

— *Monografías* —

CONFRONTING
THE 'DIRTY WAR'
IN ARGENTINE
CINEMA,
1983–1993

MEMORY AND
GENDER IN
HISTORICAL
REPRESENTATIONS

Constanza Burucúa



Colección Támesis
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The systematic illegal persecution and annihilation of political opponents of the 1979–1983 Argentine military dictatorship, commonly known today as the 'Dirty War', became one of the main themes of the nation's cinema after the regime's fall. In this study, while providing a detailed survey of the conditions of production of post-dictatorship Argentine cinema, the author focuses on a selected corpus of films in order to explore how issues of memory, mourning and trauma, together with questions of gender and genre representation, have been dealt with in the cinema that followed the advent of democracy in 1983.

By means of a solid theoretical underpinning and the thorough textual analysis of some canonical films, such as *La historia oficial* and *Sur*, and others less well known, for example *En retirada*, *La amiga*, *El acto en cuestión*, the book offers new insights into contemporary Latin American cinema.

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CONSTANZA BURUCÚA

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TAMESIS

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To Luis Martín Burucúa (1953–1976)
In memoriam

‘History is lived forwards but is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only.’ C. V. Wedgwood

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ABBREVIATIONS

CONADEP	Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons)
ESMA	Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (Navy School of Mechanics)
GCL	Grupo Cine Liberación (Group Cinema Liberation)
INC	Instituto Nacional de Cine (National Institute of Cinematography)
INCAA	Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (National Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts)
NLAC	New Latin American Cinema
OSPAAAL	Organization of Solidarity between Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America
PRONASUR	Proyecto Nacional Sur (National Project of the South)
SOA	School of the Americas
UCR	Unión Cívica Radical
Whisc	Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

This book explores the representation of the 1976–1983 military dictatorship in the Argentine cinema of the decade that followed the return to civilian rule in 1983. At a time when national identity was in need of reshaping, and a new and more egalitarian array of social habits needed to be promoted, film became a privileged arena in which to give image and voice to a new national project. The films produced between 1983 and 1993 bear witness to the historical milieu from which they emerged and the complex relationships between this period and the one immediately preceding it. The study of how the traumatic legacy of the dictatorship is presented in a selected corpus of these films will therefore offer new insights into the defining characteristics and development of the so-called cinema of redemocratization. It will further allow us to ponder the contributions of this cinema to the formation of both a new identity and a historical imagery for a nation that has experienced major social, cultural and political change in the last 30 years.

On 10 December 1983, Raúl Alfonsín became the first democratically elected president of the Argentine Republic after seven years of military rule. Between 1930 and 1976, the Argentine nation witnessed seven *coups d'état*, each followed by an increasingly violent exercise of power by the armed forces, the crudest of all being the 1976–1983 dictatorship. Its legacy was a lost war – the Malvinas / Falklands war (April–June 1982), which, ironically, accelerated the downfall of the regime. The country was left in economic disarray, with thousands of *desaparecidos*, also referred to in English as ‘the disappeared’. The *desaparecidos* – the unavoidable central issue around which the new Argentine democracy was to be built (Vezzetti, 1998) – number 9,000 according to official reports, although human rights organisations have always claimed a correct estimate to be around 30,000.

What happened in Argentina during the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganisation), as the military referred to both their political project and their government, became known internationally as the Dirty War – an expression that today alludes to state terrorism and its associated systematic violation of human rights. Whereas the latter term is central to this study, concerned as it is primarily with the representation of the

recent past in post-dictatorship Argentine cinema, the former will hardly be used here. The reasons for these lexical choices should be elucidated straight away.

The use of the term *Proceso* (process) is refused because it tends to naturalise, and even justify under the form of a process, a political scheme that actually did almost nothing to 'reorganise the nation' which was its purported aim. The little it did do reflected a totalitarian and discriminating understanding of what the Argentine nation was meant to be. The rejection of the military's self-given name, then, aims to avoid what Idelber Avelar describes as 'the torturer's great victory' (2001, 262), namely, 'to define the language in which the atrocity will be named' (262). In turn, the expression Dirty War – although it too was employed during the years of military rule – is used here for two main reasons. Firstly, because it carries within itself the idea that there is something dishonest and unequal about it and, secondly, because as Avelar argues, 'the name of the atrocity—Holocaust, Apartheid—is a proper name, written with a capital letter ... [that] marks its singularity, its resistance to being translated into a common noun' (256). Thus, when using the term Dirty War, which became commonly associated with Argentina's state terrorism and its disappearances (Robben, 2000, 70), I will be referring always to a historically and geographically specific set of events.

Throughout his electoral campaign, Alfonsín, the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR) candidate who became the elected president, tirelessly repeated the catchphrase 'in democracy, we eat, we educate, we live', openly differentiating the future to come from what was already beginning to be perceived as the darkest period in Argentine history. This sense of a 'new beginning' was a discursive constant that characterised the campaign and lasted for at least two years after 1983. There was a clear sense at the time that the 1976–1983 dictatorship was already a part of history. Understandably enough, this aspiration to put behind a past that was nonetheless fairly fresh tended to be articulated, initially, more in the form of testimonial cinema, or even what can be described as reactive cinema – reacting against state violence and the previously imposed censorship – than as a critical approach to recent history and the related national trauma.

Echoing the idea that the 'national question' was indissolubly linked to the 'democratic question', an opinion that gained strength after the military defeat in the South Atlantic (Altamirano, 1982), the film industry became one of the mainstays of the democratic government's discursive strategy to reshape a somewhat damaged national identity. In February 1984, the abolition of censorship was sanctioned and well-respected film maker Manuel Antín was appointed director of the *Instituto Nacional de Cine* (INC – National Institute of Cinematography), later re-named *Instituto Nacional de*

Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (INCAA – National Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts). Antín summarised the government’s interest in the medium as follows:

The government is very much interested in supporting cinema because it considers it not just a vehicle of culture but also a means to communicate with the world, an open window to the exterior that will bear witness to the democracy that we have gained. (In España, 1994, 16)^{1*}

As is evident from this extract, the support given to the industry had a domestic and an international purpose, both of which were effectively accomplished during the first half of Alfonsín’s presidency, before the economic decline that began in 1986. According to INC sources, this state-run institution gave loans for the production of 30 films in 1984, 47 the following year, 41 projects in 1986, and only 28 in 1987 (304). During the same period, Argentine films collected international prizes and awards from around the globe, the Oscar for best foreign language film awarded to Luis Puenzo’s *La historia oficial / The Official Story* (1985) being the most memorable.

It can be claimed, then, that the programme of financial assistance given to the industry by the state initially succeeded in finding the right equilibrium between what Pierre Bourdieu calls the autonomous principle of legitimacy, which determines ‘a hierarchy according to the aesthetic realization or ... the cultural or political configuration of the film object’ (Johnson, 1993, 209), and the heteronomous principle ‘that establishes a hierarchy based on factors external to the filmic text *per se*, especially success in the market-place’ (209). However, such a balance was disrupted after 1987 – a year which marks a crucial turning point. On the one hand, the country’s economic situation was beginning to have a knock-on effect on the industry; on the other, the high profile of Argentine films on the international circuit was not matched by a similar success among national audiences. As I shall argue throughout my work, the successive amnesty laws granted to the military, which commenced in 1986 following the 1985 trial of the military *juntas*, seem to have had a considerable impact on the Argentine spectators’ interest in the national cinema. Accordingly, the audiences’ genuine interest in the recent past immediately after the advent of democracy in 1983 progressively faded

¹ ‘Al gobierno le interesa mucho apoyar al cine, porque lo considera no solamente un vehículo de cultura sino una comunicación con el mundo, una ventana abierta al exterior para dar fe de la democracia que hemos conquistado.’ (In España, 1994, 16).

* Unless otherwise stated, all translations from foreign language sources are my own.

as the economic crisis was reflected in the film industry and the country entered a period of institutionalised oblivion, promoted by the amnesty laws.

Between 1983 and 1993, the Argentine film industry had a cultural prominence, both nationally and internationally, comparable only to that reached during the golden age of this national cinema, that is, the late 1930s and 1940s (España, 1994, 13). The success of Argentine cinema during the decade studied here can be thought of as predicated on the emergence of the Dirty War as a marketed trope of ‘Argentine national culture ... [and] a cinematic construction of Argentineness’ (D’Lugo, 2003, 108). As will become evident throughout this study, the period is characterised by a thematic preference for historical subjects, primarily ones deriving from the recent past. It therefore seems pertinent to point out at this stage that to understand the decade in question appropriately, one should begin by explaining its delimitation and then presenting the successive and distinct stages which characterise it.

Consensually understood as the period of cultural redemocratization (Grant, 1996, 19), this decade begins in 1983, a year marked by a concrete political and historical parameter – the return of democracy – and ends in 1993. Although no remarkable political changes or events took place during this year, its relevance and appropriateness as a delimiting date relies on two different factors. On the one hand, it was the first time in more than 50 years (since the military coup of 1930) that the country had enjoyed the absence from power of the military for an entire decade. Despite a couple of unsuccessful attempts at insurgence by certain factions within the armed forces between 1987 and 1988, by 1993 the general feeling was that the democratic system was stable and definitively reinstalled in the country. This differentiates the period in question from that of 1945–1955, during which General Perón ruled the country for ten years but was overthrown by a *coup* known as *Revolución Libertadora*, which will be further referred to in Chapter 3. This newly acquired democratic continuity, then, was in itself a reason to celebrate and everyone – from governmental institutions to the people in general – perceived it as such, transforming an otherwise irrelevant year into a significant one. Among the many commemorative programmes and activities that took place during that year, the *Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación* (Secretary of Culture of the Nation) commissioned Argentine film scholar Claudio España to write a book on the cinema of the 1983–1993 decade. Thus, *Diez años de cine en democracia* (*Ten Years of Cinema in Democracy*, [1994]), a book to which I shall return towards the end of this introduction, appeared as something of a celebration of a decade that was nearing its end. On the other hand, the year 1993 marks not just the tenth anniversary of the reinstatement of civil liberties but also signals the end of a decade of filmic concern with a

period that was receding into the more distant past. After that year, and until 1999 when Marco Bechis's *Garage Olimpo* was released, Argentine cinema remained almost silent about a period that was, and, in fact, remains, traumatic for the nation and its people.

As previously mentioned, the decade examined in this study can, in turn, be divided into two main phases. According to different criteria or approaches, these two phases can be read either in terms of a 1980s' 'testimonial cinema', as opposed to a 1990s' 'testament cinema' (Triquell, 1997), or as a cinema that initially accompanied the optimism that characterised the first years of the reinstated democracy, but which progressively, and more or less voluntarily, began to reveal either the cultural impact of the amnesty laws or the consequences of the economic crisis (or both). These two stages can further be distinguished in relation to the difference between the films made during the Alfonsín years (1983–1989), which, despite the economic fluctuations, were predominantly state financed, and those produced under the presidency of his successor, Peronist Carlos Menem (1989–1999), during which time there developed, and ultimately prevailed, the system of international co-productions.

As this brief contextualisation would suggest, this research is thereby inscribed within the field of study that results from the encounter between film studies and history, and is comprehensively informed by theoretical matters concerning national cinemas. Its aim is to analyse several key themes and some of the representational strategies through which the 1976–1983 military dictatorship has been presented in Argentine fiction films released after the return of democracy and throughout the following decade. The research is focused on the different types of historical discourse that the films have constructed, exploring what they could show and say about the period and the society in question, according to their relative proximity to the historical events, their generic inscription and/or their authorial perspective. I shall also be looking at the relationship between cinema, nation and cultural identity in order to outline the medium's role in the complex development of moral reconstruction and collective mourning. By applying theoretical concepts which have seldom been associated with the study of Argentine cinema, the analysis will be focused on the way in which these questions have been dealt with and represented in audio-visual fictional discourses which should also be taken as rich historical sources of information regarding the period 1983–1993.

This study will begin, then, by establishing its positioning in relation to the contemporary debates surrounding both the specificity of film history as a discipline and those concerning cinematic representations of the past – their characteristics and their relationship with other types of historical discourse.

Such issues will be addressed in the first chapter where the theoretical framework that guides the entire work will be outlined. This chapter will be divided into several sections, starting with an overview of the main trends in the historiography of film history, which is to say, the main approaches through which it has been and can be written. Special attention will be paid to the pioneering works of Marc Ferro and Pierre Sorlin, the initiators of a French tradition that today has Michèle Lagny as one of its main representatives. Subsequently, before reviewing Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery's seminal book, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (1985), I shall discuss the current debates regarding cinematographic historical representations which, in Robert Rosenstone, have found their most articulate expression. In the second section, I will introduce the main concepts that are implied by the category of national cinema and how it relates to a national identity and the thematisation of the nation. These arguments will be accompanied by the presentation of Thomas Elsaesser's work on the representation of fascism, which became clearly influential as regards my own approach to post-dictatorship Argentine cinema. Closely related to such considerations, questions concerning historical traumas will be approached in the final section of this chapter, whereby I shall focus on the difficulties of, and the conditions for, the representability of national trauma and mourning work. Particular attention will be paid to the intellectual debates surrounding memory and (cinematographic) representation that the legacy of the Dirty War has produced.

After presenting the historical background and having clarified the conceptual basis of the research, the second chapter will be dedicated to questions relating to Third Cinema. Coined in the late 1960s in opposition both to the commercial and mainstream First Cinema and to the *auteur* and intellectually elitist Second Cinema, the idea of a politically committed and revolutionary Third Cinema has, until quite recently, dominated not only the debates surrounding Latin American cinema, but also its readings. Until the very late 1980s, when some scholars began critically to challenge the political implications and related aesthetic principles on which Third Cinema was based, it seemed almost unimaginable to think about cinematic representations of history and political discourses in Latin American films outside the territory delimited by Third Cinema.

Today, it would be misleading to read Third Cinema without acknowledging the consequences of the historical events that followed the revolutionary euphoria that originally inspired the concept. In other words, the subsequent historical facts ask us to think about Third Cinema and its ideological assumptions differently. While concerned with how to represent recent history, many post-1983 Argentine films were also politically

committed to the restoration of democratic institutions in the country and a stable and sustained return to civilian rule. The political dimension of these films, however, differs drastically from that found in the cinema that preceded the 1976 *coup d'état*, which was politically more radical. Thus, it seems essential to revisit this concept, both historically and theoretically, for an updated and comprehensive understanding of contemporary Latin American and, more specifically, post-dictatorship Argentine cinema, which was also political but by no means revolutionary.

Although most of the best known films of the 1983–1993 period, such as Héctor Olivera's *La noche de los lápices / The Night of the Pencils* (1986), Carlos Sorín's *La película del rey / A King and His Movie* (1986), Eliseo Subiela's *Hombre mirando al sudeste / Man Facing Southeast* (1987), cannot be catalogued under the label of any particular genre, the remaining chapters of this book will examine three exemplary modes of representation through which the Argentine cinema of the period has dealt with the legacy of the dictatorship. Thus, in the third chapter I shall focus on a group of films which can be categorised either as political thrillers or as paramilitary thrillers, a local variation and adaptation of the genre, which, I shall argue, functioned as a transitional genre between the years of dictatorship and the new democracy, progressively revealing the moral decadence of the former and becoming the first and, to some extent, the most appropriate genre to represent acts of state terrorism explicitly. The fourth chapter will be concerned with gender matters, approached in relation to female representations and questions relating to the study of melodrama and the complex and multifaceted notion of women's films. The analysis of three films centred on female protagonists, the first from 1985, the next from 1988 and the last from 1993, summarises in part the decade under scrutiny from the point of view of women who gradually became self-conscious historical actors. The fifth and final chapter will be dedicated to metaphoric representations of history which will be analysed as discursive strategies with sufficient complexity to both transmit and represent traumatic historical experiences. As in the previous chapter I will be dealing here with texts that are representative of the different moments and changing moods of the period under examination. Finally, in a separate appendix, I shall provide the synopses of the fiction films that form my corpus, presented in alphabetical order.

Many scholars have worked on the cinema of the redemocratization years, expressing their views in various books and articles (most of which will be presented and discussed where appropriate throughout this book). Yet, the complexity of the topic and the fact that most of the films produced during the period are under studied, both in terms of textual analysis and in relation to theoretical debates generated within the field of film studies, allow for new

approaches. Thus, since this book aims to offer a set of readings which seek to enrich the study of specific films in order to deepen our knowledge and appreciation of the Argentine cinema of redemocratization, it seems sensible to refer briefly to the most relevant and influential books on this topic in order to position this work in relation to them. The previously mentioned *Diez años de cine en democracia*, a collection of essays compiled by España, is the most complete review of the cinema of those years currently available in the Spanish language. One of the remarkable qualities of this book is that although it concentrates on one particular period, it invokes previous Argentinian film history as a necessary frame of reference. While not as exhaustive as one would wish in terms of the analysis of the film texts themselves, it still offers a detailed panorama of the cinema of the redemocratization period, which is further enriched by copious references to extra-cinematographic sources, such as interviews, newspaper comments, and statistics.

Amidst the books available in the English language, the first one to be published was Tim Barnard's *Argentine Cinema* (1986). Besides the general survey of the history of Argentine cinema written by the author, its main achievement is perhaps the divulgation in the Anglophone world of a whole range of heterogeneous material concerning Argentine cinema, which includes interviews with film makers Fernando Birri and Octavio Getino, writings by Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar on some local films, and a report on the state of the national industry in 1985. Three years later, the British Film Institute published *The Garden of Forking Paths: Argentine Cinema*, co-edited by John King and Nissa Torrents, and in 1990, *Magical Reels: a History of Cinema in Latin America*, John King's already classic book on Latin American cinema, was published. In it, the British scholar offers one of the earliest historical accounts of a cinema that was still largely in the making.

With a narrower scope than any of these books – for my study seeks neither to cover every element of Argentine cinema in the redemocratization years, nor to offer an overview of the whole history of this national cinema (let alone that of Latin America) – this study's main intention is to articulate an analytical and systematic study of a specific series of issues relating to the Argentine cinema of the period in question: how it represented recent history, what kind of historical discourses it constructed, and which ideas of nation and identity it articulated. Hence, since this study does not aspire to provide a full filmic account of the period, such questions will be addressed in relation to a selected corpus of films in which these matters have been eloquently represented, even if in some cases hardly studied. To accomplish this purpose I shall apply theoretical concepts originating within the field of film studies,

always substantiating the arguments put forward with detailed textual analysis, the preferred methodological tool of this research. Thus, with the exception of the first chapter, which is entirely dedicated to the exposition of the general theoretical framework that guides this investigation, all other sections will be structured around an appropriately justified set of concepts which, having been presented, discussed and historically contextualised in relation to my object of study, will guide the historical analysis of a selected corpus of films.

As has already been suggested, the period studied in this book has been characterised by the national cinema's restless attempt to understand and explain Argentina's recent traumatic past. Such a need was captured by something like 50 films of different genres and visual styles with varying degrees of success. I chose to work on a sample that is approximately one fifth of the total number of films that dealt with the different aspects of this recent past and its legacy. The selection I have made is based on several different factors, such as the films' popularity, their influential appeal in subsequent Argentine films and the kind of questions they pose about certain aspects of the representation of history. Although in each chapter I shall further justify the relevance of the films that form my corpus, it is worth pointing out that, having watched most of these fifty films either at the time of their release or during the course of my research, I have found that different thematic, generic, and stylistic trends emerged. By focusing on the political / paramilitary thriller, on films for women and metaphorical films or historical allegories, I have been able to look at different representational approaches to history and to focus on my main thematic interest, namely, the representation of state terrorism and its social consequences. It should not surprise the reader, then, if some emblematic films of the period such as those of María Luisa Bemberg: *Camila* (1984), *Miss Mary* (1986), *Yo, la peor de todas / I the Worst of All* (1990), *De eso no se habla / I Don't Want to Talk About It* (1993); Subiela's previously mentioned *Hombre mirando al sudeste / Man Facing Southeast*; Olivera's *No habrá más penas ni olvido / Funny Dirty Little War* (1983); and Miguel Pereira's *La deuda interna / The Debt* (1988) among others, are not analysed in this study.

These are the reasons why I have preferred to focus on a limited number of case studies, all of which I consider to be good exponents of a genre, of a historical moment and an economic conjuncture, or of an idea. Richard Dyer has argued with regard to textual analysis that, 'at best it seeks to show the way that the textual facts of a film itself, its narrative organization, its address to the viewer, its visual and aural rhetoric, construct, not necessarily coherently or without contradictions, a perception of social reality' (1998, 8). By choosing to carry out exhaustive readings of key films, then, I hope not just

to understand the crystallised perception provided by those texts of the social reality I work on, but also to translate it, both historically and culturally. For if, on the one hand, the films I study deserve to be thoroughly examined as historical sources of information on a period of deep political, social, and moral change, they also offer me the opportunity to translate to the interested reader, at least partly, the culture in which I grew up and the period through which I lived during my teenage years and early adult life.

Together with Christine Gledhill, I believe that

[i]f readings are determined by the social and subjective formation of the reader, then the readings tell us less about a text, than what for a particular group of readers the text makes possible. ... Textual analysis is not simply a rarefied, academic activity, but participates in the cultural production, negotiation and circulation of meanings. (1995, 78)

One afternoon in 1984, while growing up in Buenos Aires, I went with a group of girl friends from school to the cinema to see Maria Luisa Bemberg's *Camila* (1984). We were between 12 and 13 years old, we took public transport to get to the city centre and entered the cinema without being accompanied by an adult. In later years, some of my friends named their daughters Camila. I know for certain that the film had a great emotional and intellectual impact on me. I still remember vividly how I loved *Camila* and how that fondness was in some way connected to my feeling that it was a meaningful film and that I myself was participating in history simply by having seen it there and then. It is perhaps that experience, alongside those that followed as a spectator of such films as *La historia oficial* and Héctor Olivera's *La noche de los lápices / Night of the Pencils* (1986), which ultimately motivates this attempt to coherently systematise, and communicate to others, my own story, inscribed within the broader history of Argentina's coming to terms with its recent and traumatic past.

In focus:
On film and history,
national cinema and mourning work

Introduction

In this chapter I shall present the theoretical and conceptual basis that underpins my research on the representation of the Dirty War in the Argentine cinema of the first ten years that followed the return to a democratic system in 1983. Considering that this investigation is particularly focused on the historical discourses that have been delivered by a group of selected films which, through different genres and narrative strategies, engage with this recent past, and given that this study aims to be inscribed in the field of film history, several issues concerning the relationship between film and history need to be addressed from the beginning. The study of the history of Argentine cinema has seldom been approached in relation to the principles and the categories that film history, as part of the broader discipline of film studies, builds on. Thus, the theoretical nature of this chapter is due to the need to position this research in the field of film history and, for that purpose, it seems opportune to begin by outlining the development of the discipline itself.

The mapping of the growth of, and changes in, film history over the last couple of decades will show how, in the search for the discipline's specificity, two main trends have developed, each building on the other's contributions. On one side are those scholars who have centred their work on the relationships between film history, its object of study and its methods, and the broader field of history. On the other are those academic studies which have concentrated on the relationships between film and history by considering how the latter is, has been, or can be represented in a film text; in other words, they question the possibilities and the limits of a historical discourse in cinematic terms. Central to these two main lines of research that very often overlap is the preoccupation with issues of historiography. They will not be absent here, for this work shall also be positioned in relation to them.

Some of the most influential and pioneering writings in the heterogeneous

field of film history come from historians, their primary object of interest being history rather than film. Thus, this chapter will begin by introducing the different approaches to film proposed by historians, primarily from two different schools and traditions. The main challenge for film historians, then, is to demarcate an autonomous, though somewhat dependent, domain for film history by privileging film texts as their focus of attention. Some of the most relevant works in this field of study will be examined in a later section of this chapter. Finally, I will concentrate on issues associated with the notion of national cinema(s), since this concept is often implied in film history research (as it will be in this investigation). In the final section, special attention will be paid to questions of national identity and national trauma in relation to the peculiarities of the Argentine scenario during the dictatorship's aftermath and the scholarly debates that originated around the question of memory and representation.

Preliminary questions

In 1971 Christian Metz published *Langage et cinéma*. Still regarded as a groundbreaking text in the French academic context of film studies, the book is dedicated to establishing the basis for a semiotic approach to the film text. Metz's work is particularly relevant to the aims of this study for two reasons: firstly, for his basic distinction between 'cinematographic fact' and 'film fact'; and, secondly, for the definition of 'history of cinema' that he advanced in the arena of the late 1960s and early 1970s film theory.

Metz points out that, while the 'cinematographic fact' (*fait cinématographique*) appears as a 'vast and complex socio-cultural phenomenon' (1971, 5), where the technological, the economic and the sociological aspects predominate, the 'film fact' (*fait filmique*) is a much more strictly delimited object, consisting in a 'punctual significant discourse' (1971, 7). Such a distinction between 'cinematographic fact' and 'film fact' could be taken as a fundamental principle in the demarcation of the different areas of study related to cinema as a social phenomenon, on the one hand, and to the film as a circumscribed text, on the other. Yet, throughout *Langage et cinéma*, Metz acknowledges that film itself is also a 'multi-dimensional phenomenon' (8) that has motivated studies from different fields of research, such as psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology and aesthetics. It is among the aesthetic approaches to film that Metz locates what he calls cinema history:

The discipline known as the 'History of Cinema' (which is very often the history of the major films' succession) is an area of the History of Art, or at least it should deserve to be, if it was not sometimes blocked by irrational

prejudices of cultural legitimacy, related to the unequal ‘nobility’ of the different means of expression. (9)¹

Two relevant issues arise from this quotation. The first one is that the more recent considerations about the status of both a ‘history of cinema’ and a ‘film history’, as specific and different disciplines, seem to be more concerned with their affiliations to social history and/or to cultural studies rather than to art history. This became particularly evident after the encounter between what I would call the French ‘school’ and the Anglo-American approach to the study of film, mainly derived from the field of cultural studies. The second issue is the matter of the cultural legitimacy of these disciplines. The work of the different authors that will be presented in this review will provide proof of how this search for legitimacy has always been, from the 1970s until the present day, at the centre of the debates. Thus, by building on and discussing the main concepts coined in the founding works of the field of study that has developed from the encounter between ‘film’ and ‘history’, this investigation aims to validate the legitimacy of this approach for the Argentine cinema of the post-dictatorship years, and to question the validity of the cinematic discourses on a recent historical period (the dictatorship years) as historical discourses.

History looking at film

The contributions of Marc Ferro and Pierre Sorlin

The outcome of the events of 1968 and the political and theoretical debates that surrounded them, as far as film theory is concerned, was ‘the encounter of Marxism and psychoanalysis on the terrain of semiotics’ (Stephen Heath in Anthony Easthope, 1998, 52). Metz’s work as a whole, despite the controversies that it generated amongst film scholars and commentators after the appearance of the *grande syntagmatique* in 1966–7 (translated into English in 1974), is perhaps one of the clearest examples of this theoretical ‘encounter’. In Easthope’s words, ‘the achievement of film theory to Metz is to establish the principle that in cinema any visual element may be turned to expressive purpose ... This renders the whole visual, aural, and narrative effect of cinema available to inspection for its significance, the meaning it

¹ ‘La discipline appelée “histoire du cinéma” (qui n’est le plus souvent que l’histoire de la succession des principaux films) est une branche de l’histoire de l’art, ou du moins mériterait de l’être, et n’en est parfois empêchée que par des préjugés irrationnels de légitimité culturelle, relatifs à l’inégale “noblesse” des divers moyens d’expression’. (In Metz, 1971, 9).

produces' (55). The post-1968 theoretical debates affected not only film theory but also the field of history and the social sciences in general. As Michèle Lagny points out, history as a 'discipline inserted itself ... in the collective of the "humanities", sometimes attached, *à l'anglo-saxonne*, to the "social sciences"', which implies that 'at this point, if there is a historical science, it is an interdisciplinary science' (1992, 68–69).² In this light, the works on film and history, and on film and sociology, that Marc Ferro and Pierre Sorlin produced in France during the 1970s have to be understood as very much determined by these debates and as concrete practices of this understanding of history as an interdisciplinary science.

Following Metz's distinction between the social dimension of the cinematographic fact and the film fact as a circumscribed significant discourse, Ferro, despite being a historian, is principally interested in the films themselves which he understands as testimonies or witnesses of the past. According to his conceptualisation of films as sources and agents of history, every film is a historical source because its images are (mediated) visual information about the past (which, in this case, commenced with the birth of the medium in 1895). These images can be used as archive material by the historian since every film constitutes its own 'museum', contained in the objects, gestures, attitudes and social behaviours that every film reveals through its images. At the same time, every film functions also as a historical agent 'by the way it affects people's imaginary universe, and by the very imaginary universe that it conveys' (1988, 82).

The understanding of films as sources and agents of history appears to be very productive, not only when dealing with documentaries or newsreels but also when examining fiction films, which is the case in this investigation, since, as Argentine film commentator Raúl Beceyro has argued, 'all the Argentine films made since 1984 are crafted in a state of tension with Argentine history. Through very different means, approaches and perspectives, each one of those films wants to narrate Argentine history. The largest group is constituted by films that refer to the military dictatorship' (1989, 30).³ In this study, then, a particular type of fiction film will be analysed, for the films of my chosen corpus, according to a genre categorisation that I will refer to

² '[N]otre discipline est venue s'insérer ... dans le collectif 'sciences humaines', parfois limité, *à l'anglo-saxonne*, aux 'sciences sociales'. Désormais, si science historique il y a, c'est une science interdisciplinaire.' (In Lagny, 1992, 68–9).

³ 'Todos los filmes argentinos hechos a partir del 84 se elaboran en un estado de tensión con la, llamémosla, historia argentina. Con medios, enfoques y perspectivas muy diferentes cada uno de esos films quiere narrar la historia argentina. El grupo más numeroso está integrado por los films que se refieren a la dictadura militar (1976–1983).'' (In Becerro, 1989, 30).