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# Paola Margulis

## THINKING TRANSITION 'FROM THE OUTSIDE': AN ANALYSIS OF THE FILM *DE L'ARGENTINE* BY WERNER SCHROETER

*The present article concentrates on the analysis of the film De l'Argentine/De la Argentina/For example Argentina (Werner Schroeter, France/Argentina, 1983–1985) as a way of access to a number of specific problems concerning the process of Argentinean democratic consolidation. It is a film that was only screened in Argentina for the first time in 2013, after a copy was found at the French Cinémathèque. Like other films produced in the context of dictatorship and democratic transition, Schroeter's film has tended to think Argentina 'from the outside', that is, with a view marked by strangeness. These are documentaries which reflect upon physical and temporal distances, but, not the least, through cultural and ideological remoteness. On the basis of an analysis framed within Documentary Theory and the Sociology of Culture, this article seeks to make a contribution by way of an original perspective on a political film which, as far as we know, has not been addressed yet by Film Studies.*

**Keywords:** Documentary; transition to democracy; Argentina; latin American film and media

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. *The documentary genre during Argentina's democratic transition*

As a process,<sup>1</sup> transition to democracy tends to reformulate discourses that address the public sphere (Habermas 1994). In particular, this can be observed in the domain of documentary film production, a kind of discourse which, according to Michael Chanan, 'is directed to the spectator as citizen, as a member of the community, as a putative participant in the public sphere' (2003, 22). In Argentina, documentary film began to reemerge and gained considerable public visibility with the return of democracy in 1983. In the years that followed, a number of documentaries attracted substantial public attention, starting with the commercial release of a group of films that reconsidered Argentina's historical past. In this context, films organized largely on the basis of archive footage – whether 'Radical' or 'Peronist' in political orientation – had, on many occasions, a monumental success

in terms of the number of spectators they attracted (Paranaguá 2003). In a short period of time, various documentaries were released that either thematized or problematized Argentinean history, such as *La República perdida I and II/The Lost Republic I and II* (Miguel Pérez 1983, 1986, respectively, Argentina), *Evita, quien quiera oír que oiga (Evita, for those who want to hear)* (Eduardo Mignogna 1984, Argentina), *Malvinas, historia de traiciones/Malvinas, Story of Betrayal* (Jorge Denti 1984, Argentina/Mexico), *El misterio Eva Perón/The Mystery of Eva Perón* (Tulio Demicheli 1987, Argentina/Spain), and later on, *Permiso para pensar (Permission to think)* (Eduardo Meilij 1986–1988, Argentina) and *DNI (caminar desde la memoria) (To walk through memory)* (Luis Brunati 1989, Argentina). In spite of their diversity, these documentaries displayed a number of common characteristics, especially regarding their attempt to reveal key aspects and/or alternative versions of history that did not match the official ‘truth’ upheld until then (Margulis 2014).

As an alternative to the public struggle to expose Argentina’s ‘real story’, a different discursivity also began to upsurge: one that attained considerably less visibility in the public sphere. These were a group of heterogeneous productions which, far from proposing a revisionist version of long periods of Argentine history (such as the above-mentioned documentaries), critically raised a number of different problems about Argentina’s recent past. Organized in terms of more specific concerns, the films that follow opened up a whole new line of inquiry, which included both objections and denunciations about the horrors surrounding the last military dictatorship. In 1983, Carlos Echeverría shot *Exil und Rückkehr/Cuarentena. Exilio y regreso (Quarentine. Exile and Return)* (1983, Germany), a film about the experience of Argentinean writer and historian Osvaldo Bayer during his exile in Germany. Four years later, Echeverría filmed *Juan, als wäre nichts geschehen/Juan, como si nada hubiera sucedido (Juan, as if Nothing Had Happened)* (1987, Germany/Argentina). *Juan...* undertakes an investigation pertaining to the kidnapping of Juan Marcos Herman, the only disappeared in San Carlos de Bariloche during the last military dictatorship. Other films such as *Todo es ausencia/Only Emptiness Remains* (Rodolfo Kuhn 1984, Spain) and *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo/Las Madres: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* (Susana Blaustein Muñoz and Lourdes Portillo 1985, United States/Argentina) approached from different angles the struggle of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo<sup>2</sup> who attempted to recover the many children kidnapped during the dictatorship. Towards 1986, Jorge Denti completes the trilogy, *La Argentina que está sola y espera (Argentina, Alone and Waiting)* (1986, Mexico), consisting of the short films *Pampa del infierno (Pampas from Hell)*, *Entre el cielo y la tierra (Between Heaven and Earth)* and *No al punto final (No to Full Stop)* (Mestman 2009). This trilogy raised once more the issue of crimes against humanity committed by the military, in addition to exposing the complicity of the Catholic Church with the military dictatorship and broadening its critique to include certain aspects of Raúl Alfonsín’s newly elected government. In Argentina, the circulation of these films was generally very limited, at times even marginal. It is a type of cinema that was scattered and forgotten; only in recent years has it been retraced and reassembled by scholars and practitioners from the fields of visual and film studies.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the variety of topics covered by these documentaries, there are a number of features the majority of them share, specifically, some characteristics of their form of production. In general, these are films that were created by Argentine

filmmakers in exile or who resided outside Argentina during the years of dictatorship, and which were financed by external sources such as foreign production companies and/or TV channels. The 'in-and-outs' of different cultural personalities during dictatorship and democratic transition have left a lasting mark on this kind of political cinema, which was generally planned and executed 'from the outside'. This has had a major impact upon the trend to construct a view of the country characterized by strangeness. We allude, in particular, to documentaries which reflect upon the Argentinean situation across physical and temporal distances, and not in the least through ideological and cultural remoteness. In most cases, such remoteness is expressed through a problematization of exile, the overall process of assimilation to the new country of residence and the longing of the motherland; however, just as often, critical distance also appears as a confrontation with the country where 'State terrorism' took place, and the feeling of no longer being part. With certain differences, these are films which question the recent past and its very present through a reexamination of key events.

Taking as a contextual framework the above-mentioned films, the present article analyzes key aspects of the documentary *De l'Argentine/De la Argentina/For example Argentina* (France/Argentina, 1983–1985),<sup>4</sup> by German filmmaker Werner Schroeter, as a way of accessing specific problems related to the process of democratic consolidation in the said country. In general, we are interested in the various modes in which the film portrays the crisis in and around some of the fundamental pillars of a democratic system and, in particular, issues of (1) freedom of expression and ideological pluralism, (2) the observance of human rights and (3) freedom of the press (Ansaldi 2006, 24).<sup>5</sup> In the pages that follow, we will problematize the three areas of concern just enumerated, in an attempt to account for some of the tensions disclosed by the film, using tools borrowed from the Sociology of Culture and Documentary Theory.

As stated in his autobiography, Werner Schroeter (2013) allegedly travelled to Argentina in 1983, invited by his friend Marie-Louise Alemann, to teach a workshop/seminar at the University of Buenos Aires, entitled, ironically, 'Tango and reality in Argentina in 1983'.<sup>6</sup> As part of the seminar, students were divided into groups and asked to interview artists, politicians and people from low-income neighborhoods about the situation in the country and their hopes for the future. Schroeter points out in his autobiography that the seminar probably raised the suspicion of the secret services, since, shortly after his arrival, bomb threats became a daily affair at the Goethe Institut of Buenos Aires. After only three months, the filmmaker decided to abandon the country when a university colleague and his wife were threatened with the death of their newborn baby. In 1985, two years after Raúl Alfonsín took office as President, Schroeter returned to Buenos Aires to finish *De l'Argentine* with his students from the seminar (Schroeter 2013, 263–267). Although the documentary was produced in Argentina between 1983 and 1985, it was not publicly screened in the country until 2013, when a copy was found at the French Cinémathèque. Due to the specifics of the production process, those who participated in making the film – whether in front of or behind the cameras – were only able to see the finished product thirty years later, thanks to a retrospective about Schroeter organized by the Goethe Institut of Buenos Aires.<sup>7</sup> The fact that it was a co-production with the French TV channel FR3 – with a French title,

credits and voice-over – allows us to infer that initially the target audience was largely European, as is suggested towards the end of the film by the relative of a disappeared citizen who took part in the documentary.<sup>8</sup>

The authorial view of Schroeter and his personal distance from the Argentine context are some of the distinct general features of the film. The documentary showcases a defiant style that includes controversial scenes – such as the presence of iconic actress Libertad Leblanc, sex symbol of the 1960s and 1970s, wearing an ostentatious and provocative dress, together with replicas of the jewels that once belonged to Maria Eva Duarte de Perón, in order to personify the ‘emblem of the humble’ in a dialogue with a child from the lower classes who, on his knees, asks her: ‘Evita, how do you feel now that you are no longer with us?’, and ironic appearances by the director himself, experimenting with eccentric poses and body language, while he puts on different games as part of the *mise en scène*.<sup>9</sup> These provocative passages enter into an ongoing dialogue with images of different tones and registers, aimed primarily at characterizing the historical and political context of the period, and resorting to testimonies and documents of their own time (1983–1985). However, beyond these distinguishable characteristics, the film also shares with the above-mentioned documentaries shot ‘from the outside’ – that is, made by Argentine filmmakers in exile – certain fundamental characteristics, mainly, the sense of strangeness. His distant view is then reinforced by way of interpreting some of Argentina’s peculiar cultural traits. The film approaches ‘State terrorism’ contrasting official statements by the military personnel with testimony by members of human rights organizations, victims and relatives of the disappeared – among them, family members of Haroldo Conti and Rodolfo Walsh (the film is dedicated to the latter).

### 1.2. *A period of conciliation*

In general, democratic-transition films produced in Argentina during the 1980s came to be characterized as ‘tolerance films’ (Lusnich and Kriger 1994). As Ana Laura Lusnich and Clara Kriger describe it, this is a cinema which attempts to moderately review the historical events, giving up aesthetic experimentation in favor of promoting the ideal of consensus. Following the argumentation of the authors, what distinguishes these films is a tolerant point of view that tends to highlight both the positives and negatives of popular movements throughout history, thus setting aside antinomies and confrontations (1994, 96). As Lusnich and Kriger point out, it is a type of cinema that ‘replaced the Peronist vs. anti-Peronist dualism with the democracy vs. dictatorship opposition’ (1994, 96).

Commencing with democratic transition, certain proper features of the documentary took on a great relevance, powered by the political juncture. According to Ricardo Manetti, ‘documentalism’ was one of the main features of films created between 1983 and 1993 (1994, 257). David William Foster claims that Argentine films after 1983 are ‘historical’ through and through, and documentary ‘in either a literal sense or in the sense of the documentary-like recreation of events from an earlier era’ (1992, 12). In a context marked by documentalism, two of the main elements which characterize the documentary film – the use of archive footage and

testimony – acquired a social significance which transcends cinematographic production per se, and traverses discursivities of a different order, becoming marks of an epoch.

Even though *De l'Argentine* is a document of its own time, it also tends to distance itself from some of the features which are common to 'tolerance film'. Just like the films 'from the outside', which are far from offering a conciliatory view, *De l'Argentine* chooses instead to emphasize different conflicts and tensions inherent to the historical period under scrutiny. At the same time, the fact that it does not belong to a local, partisan tradition appears to grant the documentary considerable freedom to ironically explore a number of historical rivalries – such as the above-mentioned between 'Peronists' and 'Radicals' – without necessarily siding with either group.

If presenting the perspective of a German national about Argentina's post-dictatorship and democratic-transition periods already transforms the documentary into something peculiar, *De l'Argentine* also stands out for setting the agenda about questions and concerns that were not frequently raised by other films dealing with the same historical context. These aspects – which shall be explored at a later stage – make up an epocal collage about the challenges of democracy, and encompass issues of gender, a critique of obscurantism aimed at elite sectors within the Catholic Church, class inequality and the emergence of new generations of dispossessed. In this regard, the documentary reflects some of Schroeter's personal interests and concerns, which amount to a line of inquiry quite common in the German context of the 1980s, but much less frequent in post-dictatorship Argentina.

## 2. De l'Argentine

### 2.1. Freedom of expression and ideological pluralism

In addition to denouncing 'State terrorism', *De l'Argentine* provides, in an oblique manner, a snapshot of certain aspects of the cultural fabric, which were both cause and effect of the military dictatorship. These issues come to the fore in the manner in which the film approaches the problem of freedom of expression during both dictatorship and transition to democracy. The documentary prioritizes the coverage of artistic expression, placing special emphasis on the theatrical scene of the time and incorporating a stage business within the *mise en scène*, which reflexively provides the film as a whole with a kind of histrionic aura. *De l'Argentine* includes registers from the prestigious San Martín Theater, the incorporation of key fragments from the monologues of Enrique Pinti in his play *Salsa Criolla*, the underground cultural scene, various dramatic pieces especially staged for the documentary, and the testimony of film and theater actors.

A few minutes into the film, we witness the theatrical images being used as a counterpoint to the visit of the Pope to Argentina. After showing the masses, the documentary ironically extends the soundtrack of religious chants into the following frame: a monologue of *Life of Galileo* performed by the well-known artist Cipe Lincovsky. This brief passage, which manifests the conflict between institutionalized religion and the sciences in the West, also bears the incomparable stamp of the Brechtian oeuvre, promoting a certain distance as well as a critical gaze in the eyes of the spectator. Moreover, incorporating a Brechtian dialectic almost from the

start sets the tone for a particular reading of the rest of the film: a reading marked by the contrast of opposing discourses. Hence, *De l'Argentine* uses as a preferred and recurrent resource the juxtaposition of antithetic discursive pairings, thus stressing the way in which society continued to be dominated by oppositions and unresolved issues even in times of democracy.

After the Galileo monologue, the film takes us into a tracking shot through the silhouettes of the disappeared, part of what came to be known as 'El siluetazo', a practice put forth by Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, which tended to involve silhouettes that portrayed the disappeared through collective and anonymous actions.<sup>10</sup> These interventions sought to combat impunity while at the same time, situating themselves in the streets, they radically transformed public space (Longoni and Bruzzone 2008). Later on in the film, we meet the son and daughter of writer Haroldo Conti standing next to a portrait of their disappeared father, hung up on the wall. The references to paintings, portraits, sculptures, statues, signs and other objects are frequent in the film: they operate as a supplement to the testimonies of participants. In some instances – such as the case of Walsh's and Conti's sons and daughters – this resource helps to dramatically reinforce the spoken word. The characterization of Conti's career and the details of his disappearance are exposed through resources that repeat themselves several times in different (but similar) situations throughout the film. First of all, there is an enumeration and display of his written oeuvre, the materiality of his books, piled one upon the other as the voice of his daughter supplies different details about his production, including the awards and recognitions he achieved. These volumes present the visual form of those ideas for which the authors fought and were eventually disappeared. At the same time, this resource also serves to highlight the mode in which such materiality has managed to outlive the constraints that were imposed upon them by the military dictatorship.

The fragment just described exhibits another dynamic which is also recurrent in the film: namely, dissociating – over the course of brief passages – the images of witnesses from their spoken word. Thus, at times we listen to the son of Haroldo Conti narrating the events concerning the disappearance of his father, while the screen shows the image of his body, in silence, looking straight into the camera.<sup>11</sup> The fact that these fragments of audio and images – body and speech – are out-of-sync means that the sounds we listen to are attributable to an 'other' we do not see, while the bodies we observe appear to watch us in silence. By highlighting the face of the witness, *De l'Argentine* stresses that ethical dimension that Emmanuel Lévinas attributes to the interaction with the other. From his perspective, the encounter with the other necessarily implies responsibility, given that his or her face prevents indifference towards him/her (Finkelkraut 1986, 27). According to Lévinas, the face of the other imposes itself in such a way that we cannot remain indifferent to its calling or avoid being responsible for its misery (Lévinas 1972, 49). In this sense, the face of the witness in Schroeter's film interpellates us as spectators, highlighting the ethical bond which involves us as witnesses of their experience as relatives and victims of 'State terrorism'. As Gonzalo Aguilar (2015) points out, documentary cinema which makes reference to Latin American dictatorships and their recent past is obsessed with the preeminence of the face-image, in an attempt to encode a story, a memory, a space and a subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> That said,

the techniques utilized in Schroeter's film attempt a different type of articulation of the visage, spoken word and silence, whereby there is a tendency to highlight the gesture of the witness. Far from proposing a simplifying perspective of democratic transition based upon a binary logic such as 'censorship versus freedom of expression', Schroeter's film articulates, in turn, a complex context in which the recent past has left traces of violence in the testimony, but also in the silence of the witnesses.

## 2.2. *The observance of human rights*

Even if one of the main objectives of the documentary is to denounce the crimes against humanity committed during Argentina's last military dictatorship, its embeddedness in such a specific time frame dovetails the inclusion of more specific problems concerning democratic transition, such as the difficulties experienced by the newly elected democratic government in processing reports by victims of 'State terrorism' and relatives of the disappeared. Raúl Alfonsín had won the elections with a promise of 'distance and confrontation with the military regime and his political opponents, basing himself on the revolutionary and, at the same time, conservative demands to rebuild both the State and the rule of Law' (Acuña and Smulovitz 1995, 50, as quoted in Feld 2002, 12). As Claudia Feld (2002, 12–13) explains, this position would have echoed profoundly with a public opinion shocked by repeated denunciations of crimes committed by the military, at a juncture where human rights organizations had managed to unify the demands for justice. If an important part of Alfonsín's presidential campaign was based upon the explicit promise to investigate the events concerning the forced disappearance of people (Novaro 2010, 41), *De l'Argentine* focuses precisely on that period where pressures and difficulties begin to arise in the course of implementing these objectives.

One of the moments that best exposes such conflicts is when the film contrasts public speeches by Raúl Alfonsín and Hebe de Bonafini, one of the founders and President of the association 'Mothers of Plaza de Mayo'. In addition to the trials against the military junta, other important actions by Alfonsín were aimed at gathering information, determining responsibilities and investigating the violations of human rights by the military through the creation of the National Commission for Disappeared Individuals (CONADEP) – a government body designed to compile information about the disappeared; the creation of this government agency, however, had caused different reactions from various human rights organizations. A dissident position to these new measures was upheld precisely by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who 'rejected it because it was a non-parliamentary commission and because it had no powers to force the military to testify' (Crenzel 2008, 40).

Schroeter's film alludes to this problem by juxtaposing audios from Alfonsín and Bonafini. Specifically, the two speeches are articulated over a visual background that alternates, on the one hand, the image of the President standing on the balcony of the government house, speaking before a multitude of approximately 250,000 followers<sup>13</sup> on April 26, 1986, in a public demonstration in support of democracy called for by Alfonsín himself; and, on the other hand, different rallies and actions organized by Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. Thus, against the wide shots that displayed the May Square ('Plaza de Mayo') overcrowded by ordinary citizens



in support of the President, Bonafini's speech imposes on the visual field the 'march of the hands' of 1985, whose leitmotif was 'give a hand to the disappeared' (Bonafini 2009). As a result of this initiative, the May Avenue ('Avenida de Mayo') and the May Square were covered with long cords that held overhead a million cards with hand shapes signed by different personalities from the entire world, expressing their support for the declaration 'No to amnesty. Trials and punishment for the guilty'. Such a declaration referred to the fight of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo to ensure that those responsible for crimes against humanity committed during the last dictatorship were brought to justice, preventing the military institution itself from taking on the responsibility of judging the guilty, or else setting up a deadline after which further trials could not take place, as the Armed Forces expected.

The documentary plays the audio of Hebe de Bonafini demanding that government officials 'keep their word' – in tacit reference to Alfonsín's promise – before ending with a touching reading-out-loud of a fragment of Pablo Neruda's *The enemies*.<sup>14</sup>

For these dead, our dead  
I seek punishment.

For those who shed blood over the homeland,  
I seek punishment.  
For the executioner who ordered this death,  
I seek punishment,  
For the traitor promoted because of that crime  
I seek punishment.

For he who gave the order of agony,  
I seek punishment.  
For those who defended the crime,  
I seek punishment.

This reading by Bonafini is presented in a fragmentary fashion, alternating with parts of Alfonsín's speech at the demonstration in support of democracy. In one of the passages, the President states:

This is what we quickly learned following the events: the great need to defend every day and in all fields this democracy we have recovered. To defend it without falling into the simplification of supposing that the guilt is always entirely on the side of a sector or an institution. It is not true in this case, as it has been shown.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the layout of the film interchanges the phrase, 'I seek punishment', in the voice of Bonafini, with Alfonsín's speech, in which he relativizes the role of an institution – the army – in the execution of 'State terrorism'. Against the background of a government that reached 'the limits set by a worsening economic crisis and corporate mobilizations by chief organizations of capital and work' (Nun 1987, 48), the speeches of Alfonsín appearing on Schroeter's film were no longer those

which upheld the promise of democracy (i.e., the well-known phrase ‘with democracy we eat, with democracy we educate, with democracy we cure’ pronounced at his inaugural address (Gerschenson 2013), but those other public statements which – anticipating the disenchantment of later years – would expose the fragility of the democratic conquest, the need to defend it, and the pressures from different sectors, mainly the military, to stop the trials from carrying on. In this sense, the film provides a convincing account of this point of inflection in the process of democratic consolidation. With reference to the way in which the presidency of Alfonsín confronted these challenges, Roberto Gargarella considers that the April speech cruelly exposes the dilemma with which the President was faced:

Afflicted by a grave economic crisis and facing the first rumors of instability (...), the expectation was for Alfonsín to speak about a coup under way; however, in front of a multitude, the President did not allude to the threat of a potential coup, but made reference instead to the advent of a ‘war economy’ (the need for policies of rigorous economic adjustment), an announcement towards which the citizens – with strong Alfonsinistic sympathies – could not feel but disappointment. (2010, 35–36).

The tension manifested by the speeches of Alfonsín and Bonafini, we know today, would reach a climax with the approval of the ‘Full stop law’ (1986)<sup>16</sup> and ‘Due obedience law’ (1987)<sup>17</sup> – both of them implemented after Schroeter’s film – which set limits to the trials of the military.

In a sense, the conflict just revealed is based upon the contrast between the event promoted by Alfonsín and the other one organized by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. On the one hand, there are images of the masses overflowing the borders of the screen in a demonstration called for by the President himself; on the other hand, there are the actions of the Mothers, with the contours of hand shapes filling the air space of the same square. If, as Georges Didi-Huberman (2010, 18) points out, a volume – a body – evidences the loss of a body, the articulation of these images can only signal the maximization of this loss. In other words, the volume of the many who participated in the rally in defense of democracy makes evident the disappearance of thousands of others.<sup>18</sup> This technique also exposes some of the acute conflicts of the transition to democracy: the need for justice to judge those responsible for the crimes (absent bodies), and, at the same time, the difficulties concerning governance, the requirement of civil support (present bodies) to sustain a democratic regime threatened by different forces. Both acts defend the plurality, civil power and justice, but they do so from different conceptions of democracy. If in the first case to defend democracy means saying ‘no’ to amnesty, in the second, it means opening up different fronts of negotiation that include the army.

### 2.3. *Freedom of the press*

Within this wide range of problems, *De l’Argentine* exhibits some aspects of the relationship between the media and the military dictatorship. Jorge Saborido and Marcelo Borrelli (2011, 8–9) describe the way in which, along with the different

mechanisms of censorship implemented by the military – such as reports, memos, ‘recommendations’, warnings, ‘suggestions’ or black lists – there was also the unwillingness of media organizations to confront the regime, thus promoting a politics of self-censorship.

As with the treatment of other topics, Schroeter’s documentary resorts in this case to the juxtaposition of opposing discursive strategies to reveal conflicts and tensions. To this end, it deploys resources from the Argentine media, that is, images from that time to showcase the scandal that took place in the journalistic milieu following the visit of Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci. We hear statements of a reporter saying ‘Oriana Fallaci gave a press conference and treated Argentine journalism very poorly. But the journalists reacted vehemently. They all left’. Together with these statements, we also hear in the background voices that scream ‘don’t give her any publicity, let her go home’, ‘who does she think we are – a colony?’, ‘would she dare to do this in Europe?’, while some journalists walk in front of the camera as they leave the room and others remain, chaotically surrounding Fallaci to cover the event. There is a cut in the film and the next scene shows Fallaci again, this time at *Tiempo Nuevo*, a news program hosted by journalists Bernardo Neustadt and Mariano Grondona, probably the most popular show of its kind during the 80s and 90s. There is a close shot, which only moments later will be placed side by side with the image of the hosts, in which Fallaci says

I think you must not be judged for what you say very timidly ... or for that you do today, in this historical period of Argentina, in this presumed opening up to a supposed freedom. I think that you must be judged for what you didn’t do in the past. That is, for the silence that the majority among you kept when, to know what really happened in Argentina, we had to read foreign newspapers. (...) We know that some journalists were arrested, killed and disappeared. (...) Precisely, they were arrested, killed and disappeared. Not you. (...). You were alive because you didn’t represent a danger to the dictatorship, to power. Because you were journalists of the regime, you censored yourselves. (...) Those who performed their duty ended up incarcerated or killed.

These words, uttered in Italian by a cultural figure who occupied a social role similar to Schroeter’s – a foreigner who critically raised a number of problems about Argentina – turned out to be extremely provocative when said before two journalists such as Neustadt and Grondona, who, on many instances, had explicitly supported the military regime. But, beyond the impact that this may have had on viewers at the time, the arguments in themselves do not add much to the discussion about the problematic connecting the media with the dictatorship. The defiant position from Fallaci tends to simplify the conflict, condemning the journalists swiftly, but without alluding, precisely, to the hegemonic media companies that employed them. These firms, up to the present day, have not delivered a true self-criticism regarding their involvement as accomplices of the dictatorship, in part because they never considered themselves as ‘actors’ (Blaustein 1998, 16). Even if this topic is not treated in depth by the film, *De l’Argentine* manages to at least signal this aspect as a problematic area, pointing to further complicities during the

dictatorship, but also to the shortcomings that these aspects would mean for the process of democratic consolidation already in progress.

### 3. Closing remarks

After contextualizing some of the tensions that *De l'Argentine* introduces in relation to democratic transition, we notice the interest of the film in evidencing the continuities between dictatorship and democracy. Just like the documentaries created 'from the outside', Schroeter's work is a considerable distance from the general features that tended to characterize 'tolerance cinema' in general. As a predominant feature, we could stress that, far from idealizing the democratic institution or contemplating it simply as an end in itself, *De l'Argentine* tends to highlight unfinished business, the difficulties in condemning 'State terrorism', and inequality in general. Within this scheme, the impediments to guaranteeing freedom of opinion and freedom of the press, political and ideological pluralism and the observance of human rights create both an agenda of pending issues and elements to be defended by the new government and civil society. In that universe of continuity and change, Schroeter's defiant view appears to ironize about the mode in which, far from overcoming it, the democratic institution continues to hold within itself the seeds of military dictatorship.

In contrast to cinema from previous decades, mainly of the seventies, in which the face would dissolve in the figure of the people, post-dictatorship documentary tended to highlight personal experiences through testimony (Aguilar 2015, 143), stressing the role of the gaze and body language. As Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker point out, if 'talking heads' were traditionally considered a sign of the lack of creativity by documentary scholars, currently there is a tendency to prioritize 'the expressive, ethical, and activist potential of audiovisual testimony to further human rights and transitional justice initiatives' (2010, 2).

*De l'Argentine* constitutes a document of its own present which relies, to a considerable degree, not on archive footage of the past, but on testimony and resources from its own time, such as TV images, video recordings from theater plays and other resources which were not common in Argentine documentaries of the period. Just like other films characterized by strangeness – such as the works of Jorge Denti and Carlos Echeverría – Schroeter's documentary takes on the difficult interpretive challenge of deploying techniques that are not influenced by the passing of time, thus risking a hypothesis, making denunciations and judgements about its own historical present. The film captures the sensibility of an epoch marked by transition to democracy through the critical distance emerging from the juxtaposition of opposing discourses. That is quite possibly one of the greater merits of Schroeter's work: the attempt to provide a different framing of a post-dictatorship Argentine scenario.

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## Notes

1. We understand democratic transition to be a complex process that extends in time well beyond democratic elections. According to the criteria offered by Juan Carlos Portantiero (1987, 262–264), the process of democratic transition consists of three stages: first, an ‘authoritarian crisis’, second, the ‘establishing of democracy’, and lastly, the ‘consolidation of a democratic system’. The success of this last stage can be reached only when a stable regulation of democratic and political forms and the explicit presence of interests of state are in place.
2. Mothers of Plaza de Mayo is a civil organization created during the military dictatorship whose aim was to recover alive detainees and the disappeared, and then ascertain responsibilities for the crimes against humanity, promoting both judgement and punishment.
3. Cinema studies tended to focus on the decades of the 1960s and 1990s, as can be noted in the periodizations of edited works by Marrone and Moyano Walker (2011) and Peña (2003). The said tendency privileged political cinema of the 1960s, and the documentary of memory that emerged in Argentina during the mid 1990s, setting aside the approach to cinema of the 1980s, which coincided with democratic transition. This was due to the dispersion and in many cases also the lack of knowledge of this production made outside Argentina. For this reason, it is always possible that with the passing of the years more films could be found, as is the case precisely of the recent recovery of the film *De l’Argentine*, the object of this analysis.
4. I thank the Goethe Institut of Buenos Aires for granting access to the film.
5. Along with the three pillars just mentioned, Waldo Ansaldi (2006, 24) also characterizes democracy in terms of other variables, such as freedom of association, the proper functioning of political parties, the separation of branches of government and the organization of free elections.
6. The irony rests on a joint mention by the same title of both tango and Argentinean reality in and around 1983. Tango alludes to a certain melancholic perspective, proper to its poetics, which could be read in line with the events of the convoluted Argentinean reality of the first half of the 1980s (which involves violence, the disappearance of people and, in general, the violations of human rights).
7. The retrospective ‘Werner Schroeter. Superar la insoportable realidad’ (*Werner Schroeter. To overcome the unbearable reality*) took place in the auditorium ‘Leopoldo Lugones’ of the San Martín Theater between August 17 and September 1, 2013.
8. While publicly sharing her testimony, the woman stated: ‘We wish that in Europe, the place where this [film] will be released, they gain conscience about the situation in Latin America’.

9. As an example, we can refer to the way in which Schroeter himself appears in the scene of actor and director Norman Briski's testimony. Schroeter is located next to a sign with the silhouette of a soldier pointing with his long-range rifle in the direction of his head, next to a sign that says 'Stop!'.
10. The 'siluetazo' practice consisted in drawing on large pieces of paper silhouettes of human bodies on a natural scale, which were then posted in different points of the city. These actions were an attempt to render visible the 'present absence' of the disappeared during the last military dictatorship.
11. In other cases, the faces of the interviewees remain in silence, accompanying the voice-over of the narrator.
12. Even though Gonzalo Aguilar refers specifically to 'memory cinema' quite typical of 1990s Argentina, we believe that some of his observations are indeed applicable to Argentinean cinema 'from the outside'.
13. Estimates of the number of attendants were taken from Pucciarelli (2006, 116).
14. The English translation of the poem '*The Enemies*' was taken from [https://www.proz.com/forum/literature\\_poetry/62348-nerudas\\_los\\_enemigos\\_and\\_my\\_translation.html](https://www.proz.com/forum/literature_poetry/62348-nerudas_los_enemigos_and_my_translation.html) (access date October 12, 2015).
15. The speech of then President Raúl Alfonsín was delivered in Spanish and translated into English by me.
16. The 'Full stop law' (N° 23.492) established the expiration of legal action against material authors of crimes surrounding the forced disappearance of people during the military dictatorship that, for whatever reason, had not been called to declare within sixty consecutive days from the date the law was passed.
17. The act of 'Due obedience' (N° 23.521) established a presumption (which did not admit counter-evidence) that the crimes committed by members of the Armed Forces (whose rank was inferior to Colonel) during 'State terrorism' and the military dictatorship were not punishable on account of 'due obedience'.
18. Estimates suggest around 30,000 disappeared in Argentina as a consequence of 'State terrorism'.

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Paola Margulis holds a PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Buenos Aires. She is a researcher with the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET). She teaches an undergraduate Seminar about documentary film at the University of Buenos Aires, where she also co-directs the Department of Communication and Documentary Film Studies. She is the author of the book, *De la formación a la institución: El documental audiovisual argentino en la transición democrática (1982-1990)* (*From Formation to Institution: The Argentinean Audiovisual Documentary in the Transition to Democracy (1982–1990)*).

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