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# Uruguayan Cinema, 1960-2010. Text, Materiality, Archive

**By Beatriz Tadeo Fuica**

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**Reviewed by Isabel Seguí**

Some books are more instrumental than others. Beatriz Tadeo Fuica's recently published *Uruguayan Cinema, 1960-2010. Text, Materiality, Archive* is one of those volumes that comes to fill a long overdue gap in research. Moreover, the author does so in a monography that belongs to and acknowledges a new wave of local film scholarship conducted by her own generation of young Uruguayan film historians. The result is a comprehensive review of fifty years of cinema history in the South American country, taking into account not only the filmic texts (aesthetics and representation) but their physicality and the material course followed by these 'bodies' —towards preservation or vanishing— throughout different support media.

Tadeo's book is the distilled result of her thorough doctoral dissertation conducted in an Anglo-Saxon university (St Andrews). The text was awarded the Publication Prize by the Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland in 2014. In my view, the author's approach and methodology benefit from a dual positionality, her origin as a Uruguayan national and the fact of having developed her writing in a British academic environment. Tadeo is an insider; she understands Uruguayan national history and politics in an all-encompassing way, and this translates to her interpretation of the films, which is nuanced, marked by a focus on complexity. Furthermore, there is a constant reminder on the part of the author of the tensions and negotiations present in each historical period and how they affect Uruguayan filmmaking in all its facets. In addition to being an insider, she has received a positive influence from the academic culture within which she raised her research. This can be noticed in the theoretical framework and the writing of the book, in particular, the precise communication of ideas. The author balances her two origins and influences in a way that guarantees the completeness of the result.

If the aim of the editors, and the author, was to situate the volume as a baseline for the under-researched field of Uruguayan cinema, the target has been achieved by its strong structure, strictly chronological order, and clear layout, which makes it easy to use as a reference book. After the introduction, there are four chapters. The first one is devoted to the cinema of the long 1960s. The second is focused on the cinema produced

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during the dictatorship (1973-1985). The third addresses the transition to democracy (1985-2000). And the last chapter analyses Uruguayan cinema during the first ten years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Every chapter is divided into the same sections: a historical contextualisation, a succinct account of the country's tendencies in filmmaking during the period, and an in-depth analysis of three filmic texts and their materiality and current archival situation.

This last perspective, is probably, one of the main contributions of the book to the broader field of Latin American film studies. As the author notes in the conclusion: "the approach presented here, incorporating in the films' analyses the experience of the archive and the condition of the copy used for research, could certainly be beneficial for the study of the cinema of several other nations, especially those which do not have an established film heritage and filmmaking tradition."[\[1\]](#) This is an exciting methodological suggestion for those researching marginal cinematographies, and Tadeo's book showcases how useful it is to track the copies that we hold, to understand the palimpsestic conformation of the filmic bodies on which the researchers are working.

Another significant contribution of the author is her interest in all types of formats and gauges. Tadeo advocates, programmatically, for a revision of the definition of cinema adapting it to the material context of production. In order to recover cinema history in countries without film industry, the researcher is forced to look beyond the production of feature films in 35mm. Consequently, it becomes an indispensable shift in the study of Latin American cinema in any national context to include small gauges and video as preeminent objects of research.

Following the last premise, the book takes twelve variegated film texts as case studies, and through them, the author transmits the fascinating sophistication behind every film process. For instance, the first movie analysed is the short documentary *La ciudad en la playa* (*The City on the Beach*; Ferruccio Musitelli with Sheila Henderson and Juan José Noli, 1961), funded by the National Office of Tourism to promote Uruguay as a vacation destination. This piece that started being promotional material has ended up being part of the canon of the Latin American experimental and avant-garde cinema. Or, the case of the documentary *Carlos: Cine-retrato de un caminante en Montevideo* (*Carlos: Film-portrait of a Homeless Walker in Montevideo*; Mario Handler, 1965) funded by an educational institution, the University Film Institute of Universidad de la República, with the intention of conducting a sociological research but which ended up being a piece of political denunciation due to the approach provided by its director. The film that closes the first chapter is *Refusila* (GEC, 1969) as a case study of the militant cinema developed in the country.

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In the second chapter devoted to the cinema during the dictatorship, Tadeo shows how the *inxiled* artists managed to make subversive films using apparently innocent formats such as children's animation in the case of *El honguito feliz* (*The Happy Mushroom*; CINECO, 1976). Or how the dictatorship collaborated with American educational film companies in the creation of docudramas such as *Gurí* (Eduardo Darino, 1978). Or the strategies used to interpret the events of the time critically —while avoiding censorship at the same time— using filmic reenactments of historical events, like in the case of the film *Mataron a Venancio Flores* (*Venancio Flores was Killed*; Juan Carlos Rodríguez Castro, 1982).

In chapter three are addressed the post-dictatorship moment and the transition to the video era. In that period, both state and television channels started supporting films such as *El cordón de la vereda* (*The Kerb*; Esteban Schroeder, 1987). Moreover, other commercial and political and technological complexities of Uruguayan cinema are addressed here, using the coproduction *El dirigible* (*The Airship*; Pablo Dotta, 1994) and the state-funded *Una forma de bailar* (*A Way of Dancing*; Álvaro Buela, 1997) as case studies.

The last chapter addresses *25 Watts* (Pablo Stoll and Juan Pablo Rebella, 2001), a milestone of Uruguayan cinema at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that marked the start of the producing company Control Z, which has built an international reputation. The second film analysed is *Hit! Historia de las canciones que hicieron historia* (*Hit! History of Songs that Made History*; Claudia Abend and Adriana Loeff, 2008), an indy documentary about the political use of popular music by the dictatorship. The last case study of the book is a fully digital production *Reus* (Pablo Fernández, Alejandro Pi and Eduardo Piñeiro, 2010). Here the author reflects on how the disappearance of film stock has allowed for a democratisation of the commercial access for marginal national cinematographies, such as the Uruguayan.

Through the pages of *Uruguayan Cinema, 1960-2010. Text, Materiality, Archive*, the reader navigates a universe of iconic institutions —such as SODRE (Official Service for Radio-television) or Cinemateca del Tercer Mundo (Third World Cinematheque)—, cinematic collectives —such as CINECO (Film Cooperative), GEC (Experimental Film Group), CEMA (Centre for Audiovisual Media), and individual filmmakers— although the emphasis is never auteurist. Tadeo has combed the institutional archives, has interviewed and accessed the personal files of a myriad of filmmakers and has established fruitful personal relationships with them that permeate the text of the book. Outstandingly, the author manages to keep accessible and clear the enormous amount of information behind this history of fifty years of Uruguayan cinema, without losing any rigour or simplifying excessively the portrait. Finally, in her conclusion, Tadeo

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invites other investigators to further the research conducted by her and her colleagues of GESTA (Group of Audiovisual Studies based at Universidad de la República), because Uruguay is undergoing momentous change not only regarding audiovisual studies but film heritage policies, funding bodies, film contests and alternative exhibition outlets. Tadeo's book has arrived in the right moment to help to ground all this effervescence into a solid —although flexible and purposely unfinished— account of Uruguayan cinema.

## Notes

[1] Beatriz Tadeo Fuica. *Uruguayan Cinema. Text, Materiality, Archive*. Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2017: 149.