and their existence is generally not confirmed. In the case of existing films, their preservation status is often unknown.

The project undertaken by both institutions under the title ‘Comprehensive Rescue of Argentine Antarctic Cinema’ aimed to reverse this situation through the rescue of Argentine heritage films shot in Antarctica during the 20th century, given their scientific, political, and cultural value. The proposal focused first on working with films recently found in various institutions, notably materials from the archives of the Argentine Antarctic Institute, the Museum of Cinema, military institution archives, and family collections, among others. Much of this footage has not been systematically reviewed or identified. The research effort involves surveying, identifying, and cataloging the material in various state and private repositories. After completing this initial survey phase, a plan for the conservation, preservation, digitization, and digital restoration of the materials was developed, establishing priorities based on the condition of each film and the available budget. Additionally, the project investigated the production, distribution, and exhibition methods of each film element to determine their origins, screenings, and their journey through time. All this information is intended for online publication and a printed catalog to facilitate public access. The films, their aesthetics, and their history will be showcased through the digitization of the most significant productions to ensure their preservation and circulation through various institutional channels, including exhibitions at festivals, meetings, web platforms, and other possible avenues. Some of the digitized films will be available on the IAA and Museum of Cinema’s YouTube channels, with more films being added as work progresses.

Through this joint effort, the research team has identified 86 Antarctic films produced between 1927 and 1985 to date. The project also conducts research to gather data and information that helps understand the context of film production and circulation. Each film holds immeasurable value because the images encapsulated in every frame constitute an essential part of Antarctic memory. In a very basic sense, the project’s goal is to make this film material known so that the public can enjoy these historically significant Antarctic films.

Most of these films show signs of the passage of time and neglect, including physical deterioration, missing sections, emulsion loss, scratches, and more. Therefore, reviewing the material to assess its physical condition, followed by preservation efforts, are necessary steps. Subsequently, the project aims to make the digitized materials accessible in high quality, along with all the information gathered about them. Some of the recovered films have already been screened, either in their film or digital format, at film festivals such as the FICMUS (International Mountain Film Festival of Ushuaia) on various occasions, in exhibitions of Antarctic films – such as in 2022 at the Kirchner Cultural Center

in Buenos Aires – international specialist meetings, and at Antarctic bases. The project also intends to produce a series of texts written by each of the researchers involved.

ARGENTINE ANTARCTIC CINEMA

The first Argentine film dedicated to Antarctica was made in 1903 when Eugenio Py filmed the departure and arrival of the Argentine expedition aboard the cannon vessel ARA Uruguay, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Julián Irizar, during the rescue of the Swedish Antarctic Expedition led by Otto Nordenskjöld (Destéfani, 2003). Unfortunately, this material is lost, as is the film shot in 1921 by Alberto Sorianello, 'Hacia el fin del mundo,' a ten-minute travel diary that depicted the journey of ARA Uruguay to the South Orkney Islands to relieve the Argentine observatory staff (Levinson, 2011).

The oldest of the recovered Argentine Antarctic films today is the aforementioned 'Entre los hielos de las islas Orcadas,' filmed in 1927 by José Manuel Moneta. This could be considered the first cinematic document showing the scientific practice of Antarctic overwintering in a permanent station. In fact, the documentary was filmed by the Antarctic overwinterers themselves, making it a valuable source to access a representation of life in Antarctica. It reflects a particular conception of time, with certain circular characteristics rather than linear ones (Fontana, 2019). In other words, the documentary does not follow an expedition departing from a port, reaching its destination, and finally its return. Instead, it starts and ends with the same image: the changing of the guard from the outgoing to the incoming staff. The year of overwintering depicted in the documentary is just one cycle among many that repeat successively.

The Argentine meteorological and geomagnetic observatory on Laurie Island in the South Orkney Islands continued to play a central role in Argentine Antarctic cinema of the 1930s, as seen in the documentary 'Cuatro hombres en las Orcadas' (1939). This was because it was the only Argentine station on this continent until 1947, and it was also the only permanent station in Antarctica from any country until 1944. In 1942 and 1943, with the expeditions of the Argentine Navy ship ARA 1 de Mayo, the Antarctic Peninsula and the South Shetland Islands were included as natural settings in these documentaries.

When Argentina undertook a major Antarctic expansion in the late 1940s and the first half of the 1950s (Fontana, 2014) to establish most of the research bases, Antarctica became the subject of numerous Argentine film productions, mainly newsreels and documentaries. During those years, coinciding with the first and second presidencies of Juan Domingo Perón, eight permanent bases were established (two of them at the time the southernmost in the world), along with 23 refuges, the creation of the Argentine Antarctic Institute (IAA), and the acquisition of an icebreaker. During this period, the media coverage of Argentine Antarctic activities also increased. Antarctica appeared in weekly black and white newsreels such as 'Sucesos argentinos' and 'Noticiero Panamericano,' as well as in special features or standalone documentaries. Notable productions from that era include 'Soberanía argentina en la Antártida' (1947), a cinematic version of the simultaneously published book by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship; 'Argentina Austral' (1947), about the Summer Antarctic Campaign and the installation of the Melchior Naval Detachment; 'Alas navales' (1947),

about the flight of naval aviation from the South American continent beyond the Antarctic Circle; 'La Flota en la Antártida Argentina' (1948), about the journey of the Argentine Fleet to Antarctica; 'Viaje del ARA Chaco a Orcadas' and 'Decepción' (1949); 'Soberanía austral' (1952), about the establishment of the General San Martín Base, the first Army base; 'Vuelo austral' (1953), about the Antarctic flights of Argentine Air Force Avro Lincoln bombers; 'Pampa Blanca' (1954), an IAA documentary about Antarctica; and 'Cinco meses en los mares antárticos' (1954), about the visit of Rear Admiral Aníbal Olivieri, Minister of the Navy, to all Antarctic outposts.

During the de facto military government of the self-proclaimed 'Revolución Libertadora,' we find 'Antesala al Polo' (1956), which reveals how the Navy regained control of the dissemination of Antarctic activity, sidelining the Army's Antarctic presence and the figure of General Hernán Pujato, one of the key figures in Argentina's Antarctic presence at the time. He was an advocate and the first Director of the IAA, considered too closely associated with the ousted government. During the International Geophysical Year 1957/1958, color films documenting Argentine polar activities were produced, such as the Navy's documentary 'Tareas antárticas' (1957) about the IGY and an excellent documentary about the first Argentine government-sponsored tourist trip to Antarctica in 1958, 'Turismo en la Antártida.' Some raw footage of the interiors of the Argentine Antarctic Institute from those years was also rescued as part of this project. In 1958, even the first Argentine feature film shot in Antarctica, 'Continente blanco,' was released, directed by Bernard Roland with music by Astor Piazzolla. It depicted a love triangle involving two Argentine Navy officers, with scenes shot in Antarctica. Just a few years later, in 1960, the dramatic film 'Silencio Blanco,' an Argentine-Brazilian co-production directed by Brazilian filmmaker Geraldo Junqueira de Oliveira, was released. It is a documentary with small fictional scenes, and its voiceover narrates the adventures of an Argentine sailor participating in the Antarctic campaign, leading to a tragic ending.

The Antarctic Treaty, signed in December 1959 and ratified in June 1961, did not negatively impact Argentine film production, which continued with some intensity in the 1960s. It added more frequent references to the pillars of the treaty, such as maintaining peace and international cooperation in a continent dedicated to science. This was clearly expressed in the radio speech by Argentine President Dr. Arturo Frondizi from the Deception Naval Detachment to the entire country, broadcast through the cameras of 'Noticiero Panamericano.' He was the first Argentine president to visit Antarctica. Nonetheless, the epic spirit of the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration would not be absent from Argentine documentaries and reached its peak with the 1962 documentary 'Operación Polo Sur,' which recounts the Argentine Naval Aviation's aerial expedition to the Geographic South Pole, as well as 'Operación 90' and 'Marcha al límite austral de la Patria,' both about the Argentine Army's overland expedition to the South Pole in 1965. Here, as in the typical accounts of the Heroic Age, the narrative time of the journey to the South Pole is linearly structured, with the climax being the arrival at the South Pole.

In the 1970s, there were productions documenting Argentine actions in Antarctica, emphasizing their regular nature and the large number of Argentine bases in operation and focusing on the logistical tasks of the Armed Forces. Examples include the documentaries 'Operación Antártida' (1973) and 'Patria blanca' (1974), as well as scientific activities of the IAA. Some of these films were produced by the National Directorate of the Antarctic - Argentine Antarctic Institute (DNA-IAA), such as

the 1970 documentary 'Bahía Paraíso' with a script by the writer Haroldo Conti, who disappeared during the last civic-military dictatorship (1976-1983). It shows the diverse scientific activities at the Almirante Brown Scientific Station, Argentina's main scientific hub in Antarctica at the time. In this base, advertising for an Argentine-distilled whiskey ("Old Smuggler") featuring DNA-IAA scientists and technicians as protagonists was also filmed, and this is another piece of material rescued by the project. In the same vein, but with a greater emphasis on the site's biodiversity, the DNA-IAA produced the documentary 'Una visita a Caleta Armonía' in 1985.

In the 21st century, the sixth continent continued to have some prominence on Argentine screens, but mostly on television, such as the first episode of the fiction series 'Cromo' (2015) and the documentary series 'Antártida, Desafío Polar' (2021), among many others. Thus, Antarctica has been a recurring theme in Argentine cinema, practically since its inception. From the mid-1940s, it can be said that all Argentine summer Antarctic campaigns were subjects of filming, and we hope to rescue as many of these films as possible. However, in this overview, we have only commented on the most notable productions, while in the catalog publication of the project, expected to be released in 2023, all identified Antarctic films and those that could be rescued will be listed.

EPILOGUE

Argentine Antarctic cinema is one of the most prolific in the world, and, in relative terms, when considering the number of productions shot in the 20th century, it possibly has the highest proportion of films dedicated to Antarctica. Its rescue, through the described project, allows us to highlight its magnitude and diversity. As a historical document, it is a source of profound richness due to the insight it provides into how the Argentine state understood and sought to have Antarctica understood. These representations encapsulate that imagery to serve as its expression, while also being a constitutive part of it as it is dynamically reproduced to this day. Thus, its rescue through the described project is also an act with implications for Antarctic imagery within Argentine society.

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