

Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2004

Ellipsis and insurrection: Argentina, media, experiment, and liberation

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Suggested citation:

McIntosh, David (2004) Ellipsis and insurrection: Argentina, media, experiment, and liberation. Fuse Magazine, 27 (3). pp. 18-29. ISSN 0838-603X Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/883/>

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Ellipsis and Insurrection: Argentina, Media, Experiment and Liberation David McIntosh



We've turned ideology into blood, saliva, sperm,
death, exile, resistance
A serenely violent liberation of the hunger
of consciousness
The problem now is language
A revolution which does not permanently
revolutionize its language, alphabet,
gestures and looks
Becomes reactionary or dies

— Fernando Birri, *For a New New New Latin American Cinema*, 1985

We make films to tell stories. We are writing the story
of our history. We are telling a story, our history,
Argentina's story ...

— *La Bisagra de la Historia* (The Hinge of History), 2002



Stills from the Venteveo collective's *La Bisagra de la Historia*, 2002

Frantic images of a violent police assault on the people of Buenos Aires. Slow motion images of pillars of smoke rising up from the city streets, of clouds of tear gas spreading through crowds of protesters, of police firing on unarmed people from the back of speeding vans. Deathly still images of bodies lying in the street. *La Bisagra de la Historia* tells a visceral video story of a history of insurrection and repression in Argentina in December 2001, a story set in a moment of failed globalization and violent economic collapse, and a story of popular resistance. An act of insurrection itself, *La Bisagra de la Historia* is one of many such works to emerge from the events of December 2001 which not only tell that immediate history but which reach back into Argentina's past to recuperate a history of artistic insurrection and experimentation and to rebuild a brutalized society.

Reaganomics, voodoo economics, supply-side economics, Washington Consensus, Wild West capitalism, flexible global capital, structural adjustment, IMF discipline, free-trade agreements, post-fordist economics, Conservative Party of Canada free-market campaign

platform. There are many names for, and many incarnations of, the neo-liberal economic model of privatization, deregulation and downsizing that spread throughout the world since it was first enshrined as global gospel truth and proselytized by the fundamentalist Thatcher-Reagan regime in the early 1980s. As it was applied in country after country, this model

provoked near economic collapses in Mexico, Russia, Thailand, Indonesia and Korea, but each time disaster was staved off at the last minute by IMF or USA rescue loans to protect their own investments. The model was applied nowhere more brutally and completely than in Argentina in the 1990s, where President Carlos Menem sold every state asset — airlines, natural gas operations, water services, telephone systems — to multinational corporations. He also eliminated public-interest regulation of the activities of those corporations, weakened labour laws to the point of irrelevance and hacked state expenditures on every public program, from education to pensions. This new Argentina was held up by the IMF as a poster

child, a shining example of the potential of the “Third World” to completely reconstruct itself and enter the new millennium on sound global economic terms. But Argentina’s perfect free market rapidly transformed into a perfect nightmare when, in December 2001, a run on the Argentinean peso exploded into a mass flight of capital where over \$40 billion dollars in cash were hustled out of the country in two days. The multinational corporate smash-and-grab left the Argentinean state’s cupboard bare and forced it to suspend payments on its then \$120 billion international debt. Argentina had been sacked and left bankrupt, and this time no one came to the rescue.

On 19 December 2001, millions of suddenly penniless and enraged Argentineans took to — and stayed in — the streets across the country, banging empty pots and

barter exchanges where people brought their medications to trade with each other. Out of this post-global commune arose the *Que se vayan todos* (Get rid of them all) movement, a mass popular call for the removal of all politicians, court justices, bureaucrats, bank officials and corporate heads. In parallel with the unfolding of this remarkable insurrectional process, independent media production exploded in a variety of new forms that reconnected with Argentina’s history of media insurrection, which had been suppressed since the 1970s. Many Argentinean activist artists and intellectuals took up the challenge of reaching back in history to examine the last twenty-five years, from the beginning of the murderous Videla military dictatorship in 1976 to the economic collapse of 2001, identifying the period as a broad surface on which the neo-liberal model had been consistently played out. As political



Stills from the *Venteveo* collective's *La Bisagra de la Historia*, 2002

pans, trashing and burning banks, and looting grocery stores for food they no longer had the money to buy. They also formed local *asambleas populares* (people’s assemblies) to build a network of alternative direct democracies. State repression of the mass popular insurrection was swift, as various armed forces fought to take control, killing at least forty citizens, leading to even more determined resistance by the millions of Argentineans occupying the streets. President Fernando De La Rúa was forced to resign and flee in disgrace. The mobilized mass of Argentinean citizens grew even stronger as self-management and self-organization initiatives grew out from the *asambleas populares* into a range of collective survival initiatives. These ranged from open community kitchens to pharmaceutical drug

theorist Attilio Boron has suggested, the 2001 collapse marked “the end of the cycle of neo-liberal hegemony in Argentina’s public life. This quarter century long stage extends from the dying moments of Isabel Peron’s government to today.”²

Clearly, there were activist intentions and oppositional themes played out in Argentinean film and video between 1976 and 2001, notably in dramatic feature films addressing the legacy of the military dictatorship, like Adolfo Aristarain’s *Tiempo de Revancha* (A Time of Revenge, 1981), Luis Puenza’s *La historia oficial* (The Official Story, 1985), and Hector Olivera’s *La noche de los lapices* (The Night of the Pencils, 1986). Most recently Marco Bechi’s *Garage Olimpo* (2000) and Albertina Carri’s

Los rubios (The Blondes, 2003), have presented innovative approaches to this important socio-historical dramatic tradition. A number of documentaries were also produced in this twenty-five-year period that exposed the brutalities of the military dictatorship, including David Blaustein's *Cazadores de utopías* (Utopia Hunters, 1995) and *Botín de Guerra* (War Booty, 1999). In 2001, just before the economic collapse, a range of documentaries took up the more recent history of the increasingly devastating effects of Menem's neo-liberal model. Grupo Boedo's *Aqua de Fuego* (Fire Water, 2001) took as its starting point Menem's 1995 privatization of YPF, the national oil production company. It examines the growth of long-term unemployment into riots and road blockades by *piqueteros* (unemployed picketers who organized into a national movement) and food looting by the suddenly unemployed oil workers in three provincial cities. Alejandro Moujan's outstanding documentary *Las Palmas, Chaco* (2001) examined the long-term effects of Menem's 1989 closure of the Las Palmas state-owned sugar-cane factory in the desperately poor northern province of Chaco, which left an entire town without any hope of employment or income. And *Matanza* (2001), by the *Grupo Documental 1º de Mayo* (May Day Documentary Group), followed the growth of a movement of unemployed workers in 1997 in the poor Buenos Aires suburb of Matanzas, to fight further weakening of labour laws and huge increases in privatized water and electricity costs.

All of the works mentioned are important in their own right, but do not fulfil Fernando Birri's call for a continuing revolution in media language, an approach firmly established in Argentinean cinema in the two decades leading up to the 1976 military dictatorship. It was media work produced after the 2001 collapse and in the midst of the popular rebellion that recuperated the liberationist/experimentalist tradition repressed by the military dictatorship twenty-five years earlier. To more fully comprehend this elliptical relationship between present and past, it is necessary to return to the insurrectionist moment preceding the 1976 coup and the role assumed by insurrectionist filmmakers then.

cosmunism communism cosmic and magical
for a cosmic, delirious and lumpen cinema
of completely questionable methods
(but every operation is a demonstration that

Utopias can be made real)
madness and rigor taken in hand
a confirmation of a cinema for mutants
a total cinema and hope for communication
a new game of the mind
(but every operation is a demonstration that

Utopias can be made real)
ideologizing everything but sensualizing everything
thinking with our guts:
cosmunism

— Fernando Birri,

Cosmunism: The Cosmic Communist Manifesto, 1976³

This political-poetic text from filmmaker Fernando Birri sets the stage for understanding the principles underpinning the historical trajectory of media insurrection in Argentina. Acknowledged as the father of New Latin American cinema, Birri's theories and practice of film as an ongoing political and aesthetic revolution were established in 1958 in his first documentary film *Tire Dié* (Throw Me A Dime), which for the first time portrayed the reality of poverty in Argentina. Made between 1956 and 1958, *Tire Dié* documented the misery of children living in slums surrounding Sante Fe who beg for money from commuting workers on trains. The wildly popular film was screened throughout the country, in all kinds of neighbourhoods — from rich to poor. It was shown on soccer fields, and in schools and union halls, establishing an alternative exhibition network. Birri was eventually forced into exile, returning only after the fall of the military dictatorship, but as a Cosmunist Democratic Alchemist image poet, his originary concept of the documentary film as an experimental and liberatory process expanded dramatically to address a utopian imaginary, all the while maintaining a sensorial commitment to the people. His subsequent memories of the birth of a new insurrectionist film movement resonate with Argentinean media artists experimenting with liberatory representation in a post-collapse context. Twelve years

later, after Argentina's return to democracy and Birri's return to Argentina, he looked back to assess the legacy of the movement he galvanized:

What was this incipient liberatory movement liberating the cinema from? From cultural fetishism, the pseudo-cultural, the sub-cultured. From petit bourgeois ideology. The intention of the cinema of ideas is to be realist and popular at the same time. New cultural and economic realities propel the new cinema of ideas. This is the cinema which gives us consciousness, which worries, scares and weakens those of bad consciousness, reactionary consciousness. It is anti-oligarchic and anti-bourgeois towards its nation, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial towards the international, and it is for the people and against those who oppose the people, it helps us emerge from the sub-stomach to the stomach.

—Fernando Birri, *The Democratic Alchemist*, 1987⁴

Birri's cosmically experimental realism that developed in the 1950s was taken up and further transformed in the 1960s by documentary filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, who formed *Grupo Cine Liberación* (Film Liberation Group), the first film collective in Argentina. Their documentary *La Hora de los Hornos* (The Hour of the Furnaces) began in 1963 as a documentation of popular testimony of the experience of under-development. As filming continued over the five following years, Solanas and Getino's representational focus shifted to one of militant opposition to the state. Forced into clandestinity, their production paralleled the radicalization and coalescence of a number of societal forces, including industrial unions, students and middle classes, into a united militant opposition, which staged violent uprisings in the industrial cities of Rosario and Córdoba. *La Hora de los Hornos* was screened clandestinely to these forces as it was being shot, and viewers participated fully in the construction and direction of the film, enacting subject agency in a completely new experimental insurrectional representational process. Solanas described the film process and resulting artifact as "an Act more than a film; an Act of liberation. An

incomplete work, open to dialogue and to encounters with revolutionary wills. A work marked by our own and by society's limitations, but also full of the possibilities of our reality."⁵ The resulting film was a five-hour militant epic of liberation that was acclaimed internationally and violently repressed in Argentina, forcing both Solanas and Getino into exile. Their subsequent manifesto, *Hacia un tercer cine* (Towards a Third Cinema), stands as a key text of the cinema of decolonization and liberation, and locates their film work as a revolutionary feedback structure merging film and historical events, film and liberation theory.

A third key contribution to insurrectionist experimental media in Argentina leading up to the 1976 military coup was made by Raymundo Gleyzer, who was radicalized during his work with ethnographer Jorge Preloran documenting the conditions of aboriginal peoples in Northern Argentina and Brazil in the 1960s. While working as a television journalist, Gleyzer joined the *FATRA*C (*Frente de Trabajadores de la Cultura* — Cultural Workers Front), which was a clandestine project of the *PRT* (*Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores* — Revolutionary Workers Party), a Marxist movement that also maintained its own unit for armed insurrection, the *ERP* (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* — Revolutionary Peoples Army). Gleyzer made a number of works called *Comunicados* (Communiqués) that documented actions of the ERP, including assaults on banks and industries, and formalized his commitment to this experimental insurrectionist project with the formation of a new media collective, *Grupo Cine de La Base* (The Base Film Group). Gleyzer developed the concept of "counter-information" as a means of offering a radically different media perspective of militant actions that illuminated the lies of official media regarding revolutionary violence and that portrayed the true conditions of the workers, revolutionaries and capital. Gleyzer's experimental perspective is perhaps best exemplified in his 1972 *No olvido ni perdón* (Neither Forgive nor Forget), in which he re-narrates a videotaped press conference by guerilla insurgents who were subsequently executed covertly by the military, as a denunciation of the violence of the capi-

talist state. Gleyzer himself was disappeared by the military in 1976. There were numerous reports of him being interned and tortured, even blinded, in a secret prison in Buenos Aires, but his death has never been confirmed. Gleyzer's experimental media deconstructions continued to be shown to members of the military junta as examples of the attitudes of the revolutionaries and the reason they should be eliminated.⁶

Testimony, truth, decolonization, liberation, experiment, aesthetic revolution. These were the key principles and processes of the insurrectionist media legacy of Birri, Solanas, Getino and Gleyzer, contemporaries whose image ideologies and strategies intersected and overlapped. And this is the historical media legacy that was caught in a twenty-five-year ellipsis, suppressed first by military dictatorship and then by Menem's radical and ideological free-marketism, which has re-established itself since the 2001 collapse of the neo-liberal model.

One of the dramatically changed conditions that contemporary Argentinean media insurrectionists faced in 2001 was a fully realized state of multinational information capitalism. It was another incarnation of the neo-liberal model that was theorized and critiqued twenty-five years earlier (notably by Solanas and Getino) as media imperialism. A key component of Menem's brutal application of the model in the 1990s was to enlist national and multinational corporate television interests in his project, which he accomplished by privatizing state-television operations and removing all regulatory controls on media concentration and foreign investment. As a result, Argentina's two leading newspaper publishing companies, Clarín and Atlantida, were each awarded a concession for a privatized state television channel, with Atlantida eventually being sold to US-based CFI-Citigroup. The very profitable cable television industry — cable subscription in Argentina is third highest in the world, after Canada and the US — was multinationalized with the purchase of Cablevisión by US-based investment group TCI, while CFI-Citicorp extended its media control in Argentina by purchasing majority interests in the

other major cable operator, Multicanal. Just before the 2001 collapse, Guillermo Mastrini, leading Argentinean communications analyst and historian, clearly located Menem's actions in the context of the twenty-five-year continuous neo-liberal ellipsis:

The design of communications policies in Argentina over the last twenty-five years has resulted from two related but dissimilar authoritarian experiences: one, the absence of political or social debate under the military dictatorship, where terror produced policies which were manifested in contradictory relations with media owners and were simply imposed on everyone else; and two, a narrowly configured relationship between a corporatist state, legitimized by parliamentary majority, and hegemonic economic interests, an accord which precludes debate in a depoliticized civil society crushed by economic problems. Despite the obvious differences between these two authoritarian forms, it is not possible to understand the political-economic dimensions of contemporary policy logic without acknowledging its roots in the neo-liberal policies instigated by the dictatorship... The current framework of strategies for the realization of the virtual utopia of participation in a global communications network excludes the possibility of introducing any logic other than the logic of the market.⁷

It was within this globalized free market information context, with television flooded with American product and Argentinean media produced almost entirely in collusion with the Menem ideological project, that post-2001 media insurrectionist responses were conceived and enacted.

The first and most immediate media insurrectionist productions to revive the historical liberationist/experimental legacy of the 1960s and 1970s after the 2001 economic collapse can be grouped together loosely in a new media form known as *Cine Urgente* (Urgent Cinema). Using consumer video cameras — in fact any kind of camera available — a number of media collec-

tives formed spontaneously to document the mass uprising and violent state repression, as well as to proclaim the neo-liberal model dead. The collective *Argentina Arde* (Argentina is Burning) produced the short *Solidaridad con Zanon* (Solidarity with Zanon, 2002), a tribute to the Zanon ceramic factory workers who had occupied and were operating their abandoned factory. This short engages history by re-enacting Raymundo Gleyzer's anti-capitalist narration from his 1974 short film *Me matan si no trabajo y si trabajo me matan* (They kill me if I don't work, and if I work they kill me). *Grupo Contraimagen* (Counter-Image Group) also collectively produced the video short *Ceramica Zanon* (Zanon Ceramics, 2001), juxtaposing the productivity of the same worker occupied factory with televised statements by Argentina's imploding finance minister and with images of violence exploding in the streets.⁸

One of the most prolific and enduring of media collectives to contribute to the *Cine Urgente* movement is *Ojo Obrero* (Worker's Eye), associated with the militant national workers movement *Polo Obrero*, much as Gleyzer's film collective was associated with the *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores*. *Ojo Obrero*'s video work began with *Argentinazo: Comienza La Revolución* (Argentina Rebels: The Revolution Begins, 2001), a direct documentation of the mass insurrection of 19 and 20 December 2001, focusing on the formation of motor-bike couriers into a popular street force to repel state repression and on the birth of the *Que se vayan todos* movement. Their direct, unmanipulated documentation style was extended in *Asambleas Populares* (People's Assemblies, 2002), which documents a neighbourhood assembly's call for solidarity among all assemblies to form a people's government. One of *Ojo Obrero*'s most elaborate video documents is *Acampe Piquetero* (Picketers Occupation, 2002), which records the peaceful occupation of the main plaza of Buenos Aires by tens of thousands of members of a range of national organizations of workers and unemployed. This piece differs from earlier direct documentation as it is constructed from two perspectives — footage of the event shot by *Ojo Obrero* from inside the occupation, which is intercut

with footage from broadcast television coverage — offering a unique insight into the disjunction between commercial televisual representation and insurrectionist self-representation. *Ojo Obrero* also provides nationwide circulation and screening of their work as both counter-information and do-it-yourself tools.

As the *Cine Urgente* movement grew, so did its organization with the formation of ADOC (*Asociación de Documentalistas* — Association of Documentarians), a collective of collectives, including *Grupo Boedo*, *Cine Insurgente*, *Contraimagen*, *Ojo Obrero*, *Indymedia Argentina* and *Grupo 1° de Mayo*, which amassed visual materials from its members to produce *Por un nuevo cine, por un nuevo país* (For a New Cinema, For a New Country, 2002). This video builds an imagistic overview of the preceding twenty-five years, promiscuously and rapidly intercutting images of various presidents and ministers of finance announcing cuts and privatizations with footage of genocidal generals from the 1976 military dictatorship walking the streets freely. This imagery is juxtaposed with footage of people eating from garbage cans, the looting of food stores and finally the mass insurrection and repression of 2001. The overall effect of this swirling montage is to conjure a historical process of military and economic repression that has deep roots and can only be countered with sustained popular insurrection. This historical understanding was widely taken up in Argentina through screenings of *Por un nuevo cine* in such diverse public spaces as soccer-stadium Jumbotrons and neighbourhood plazas.

The recontextualised liberationist/experimental discourse in the *Cine Urgente* movement was dramatically enhanced in one of the most effective pieces to emerge from the 2001 mass insurrection, *La Bisagra de la Historia* (The Hinge of History, 2002). Produced by the politically unaligned anarchist arts collective *Venteveo* (named after a bird which, according to the pitch of its song, is said to announce either death or birth), this video establishes itself from the outset as an alternative television channel, complete with onscreen identification logo, playing out the concept of counter-information

by rewriting history over television. *La Bisagra* builds slowly from direct street interviews with exasperated people in Buenos Aires on the evening of 19 December 2001, to a documentary montage of the first explosion of thousands into a rhythmic pot-banging collective uprising and drumming fest. As violent police repression grows, the piece pointedly manipulates pirated television footage and the collective's own footage for maximum effect, with freeze frames, slow motion and rapid inter-cutting to the pounding music of Macaco. A particularly emotional sequence in this insurrectionist music video involves a slow motion image of soldiers mounted on horseback, galloping through swirls of smoke and tear gas like the four horsemen of the apocalypse, swinging batons and aiming rifles at running people. After the furious imagery of tanks, molotov cocktails, burning buildings and guns firing, the video collapses into complete silence as a text crawl lists the name, age, occupation, city and cause of death of every citizen killed in the repression. The final section of *La Bisagra* roams through empty streets in a more sombre montage of graffiti messages; "It's not that the enemy is bigger than us, it's just that we are looking at the enemy from on our knees," "This is just the beginning," "If elections really changed anything, they'd already be outlawed," "The only church that can illuminate anything is a church that is burning." The scene builds into a physical attack on a commercial television station that was collaborating with the repressive state. The attack plays out to the chant: "They piss on us and you tell us it's raining!" In the final credits, the *Venteveo* experimental/liberationist television channel steps outside of the globalizing tool of copyright and into the free information commons, encouraging free and widespread

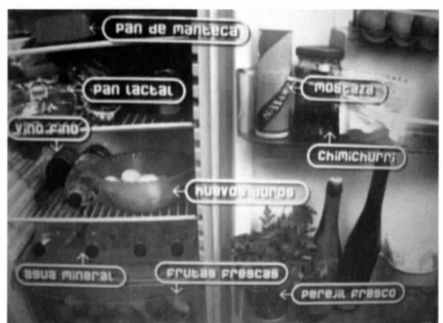
copying and distribution of their work. Within the *Cine Urgente* movement, *La Bisagra* stands as the fullest recuperation of the strategies and objectives of the repressed insurrectionist media from twenty-five years earlier.

In addition to the *Cine Urgente* movement, an equally crucial form of post-collapse media mobilization emerged from the more established video art sector. It is based around the principles of experiment and liberation, but has negotiated a very different relationship with its insurrectionist environment. This effort centres on another collective of young artists, but their video project has no name and is flexible in its composition. The two founding members — Gaston Duprat and Mariano Cohn — form the central core, which other artists, including Federico Mercuri, Adrian De Rosa and Mario Chierico, move in and out of quite fluidly. Duprat and Cohn established unique reputations in the late 1990s as leading media experimenters in both the non-commercial video art world and the highly commercial realm of broadcast television. Their first full collaboration was the 1997 experimental video *Circuito* (Circuit), an elegant and eloquent twenty-minute observational document of the details of daily lives in the province of Bahia Blanca. Part road trip, part examination of bodies in motion and part structural deconstruction of the acts of perception and photography, *Circuito* is a collective human portrait that subverts narrative in favour of representing the phenomena of existence and perception as vital and multiform. In 1999, they deployed this structural-observational-phenomenological-experimental artistic strategy fully in the 100-minute video *Enciclopedia* (Encyclopedia), a non-narrative compendium of three minute chunks of



Stills from *Enciclopedia*, 1999

lives mediated by communications technologies. These range from portraits of portraiture at weddings and birthdays to observations of being observed by building guards and police; or from empty landscapes of pastures and cattle to teenagers reciting a list of their television channels by heart. This map of human experiences inside the video-capitalist state is described by Duprat as “crude, anti-esthetic, boring, no digital intervention, flat, drawn out. Just people speaking. Instead of creating a poetic figure, the environment or the person says it all in three minutes, nothing precious, unedited.” *Enciclopedia* plays across the disjunction between the realist specificities of human experience and the formal structure of techno-observation to construct a new form of dialogue between self-representation and surveillance in the condition of global capitalist information systems.



Stills from Gaston Duprat and Mario Cohn's *Television Abierta*

At the same time, Duprat and Cohn were invited to develop local programming and interstitial materials for the Buenos Aires franchise of Canadian-owned MuchMusic. Applying their successful video-art philosophy of inclusive phenomenological observation to broadcast television, Duprat and Cohn revolutionized the one-way delivery structure of commercial television with the weekly half-hour MuchMusic program *Televisión Abierta* (Open Television). The program invited anyone and everyone in Buenos Aires to claim three minutes of TV as their own. Their amazingly simple and inexpensive production format involved viewers calling in, booking a videographer and taking complete control over their own presentation; whatever was recorded in three minutes in a single take from a static observational camera was aired unedited on the program. *Televisión Abierta* content was sometimes extreme, often absurd and always unexpected, including: an elderly woman displaying her drinking-straw hat sculptures, a man in his mid-thirties trying to sell his lemon of a car, a gang of twelve-year-olds breakdancing to their favourite tune and a middle-aged woman demonstrating effective but mean dog training techniques. One of the most successful programs ever on Argentinean television, *Televisión Abierta* deployed a TV karaoke format as a popular vehicle for people to make their private lives, whatever they might be, public in a city renowned for its labyrinthine enclosure. This experimental urban ethnography project set off a flurry of other related broadcast projects in which Duprat and Cohn turned over creative control of television to the people, including *Mi Abuela* (My Grandmother), *Mi Cuarto* (My Room) and *Mi Heladera* (My Fridge). Each one is a thirty-second unedited portrait in which an ordinary person showed and shared a part of their private lives. Continuing their discourse across the video art/broadcast television divide, Duprat and Cohn targeted themselves and the video art world in *Hágalo Usted Mismo* (Do It Yourself, 2001), a satirical how-to catalogue of video art techniques and conventions — out of focus landscapes, frame in frame, crawling text, water sounds — that deconstructs and demythologizes art. Ironically, it won awards in many video-art festivals.

The December 2001 collapse and mass popular insurrection provoked two important video responses from Duprat and Cohn, which located their experimental/democratic project within the more insurrectionist context of liberation. The first unnamed project consisted of a single image of a hand waving goodbye that was projected at an enormous scale as the speakers' backdrop at a mass public *Que se vayan todos* demonstration. The demonstration was targeted against institutions and corporations and was held in front of the National Congress. This simple image of an unmistakable physical gesture captured imaginations as a symbol of collective opposition much as a fluttering flag might.

Their second post-collapse video, titled simply with the date 20/12 (the second day of the popular insurrection and police repression in 2001) is an experimental reconstructed personal document, a single continuous shot through the viewfinder of a video camera operated by a middle-aged, middle-class man. He plays with his brand new video camera at home, wandering about the apartment, taping his wife, mother-in-law, grandfather, as they do housework, chat with each other, watch TV. We see through his eyes/viewfinder as he records and tries out every preprogrammed image effect; sepia, solarize, fader, overlap, dot, still, flash — the name and the effect overlay the scene being recorded. Finally, he turns his camera on the television to record a live news broadcast of President de la Rúa fleeing Buenos Aires in a helicopter. Superimposed programmed in camera greetings flash over of the televised moment of the end of an era — Welcome, Happy Birthday, Happy Holidays, Congratulations and, finally, The End — as

the helicopter disappears in the distance, while the TV anchor announces the citizen death toll, and the people in the streets chant "Argentina! Argentina!" This simple seven-minute short work pushes experimentation with the observational mode to reveal the convergence of private everyday experience with public insurrection, and displays the multiple, conflicting but determining roles of media technologies in structuring language and narrating experience.

The most extensive experimental and liberationist project undertaken by Duprat and Cohn yet is the launch in June 2003 of the public television channel *Ciudad Abierta* (Open City). The name resonates strongly with Rossellini's innovative neo-realist classic film *Rome Open City*, which radically reformulated the relationship between reality and representation in liberated post-fascist Rome in 1945. In 2002, the Cultural Secretariat of the City of Buenos Aires contracted Duprat and Cohn to construct an inclusive and innovative cultural television channel for the city, within a severely limited budget framework. Masters of the old neo-realist tradition of making the most out of the scarce resources at hand, Cohn and Duprat developed a channel that incorporated their key image philosophy and strategy — collective self-representation by turning control of imagery over to the people. It is on air 24 hours a day, seven days a week with a total start-up cost of \$12,000 CAD and monthly operational costs of \$10,000 CAD. At first glance, *Ciudad Abierta* resembles information stations like the Weather Channel or Toronto's CP24, with a graphic strip for date, time and temperature at the top of the screen, a running information crawl along



Stills from Gaston Duprat and Mario Cohn's 20/12, 2001



Stills from Gaston Duprat and Mario Cohn's public television channel *Ciudad Abierta*

the bottom of the screen, and an image box in the centre. But any similarity with other channels ends there. First and foremost, the content is entirely concerned with culture, in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the word. Formal culture is divided into eight categories: dance, visual art, music, tango, theatre, film and video, literature, children's events. These categories are represented in two ways: first, in the running crawl of event listings for the day, and second, in a full screen text calendar for each category that changes every five minutes. However, the truly radical experiment in this broadcast project is in its foregrounding of the culture of the everyday. The predominant *En Imagen* (On Screen) image section of the screen is devoted to a constant and constantly changing non-narrative and unnarrated stream of five- to ten-minute unedited observations. These come from an almost infinite range of vantage points and perspectives offered by a city of thirteen-million inhabitants.

A brief listing of some video observations screened over the course of one day on *Ciudad Abierta* illustrates the exploded sense of culture represented: Sunday mass in a church; children play in a park in the middle of a display of electric toy trains; four young men make dinner in their apartment; a green grocer stocks shelves in his store; a street sweeper picks his way through a crowd demonstrating in front of the National Congress, trying to sweep up hundreds of pamphlets; four elderly musicians sing classic tangos in a local bar; a man gets his hair cut; a dog sits in an open window watching street traffic; a series of performers audition for a local staging of *Hairspray*; a tailor prepares a bolt of cloth to make a suit; two women direct car traffic in a parking lot; two young women sit in a park discussing their university

classes. There are no talking-head reporters, no narration, no interpretation. A myriad of everyday events are observed and unfold on their own terms. Intermittently, this flow of everyday life is interrupted by public-service announcements for free condoms and HIV/AIDS education. As well, there are a range of thematically organized interstitial stingers of thirty to sixty seconds: *Protagonistas de Buenos Aires* (Heroes of Buenos Aires), where bus drivers, nurses, bookstore owners describe their jobs; *Sonidos de Buenos Aires* (Sounds of Buenos Aires), an entirely black screen with location sound recordings from train stations, restaurants, parks; *Manzanas de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires City Blocks), where a resident walks around their block pointing out friends, stores, their home; *Cine de Buenos* (Buenos Aires Cinema), short clips from feature films shot in Buenos Aires; *Tribus de Buenos Aires* (Tribes of Buenos Aires), featuring Star Trek groupies, Michael Jackson fans, and goth kids, all posed as gangs.

The production device behind this channel is utterly simple and ingenious. There is no studio for *Ciudad Abierta*, the city is the studio. All production staff work out of their homes. At all times there are three videographers roaming the city collecting segments, which are delivered to a compiler who logs the materials as they arrive and then sends unedited computer disks and playlists to the cable service that delivers the signal. As the *Ciudad Abierta* digital image database accumulates over time, the playlists can be compiled from different days and times to offer a historically recombinant cultural signal. New concepts for structuring and presenting materials proliferate. In December 2004, *Ciudad Abierta* launched ZOOM, a series of commissioned single-shot, unedited five-minute video works from 100 artists

— filmmakers, video artists, photographers, performance artists, painters — and plans are currently in development for *Edificios de Buenos Aires* (Buildings of Buenos Aires), a longer form observation of the ongoing relations and interactions of the residents of entire buildings. As well, the Cultural Office of the City of Buenos Aires now publishes a weekly free print and online publication titled *Ciudad Abierta* as well, which exists in a symbiotic relationship with the television channel's cultural calendar. *Ciudad Abierta* is an engaged mutating and collaborative project on a mass scale. It extends the structural-phenomenological-observational experiment in liberating media through redistribution of self-representational processes, which underpins of all of Duprat and Cohn's work.

Almost three years after the 2001 collapse, insurrectional fervour has subsided and Argentina has stabilized somewhat. Many *asambleas populares* have disbanded or transformed into neighbourhood cultural centres, and the *Que se vayan todos* movement has dissipated, but the unemployed *piqueteros* continue to disrupt daily life, most recently with their 25 June occupation of nine McDonalds outlets in Buenos Aires. The new president of Argentina, Nestor Kirchner, is a populist who governs from the left and who, in many ways, draws another kind of direct line between past and present, given his involvement with militant opposition movements in the 1970s. Kirchner's slogan is "Justice and Memory" and he has moved forcefully to bring genocidal military personnel to justice. But Argentina remains in default on its almost \$200 billion international debt, owed to an array of foreign banks, private investors and financial agencies like the IMF and the World Bank. The globalist neo-liberal model has not succumbed anywhere else in the world, and global multinational forces can be expected to fully assert themselves to recuperate their investments. Argentina remains a society in constant flux. The urgency of insurrection may have dissipated, but the people's collective historical memory and self-representations have proliferated. The twenty-five-year ellipsis in which the multiform insurrectionist media practices of Birri, Solanas, Getino and Gleyzer were repressed has

been sutured back into material history in post-2001 Argentina by a range of new insurrectionist media practitioners determined to define a continuous thread between past and present and to revolutionize language, meaning and action. This new post-global media commune, as exemplified by the divergent but complementary experimental and liberatory projects of the multivocal *Cine Urgente* movement and the video art sector, has reformulated the historical legacy of media insurrection. The contemporary incarnation of this legacy has created a productive and progressive dialectic between the mass and the self, between the spontaneous and the structural, and between the embodied local and the global techno-imaginary. Such ongoing liberatory media experiments assure that collective memory continues to simmer and mass action is always close at hand.

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Notes

1. Acknowledged as the father of the New Latin American Cinema Movement in the 1950s, Argentinean filmmaker and theorist Fernando Birri has written extensively over the last five decades about the ongoing political and aesthetic revolution in the New Latin American Cinema movement. Fernando Birri, *El Alquimista Democrático* (Santa Fe: Ediciones Sudamerica, 1999), 235.
2. Atilio Boron, "Requiem para el neoliberalismo," in *Página 12* (Buenos Aires: 23 December 2001), 25.
3. Fernando Birri, *El Alquimista Democrático* (Santa Fe: Ediciones Sudamerica, 1999), 233.
4. *Ibid.*, 163.
5. Fernando Solanas, *Cine Cultura y Descolonización* (Buenos Aires: Siglo xxi, 1973), 62.
6. Gleyzer's legacy is increasingly being reclaimed and reassessed. His life and work are the subject of the biographical documentary *Raymundo* (2002) as well as the book *El Cine Quemá: Raymundo Gleyzer* (Fernando Martín Peña and Carlos Vallina, Ediciones de la Flor, 2000).
7. Guillermo Mastrini, et al., "La política a los pies del mercado: la comunicación en la Argentina de la década del 90," in *Globalización y Monopolios en la Comunicación en América Latina*, Guillermo Mastrini and César Bolaño, eds. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 1999), 149.
8. The occupation and self-management of the Brukman and Zanon factories were subsequently taken up as subjects in Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein's 2004 feature documentary on worker self-management in Argentina, *The Take*.