

An overview of studies on contemporary Argentine cinema

Panorama de los estudios sobre cine argentino contemporáneo

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to review the state of the art regarding contemporary Argentine cinema studies by summarizing some of the main academic debates on this subject. First, the influence of film critics on film studies about recent Argentine cinema is acknowledged, to then proceed to link the New Argentine Cinema and the economic crisis of 2001. There is a reflection upon the relation of these films with politics and the question of allegory is introduced, as well as a discussion regarding the importance of concepts such as realism and the return of the real in studies on contemporary Argentine cinema.

Keywords: contemporary Argentine Cinema; New Argentine Cinema; allegory; return of the real; film studies; Argentine crisis of 2001.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es abordar algunas discusiones que atraviesan la bibliografía sobre el cine argentino contemporáneo con base en un recorrido por los principales estudios sobre el tema. En primer lugar, se reconoce la influencia de la crítica cinematográfica en los abordajes académicos sobre el cine argentino reciente. Luego, se aborda el vínculo entre el Nuevo Cine Argentino y la crisis de 2001 y se presentan algunos ejes de debate en relación con este corpus fílmico: el abandono de la alegoría, la reconfiguración de la dimensión política, las distintas concepciones del realismo y el retorno de lo real, entre otros.

Palabras clave: cine argentino contemporáneo; Nuevo Cine Argentino; alegoría; retorno de lo real; estudios sobre cine; crisis argentina de 2001.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é revisar os principais estudos sobre o cinema argentino contemporâneo, baseado nos principais estudos sobre o tema. Em primeiro lugar, reconhecemos a influência da crítica cinematográfica nos estudos acadêmicos sobre o cinema argentino atual. Em segundo lugar, abordamos o vínculo entre o Novo Cinema Argentino (NCA) e a crise econômica de 2001. Depois, apresentamos alguns eixos de debate acerca deste corpus fílmico: o abandono da alegoria, a reconfiguração da dimensão política, as distintas concepções do realismo e o retorno do real, entre outros.

Palavras-chave: cinema argentino contemporâneo; Novo Cinema Argentino; alegoria; retorno do real; estudos sobre cinema; crise argentina de 2001.

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INTRODUCTION

In Argentina, the beginning of the century coincided with the crisis of 2001, but also with a flourishing of national cinema, particularly the so-called New Argentine Cinema (NCA, the Spanish acronym for *Nuevo Cine Argentino*), marked more by a break with the previous cinema than by a program or an aesthetic common to the directors associated with this movement (Lucrecia Martel, Lisandro Alonso, Israel Adrián Caetano, Pablo Trapero, among others). The so-called commercial cinema also experienced an important growth from that date, from the hand of directors such as Juan José Campanella, Damián Szifrón and Marcelo Piñeyro.

The aim of this paper is to gather, based on certain debate axes, the abundant literature on contemporary Argentine cinema, which has multiplied in the last 15 years and continues to grow. Contemporary Argentine cinema has been the subject of several academic works: the firsts, published very close to the premiere of the films that gave rise to the so-called New Argentine Cinema; the last ones, of recent appearance. There have been books published in Argentina, but also in the United States, England, Spain, Venezuela, Austria, Germany and France.

All the researches mention the relationship between Argentine cinema and the social context, proposing the years of Menem's presidency and the crisis of 2001 as a crucial key to understand the films. In this article we will focus solely on works related to fiction films, leaving aside the specific literature about the documentary. We will pay special attention to the books dedicated to contemporary Argentine cinema, since they constitute a relevant indicator of the consolidation of the field of studies around this subject. The paper does not cover the totality of the published literature but focuses on some of the studies that have had the greatest influence on the delineation of the approaches to recent Argentine cinema.

THE INFLUENCE OF FILM CRITICISM

The academic studies on contemporary Argentine cinema (which begins with *Rapado* (1992), by Martín Rejtman and the Cinema Law of 1994) have been strongly influenced by cinematographic critic. In fact, many of the ideas that today generate consensus around the Argentine cinema of this period were formulated for the first time in the book published in 2002 by

the association of critics FIPRESCI Argentina, edited by Horacio Bernardes, Diego Lerer and Sergio Wolf.

Bernardes, Lerer and Wolf (2002) entitled their book *El Nuevo Cine Argentino. Temas, autores y estilos de una renovación*. The phrase New Argentine Cinema (and even the NCA acronym) was coined by the journalistic critic, and from this book it will also reappear as the title of other academic publications, such as Amatriain (2009), Aguilar (2010), Campero (2009), Daicich (2015) and Andermann (2015). In the cases of Bernardes et al., Amatriain and Andermann, the reference to the New Argentine Cinema does not imply exclusive attention to the NCA, but also reveals the novel in the field of mainstream cinema.

It is interesting, furthermore, that Bernardes et al. talked about *authors* in the title of their book, whose second part is devoted to analyzing the poetics of four directors identified with the NCA: Martín Rejtman, Adrián Caetano, Pablo Trapero and Lucrecia Martel. It is remarkable that these filmmakers were considered authors, when the first two had released two films (*Rapado* and *Silvia Prieto* (1999); *Pizza, birra, faso* (1998) and *Bolivia* (2001), respectively) and the second two, only one – *Mundo grúa* (1999) and *La ciénaga* (2001). The authorial perspective is another decision that reappears in later studies, particularly in those referred to the NCA, although most of them are structured from films and not filmmakers.

The renewal of Argentine cinema is explained in Bernardes et al. by the 1994 Cinema Law, and they point out the fundamental role of critique, film schools and festivals (Bafici in Buenos Aires, and Mar del Plata) in the emergence and consolidation of a new cinema.

They draw up a genealogy of the NCA that begins with *Historias breves* (1995), *Pizza, birra, faso*, and *Mundo grúa*, preceded by *Rapado*, *Picado fino* (1995) and the films by Raúl Perrone and Alejandro Agresti. In addition, they discuss the problem of the (scarce) public, the changes in exhibition and the difficulties of the NCA to reach the audiences. All these ideas, which were already circulating in the critics' magazines – above all, *El Amante* and *Film* – will be part of the subsequent works on contemporary Argentine cinema.

Another pioneering work on the renewal in Argentine cinema was that of Fernando Martín Peña, *Generaciones 60/90*, published in 2003 to accompany a movie cycle at the Malba museum that brought together films from the 60s Generation and the New Argentine Cinema of the 90s. It was a monumental

work, of more than 600 pages; a double book presented as “an attempt to bring works and experiences from both eras together through the testimony of their main protagonists” (Peña, 2003, p. 8).

The title proposes to categorize the cinematographic renewal of the 90s based on the concept of *generation*, which did not find much echo in subsequent works¹: New Argentine Cinema was imposed over 90s *Generation*. Structured from in-depth interviews with the directors—a methodological resource infrequent in the works on contemporary Argentine cinema—the starting point of the text is the existence of an affinity between the cinematographic renewal of the 90s and that of the 60s.

Opposite to the idea of orphanage held by the NCA filmmakers, Peña’s work proposes a series of continuities between the cinema of the 60s and the 90s, more related to the conditions of the cinematographic field than to the aesthetic and narrative decisions of both generations. The text also highlights the importance of film schools, critique and short films in shaping the two movements of film renewal.

In a similar vein we have the work of Campero (2009), *Nuevo Cine Argentino. De Rapado a Historias extraordinarias*. The text proposes, from the title, a historical journey that begins in the early nineties—the film by Rejtman—and a sort of arrival point in 2008—*Historias extraordinarias* (2008), by Mariano Llinás—that would mark the end of the NCA period, coinciding with Bafici’s 10th edition. In the middle, the author points out a decline in the evolution of the NCA at the middle of the decade, between 2005 and 2006, when the critics began to denounce “traits of stagnation”, “more introspective” films, closed in on themselves, limited by the “meaningless repetition and exacerbation of stylistic features” (2009, p. 8). According to the parable drawn by Campero, that plateau begins to be overcome with the premiere of the film by Llinás and other movies that, from the margins, would have created new possibilities for the national cinema.

THE TRACES OF THE CRISIS OF 2001

One of the essential studies on recent Argentine cinema is that of Joanna Page (2009), *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, published in English by Duke University Press. Page prefers the denomination contemporary Argentine cinema instead of New Argentine Cinema, in a conceptual

displacement that will be retaken for example in Chappuzeau and von Tschilschke (2016). In any case, the author’s analysis almost does not consider mainstream films (except for *Nine Queens* and *The Aura* (2005), both by Fabián Bielinsky) and focuses mostly on the canonical corpus of the NCA.

The author defines the crisis of 2001 as the starting point of her work and establishes the objective of her analysis in terms of a sociological reading of contemporary Argentine cinema: “My central purpose is to explore how cinema has registered, and indeed helped to construct, certain modes of subjectivity relating to Argentina’s experience of capitalism, neoliberalism, and economic crisis” (2009, p. 3). Page’s main interest has to do with the ways in which cinema registers changes in subjectivities and in representation as a consequence of economic and political transformations.

In addition to the cinematographic record of the crisis and the social consequences of neoliberal policies, Page introduces the theme of national identity imagined by the films, always in tension with the processes of globalization (and, in turn, with the notion of State). On the other hand, the dialectic between identity and globalization allows the author to discuss—and defend—the relevance of a film analysis with a national perspective, against certain authors (Marvin D’Lugo, Ann Marie Stock) who advocate for a post-national critique.

This debate also arises in Andermann’s work (2015), who questions the defenders of post-national critique, but also the strictly national readings. Andermann postulates that “the idea of a national cinema as a visual space and an autonomous discourse [...] is a fiction of critique” (2015, p. 20) and, consequently, vindicates the need to study national filmography without neglecting its global crossings.

Also in line with Page, the author points to the collapse of 2001 as the necessary starting point to understand the cinema produced in Argentina in the 21st century, in particular the NCA, born almost simultaneously with the crisis. Andermann explains that the NCA sought to account for the instability of the present through “variations of the Deleuzian time-image”, i.e., of a self-reflective image, “self-conscious”, which incorporates in its composition the “crisis of historical experience” through a work on narrative temporality, or the lack of definition between the real and the staging (2015, p. 250). On the other hand, the study acknowledges, from *Historias extraordinarias*

and several films of the second half of the 2000s, a “return to the story” according to which the stories are strengthened, but the “intensity” of the film image is weakened (2015, p. 275).

Page, in addition, proposes to read NCA films based on a conception of cinema as an instrument to produce social knowledge (2009, p. 36), which does not imply ignoring the cinematographic language. From a formal analysis, Page finds that the films rightly question the possibility of representing the real and deploy contingent, hesitant and provisional views on the social, thus frustrating the viewer’s desire to know. The author argues that, in aesthetic terms, the New Argentine Cinema is characterized by the insistence on material reality (as opposed to the transcendent issues of the 1980s); ambiguity, opacity and the deliberate search for the illegibility of images (2009, p. 48); the distancing that prevents the spectator’s identification, and an “anti-explanatory” approach (p. 40), both of the psychology of the characters and of the social present in which they are immersed.

Among the main influences on the NCA, the author points out to Italian neorealism and its focus on the materiality of the present, as well as the Argentine and Latin American cinema of the 60s. Page underlines that the Italian neorealism and the NCA share the impulse to develop an imperfect cinema that would account for the deterioration of the present, in a comparison that equates the images of the Argentine crisis with those of a post-war situation: “The grainy, unfinished, ‘ad hoc’ nature of these low-budget, independent films expresses with greater eloquence the fissures and imperfections of the present, both in postwar Italy and in contemporary Argentina” (2009, p. 34).

Another work that has been of great influence for the study of the NCA is that of Ana Amado, *La imagen justa* (2009). The book is divided into five parts, in which the author addresses the issue of the memory of the dictatorship and the links between cinema and Peronism from the mutations in the relationship between Argentine cinema and its historical-political context. Amado dedicates several chapters to the documentary and the cinema of the 80s and 90s; the last part of the text refers to the 2001 crisis and analyzes the figures of the crisis in fiction films. Amado’s perspective is based on the premise that in the narratives of the NCA the family sphere constitutes a privileged sphere of expression of the political.

ABANDONMENT (AND PERSISTENCE) OF THE ALLEGORY

Otros mundos, the book by Gonzalo Aguilar (2010) published by Santiago Arcos as part of the *Biblioteca Km 111*², has probably been the most influential work on the New Argentine Cinema. When formulating the objective of his work, Aguilar points out that he proposes to draw a sociological reading of the films from specifically cinematographic categories (scenes, frames, narrations), i.e., to read the social from the staging (2010, p. 42).

Aguilar is specifically interested in the New Argentine Cinema, rejecting industrial cinema. The author recognizes a “new creative regime” (2010, p. 13) defined by a renewal in the fields of production, artistic production and aesthetics. Regarding the latter, Aguilar points out a series of “epochal features” (p. 23) common to several films of the period, and thus proposes a delimitation of the NCA from the relationship between aesthetics and history. The author’s aesthetic characterization of the NCA has been profusely taken up in later works.

On the other hand, in the epilogue for the 2010 edition, Aguilar suggests that in the course of the 2000s the distinction between New Argentine Cinema and certain industrial cinema becomes more diffuse, from “the rise of the level of the Argentine mainstream” but, above all, from “the incorporation of directors from the new cinema into the industrial system” (Aguilar, 2010, p. 239), including Pablo Trapero and Adrián Caetano. This consolidation of certain directors as industrial authors would constitute a moment of necessary institutionalization of the NCA and would mark a fundamental difference with the frustrated 60s Generation.

Aguilar affirms that the New Argentine Cinema is characterized by a breakup with previous films, and points out two crucial oppositions regarding the films of the 1980s: “Two great rejections are found in [...] the scripts and in the stories of the new films: to political demand (what to do) and to identity (how we are), i.e., to pedagogy and self-incrimination” (2010, p. 23). In this regard, Aguilar questions Jameson (1986), who proposed to read all the texts of the Third World as national allegories³, and affirms that, against that statement, the New Argentine Cinema avoids the national allegory. There lies, to a large extent, the core of the renewal of the NCA and its breakup with the

films of the 80s, in which the allegory worked as the main mechanism of reference to the social context.

The rejection of the allegory and the pedagogy mark the fundamental difference between the NCA and the cinema of the 1980s, but also the frontier between the new cinema and the cinema that, despite being contemporary in chronological terms, continues to use those old signification mechanisms. The absence of allegory requires new interpretation modes from the spectator; specifically, it requires ways of reading the political that elude the “imperative of politicization” attributed by Jameson (1986) to the aesthetic productions of the Third World.

The question of allegory has also been taken up in Page’s analyzes (2007, 2009) about the cinema of Lucrecia Martel. The author points out that Martel’s films “stage the decomposition of allegory” (2007, p. 157) thus evoking the fall of distinctions between the public and private spheres in contemporary Western societies. In any case, Page finds a tension that prevents her from completely discarding the notion of allegory: on the one hand, Martel’s films “suggest the possibility of symbolic readings”; on the other, “allegorical readings are deliberately disturbed” (2007, p. 159). In this cinema there would thus be “insufficient and incomplete allegories” (p. 164).

Both Dufays (2013, 2014, 2016) and Copertari (2009) claim the notion of allegory as a tool for analyzing recent Argentine cinema. Dufays (2013, 2014) focuses on the child’s allegorical role in post-dictatorship films (including films from the 2000s, such as *Lamb of God* and *Kamchatka*). Then, in another book (2016), she resumes that axis to analyze *La ciénaga* and *La rabia* (Albertina Carri, 2008). In her reading, Dufays interprets the narrative vicissitudes of children’s characters as allegories of national history.

On the other hand, Copertari’s corpus does not include any of the canonical films of the New Argentine Cinema, but some blockbuster films such as *Nine Queens* and *Son of the Bride* (Juan José Campanella, 2001). Copertari states that these films operate as allegories of the social transformations produced by neoliberal policies and the insertion of Argentina in globalization, mainly from the experience of the middle class. The author pays special attention to the allegorical functioning of the narrative spaces and the identities of the characters. The text addresses the problem of justice against the relapse of the State, as well as the attempts of these narratives to imagine

ways of national reconstruction in the face of the disintegration produced by the crisis.

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

For Aguilar, the fall of the “political demand” can be explained because “the successive crises [...] made the new directors suspend several of the inherited certainties” (2010, p. 28). At the same time, the exhaustion of the demand for identity would obey to the process of decomposition of the national community, and to the increasing impact of global processes. In short, it is the social crisis that allows to find some interpretation keys for the aesthetic changes that define the new cinema.

Some of the categories contributed by Aguilar had an important repercussion in the studies on the cinema of that period, such as the concepts of *nomadism* and *sedentarism*, two “fiction figures” (2010, p. 41) through which the narratives explore the effects of the crisis⁴. *Nomadism* refers to characters defined by the absence of a home, lack of ties of belonging and permanent and unpredictable mobility; these narratives focus on the “discards of capitalism” (p. 42). Meanwhile, *sedentarism* refers to the disintegration of families, the ineffectiveness of traditional ties and the paralysis of characters who insist on perpetuating an outdated order: the focus is on the decomposition of institutions.

Aguilar questions the critics who pointed out the depoliticization of the new cinema, among them González (2003), and points out that this accusation conceives the political as praxis (in the manner of the *Grupo Cine Liberación*, whose films indicated to spectators *what to do*) or as a pedagogical function (in the manner of the cinema of the 80s, its national allegories and its ethical characters). Against these positions, Aguilar argues that “the Argentine cinema of the 90s is the most genuinely political of all” (2010, p. 140): the political is no longer anchored in the denunciation or the message of the film, but in the indeterminacy opened by the staging work.

This question will be taken up by the author in *Más allá del pueblo. Imágenes, indicios y políticas del cine* (2015). Published on the end of the Kirchnerist cycle, the text points to a new climate compared to that of the 1990s and a return of politics, but warns: “There was, of course, an attempt to fortify the official version with some films –especially in television–, but the New Argentine Cinema remained rather on the sidelines”

(2015, p. 14). For Aguilar, the idea of a New Argentine Cinema is still valid twenty years after the premiere of *Historias breves*, and the political dimension of these films continues to be anchored in the exploration of emerging forms of politics: “Cinema is no longer a device for the invention of people, but a device for the political reflection” (2015, p. 193).

The discussion about the modes of the political in contemporary Argentine cinema has been taken up frequently by academic critique. Maranghello (2011) highlights, among other features, the refusal of the NCA to deliver an explicit message, and understands this absence of denunciations of the socioeconomic reality as a symptom of a pessimistic conception that would be present in a good part of the films: “Filmmakers limited themselves to showing reality as irreversible. [...] Suddenly, all filmmakers had a similar vision of the world” (2011, p. 23). The author cites some recurrent elements in this regard: the deprived environments, the prolonged silences of the characters or the predominance of fatalism in the narrations.

Agreeing with Maranghello’s position, Prividera considers that the NCA was apolitical: “The minimalistic appropriated the scene [...] and the historical was diluted in a sort of limbo” (2016, p. 38). The author questions especially the topic of nomadism, according to which the characters without attributes wander aimlessly through the landscape. From his perspective, the NCA had two main problems: “historicity deficit” and “class unconsciousness” (p. 39). The author interprets these features in the light of postmodernism: for Prividera, “the constant ellusion of politics sooner or later ends with the implosion of the minimal stories and the lack of articulation of any project, be it cinematographic or political” (2016, p. 41).

On the other hand, Chamorro (2011) defends the political commitment of the NCA, but from the documentary dimension of fiction film. The author starts from the premise that the directors share certain features in the representation of the urban space. In this presence of the city, the (catastrophic) results of neoliberal policies are shown in the reconfiguration of spaces and the subjects that inhabit them (2011, p. 13). In contrast, Oubiña understands the political in the New Argentine Cinema from the formal. For this author it is not enough with the recording, which can be limited to a “superficial reflection” (2013, p. 43) and fall into the trap of insignificance. In this regard, Oubiña argues that the political dimension of the films of the NCA does not rely on “supporting a particular

ideology, but on establishing a new critical relationship of images with reality” (2013, p. 49): a relationship sustained in the distance taken when facing the real.

Understanding the recent Argentine cinema in a political key constitutes the axis of the collective work coordinated by Viviana Rangil (2007), *El cine argentino de hoy: entre el arte y la política*. Rangil defends the relevance of reading films as “texts” in which it is possible to “observe and analyze phenomena of daily life in their political and social context” (p. 19). Here, the political dimension of the films is analyzed mainly in relation to the crisis of 2001, the memory of the dictatorship and the gender perspective. This last axis, supported by the possibility of thinking of a female gaze, has often been used to address films directed and starred by women: in addition to Lucrecia Martel and Albertina Carri, the names of Celina Murga, Lucía Puenzo, Julia Solomonoff, Paula Hernández, Ana Poliak, Anahi Berneri and Ana Katz, among others, are essential when reconstructing a possible canon of contemporary Argentine cinema³.

THE DEBATE ON REALISM

One of the issues that divided the critique and academia in the early years of the NCA was the debate on realism: the distinction between realist and non-realist filmmakers was as recurrent as it was questioned. In a much-quoted article, Beceyro, Filipelli, Oubiña and Pauls discuss the emergence of a “new urban neorealism” from *Pizza, birra, faso* and *Mundo grúa*, point out a “return of the real” and a renewed importance of “the documentary” in the NCA, but also question the neglect of the staging (Beceyro et al., 2000, pp. 1-5). On the other hand, the first to talk about the non-realists was Schwarzböck (2001) in *El Amante*, linking *Sábado* (2001), by Juan Villegas, with *Silvia Prieto*, by Martín Rejtman, and to inscribe both in a “neo non-realism” (2001, p. 9) based mainly on the dialogues—arbitrary, anachronistic, monochord—and in the language of the characters.

The non-realist category will be taken up by *Kilómetro 111* to account for the works of Villegas, Lerman and Acuña. There, it is postulated that these filmmakers “prefer to build intimate worlds, in one point artificial and in another arbitrary, that do not respond to realistic recognitions nor to the rules of genres” (Bernini, Choi, & Goggi, 2004, p. 153). It is also affirmed that, unlike the realists, these filmmakers would grant a greater importance to the staging, from

a world view strongly mediated by literature (and not by reference to reality, nor by the Argentine cinema of the past).

On the other hand, the reading of Dipaola (2010, 2016) directly rejects the category of realism to think the New Argentine Cinema, and prefers an approach focused on the “expression of experience”. Dipaola defines the NCA as a “cinema of expression” (instead of “representation”) because it avoids any totalizing pretension in the representation of reality and limits itself to *expressing* experiences.

Eseverri and Luka (2003) recognize two differentiated lines in the New Argentine Cinema of the 90s. On the one hand, the “Rejtman line” (in which they inscribe Juan Villegas, Ezequiel Acuña and Lisandro Alonso), defined by “the lack of pretensions, distancing and de-dramatization”, in addition to inaction, paralysis and deprivation. On the other, a line characterized by “a greater commitment to reality” and a greater concern for film genres, which would include Trapero, Caetano, Stagnaro and Martel (2003, p. 21). Prividera also recognizes these two trends and maintains that they are updated in the mid-2000s, with names such as Matías Piñeiro (in the non-realist line) and Santiago Mitre (in the realist line) (2016, p. 37).

In contrast, for Aprea (2008) the central distinction will be between naturalism (Trapero, Caetano) and “modern” cinema (Martel, Alonso, Rejtman) (p. 41). Whereas Paulinelli (2005), following Bernini (2003), traces her division between the poetics “of transparency” (Caetano, Trapero, Martel, Alonso) and the poetics “of opacity” (Sapir, Rejtman), characterized by less realism and more experimentalism⁶.

On the other hand, Aguilar (2010) takes up Bazin –defender of realism *and* staging– to question the positions that distinguish between realists and non-realists. Aguilar points out that this dichotomy is not recognized by the directors themselves and affirms that it is based on a false opposition between documentary recording and staging. Amado (2002) and Andermann (2015) also dismiss the division between realists and non-realists, considering that, although film is fundamentally a record, reality never appears directly or naively in movies. Verardi agrees with these authors: “In the NCA, the connection with ‘reality’ does not occur through explicit and direct reference to the profilmic context [...] but through formal operations” (2009, p.188). Verardi refuses to classify films as realistic based on certain themes (typically, poverty, urban marginalization, labor

precariousness), to avoid the (erroneous) presumption that these issues would always require a transparent representation.

Barsotti (2005) also rejects the division between realists and non-realists, which he associates exclusively with a class perspective: “The difference is that the former offer a realistic view of the alien social world (the representation of marginality) and the latter represent a social world of their own (the representation of the Argentine bourgeoisie)” (2005, p. 60). In short, the division would be given by the content of the films and not according to aesthetic criteria. The paradox that Barsotti raises is interesting: he points out that the critique considers the representation of *others*⁷ to be realistic, but it marks a distancing from the representation of one’s own world, that of the middle class, always considering it unrealistic.

THE RETURN OF THE REAL

Along with those of Aguilar (2010) and Page (2009), Jens Andermann’s (2015) study of recent Argentine cinema –published in English in 2012 and translated into Spanish in 2015– is essential due to its ability to articulate aesthetic analysis with the sociocultural gaze. Andermann studies both fiction and documentary films; despite the title (*Nuevo Cine Argentino*), his work does not strictly refer to the NCA. The main difference between Andermann (2015) and the two authors already mentioned is the incorporation of commercial movies, such as those of Campanella, omitted in most of the academic approaches. The author suggests the need to “look beyond the uncertain boundaries of an ‘independent’ generational project, which has in many ways been but a critical fiction” and address “the wider, more contradictory and multilayered landscape of filmmaking in Argentina” (2015, p.14), including quality commercial cinema. In this vein, he argues that, since there is no industrial system of studios in Argentina, it is artificial to distinguish between independent cinema and commercial cinema, an opposition that is considered imported from the United States and not very useful for analyzing Argentine cinema, because it masks the diversity of production models.

Another work compiled by Andermann and Fernández Bravo covers several NCA films and the Brazilian *retomada* –both defined as “post-crisis cinemas” (2013, p. 7)–, based on the question of the return of the real⁸. For Andermann, in fact, it

was the outbreak of the crisis of 2001 what imposed this return on Argentine cinema, by breaking “the charm of a society fiercely spectacularized by financial capitals and their media apparatuses” (2013, p. 224). According to this point of view, in which the return of the real appears as a triumph over the simulacrum of the neoliberal discourse and a restitution of a certain objective truth, the crisis destroyed the (fictitious) promise of Argentina’s entry into the first world and evidenced the exclusion and the misery, whose registry will be constitutive of some films of the NCA.

In any case, Andermann and Fernández Bravo clarify that the return of the real does not refer simply to the “return to poetics of pure indiciality and impregnation of the image by the pro-filmic”, but to the cinematic presence of a “traumatic real” (as Foster [2001] originally stated, following Lacan) that would refer to “experiences that resist being re-inscribed in coherent plots without leaving traces” (2013, p. 8). The main theoretical references here are Bazin, Deleuze and Rancière.

For Andermann and Fernández Bravo, the return of the real in Argentine and Brazilian contemporary cinema implies an articulation between aesthetics and politics that inscribes these cinemas among the “new realisms” of global cinema, against “the audiovisual globality promoted by the large mass media corporations” (2013, p. 9). This idea of the return of the real, which works as a starting point for the book, will find an answer in Aguilar (2015): to him, the slogan is distorted when it is used to signal a return of realism, because it is stripped of its Lacanian foundation, which understands the *real* as the traumatic, that which resists symbolization. For Aguilar, the return of the real is a weak syntagma, which barely “enunciates a desire of the critique for accessing the contemporary and the immediate” (2015, p. 11).

Andermann and Fernández Bravo’s collective study also proposes a balance of the New Argentine Cinema –ten years after the publication of the first book on the subject and fifteen years after *Pizza, birra, faso*–, warning about the exhaustion of some of its aesthetic options. Within this balance perspective, Oubiña’s article (2013) denounces the repetition of certain procedures in the New Argentine Cinema, such as the narrative suspension and the (excessive) confidence in the record. Oubiña warns that these formulas run the risk of becoming a commonplace, a mannerist gesture, meaningless, to the extent that they lose their condition of image-symptom. The author

points out the risk of “a confusion between reality and documentation, between observation and the absence of staging, between the representation of a surface and a lack of density” (2013, p. 41). Oubiña advocates a “critical realism”, capable of combining record and invention to “restore the ambiguity” of the image, i.e., to return its “textural value” (and, with it, its political dimension, its ability to make reality become *strange*) (p. 49).

SOCIOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL VIEWS

Another relevant study, of a collective nature, is the one coordinated by Amatriain (2009), entitled *Una década de Nuevo Cine Argentino (1995-2005). Industria, crítica, formación, estéticas*. The text addresses the first decade of the NCA and proposes an approach framed mainly in Bourdieu’s theoretical contributions. The introduction, by Amatriain, raises the need to consider cinema as “an emerging expression of significant sociocultural processes” (2009, p. 16).

The particularity of this work is its sociological approach, including articles on production circuits, film training spaces, the critique’s role in the origin of the NCA and the challenges of the national film industry. One of the concerns that run through the text has to do with the circulation of the new cinema and its (scarce) reception by the public, a problem that most studies often overlook.

The question regarding the public is also central for Aprea (2008), who states that the Argentine cinema of the 1990s and 2000s no longer manages to appeal to the “great national majorities”, as it would have happened –according to the author– during the democratic spring with the films of Arístarain, Bemberg and Puenzo (2008, p. 45). Aprea argues that the cinema audience fragmented, as a result of a tendency repeated in other countries: “We cannot dream of a mass audience against which to raise ‘the big national problems’, because there is no longer a single model of cinematographic spectator” (p. 94).

Falicov’s study (2007), published in England, focuses on the problems of Argentine cinema as an industry, in a vein similar to that prioritized by Getino (2016) and Amatriain (2009). Falicov poses that Argentine cinema is stressed between a Europeanizing gaze and one that prioritizes the Latin American perspective; between a “wealthy cinema” and a “poor cinema” (2007, p. 9). Consistently with its industrial approach, this study relegates to the background the

films' aesthetic approach and prioritizes, instead, the analysis of the production and exhibition context, State policies and reception statistics. In doing so, it studies not only independent films, but also commercial films.

Most studies on contemporary Argentine cinema omit the historical perspective. In this field there are classic works—those of Domingo Di Núbila, Agustín Mahieu and Jorge Miguel Couselo, followed by the researches of Claudio España, Octavio Getino, Clara Kriger, Ana Laura Lusnich and Cecilia Gil Mariño, among others— that are not usually taken up by the investigations referring to the cinematographic production of the last decades. One of the exceptions to this trend is the book by Nicolás Prividera, *El país del cine* (2016), a compilation of texts by the author, with a clear polemic intention.

Prividera inscribes the New Argentine Cinema in the history of national cinema (and in national History); consequently, he defends the “generational perspective” (2016, p. 18). The author denounces the “historicity deficit” of the NCA and proposes to read it “as part of the Argentine cinema family novel” (p. 21), tracing a genealogy of its different generations. For Prividera, the NCA of the nineties is the “grandson of the generation of the sixties and the son of the seventies” (p. 35), although both filiations would be denied in the films of these directors. The link with the 60s generation has to do with the recovery of some features of neo-realism and *Nouvelle Vague*; that link would resume a line that would have been interrupted by the 1966 coup d'état and the subsequent political radicalization. On the other hand, it is an unrecognized filiation: the directors of the NCA have preferred to consider themselves as orphans.

That reluctance to revise the tradition of national cinema would precisely explain, for Prividera, the difficulties of the NCA to build an audience of its own. According to the author, the relationship with the generation of the seventies—that of the disappeared parents, or possibly incorporated into Menem's “party”— would also be of “disdain or apathy” (2016, p. 50). According to this reading, the only director whose work would make it possible to draw a bridge between the 60s and the 90s would be Leonardo Favio, whose synthesis between “tradition and modernity” (p. 171) would only appear again, in a very different way, in Lucrecia Martel's work.

FINAL COMMENTS

In the last twenty years, cinema has become an increasingly relevant object for cultural studies in Argentina. To a large extent, this is due to the success of the New Argentine Cinema and the opening of new careers and university training spaces linked to film production. Film studies are a field in full consolidation in Argentina (Ciancio, 2013; Kelly Hopfenblatt, 2017)⁹.

That growth has had its limits. The relatively simultaneous flourishing of the New Argentine Cinema and the studies on cinema reverberated in an almost exclusive attention to the films of the NCA on the part of the academia. Consequently, research generally neglected the most commercial contemporary cinema, as well as classic cinema and, in general terms, most of Argentine film production prior to the 1990s (except for some interest in the 60s Generation and in the subsequent militant cinema, which has also been the object of international interest).

The abandonment of the allegory, the reconfiguration of the political dimension, the different conceptions of realism and the return of the real constitute some of the axes that cross the studies on contemporary Argentine cinema, under the influence of authors like Bazin, Deleuze, Rancière, Foster and Jameson. In this regard, another limit that can be noticed when revising literature is the recurrence of the same theoretical references, coming exclusively from the French and American traditions.

A third limitation that can be mentioned has to do with the scarce dialogue between studies on contemporary Argentine cinema and research on other Latin American cinemas (Mexican, Chilean, Colombian, etc.). There only seems to be a more fluid dialogue with research on Brazilian films, as can be seen in Andermann and Fernández Bravo (2013), or in the numerous papers in Portuguese published in the academic journal *Imagofagia*, edited by the Argentine Association of Cinema and Audiovisual Studies (AsAECA).

To end this paper, we believe that the consolidation of the field of contemporary Argentine and Latin American film studies needs greater efforts to gather the contributions, sometimes dispersed, of the different researchers and academics who have been interested in this subject. Specifically, it is necessary

to build bridges between the works that had the greatest impact on national academic circuits and those published in Europe or the United States, which tend to have less local impact. On the other hand, there is also a challenge for the Argentine academia:

to engage in a more fluid dialogue with film studies in other Latin American countries, to establish crossings and discussions to broaden perspectives, as well as to recognize differences and common elements between the different cinemas of the region.

FOOTNOTES

1. Another work that claims the concept of generation is that of Prividera (2016). However, the author argues that the NCA was an “age group” rather than a “generation”, because it failed to articulate a clear project (2016, p. 50). This lack of a common project is, in short, the main reason to discard the notion of generation when referring to the NCA.

2. The essays, critics and interviews referred to the New Argentine Cinema published in the journal *Kilómetro 111*, directed by Emilio Bernini and Domin Choi, have been fundamental to establish reading keys of the NCA that will be retaken by several of the authors mentioned in this paper. Some essays published in the journal *Punto de Vista* by authors such as Bernini, Raúl Beceyro, Rafael Filipelli and David Dubiña have had a similar relevance.

3. “All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, [...] particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel” (Jameson, 1986, p. 69).

4. Cartoccio’s study (2016), for example, takes up the notion of nomadism to think about the drifts of the young characters who leave the paternal home in the NCA films. For Cartoccio, nomadism and sedentarism are the two alternatives presented to the characters as a consequence of “parental and family decline” (p. 29).

5. This link of the political in relation to the female gaze and gender studies is fundamental in other works on recent Argentine cinema, like *Otro punto de vista. Mujer y cine en Argentina* (2005), also by Viviana Rangil, based on interviews, and *Tránsitos de la mirada. Mujeres que hacen cine* (2014), a collective book edited by Paulina Bettendorf and Agustina Pérez Rial.

6. The contrast between transparency and opacity is often linked to the opposition between classical cinema and modern cinema. The transparency of classic cinema has been analyzed by several authors, among them Bazin (1990), defender of the invisible editing, and Bordwell, for whom the style of classic Hollywood cinema is characterized by being “unnoticed” (1996, p. 164).

7. The representation of otherness in contemporary Argentine cinema constitutes the central axis of several studies, among them those of Veliz (2017), Kratje (2017) and Dillon (2016).

8. In English, the title of the book was *New Argentine and Brazilian Cinema. Reality Effects*. In Spanish, *La escena y la pantalla. Cine contemporáneo y el retorno de lo real*. In the translation from English to Spanish, the *reality effects* were replaced (strikingly) by *the return of the real*. And the *New Argentine Cinema*, for *contemporary (Argentine) cinema*.

9. The creation in 2008 of the Argentine Association of Cinema and Audiovisual Studies (AsAECA) is a clear indication of this process of consolidation and growth. The Association was born “with the purpose of nurturing the professionals linked to research in the area of film and audiovisual media studies” (AsAECA, 2010).

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