The Two Avant-Gardes

Solanas and Getino’s
The Hour of the Furnaces

Robert Stam

The struggle to seize power from the enemy is the meeting-ground of the political and artistic vanguards engaged in a common task which is enriching to both.

Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino,
“Towards a Third Cinema”

If there are two avant-gardes—the formal and the theoretico-political—then La hora de los hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces, 1968) surely marks one of the high points of their convergence. Fusing Third World radicalism with artistic innovation, the Solanas-Getino film revives the historical sense of avant-garde as connoting political as well as cultural militancy. It teases to the surface the military metaphor submerged in the very expression “avant-garde”—the image of an advanced contingent reconnoitering unexplored and dangerous territory. It resuscitates the venerable analogy (at least as old as Marey’s fusil photographique) of camera and gun, charging it with a precise revolutionary signification. Art becomes, as Walter Benjamin said of the dadaists, “an instrument of ballistics” (165). At the same time, The Hour of the Furnace’s experimental language is indissolubly wedded to its political project; the articulation of one with the other generates the film’s meaning and secures its relevance.
It is in this exemplary two-fronted struggle, rather than in the historical specificity of its politics, that *The Hour of the Furnaces* retains vitality as a model for cinematic practice. Events subsequent to 1968 have if not wholly discredited at least relativized the film’s analysis. Unmoored and set adrift on the currents of history, the film has been severed from its original context, as its authors have been exiled from their country. The late 1960s were, virtually everywhere, the hour of the furnaces, and *The Hour of the Furnaces*, quintessential product of the period, forged the incandescent expression of their glow. Tricontinental revolution, under the symbolic aegis of Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh, was deemed imminent, waiting to surprise us around the next bend of the dialectic. But despite salient victories (Vietnam, Mozambique, Nicaragua), many flames have dwindled into embers, as some of the Third World has settled into the era of diminished expectations. In most of South America, the CIA, multinational corporations, and native ruling elites conspired to install “subfascist” regimes, that is, regimes whose politics and practices are fascist but lack any popular base. In Argentina, class struggle in a relatively liberal context gave way to virtual civil war. Perón—the last hope of the revolutionaries and the bourgeoisie—returned, but only to die. His political heirs veered rightward, defying the hopes of those who returned him to power until a putsch installed a quasi-fascist regime. Rather than being surprised by revolution, Argentina, and *The Hour of the Furnaces* with it, was ambushed by a historical equivocation.

*The Hour of the Furnaces* is structured as a tripartite political essay. The first section, “Neocolonialism and Violence,” situates Argentina internationally, revealing it as a palimpsest of European influences: “British gold, Italian hands, French books.” A series of “Notes”—“The Daily Violence,” “The Oligarchy,” “Dependency”—explores the variegated forms of neocolonial oppression. The second section, “An Act for Liberation,” is subdivided into a “Chronicle of Perónism,” covering Perón’s rule from 1945 through his deposition by coup in 1955, and “Chronicle of Resistance,” detailing the opposition struggle during the period of Perón’s exile. The third section, “Violence and Liberation,” consists of an open-ended series of interviews, documents, and testimonials concerning the best path to a revolutionary future for Latin America. Much of this section is taken up by two interviews, one with an octogenarian, oral archivist of the national memory of resistance who recounts past combats and predicts imminent socialist revolution, the other with labor organizer Julio Troxler, then living and working underground, who describes mass executions and vows struggle until victory.

While reawakening the military metaphor dormant in “avant-garde,” *The Hour of the Furnaces* also literalizes the notion of the “underground.”
Filmed clandestinely in conjunction with militant cadres, it was made in the interstices of the system and against the system. It situates itself on the periphery of the periphery—a kind of off-off-Hollywood—and brashly disputes the hegemony of both the dominant model (“First Cinema”) and auterism (“Second Cinema”), proposing instead a “Third Cinema,” independent in production, militant in politics, and experimental in language. As a poetic celebration of the Argentine nation, it is “epic” in the classical as well as the Brechtian sense, weaving disparate materials—newsreels, eyewitness reports, TV commercials, photographs—into a splendid historical tapestry. A cinematic summa, with strategies ranging from straightforward didacticism to operatic stylization, borrowing from avant-garde and mainstream, fiction and documentary, cinema verité and advertising, it inherits and prolongs the work of Eisenstein, Vertov, Ivens, Glauber Rocha, Fernando Birri, Resnais, Buñuel, and Godard.

The most striking feature of The Hour of the Furnaces is its openness. But whereas “openness” in art usually evokes plurisignification, polysemy, the authorization of a plurality of equally legitimate readings, the Solanas-Getino film is not open in this sense: its messages are stridently unequivocal; its ambiguities, such as they are, derive more from the vicissitudes of history than from the intentions of its authors. The film’s openness lies elsewhere, and first of all in its process of production. Coming from the traditional Europeanized left, Solanas and Getino set out to make a socially minded short documentary about the working class in Argentina. Through the filmmaking experience, however, they evolved toward a left Perónist position. The production process, in other words, inflected their own ideological trajectory in ways that they themselves could not have fully predicted. (One need not endorse the specific nature of this inflection to appreciate the fact of the inflection.) Once aware of the tenuous nature of their initial “certainties,” they opened their project to the criticisms and suggestions of the working class. As a result, the film underwent a process of constant mutation, not because of authorial whims (à la Fellini’s 8½, 1963) but under the pressure of proletarian critique. Rather than performing the mise-en-scène of preconceived opinions, the film’s making entailed inquiry and search. The reformist short became a revolutionary manifesto.

The Hour of the Furnaces is open, secondly, in its very structure as a text, operating by what might be called tendentiously aleatory procedures. At key points, the film raises questions—“Why did Perón fall without a struggle? Should he have armed the people?”—and proposes that the audience debate them, interrupting the projection to allow for discussion. Elsewhere, the authors appeal for supplementary material on the theme of violence and liberation, soliciting collaboration in the film’s writing.
“end” of the film refuses closure by inviting the audience to prolong the text: “Now it is up to you to draw conclusions to continue the film. You have the floor.” This challenge, more than rhetorical, was concretely taken up by Argentine audiences, at least until the experiment was cut short by military rule.

Cine-semiologists define the cinema as a system of signification rather than communication, arguing that the gap between the production of the message and its reception, doubled by the gap between the reception and the production of an answering message, allows only for deferred communications. *The Hour of the Furnaces*, by opening itself up to person-to-person debate, tests and “stretches” this definition to its very limits. In a provocative amalgam of cinema/theater/political rally, it joins the space of representation to the space of the spectator, thus making “real” and immediate communication possible. The passive cinematic experience, that *rendezvous manqué* between exhibitionist and voyeur, is transformed into a “theatrical” encounter between human beings present in the flesh. The two-dimensional space of the screen gives way to the three-dimensional space of theater and politics. The film mobilizes, fostering motor and mental activity rather than self-indulgent fantasy. Rather than vibrate to the sensibility of an auteur, the spectators become the authors of their own destiny. Rather than a mass hero on the screen, the protagonists of history are in the audience. Rather than a womb to regress in, the cinema becomes a political stage on which to act.

Bertolt Brecht contrasted artistic innovation easily absorbed by the apparatus with the kind that threatens its very existence. *The Hour of the Furnaces* wards off co-optation by a stance of radical interventionism. Rather than being hermetically sealed off from life, the text is permeable to history and praxis, calling for accomplices rather than consumers. The three major sections begin with *ouvertures*—orchestrated quotations, slogans, rallying cries—that suggest that the spectators have come not to enjoy a show but to participate in an action. Each screening is meant to create what the authors call a “liberated space, a decolonized territory.” Because of this activist stance, *The Hour of the Furnaces* was dangerous to make, to distribute, and, not infrequently, to see. When a repressive situation makes filmgoing a clandestine activity punishable by prison or torture, the mere act of viewing comes to entail political commitment. Cinephilia, at times a surrogate for political action in the United States and Europe, became in Argentina a life-endangering form of praxis, placing the spectator in a booby-trapped space of political commitment. Instead of the mere firecrackers under the seats of the dadaists, the spectator was faced with the distant possibility of machine-gun fire in the cinema. All the celebrated “attacks on the voyeurism of the
spectator” pale in violence next to this threatened initiation into political brutality.

In its frontal assault on passivity, *The Hour of the Furnaces* deploys a number of textual strategies. The spoken and written commentary, addressed directly to the spectator, fosters a discursive relationship, the I-you of the *discours* rather than the he-she voyeurism of *histoire*. The language, furthermore, is unabashedly partisan, eschewing all factitious “objectivity.” Diverse classes, the film reminds us, speak divergent languages. The 1955 putsch, for the elite, is a “liberating revolution,” for the people, “the gorilla coup.” Everything in the film, from the initial dedication to Che Guevara through the final exhortation to action, obeys the Brechtian injunction to “divide the audience,” forcing the audience to “take sides.” The Argentine intellectual must decide to be with the Perónist masses or against them. The American must reject the phrase “Yankee imperialism” or acknowledge that it corresponds, on some level, to the truth. At times, the call for commitment reaches discomfiting extremes for the spectator hoping for a warm bath of escapism. Quoting Frantz Fanon’s “All spectators are cowards or traitors” (neither option flatters), the film calls at times for virtual readiness for martyrdom—“To choose one’s death is to choose one’s life”—at which point the lukewarm entertainment-seeker might feel that the demands for commitment have escalated unacceptably.

*The Hour of the Furnaces* also short-circuits passivity by making intense intellectual demands. The written titles and spoken commentary taken together form a more or less continuous essay, one that ranks in rhetorical power with those of the authors it cites—Fanon, Césaire, Sartre. At once broadly discursive and vividly imagistic, abstract and concrete, this essay-text, rather than simply commenting on the images, organizes them and provides their principle of coherence. The essay constitutes the film’s control center, its brain. The images take on meaning in relation to it rather than the reverse. During prolonged periods, the screen becomes an audiovisual blackboard and the spectator a reader of text. The staccato intercutting of black frames and incendiary titles generates a dynamic cine-écriture; the film writes itself. Vertovian titles explode around the screen, rushing toward and retreating from the spectator, their graphic presentation often mimicking their signification. The word “liberation,” for example, proliferates and multiplies, in a striking visual and kinetic reminiscence of Che’s call for “two, three, many Vietnams.” At other times, in a rude challenge to the sacrosanct “primacy of the visual,” the screen remains blank while a disembodied voice addresses us in the darkness.

The commentary participates mightily in the film’s work of demystification. As the caption “for Walter Benjamin” could tear photography
away from fashionable clichés and grant it “revolutionary use value,” so the commentary shatters the official image of events. An idealized painting celebrating Argentine political independence is undercut by the offscreen account of the financial deals that betrayed economic independence. Formal sovereignty is exposed as the facade masking the realities of material subjugation. Shots of the bustling, prosperous port of Buenos Aires, similarly, are accompanied by an analysis of a general systemic poverty: “What characterizes Latin American countries is, first of all, their dependence—economic dependence, political dependence, cultural dependence.” The spectator is taught to distrust images or, better, to see through them to their underlying structures. The film strives to enable the spectator to penetrate the veil of appearances, to dispel the mists of ideology through an act of revolutionary decoding.

Much of the persuasive power of The Hour of the Furnaces derives from its ability to render ideas visual. Abstract concepts are given clear and accessible form. The sociological abstraction “oligarchy” is concretized by shots of the “fifty families” that monopolize much of Argentina’s wealth. “Here they are . . .,” says the text; the “oligarchy” comes into focus as the actual faces of real people, recognizable and accountable. “Class society” becomes the image (“quoted” by Birri’s Tire dié/Throw Me a Dime, 1958) of desperate child beggars running alongside trains in hopes of a few pennies from blasé passengers. “Systemic violence” is rendered by images of the state’s apparatus of repression—prisons, armored trucks, bombers. The title “No Social Order Commits Suicide” yields to four quick-cut shots of the military. Cesaire’s depiction of the colonized—“Dispossessed, Marginalized, Condemned”—gives way to shots of workers, up against the wall, undergoing police interrogation. Thus The Hour of the Furnaces engraves ideas on the mind of the spectator. The images do not explode harmlessly, dissipating their energy. They fuse with ideas in order to detonate in the minds of the audience.

Parody and satire form part of the strategic arsenal of The Hour of the Furnaces. One sequence, a sightseeing excursion through Buenos Aires, compares in irreverence to Buñuel’s sardonic tour of Rome in L’Age d’or (1930). The images are those customary in travelogues—government buildings, monuments, busy thoroughfares—but the accompanying text is dipped in acid. Rather than exalt the cosmopolitan charm or the bustling energy of Buenos Aires, the commentary disengages its class structure: the highly placed comprador bourgeoisie, the middle class (“eternal in-betweens, both protected and used by the oligarchy”) and the petite bourgeoisie (“eternal crybabies, for whom change is necessary, but impossible”). Monuments, symbols of national pride, are treated as petrified emblems
of servility. As the camera zooms out from an equestrian statue of one of Argentina’s founding fathers (Carlos de Alvear), an offscreen voice ironizes: “Here monuments are erected to the man who said: ‘These provinces want to belong to Great Britain, to accept its laws, obey its government, live under its powerful influence.’”

Satiric vignettes pinpoint the reactionary nostalgia of the Argentine ruling class. We see them in an antique car acting out their fantasy of la belle époque. We see “La Recoleta,” their cemetery, baroque testimonial to an atrophied way of life, where the oligarchy tries to “freeze time” and “crystallize history.” Just as Vertov destroys (via split screen) the Bolshoi Theatre in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Solanas-Getino annihilate the cemetery with superimposed lightning bolts and thunderous sound effects. Using techniques reminiscent of Resnais’s art documentaries, they animate the cemetery’s neoclassical statues, creating a completely artificial time and space. The statues “dialogue” in shot/reaction shot to the music of an Argentinian opera whose words (“I shall bring down the rebel flag in blood”) remind us of the aristocracy’s historical capacity for savage repression. Still another vignette pictures the oligarchy at its annual cattle show in Buenos Aires. The sequence interweaves shots of the crowned heads of the prize bulls with the faces of the aristocracy. The bulls—inert, sluggish, well pedigreed—present a perfect analogue to the oligarchs who breed them.
Metonymic contiguity coincides with metaphoric transfer as the auctioneer’s phrases describing the bulls (“admire the expression, the bone structure”) are yoked, in a stunning cinematic zeugma, to the looks of bovine self-satisfaction on the faces of their owners.

On occasion, Solanas-Getino enlist the unwitting cooperation of their satiric targets by having ruling-class figures condemn themselves by their own discourse. Newsreel footage shows an Argentine writer, surrounded by jewelry-laden dowagers, at an official reception, as a parodic offscreen voice sets the tone: “And now let’s go to the Pepsi Cola Salon, where Manuel Mujica Lainez, member of the Argentine Academy of Letters, is presenting his latest book, *Royal Chronicles*.” Lainez then boasts, in nonsynchronous sound, of his international prizes, his European formation, his “deep sympathy for the Elizabethan spirit.” No professional actor could better incarnate the intellectual bankruptcy of the elite, with its fossilized attitudes, its nostalgia for Europe, its hand-me-down culture, and its snide ingratitude toward the country and people that made possible its privileges.

Recorded noises and music also play a discursive and demystifying role. The sound of a time clock punctuates shots of workers hurrying to their jobs, an aural reminder of the daily violence of “wage slavery.” Godardian frontal shots of office buildings with their abstract geometricality are superimposed with sirens; innocuous images take on overtones of urban anxiety. A veritable compendium of musical styles—tango, opera, pop—makes mordant comment on the image. A segment on cultural colonialism has Ray Charles singing “I don’t need no doctor” as a pop-music junkie nods his head in rhythm in a Buenos Aires record store. A medley of national and party anthems (“La Marseillaise,” “The International”) lampoons the European allegiances of the traditional left parties. And one of the most poignantly telling sequences shows a small-town prostitute, pubic hair exposed, eating lunch while sad-looking men wait in line for her favors. The musical accompaniment (the patriotic “flag-raising” song) suggests that Argentina has been reduced to exactly this—a hungry prostitute with her joyless clientele.

Solanas-Getino prolong and critically reestablish the avant-garde heritage. One sequence fuses Eisenstein with Warhol by intercutting scenes from a slaughterhouse with pop-culture advertising icons. The sequence obviously quotes Eisenstein’s celebrated nondiegetic metaphor in *Strike* (1924) but also invests it with specifically Argentinian resonances. In Argentina, where livestock is a basic industry, the same workers who can barely afford the meat that they themselves produce are simultaneously encouraged by advertising to consume the useless products of the multinational companies. The livestock metaphor, anticipated in the earlier
prize-bull sequence, is subsequently “diegeticized” when a shot of the exterior of a slaughterhouse coincides with an account of the police repression of its striking workers. The advertising/slaughter juxtaposition, meanwhile, evokes advertising itself as a kind of slaughter whose numbing effect is imaged by the mallet striking the ox unconscious. The vapid accompanying music by the Swingle Singers (Bach grotesquely metamorphosed into Ray Conniff) counterpoints the brutality of the images, while underlining the shallowly plastic good cheer of the ads.

In *The Hour of the Furnaces*, minimalism—the avant-garde aesthetic most appropriate to the exigencies of film production in the Third World—reflects practical necessity as well as artistic strategy. Time and again one is struck by the contrast between the poverty of the original materials and the power of the final result. Unpromising footage is transmogrified into art, as the alchemy of montage transforms the base metals of titles, blank frames, and percussive sounds into the gold and silver of rhythmic virtuosity. Static two-dimensional images (photos, posters, ads, engravings) are dynamized by editing and camera movement. Still photos and moving images sweep by at such velocity that we lose track of where movement stops and stasis begins. The most striking minimalist image—a close-up of Che Guevara’s
face in death—is held for a full five minutes. The effect of this inspirational
death mask is paradoxical. Through the having-been-there of photography,
Che Guevara returns our glance from beyond the grave. His face even in
death seems mesmerizingly present, his expression one of defiant unde-
feat. At the same time, the photo gradually assumes the look of a cracked
revolutionary icon. The long contemplation of the photograph demystifies
and unmasks: we become conscious of the frame, the technical imperfec-
tions, the filmic material itself.  

The most iconoclastic sequence, titled “Models,” begins by citing
Fanon’s call for an authentically Third World culture: “Let us not pay trib-
ute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies in its mould.
Humanity expects more from us than this caricatural and generally ob-
scene imitation.” As the commentary derides Europe’s “racist humanism,”
the image track parades the most highly prized artifacts of European high
culture: the Parthenon, Dejeuner sur l’herbe, Roman frescoes, portraits of
Byron and Voltaire. In an attack on the ideological hierarchies of the spec-
tator, haloed art works are inexorably lap-dissolved into meaninglessness.
As in the postcard sequence of Godard’s Les Carabiniers (1963), that locus
classicus of anti-high art semioclasm, the most cherished monuments of
Western culture are implicitly equated with the commercialized fetishes
of consumer society. Classical painting and toothpaste are leveled as two
kinds of imperial export. The pretended “universality” of European culture
is exposed as a myth masking the fact of domination.

This demolition job on Western culture is not without its ambiguities,
however; for Solanas and Getino, like Fanon before them, are imbued with
the very culture they so vehemently denigrate. The Hour of the Furnaces
betrays a cultivated familiarity with Flemish painting, Italian opera, French
cinema; it alludes to the entire spectrum of highbrow culture. Their at-
tack is also an exorcism, the product of a love-hate relationship to the Eu-
ropean parent culture. The same lap dissolves that obliterate classical art
also highlight its beauty. The film’s scorn for “culture,” furthermore, finds
ample precedent within the antitraditionalist modernism of Europe itself.
Mayakovsky asked, even before the revolution, that the Russian classics be
“thrown overboard from the steamer” of modernity (quoted in Woroszylski
47). The dismissal of all antecedent art as simply a waste of time recalls
the antepassatismo of the futurists. “One must spit daily at the Altar of art,”
said Marinetti (quoted in Woroszylski 261). And both Mayakovsky and
Godard have evoked the symbolic destruction of the shrines of high culture.
“Make bombardment echo on the museum walls,” shouted Mayakovsky,
and Godard, in La Chinoise (1967), has Veronique call for the bombing of
the Louvre and the Comédie-Française.
While drawing on a certain avant-garde, *The Hour of the Furnaces* critiques what it sees as the apolitical avant-garde. Revolutionary films, in this view, must be aesthetically avant-garde—revolutionary art must first of all be revolutionary as art (Benjamin)—but avant-garde films are not necessarily revolutionary. *The Hour of the Furnaces* eludes what it sees as the vacuity of a certain avant-garde by politicizing what might have been purely formalistic exercises. The ironic pageant of high art images in the “Models” sequence, for example, is accompanied by discourses on the colonization of Third World culture. Another sequence, superimposing shots of Argentinians lounging at poolside with vapid cocktail dialogue about the prestige value of being familiar with op art and pop art, abstract art and concrete art, highlights the bourgeois fondness for a politically innocuous avant-garde that is as much the product of fashion and commodity fetishism as styles in shirts and jeans. In Argentina, its promotion formed part of a pattern of United States cultural intervention in which organizations such as the U.S.I.S. exhibited modernist painting as part of a larger imperialist strategy.

An apolitical avant-garde risks becoming an institutionalized loyal opposition, the progressive wing of establishment art. Supplying a daily dose of novelty to a satiated society, it generates surface turmoil while leaving the deep structures intact. The artists, as Godard once pointed out, are inmates who bang their dishes against the bars of their prison. Rather than destroy the prison, they merely make a noise which, ultimately, reassures the warden. The noise is then co-opted by a mechanism of repressive desublimation and cited as proof of the system’s liberality. *The Hour of the Furnaces* has nothing to do with such an avant-garde, and to treat it as such would be to trivialize it by detaching it from the revolutionary impulse that drives and informs it.

Embracing elements of this critique of an apolitical avant-garde does not entail endorsing all features of the film’s global politics. Without diminishing the directors’ achievement or disrespecting the sacrifice of thousands of Argentinians, one feels obliged to point out political ambiguities in the film. *The Hour of the Furnaces* shares with what one might call the heroic-masochistic avant-garde a vision of itself as engaged in a kind of apocalyptic self-sacrifice in the name of future generations. The artistic avant-garde, as Renato Poggioli has suggested, often cultivates the image, and symbolically suffers the fate, of military avant-gardes: they serve as advanced cadres “slaughtered” (if only by the critics) to prepare the way for the regular army or the new society (Poggioli). The spirit of self-immolation on the altar of the future (“Pitié pour nous qui combattons toujours aux frontières / De l’illimité et de l’avenir” [Pity us who struggle always at the...})
edge of boundlessness and the future]) merges in *The Hour of the Furnaces* with a quasi-religious subtext that draws on the language and imagery of martyrdom, death, and resurrection. One might even posit a subliminal Dantesque structuring that ascends from the *inferno* of neocolonial oppression through the *purgatorio* of revolutionary violence to the *paradiso* of national liberation. Without reviving the facile caricature of Marxism as “secular religion,” one can regret the film’s occasional confusion of political categories with moral-religious ones. The subsurface millenarianism of the film, while it partially explains the film’s power (and its appeal even for some bourgeois critics), in some ways undermines its political integrity.

Equipped with the luxury of retrospective lucidity, one can also better discern the deficiencies of the Fanonian and Guevarist ideas informing the film. It is deeply imbued with Fanon’s faith in the therapeutic value of violence. But while it is true to say that violence is an effective political language, the key to resistance or the taking of power, it is quite another to value it as therapy for the oppressed. *The Hour of the Furnaces* misapplies a theory associated with a specific point in Frantz Fanon’s ideological trajectory during the period of *The Wretched of the Earth* (first published in 1961, the point of maximum disenchantment with the European left) and with a precise historical situation (French settler colonialism in Algeria). Solanas and Getino also pay rightful tribute to Che Guevara as model revolutionary. Subsequent events, however, have made it obvious that certain of Che’s policies were mistaken. Guevarism in Latin America gave impetus to an ultravoluntarist strategy that often turned out to be ineffective or even suicidal. One might even link the vestigial machismo of the film’s language (“El Hombre”: Man) to this ideal of the heroic warrior who personally exposes himself to combat. Guerilla strategists often underestimated the repressive power of the governments in place and overestimated the objective and subjective readiness of the local populations for revolution.

As a left Perónist film, *The Hour of the Furnaces* also partakes of the historical strengths and weaknesses of that movement. Solanas-Getino rightly identify Perón as a Third World nationalist avant la lettre rather than the “fascist dictator” of Eurocentric mythology. (“Perón was a fascist and a dictator detested by all good men . . . except Argentinians,” said Dean Acheson, slyly insinuating that Argentinians are not good men.) While the film does score the failures of Perónism—its refusal to attack the power bases of the oligarchy, its failure to arm the people against right-wing coups, its constant oscillation between “democracy of the people” and the “dictatorship of bureaucracy”—the filmmakers see Perón as the man through whom the Argentine working class became gropingly aware of its collective
destiny. Perónism, for them, was “objectively revolutionary” because it embodied this proletarian movement. By breaking the imperial stranglehold on Argentina’s economy, Perónism would prepare the way for authentic socialist revolution. The film fails most crucially, however, in not placing Perónism in its most appropriate context—Latin American populism. In this version, populism represents a style of political representation by which certain progressive and nationalist elements of the bourgeoisie enlist the support of the people in order to advance their own interests. Latin American populists, like populists everywhere, flirt with the right with one hand and caress the left with the other, making pacts with God and the devil. Like the inhabitants of Alphaville, they manage to say yes and no at the same time. As a tactical alliance, Perónism constituted a labyrinthine tangle of contradictions, a fragile mosaic that shattered, not surprisingly, with its leader’s disappearance.

Perónism was plagued by at least two major contradictions, both of which are inscribed, to a certain extent, in the film. Wholeheartedly anti-imperialist, Perónism was only halfheartedly antimonopolist, since the industrial bourgeoisie allied with it was more frightened of the working class than it was of imperialism. Although Solanas-Getino at one point explicitly call for socialist revolution, there is ambiguity in the film and in the concept of “Third Cinema.” The “third,” while obviously referring to the “Third World,” also echoes Perón’s call for a “third way,” for an intermediate path between socialism and capitalism. That The Hour of the Furnaces seems more radical than it in fact is largely derives from its skillful orchestration of what one might call the revolutionary intertext, that is, its aural and visual evocation of tricontinental revolution. The strategically placed allusions to Che Guevara, Fanon, Ho Chi Minh, and Stokely Carmichael create a kind of “effet de radicalité” rather like the “effet de reel” cited by Roland Barthes in connection with the strategic details of classical realist fiction.

Perónism’s second major contradiction has to do with its constant swing between democracy and authoritarianism, participation and manipulation. With populism, a plebeian style and personal charisma often mask a deep scorn for the masses. Egalitarian manners create an apparent equality between the representative of the elite and the people who are the object of manipulation. The film, at once manipulative and participatory, strong-armed and egalitarian, shares in this ambiguity. It speaks the language of popular expression (“Your ideas are as important as ours”) but also resorts to hyperbolic language and sledgehammer persuasion.

The Hour of the Furnaces is brilliant in its critique. And history has not shown its authors to be totally failed prophets. It is facile for us, equipped
with hindsight and protected by distance, to point up mistaken predictions or failed strategies. The film’s indictment of neocolonialism remains shatteringly relevant. The critique of the traditional left, and especially of the Argentine Communist party, was borne out when the PCA offered its critical support to a right-wing regime, largely because it concentrated its repression on the non-Stalinist left and made grain deals with the Soviet Union. The film also accurately points up the ruling class potentiality for violent repression. The regime in power when this essay was first published, with its horrendous human rights record, its desaparecidos and its anti-Semitism, merely reaffirms the capacity for violence of an elite that has “more than once bathed the country in blood.”

Despite its occasional ambiguities, *The Hour of the Furnaces* remains a seminal contribution to revolutionary cinema. Transcending the narcissistic self-expression of auteurism, it voices the concerns of a mass movement. By allying itself with a concrete movement, which however “impure” has at least the virtue of being real, it practices a cinematic politics of “dirty hands.” If its politics are at times populist, its filmic strategies are not. It assumes that the mass of people are quite capable of grasping the exact meaning of an association of images or of a sound montage; that it is ready, in short, for linguistic experimentation. It respects the people by offering quality, proposing a cinema that is simultaneously a tool for consciousness-raising, an instrument for analysis, and a catalyst for action. The film provides a model for avant-garde political filmmaking and a treasury of formalist strategies. It is an advanced seminar in the politics of art and the art of politics, a four-hour launching pad for experimentation, an underground guide to revolutionary cinematic praxis.

*The Hour of the Furnaces* is also a key piece in the ongoing debate concerning the two avant-gardes. It would be naive and sentimental to see the two avant-gardes as “naturally” allied. (The mere mention of Ezra Pound or Marinetti refutes such an idea.) The alliance of the two avant-gardes is not natural; it must be forced. The two avant-gardes, yoked by a common impulse of rebellion, concretely need each other. While revolutionary aesthetics without revolutionary politics is often futile, revolutionary politics without revolutionary aesthetics is equally retrograde, pouring the new wine of revolution into the old bottles of conventional forms, reducing art to a crude instrumentality in the service of a preformed message. *The Hour of the Furnaces*, by avoiding the twin traps of an empty iconoclasm on the one hand and a “correct” but formally nostalgic militancy on the other, constitutes a major step toward the realization of that scandalously utopian and only apparently paradoxical idea—that of a majoritarian avant-garde.

Aleatory procedures are, of course, typical of art in the 1960s. One need think only of “process art” in which chemical, biological, or seasonal forces affect the original materials, or of environmental art, or happenings, mixed media, human-machine interaction systems, street theater, and the like. The film formed part of a general tendency to erase the boundaries between art and life, but rarely did this erasure take such a highly politicized form.


The Argentinian junta paid inadvertent tribute to the revolutionary potential of photography when they arrested Che Guevara’s mother in 1962, accusing her of having in her possession a “subversive” photograph. The photograph was of her son Che.

Gérard Chaliand, in *Mythes révolutionnaires du tiers- monde* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), criticizes what he calls the “macho” attitudes of Latin American guerrillas that led them to expose themselves to combat even when their presence was not required, thus resulting in the death of most of the guerrilla leaders. He contrasts this attitude with the more prudent procedure of the Vietnamese. During fifteen years of war, not one of the fifty members of the central committee of the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front fell into the hands of the enemy.

Should there be any doubt about the Perónist allegiances of the film, one need only remember the frequent quotations of Perón, the interviews with Perónist militants, and the critiques of the non-Perónist left. In 1971, Solanas and Getino made a propaganda film for Perón: *Perón: La revolucion justicialista* (*Perón: The Just Revolution*). The Cine-Liberacion group that made the film, according to Solanas, served as the cinematic arm of General Perón. During the (pro-Perónist) Campora administration, Getino accepted a post on the national film board. Upon Perón’s death, Solanas and Getino made a public declaration supporting the succession of his wife, Isabel. Ironically, the repression unleashed after her ouster was leveled as much against Solanas and Getino as against those who had been more consistently on the left.

The simplistic view of Perón as a fascist has been revived in many of the reviews of the Broadway production of *Evita*, with a number of critics comparing the play to the kind of spectacle parodied in Mel Brooks’s *The Producers* (1967).


**Works Cited**


